

# Saturday Night [under the] Lights...

2019



*Happy Saturday...*

It's been a while. *A long while at that.* Nice to be in your inbox again...

*I hope everyone is doing well and life is good with you and everyone around you...*

In the spirit of honest disclosure, when a big chunk of time passes that I don't reach out and talk about our world by writing a FNuL, it's hard for me to "restart" and get back into the swing of it. I absolutely *love* writing these (you probably have no idea), but sometimes it takes something really powerful and impactful to grab me by the shoulders and push me to the keyboard...

*That "something" happened to me two weeks ago.*

So, I'm writing tonight to hopefully share a gift with you. It's a gift that someone else gave to me and now I want to share it with you. I didn't expect to get it. In truth, they didn't know they were going to give it to me.

It came from three people I don't even know. I've never met them in person and didn't really know anything about them. Frankly, they're total strangers to me. If I would have seen them on a street, I wouldn't have known who they were.

But two weeks ago, the three of them gave me something that I've used every day since then - something that I think about and talk about at home and at work. Even my three kids know about it. I realize it's something I don't ever want to lose.

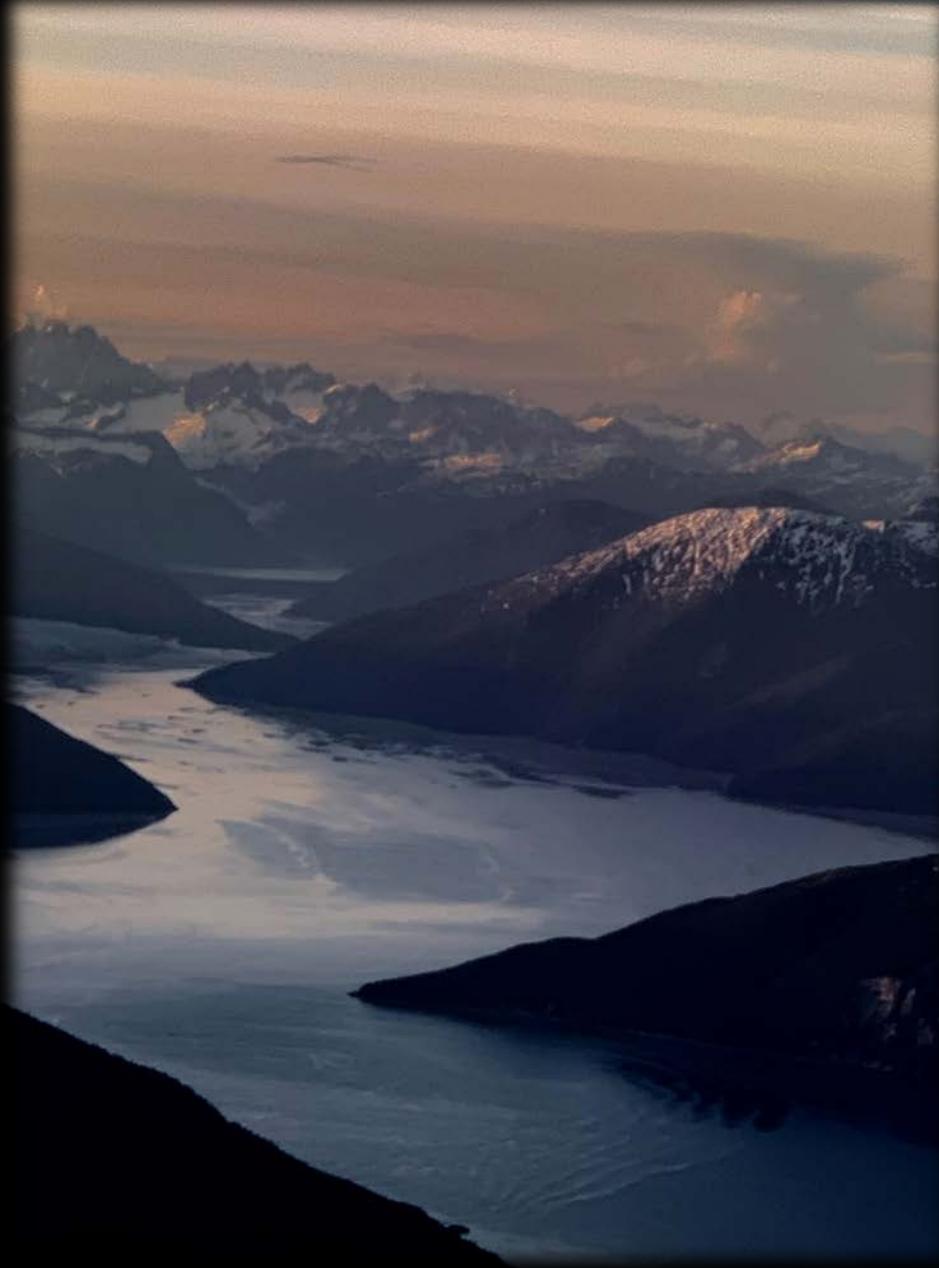
Plus, this - Not only did I not expect it - I was, in a strange way, anxious and sort of dreading going to the place where I got it. I also can't tell you exactly when I got it that day, but I can tell you that the gift is worth a ton more when you give it away to others...

*Which is what I want to do tonight.*

So, please bear with me - You know I'm not the best writer on the planet (no comments) and sometimes I don't express exactly what I want to say. *But, I want to get tonight right...*

The State of Alaska is a totally different world than most of us are used to. It's a strikingly beautiful, topographically stunning, mysterious and magical world. It's commanding and majestic, yet calm and peaceful at the same time. Its geographic isolation pulls its people together in ways most of us have never appreciated, and likely never will.

When people get sick or injured, they often have to rely on an air ambulance to stabilize them and get them to a facility that can provide the care they need. Response times can be measured on the hour hand of the clock (or sometimes a calendar), not the minute or second hands most of us are used to.



On January 29<sup>th</sup>, a Guardian Flight King Air 200 traveling from Anchorage to Kake, Alaska, went missing somewhere near the south tip of Admiralty Island in the Chatham Strait. The crew, three of our own GMR Family, was on the way to pick up a patient in the remote community of Kake.

I remember the second I heard about it (read it in a text) and experiencing that gut -wrenching, initial sense of disbelief and horror. Many of us in the profession have unfortunately been exposed to a moment like this. The disbelief (I think) is because we so passionately cherish the fact that in the midst of all the chaos, unknowns, hazards and unpredictable events we face every day, WE have the skill, ability, support and protection that keeps US safe. It's our job to go into other people's sudden catastrophes and make things better. We spend our entire careers making sure WE are OK when others are not. We're proud of that. So, when we hear news like this, it seems unfathomable.

*Can't be true.* WE bring order to chaos.

The feeling of horror (I spent hours searching my brain for the right word here) hits us when we realize it's one of our own flesh & blood, someone who's committed their heart and soul to going into everyone else's acutely problematic world. This just can't happen.

*It's us.*

When we hear stuff like this, because of who we are, we go through all the possible scenarios in our heads – We try and understand. We talk to each other to get more insight and seek comfort from like souls. We walk through every micro detail and try to make sense of what could have happened.

Similar to what we do when something significant happens to our patients or communities.

But... *This is us.* It's so different.

I didn't know Margaret or Pat or Stacie.

I had the privilege of learning a little bit about who they were, what they meant to people I do know and heard so many stories about how they impacted others. I had an opportunity to pay my respect along with hundreds of their colleagues, family & friends at a Tribute to Their Lives in Juneau two weeks ago.

But what I didn't expect was a gift from the three of them *to me.*

I know that last line sounds so cliché and manufactured. So, I want to try and tell you exactly what that gift was, and if I can articulate it as I hope I will, they'll hand it to you as well...



I'm not a big fan of Funerals or Memorials. I go because I want to be there with the people that were part of the lives of those we honor and, in my own way, say "goodbye" to people that I've spent time with in my life.

Funerals are hard. Despite what my dad used to always tell me about it being a "celebration of life", it still feels so sad. It's a loss. A permanent loss. It's the beginning of a transition to a time without the ones we love at our side.

There is seemingly no "bright side" of the event.

I get very reflective and pensive and I look back at what was, I try and focus on the good times and use the camaraderie and shared loss to make it through the hard stories.

That's what I "dread". It hurts.



Walking from my car to the inside of the building that day, I found myself looking at all the other people who were here for the same reason I was. There were EMS, Fire and Law Enforcement uniforms from local, regional and non-Alaskan Departments. I was reading every patch, curious where they were from and why they were there. There were Flight Suits from not only our Guardian family, but our other colleagues, both inside and outside of GMR. There were the lime green reflective EMS shirts. There were people in suits, formal attire, or dressed in jeans. There was colorful Native Alaskan dress. There were Kilts. There were two ladies dressed in their Delta Airlines Gate Agent uniforms. There were Pastors. There were Therapy Dogs and their handlers.



I found myself thinking about how many people's lives they were a part of and how many *each of us* is a part of. How extraordinarily different all those people are! We don't think about it until they're all in the same place, at the same time. But when they are, it's such a powerful message.

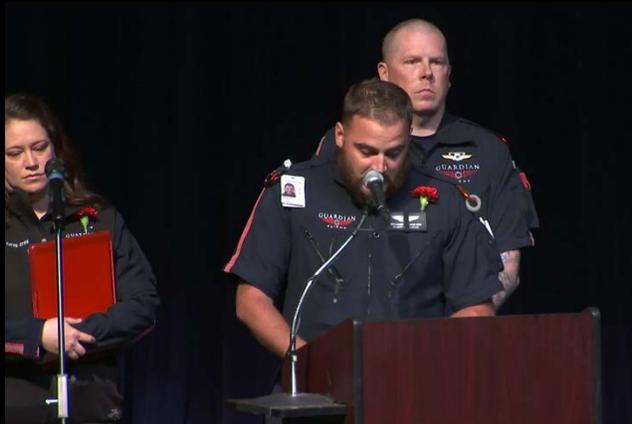
I have always loved watching Honor Guards. Every single choreographed, synchronized move in their perfectly polished, formal uniforms sends a message of strength, coordination, perfection and respect. Uniformed Services, whether Public Safety or Military, are fortunate that these men & women are a part of our ritualistic celebration and healing. The haunting, comforting sound of Bagpipes carries its own message. They talk to us in music.

I looked at the diverse representation in the Honor Guards – The US Coast Guard, Capital City Fire & Rescue, Juneau Police Department, Bellingham Police Department and Colorado Springs AMR. In its own weird way, it was a reminder to me of how powerful we can all be together, even when we come from such dramatically different places. Today, they were one. Their difference became a strength.

As the Memorial started, I was reminded that during this extremely challenging journey, while literally hundreds of people were a part of supporting all the organizations, families and friends – The man that took the podium in front of all of us at the Tribute to provide the opening remarks was the one that kept us, and the outside world, informed throughout those heartbreaking months. He communicated in a compassionate and factual way from the initial disbelief, through the search efforts, ups and downs, into the eventuality of loss and the reality of what had happened. He wrapped every message with hope and helped us all understand where things were.

And now he was in front of all of us – closing a loop that many will never want to close.

Randy Lyman was the boots on the ground – his representative leadership and communication were strong and compassionate. Randy, I admire how you and all of your colleagues shouldered so much of the day to day emotional burden while keeping literally thousands of people informed.



And then we heard the wonderful stories from Pat, Margaret and Stacie's colleagues. Who they were, what they were like – How they had impacted different people in different ways... It's so nice to hear the stories, laugh a little at the funny ones, smile a bit... Then it's hard when you hear small bursts of sobbing during those stories. As humans, you hear it and you *feel it*. You know it's someone who will forever have a void in their lives. They've lost a treasure... It should remind us all that those fun moments and great times are something we should never take for granted.

Then, near the end of the Tribute, a group of people walked quietly to the stage. They were the Kake, Alaska EMS providers.

They didn't look like me. They dressed different than I do. They played music that was different from mine. Their Fire Chief's looked different from those I know.



Joel Jackson, the Organized Village of Kake President, led his colleagues to the stage. His voice was deep and strong. He spoke with compassion and sincerity. It was one of those messages that you felt directly from his heart. There were no notes.

He shared that in their culture, when they lose a loved one, the opposite clan would “wrap their blanket of love around you – to do all the necessary work that had to be done to uphold the family and help make you strong and keep you safe”.

That Kake Community message was *the most heartfelt, sincere demonstration of support and sympathy* I have been a part of in my entire EMS career. Ever. Ever.

And they don't look like me. They don't dress like me. They don't have the same songs as me...

It was a moment in time I will remember the rest of my life.

Once again, the profound difference became the foundation of strength.



So...

*What was the gift?*

There is a Latin phrase that hangs in the halls of many academic medical institutions:

**Mortui Vivos Docent.**

“The dead teach the living”...

The phrase reminds us that those who have gone before us can provide valuable lessons. Sometimes, even more powerfully and impactfully than the living.

*Three people I didn't know gave me that gift.* Patrick Coyle, Margaret Langston and Stacie Morse reminded me how important it is to live life fully, because one day, it will be my last.

They gave me the gift of introspection – eventually, I'll be on the other side. It's one of the few certainties in medicine. Life is never as long as we want it to be. Live it well.

And, to all the Guardian Flight members of our family, your GMR colleagues wrap our blankets around you tightly.



*So, Happy Saturday.*

I end every one of my FNuLs with that (even though this is technically SNuL). Seems odd to end tonight with that, doesn't it?

*Let me share one last thing.*

As the service was concluding that Friday, one of the adorable little girls from the Kake community that was sitting in front of us, reached into her mother's purse.

She pulled out a microscopically small Chihuahua puppy whose little tail was wagging at 90 miles an hour. Then her sister reached in and pulled out another. Finally, a third puppy gets pulled out of the bag... (what the heck – It was the funniest, cutest thing...). We all smiled. Happy always feels good.

Not a peep during the whole service. Now there are three puppies the size of a guinea pig cuddling, wagging and loving on everyone around them.

It was like they came out of nowhere.

Maybe a reminder of the importance of being happy?

I know what I believe...

*Thanks for the gift.*



*Ed*

Ed Racht, MD  
edward.racht@gmr.net

