The Audacity of Floss

My wife has a saying. “A family that flosses together, stays together.” She usually says it right before she slaps the floss into my hand with that pointed look that says, “Yes, that means YOU.” Sometimes it’s less intimidating, like when we’re looking in the bathroom mirror at the goofy grins of our three daughters who are busy trying to learn how to use little tiny floss holders to do the enormous gaps in between their baby teeth. But regardless of the occasion, she says it. And that’s my wife. The responsible one. Always doing the right thing, even if it’s hard, or its boring, or it takes too damn long, or it means losing an extra 5 minutes of sleep to do it. I, on the other hand, am NOT a religious flosser. I use to con myself that I did it every other night. But then I convinced myself that I could have nights off if I had canker sores. And then of course I could rest on Sunday (since apparently God did, and he and I aren’t even in the same ballpark, so who am I to question his authority). All of this is of course smoke and mirrors to hide the fact that I’m lazy. But it occurred to me the other day while I was flossing on my own that the act itself is much more than simple dental hygiene. It is the affirmation of belief in a future.

To floss your teeth means you’re in it for the long haul. Neil Young says it’s better to burn out than to fade away and through my teen years I tended to agree with him. But as my hair grows grayer and my daughters grow older it occurs to me that I probably won’t die in a fiery blaze of glory leading the glorious revolution. In fact, it’s more likely I’ll die of a heart attack at the local mall, or get hit by a drunk driver, or maybe even a teen driver, or maybe even a teen drunk driver leaving the parking lot of the High School where I teach.

Flossing requires a daily rededication. It is, as Walt Whitman wrote, “the struggle ever renewed.” You can’t just do it sometimes. You can’t wait until right before you go to the dentist. My grandfather smoked a pack a day from the age of thirteen to seventy-six. When he finally quit it was somewhat like Tom Walker clutching onto the bible in the hopes of fooling the devil. You can try it. But my grandfather’s doctor, Tom Walker’s Devil, and your dentist? They all know the truth.

Nope, your choice to floss or not is a litmus test of your basic dedication to your life and the world. It’s like making payments on a 30-year fixed. It’s a statement of belief
that the race will be a long one, and since the teeth are coming along for the ride, you might as well make the best of them. And so it has come to my attention that on good days, on hopeful days, I floss. There are of course days when the basic goodness of humanity eludes me, my students fail to inspire, or even to complete their homework. There are days that the world continues to be ruled by small, self interested jack-a-ninnies in places as large and far away as the U.S. Congress and as close as the school district office. Joseph Cambell, a world renowned teacher of anthropology once asked a wise yogi this question: How, in this world of suffering and misery can a person choose to go on? How can we say yes to life when it repeatedly, and in innumerable ways, tells us no? The reply: You MUST say yes.

You must choose to take up the banner and charge up the hill once more. Enroll your kids in pre-school, start putting $1 a day away for their college funds, start reading Moby Dick a page at a time. Because despite the days where it seems like the world is going to fly apart, somehow, miraculously, it doesn’t. People have been predicting the end of the world for thousands of year, and yet, we’re still here.

And not only are we here, but there are even days when it is GOOD to be here. There are days when my students astonish me not only with their intelligence but, more importantly to me, their creativity. There are days when basic humanity triumphs over the grinding system. There are days when despite all my cynicism and low expectations our country comes together to elect a man to the white house who fifty years ago would have been forced to use a separate drinking fountain. And there are days when my daughters go for hours playing, laughing, and reveling with unbridled joy in the newfound world where they find themselves. And it is on those days that I renew my faith in the world, and my desire to remain in it to see everything that I can for as long as I can in the best way that I can. It is on those days that my heart is filled with hope, and my teeth are graced with floss.