



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Ashes to Ashes

There is one day a year that I wear my faith on my forehead. Yes, on Ash Wednesday anyone who crosses my path can see that I am a Christian.

And while I've been wearing the ashen cross since I was a child, it wasn't until college that I truly grasped the meaning behind it. It took a major disappointment for me to learn a lesson that impacts me still today.

I was eighteen at the time, a freshman at the University of Alabama. I'd just tried out for Capstone Men and Women, a prestigious organization of university ambassadors. As most Alabama alums know, making Capstone Men and Women is a big deal. It's a competitive, two-interview process made more daunting by the overall caliber of applicants.

With just a few slots open, the odds were against me, but I figured I had a shot. My grades and leadership experience had always opened doors for me, so why should this be different?

Unfortunately, my first interview was a flop. I was so nervous going in, and within the formal atmosphere—where half a dozen people took turns asking questions—I grew increasingly self-conscious and tongue-tied. It was an embarrassing experience I couldn't escape fast enough.

Nevertheless, I held out hope. Ever the optimist, I convinced myself it wasn't as bad as I thought. Maybe they hadn't noticed the tremor in my voice, the fragmented answers. Maybe they could see a diamond in the rough—and would grant me a second interview to redeem myself.

Suffice it to say my name was not on the list posted two days later at the Ferguson Center. Everyone I knew made the cut—everyone but me. For the first time in my life, I wasn't even a finalist, and the reality that I had, indeed, bombed something very important to me was crushing.

It was Ash Wednesday, and trying to keep my priorities straight I attended Mass that evening. Throughout the service, I dwelled on the day's events until I felt much worse. Needing affirmation, I drove to my parents' house—fifteen minutes

from campus—immediately after church.

And as I poured my heart out to Dad, waxed on about being a loser and embarrassment of a daughter, he started shaking his head. His pointed to the ashes on my forehead.

"Kari, what does it matter?" His voice was firm and compelling. "Look at your face—what does that cross mean? We all started as dust, and we'll all end as dust. Anything that burns in this world—your body, your clothes, this house—none of it matters. That interview doesn't matter. What matters is your soul, and how you live your life."

It was as if a window of clarity had opened, expanding the world before my eyes. I saw then the spiritual shortsightedness of getting worked up over something that was pretty inconsequential in the long run. Yes, I would have loved to have been a Capstone Woman, but had it worked out, my dad may never have shared this wise nugget. What I thought was the life-changing event—not making the cut—actually led to a bigger moment, a soulful awakening to things that don't burn.

This Lenten season, I'll join millions of Christians on a 40-day journey of spiritual cleansing and renewal. It will remind me of the truths I tend to forget the rest of the year: that there's life beyond the here-and-now; that this seemingly permanent world is a temporary home. My flesh is a casing, made to expire. I should use it wisely, focusing less on earthly pursuits and more on the Savior who died on the cross.

I've always been proud to be Catholic, proud of the ashen cross I receive on Ash Wednesday. It's the ultimate symbol of love, sacrifice, and eternal life. As a mortal, I started as ashes, and I will end the same. Staying mindful of this puts in perspective everything that occurs in between.

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