

All Daniel Hillard ever wanted was to be an active part of his kid’s lives—the scraped knees and the science fair projects the first kisses and the rush to school in the morning.

For the most part Daniel was able to experience all that. But when and he and his wife Miranda divorced that all changed and the court granted full custody of their three children— Lydia, Chris, and Natalie—to Miranda. The only thing Daniel was granted was a stern missive from the judge to find a job and a decent place to live if he ever hoped of gaining custody.

Not long after the judge’s order Daniel learned that Miranda planned to hire a nanny to look after the kids after school. That’s when Daniel found his opening. He would become the nanny—not as Daniel of course. With a bit of assistance from his friends in the theater business, Daniel transformed into a very convincing, sixty-something Scottish grandmother named Mrs. Euphegenia Doubtfire. It was a rather absurd notion, but nothing is ever too absurd when you’re desperate for love. Many of you know Daniel’s story as the classic 90s movie, *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

For months Mrs. Doubtfire and her brown orthotic saddle shoes fool everyone, including Daniel’s children and wife. It all comes to a head though one night when Mrs. Doubtfire accompanies Miranda, the kids, and Miranda’s new beau to one of San Francisco’s toniest restaurants in honor of Miranda’s birthday. Meanwhile, Daniel has scheduled an important dinner at the same restaurant. If all goes well with his meeting he could quit being Mrs. Doubtfire and have a job that doesn’t require him to be someone else. Over the course of the evening Daniel—or, is it Mrs. Doubtfire?—rush in and out of the restroom to change clothes so that one person can act as two people at one place at one time.

Halfway through dinner Miranda’s boyfriend Stu chokes on a piece of peppered shrimp. As he gags in agony, Mrs. Doubtfire jumps up to save the day with a perfectly-executed Heimlich maneuver. At the same time the shrimp comes flying out of his mouth, Stu falls back on Mrs. Doubtfire, and together they collapse in a heap on the floor.

In the chaos of the save, Mrs. Doubtfire's prosthetic mask peels away from Daniel's face and everyone sees Mrs. Doubtfire for who she really is—Daniel Hillard.

Game over.

Welcome to the truth.

Welcome to Ash Wednesday.

Welcome to the day when our masks come off and the stories and excuses we tell ourselves and others hit a wall, and our game is over.

We never set out to play a game. Like Daniel Hillard we've just been trying to do the best we can with what we have. We're just trying to find our way to a life of fullness and love, right? But in doing so we've made ourselves into someone we're not. We've made ourselves think that we can save ourselves and save others. Most of all, we've sought to avoid the pain of the truth—about ourselves, our fears, and our needs, and we've fooled ourselves into thinking we could think or buy or work our way out of any challenge we faced.

In our quest for security we told ourselves that there's not enough to share so we held on tight to our love and our things while looking on others with contempt or impatience.

In our longing for love we told ourselves that if we tried a little harder,
if we acted a certain way,
if we promised not to ruffle any feathers
if we could just make the other person see things our way
then we would be able to feel good about ourselves, our life, and our future.

And in our desire to be right and in control, we put on the mask of blame and self-righteous rhetoric and made everyone else the problem in our lives and world and never considered that maybe we've played a part of the mess, too.
But when the black smutty ashes mark our foreheads and bits of dust slide down our face we can do nothing but raise the white flag of surrender and as we hear the essence of our origin and our end: dust. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."
Game over.

Except with one game ending, our real living can begin.

Lent is not about fasting, repenting, and self-denial for the sake of beating yourself up or trying to prove your devotion to Jesus by being able to give up something for 40 days as Jesus says in Matthew.

These next six weeks are an open invitation to face and rid ourselves of some of the distractions that keep us from fully welcoming the Holy Spirit to make beauty out of our ashes. Ashes aren't an exercise in holy guilt tripping. They call us to remember the best thing about ourselves is not in what we do. It's not in what we attain. It's not in the commendations. It's not in the failures.

It's in our rawest, truest self.

The unadorned self.

The fragile self.

The one that we were born with and the one that God claimed by name.

As we repent today and shed all the layers we cloak ourselves in, we stand face to face with our raw need for God's mercy and love to complete us—a love God never, ever tires of giving.

Because when the dust finally settles,
the lights are turned low,
and everything else loses its luster,
that one thing that will still remain
is the blood of the Lamb washing you
white as snow.

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