



David Bowie

“Space Oddity”

David Bowie

11/1969

Philips / Mercury

What David Bowie Taught Me About Art, Death, and Letting Go

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The Montclair Railroad Trail is a mile-long, tree-lined path carved into the side of the Oakland Hills. From 1913 until 1957, the trail was part of a passenger rail line that ran from San Francisco through Oakland to Sacramento and Chico. Today it’s hard to imagine that trains once rolled on this narrow path through abundant eucalyptus and oak trees; no traces remain of the railroad or the station that once sat at the foot of Paso Robles, an area now occupied by a row of large, immaculate homes with two-car garages and shaded patios.

We go running on the trail almost every week. Years ago I pushed my son Devin in a stroller here; now he runs beside me and we race the last twenty yards over the footbridge to the stairs that lead to Montclair Village. Every now and then I run alone. I study the trees and I think about how old they must be, about how they have witnessed so much—the railroad being built then abandoned; houses rising one by one; families arriving, expanding, and eventually leaving, to be replaced by new families. Time passes, but the trees always remain, season after season, year after year.

A few weeks ago we were running on the trail on a Saturday morning. We were nearly at the end and could see the houses on Paso Robles when I noticed something moving on the ground in front of me. I stopped and shrieked. Devin saw it a split second later and jumped right over it: a thin black snake with a yellow stripe, three or four feet long, whipping back and forth in a violent motion to get across the trail to the grassy slope that led to Shepherd Canyon Road.

It was the first time we had seen a snake on the Montclair trail, and the only snake I’ve ever seen that wasn’t eerily slow or still. It felt like an omen, though I was not sure what it meant.

I had just come back from an emergency trip to Taiwan to visit my ailing father, whose health had been declining steadily for more than a year—ever since my mom passed away in July 2014. His main health issue was advanced Parkinson’s and he now lived in a nursing home, but one crisis after another would send him to the hospital on a regular basis—mysterious fevers, blood sugar crashes, digestive problems. I took the most recent trip because my dad had developed a serious intestinal blockage caused by a tumor in his pancreas, and the doctors were recommending major surgery that was extremely risky for someone in his frail condition.

My dad’s eldest sister and her daughters—my cousins—visited him every week, sometimes daily, and communicated constantly with the nurses, doctors and my dad’s hired caregiver to ensure he received the right treatment. They took in the daily measurements of his blood pressure and blood sugar, how many ounces of his nutritional

supplement he received through his feeding tube, whether he had napped or not. They swabbed his lips with a Q-tip dipped in water to keep his mouth moist. They were on the front lines of caring for my dad in a way that I was not—a chronic source of guilt for me—yet they insisted that any major health care decisions should rest with me. Because of the tumor and recommended surgery, I was summoned back to Taiwan in March to interpret my dad's final wishes, and to sign papers at the hospital either authorizing or declining treatment.

By the time I arrived, the biopsy results were ready. The tumor turned out to be benign, and my dad received a simpler and less invasive laparoscopic procedure to correct the blockage. He had dodged a bullet this time, and I left Taiwan a few days later feeling thankful but still anxious about what was to come.

We returned to the status quo of my dad's slow decline punctuated by occasional visits to the emergency room. My uncle—who is only one year younger than my dad but in much better health—would email me every few days with updates. My dad's condition was like a roller coaster, careening from stable to critical and back again. The email subject lines say it all: *Update on your dad, Urgent note, He gained more strength now, Good news, To emergency again, Returned, In hospice, Good condition, Be prepared...*

I knew deep down, though I didn't want to think about it, that my dad's time was running out. He had just turned eighty-one years old. He was getting weaker and weaker, and was completely bedridden. He had been in a coma twice, and though he regained consciousness, he was diminished each time. He could no longer read or respond to email as his eyesight was failing. He no longer had the strength or motor control to use the iPad we had given him the previous summer. This meant he could no longer continue his projects as a Bible translator, work that kept him happily occupied even though he officially retired many years ago. We couldn't talk on the phone anymore because his speech was slurred and barely audible. A couple of months ago, my uncle reported that he could no longer speak at all.

A week after I saw the snake on the trail, I had a vivid dream in which I was bitten by a boa constrictor, a large muscular gray snake that could have easily strangled me. I don't recall the setting or what happened right before, but I distinctly remember feeling the snake's fangs piercing my left side, and the venom and numbness spreading outward until half of my body was paralyzed. I was scared for a moment, then strangely calm. The world slowed down, stood still.

So this is what it feels like, I thought. A gentle extinguishing.

Later that day, I looked up the symbolism of snakes and learned that they are harbingers of change, transformation and growth. Death and rebirth. Endings and beginnings.

The first week of January, I turned 47. Three days later, David Bowie released his final album, *Blackstar*, and two days after that, he succumbed to liver cancer. I had not been a huge Bowie fan, but I was swept up in the massive worldwide outpouring of grief for a beloved and iconic musician. It quickly became apparent that he had known the end was coming; *Blackstar* was threaded with references to his own mortality.

One of my Facebook friends reacted to the news of his death with this simple, perfect statement: MAKE ART, DON'T WAIT. It was an appeal to those of us who create—but

don't necessarily make a living at it—to work harder to realize our artistic ambitions. In other words, our time on earth is finite... don't die with unfinished business... make the art that only you can make.

This epiphany was powerfully reinforced just a few months later when Prince passed away at the age of 57, less than two months after he had performed an arena show in the Bay Area. A few of my friends had attended that show; none of them suspected that that would be one of his last concerts. The impact on my generation—on those of us who grew up with *Purple Rain* as our high school soundtrack—was seismic. My friends and I traded stories about our Prince memories, like when I was sixteen and went to Paris on a summer exchange program and bought myself a “raspberry beret.” Losing Prince felt incredibly personal, like losing a part of my childhood.

Prince and Bowie weren't especially linked in life, but they were connected by the proximity of their untimely deaths, and also by their artful, uninhibited style and gender-bending sensibility. I didn't have any Prince albums on my iPod, but I had a David Bowie compilation that I started listening to over and over in my car. I read countless articles about both artists in the days following their deaths. One particular quote stayed with me, which had been posted on Twitter: *So David Bowie was the scout team and he sent word to Prince once he had found a new acceptable planet.* This seemed so perfect to me, to imagine them not dead but reunited somewhere in outer space, cosmic roommates searching for a groovy new place to call home.

Around this time, Devin developed a keen interest in architecture. We had traveled to Los Angeles earlier this year and visited the huge Frank Gehry retrospective at the LA County Museum of Art. We gave Devin a digital camera last Christmas, and this was the first time he had used it. He was enthralled by the Gehry scale models of architectural projects from all over the world, and took so many photos that I had to admonish him: *You don't need a picture of every single thing!* But he was not deterred. Between the Gehry exhibit, another modern art exhibit at LACMA, and the beautiful gardens at the Getty Center, Devin took more than 200 photos over two days.

A few weeks later, I took Devin to the newly reopened Berkeley Art Museum in downtown Berkeley, where we saw an exhibit called the Architecture of Life. We explored the galleries and enjoyed the building itself which was full of unique vantage points and unexpected details, like the all-red stairwells. But the work that riveted us the most was a huge mural at the entrance called *The World Garden* by Qiu Zhijie.

The World Garden is done in the style of classical Chinese landscape painting, with dramatic rocky peaks, delicate pagodas, and mist-shrouded trees and waterfalls. Labels in English and Chinese denote landmarks of interest, such as the Moon Worshipping Pavilion and Garden of Reciprocal Enlightenment. While many of the names conform to the quaint, poetic turns of phrase we expect from English translations of Chinese, some subvert our expectations by making double entendres explicit (*Sexual Desire in Spring*) while others sound simply awkward in translation (*Modesty and Politeness of Water*). My favorites were the place names that described reflective, melancholy states of mind such as *The Lake of Lonely Happiness*, and *The More Beautiful the Scenery the More Despair the Heart*.

The irony is that this monumental landscape depicting scenery that's meant to endure is actually temporary. The Art Wall in the front of the Berkeley Art Museum is designed to be painted over every few months with the work of a new artist.

A few weeks after our visit, Devin said to me out of the blue: *When I grow up, I want to be an artist inspired by space, science and architecture.*

I was thrilled. Anil and I have been trying to encourage his interest and abilities in the arts, science and music. He's been taking electric guitar lessons. He performs in a band with other eight-year-olds and has already composed one song. We take him to concerts and museums as much as we can. I want him to know that there's more to life than sports and TV and video games. I want Devin to appreciate literature, art, music and architecture because they have the ability to endure, to connect us to past and future generations. Exposing him to these influences is my way of saying to him: *Make art. Make music. Create or discover something that outlives you. Work on something that will have meaning long after you are gone. Just like your Grandpa did.*

For weeks and weeks, I listened to the David Bowie album on repeat in my car. I thought about the snakes, and the prophesy of change, and the metaphor of space. There were almost too many space references to count: "Ashes to Ashes," "Ziggy Stardust," "Starman," "Life on Mars?", and of course, the song "Changes." But more than anything I became obsessed with "Space Oddity." Even Devin, who was often in the car with me, would listen reverently and beg me to turn up the volume whenever it came on. We memorized the lyrics.

"Space Oddity" was released in 1969, the year I was born, and the year of the first moon landing. At the time, audiences thought the song was inspired by Apollo 11 since it came out the same week. Others have theorized that the troubled character of Major Tom was an avatar for a seriously drug-addicted Bowie, whose losing contact with Ground Control and floating into outer space was a metaphor for an overdose.

For me it took on another meaning. I thought about my dad, lying in his hospital bed, waiting to be liberated from a body that was failing him. He was fitted with tubes for breathing, eating and eliminating. He could no longer sit or stand, or write or speak. This man who used to be so mobile, who circled the globe so many times, who made an art of translating and communicating. His purpose in life had been to help others, and now he himself was helpless. Although he never said it to me, I can't imagine he thought of his wrecked, aging body as anything other than a prison.

But still, he hung on for months. And we hung on to him.

The more I listened to "Space Oddity," the more it took on a talismanic quality. I held onto it the way one holds onto a charm, certain that I needed it even though I could not logically explain why.

The song, I finally realized, was telling us both to let go. To not be afraid.

*This is Major Tom to Ground Control
I'm stepping through the door
And I'm floating in a most peculiar way
And the stars look very different today*

The Sunday before my final trip to Taiwan, we went running on the trail. Devin was going to a Star Wars birthday party in the afternoon and I reminded him to make a card for his friend. As an afterthought, I asked if he could make a nice card for Grandpa too.

What should I say? He asked. Get well soon?

No, I said and paused, choking up.

Why not?

I took a deep breath.

Grandpa isn't going to get better, I said.

We paused in front of our house so that I could break off a sprig of rosemary for our lunch. We each inhaled the sharp green smell and sighed. Devin leaned into me and I put my arm around him.

Is Grandpa dying? His eyes searched mine.

Yes, I finally said, *but we don't know when. That's why I have to go visit him now.*

I'm not sure which scientist said it first, but it resonates with me today: *We are all made of the dust of exploding stars. We are interconnected; we are the universe and the universe is us. In this way, the past touches the future and everything in between.*

Maybe, I think, dying is not the end, but just another change, a journey to somewhere unknown but ultimately peaceful.

Only two months after my previous trip, I traveled again to visit my dad for five days in Taiwan. He had been transferred to the hospice a few weeks earlier. The staff had advised my relatives that we should invite close friends and family to visit him at the hospice and say goodbye while we could. We held a small gathering on Wednesday evening, where his longtime Bible translation colleagues took turns telling stories about him and thanking him for his mentorship, and we all sang my dad's favorite hymns including a few he composed himself. I organized a four-way video call with the grandchildren, who were in three different time zones in New York, London and Bangkok. (It was the middle of the night in California, so Devin could not participate.) We all chatted with my dad and gave him updates on our lives, but none of us said an official "goodbye."

On my final day in Taiwan, I visited my dad one last time. I did not know what to say. In my heart I knew this might be our last conversation, but I could not find the right words.

What I ended up saying was: *I'll take care of everything*, meaning I would make sure any money left in his estate went to support the education of his grandchildren. This was his one remaining concern, and I wanted him to know that I would carry out his wishes.

Since he was lying on a hospital bed, his arms stiff at his side, I couldn't hug him properly. So instead I laid my head gently on his chest, and felt him inhale and exhale a few times. His breathing was steady and surprisingly vigorous.

Bye, Dad. I love you. And then it was time to go.

Sixteen hours later, I landed at SFO. I texted Anil to let him know I'd arrived, then I started downloading my email messages on my phone. Scrolling quickly through them, my eye landed on a note from my cousin that said *I just heard the news. I'm so sorry.*

What news? I thought to myself, then... Oh no. No!

I was standing in the airport immigration line with hundreds of people trudging one step at a time toward passport control, when I saw the email from my uncle saying my dad had passed away. It took a few minutes for the news to sink in.

My dad waited to let go until he knew I was safely on my way, I realized. He took care of me first, just like he always did.

On the last Friday in May, my dad and I both flew home.

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