

Because of You

By Justin J. Agolia
Visiting close friends, Potomac Falls, VA
Still dark outside (6:05 a.m.)
11/6/04

There's a story my mom and aunt have shared with me over the years and whenever I hear it, I just laugh at how funny it is. When I was about five or six years old, my mom and Aunt Rosemary were having a conversation over the phone. As they were talking, my aunt peered through her large, bay kitchen window to make sure her children were safe as they played in the front yard.

As they were conversing, my aunt noticed I was outside playing with my cousin Anthony. Confused, she took a double-take to make sure it really was me and then asked my mother, "Claudia, do you realize Justin is here playing with Anthony." My mom responded, "That can't be. He's outside playing in the backyard (referring to our yard)." My aunt proceeded, "Claudia, I'm looking outside with my own two eyes and I see Justin." This went on for a little bit until my mom finally realized I wasn't in our backyard, playing.

As they filled in the rest of the missing information, they found out how I arrived at my aunt's house. We had a friend of ours who was doing some painting for us over the course of a few weeks. Somehow, I convinced the painter that my mother said it was ok for him to take me to my aunt's home so I could be with my cousin. Strangely, he never questioned me or my mother; he simply took me at my word and drove me to my aunt's house.

What makes this event unique is that the painter had never been to my aunt's home so he didn't have directions. His only sense of direction was me. Obviously I didn't know the street names; I only went by familiar signs and landmarks. Whatever obstacles there were, I was determined to see my cousin. Before I go on, I must tell you that my

aunt and uncle lived one town over from ours and it took about 10-15 minutes to get from one house to the other. So it's amazing I was able to direct the painter to my aunt's home and that a five or six year old could convince an adult to take him some place without the proper authority. But even more significant, I remembered how to get there when I could barely read.

Why do I share that with you? In a nutshell: it demonstrates how meaningful relationships were to me at such a young age. Let me first say that I loved being with my cousin, Anthony. Whenever my dad or mom shared that we were going to visit my aunt and uncle, the first person who came to mind was Anthony. Whether the occasion was Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, or some other event, I could barely sleep. And then when we were together, we would play for hours. We would dream and create our own worlds; at times, we became heroic characters. We even discussed who we would marry, what our homes and lives would look like, and how close we would be (talk about strategic planning...we were visionaries).

I loved being with my cousin. The bond was so strong that whenever Anthony left my home, I would walk up the stairs, close the door to my room, and quietly cry. I was too embarrassed to express my feelings in front of anyone. But it was a strong indicator of how much I enjoyed being with him. (I assure you, I don't have that same reaction anymore. I think Anthony cries now.)

Over the years that story has been brought up several times at family gatherings. We even discussed it at a recent family wedding. All of us laugh at how funny that incident was and that I was able to pull something off like that. But on another level, the incident offers a window into my life. For me it clearly demonstrates that even at the very fundamental stages of my life, relationships were hallmark to my overall personal growth and development. They would help shape me and make who I am today. As I examine

the unique bond I had with my cousin, values such as loyalty, friendship, faithfulness, love, courage, communication, humor, family, playfulness, creativity, and the ability to dream were all part of our friendship. And without my knowing it, they were setting the groundwork for my future.

As I take panoramic view of my life, nothing matters more to me than people. It sounds too cliché of an assertion, but it's true. I love working hard and being industrious. I love my field in web design and development, especially when I can create and design pieces that get showcased all over the world. I also love the outdoors and the beauty of my surroundings. Going for walks, hiking, camping in the mountains, traveling, and experiencing other adventurous activities are exciting to me.

But when it comes to the opportunity to be with another person and "listen" to them share their story, nothing compares to it. It's hard to explain but something within me comes alive as I learn about the life of another. When I look into their eyes and catch a glimpse of their life, I'm honored just to sit across from them. Their life is full of so many complex layers, but each layer (whether they like it or not) had a place in developing who they are. When they share a part of them self with me, especially something quite painful, I want that individual to know that I recognize how difficult it was for them to share that with me. Whether it is shame, rejection, hurt, or something painful, when something very personal is shared, my ears and heart are attentively listening. If anything I want to communicate, "I'm so sorry you had to experience that in your life. That had to be quite painful. But if it means anything, I think you're truly special because it's who you are today that I see and appreciate." To be candid, when I hear someone share something so personal, it doesn't force me to question or reevaluate my view of them, nor do I feel the need to pull away. On the contrary, it actually draws me closer to them, helping me to both understand and appreciate them in a much greater capacity.

Nothing brings me more fulfillment than recognizing the value of people. Their story is profound. Each celebration they experienced and every challenge they faced greatly shaped that person. Even with my clinical training, I've learned that one of the greatest gifts one could ever offer someone is the gift of listening. Anyone can do this. You don't need a degree or certificate, just a willing and receptive heart. That's right our silence can have a positive effect on others. One of the joys for me, after listening to the other person share their life, is reflecting back to them what I see and hopefully communicating how special they are. Sometimes for the other person, just hearing what they shared mirrored back to them can be so affirming.

As I think about people and their significance, my father quickly comes to mind. Every person I've met with after my father died shared how special they felt whenever they were around him. When my father was in the hospital, one of the most distinctive things I noticed about him was his powerful gift of encouragement, even when he lost his ability to speak. Every person that exited his room always left feeling somehow changed, despite my father's pending death.

I remember an incident of a relative who came to visit my father while in the hospital. Always making a joke and offering a word of encouragement, there was no sadness found in my father's demeanor. He was very positive and funny, and gave hope even though his future was in question. As the relative left the room, he stopped me out in the hall. In a very serious tone, he shared, "You know, I came here to encourage your father but, after being with him, I think I feel better about myself than he does. It doesn't make sense." I was stunned by his comment because it showed me that even though my father's time on earth was slowly coming to a close (which none of us really knew for sure), his ability to empower, inspire, and reach out was even more compelling.

When I think of a leader, many thoughts and images come to mind. But there is one word that stands out when I think of this word – influence. For me, leadership is really one’s ability to influence another. Every great person had someone influence them. Sometimes it’s not just one person but a multitude of individuals. When you examine the life of a leader, you typically find at least one person who believed in them, someone who guided and developed them, and at some point released them to fly and spread their wings.

My father’s influence on many lives is so difficult to measure in terms of numbers. Only eternity will tell us how significant his influence was with people. I’ve been privileged to meet some of them but I assure you, I’ve only touched the surface. When I think of the many I’ve sat with and heard stories about how my dad deliberately went out of his way to extend himself, I’m shocked. I can’t believe the extent to which he went to show others how special they were. My father loved people. He was never too busy for you or me, even though his schedule was quite rigorous. As his son I watched many individuals from all walks of life seek out my father for his time, his talents, his wisdom, and his profound ability to make others feel genuinely valued. His life was magnanimous to say the least.

I just wonder when my days come to a close how well I will have spent my life with others. Will I be as compassionate and caring with people as he was? When others leave my presence will they see themselves in a new way as others did when they were with my father? Even the doctors and nurses were touched in a similar manner. Just before my father was released to go to the next hospital, many of the nurses and staff employees shared with me that they never saw a man draw so many people to his bedside. What they really saw was a true leader, one man who impacted a sundry of lives, each having a variety of backgrounds and cultures.

The power of relationships is significant to our own personal development. I can't tell you how valuable my mentors have been to me and my own growth. In many ways they've helped me sift through my life purpose and encouraged me to continue growing. Some have kept me on the straight and narrow and many have shared timely pieces of wisdom; others have passed on a specific skill.

Personal growth is one of my core life values. As far as I can remember, I always had an inquisitive bent towards asking questions. Even in college my peers would often instigate me to ask the tough questions, knowing that it would probably incite a difficult debate with some professors. As long as it forced me to wrestle with issues and prevented me from getting intellectually lazy, I was in for the challenge. I didn't care to debate for argument sake for I knew most issues were never settled by a dispute. Nonetheless I was open to growing and willing to admit I was wrong (which was probably more often the case). I had a professor share something with me which I agree with: "The more I learn, the more I realize I don't know much." Some of the things I once strongly believed in are now moot and, in some cases, flat incorrect.

In short, I want to enlarge my ability to become more genuine and real both as a human and as a follower of Christ. Even now if I'm in a relationship which prevents me growing, it won't last long. This is especially true with my faith. When people ask what religion I belong to, I sense an uncomfortable feeling inside because it implies that I'm a member of a club or an organization. As I've gotten older, I realize my faith isn't something that can be packaged. I'm certain of a few things, that being, I believe in Jesus Christ and want to emulate my life after him as my father and mother modeled to us. On the other hand, although I was introduced to my faith through my parents, it wasn't until I went to college that I really began to wrestle and think about what I believed. I had to ask myself difficult questions such as the legitimacy of the Christian

tradition, its validity not only by the internal eyewitness accounts, but also extra-biblical sources (things outside of scripture and the Christian faith). There was much for me to explore, but at the same time, there was a personal component to this whole thing also. As much as I was embarking on an intellectual journey, I also concluded that my intellectual exploration would hit some walls at some point. Therefore, there were some things that were uncomfortable to accept, but then again, when I thought of Jesus, he wasn't accepted also. Even when he grew into a man, the Pharisees and Sadducees (the most educated men of his day) had a difficult time embracing him especially when he claimed to be the way to God. He didn't fit in with their kingly expectations. I believe many of them were genuine in their desire to honor God, but Christ was an enigma. He couldn't be contained into something we could package. He went against the mores of the day and stepped beyond the confines of what was considered proper and right.

This is where I believe experience comes into play. As much as I cringe at the idea of using the word "experience" with Christianity because of those who have based their faith solely on experiences only, I still believe my faith is in large part an experience and quite personal. I realize some approach their faith intellectually which is fine but I believe, they are missing something.

Personally my faith has been and will continue to be a journey into understanding and knowing the man called Jesus. I believe the holy scriptures were given to us to be the bed stone of our faith. It gives us the ability to first stand on truth and it gives us a glimpse into the mind and heart of God. But at the same time, I also believe the Bible is not a cookbook of rules and regulations. As much as we want to legislate and nail down very difficult issues, there are many issues that are not clearly settled in scripture. We can come to conclusions based on things we read in scripture, but they're not always clear.

One may wonder why God didn't give us a rule book like professional sport teams go by. Wouldn't this be much easier for us? Would there be less denominations and church splits if things were so clearly laid out? To be honest, I don't think these were God's concern. Here is my own conclusion, but God can correct me when I get to heaven. I truly believe if he made scripture a laundry list of clear rules for how we're to live, I don't believe we would feel the need for God. We would perhaps be more enamored with a book than God himself.

This is perhaps the strong distinction between my faith and others. If I was asked to define Christianity in one word it would be *relationship*. This is so radical in that God would desire a personal relationship with him. Even the trinity, a mystery that no human can truly explain away intellectually, is based on a relationship. And then out of our relationship with God, he desires that we establish and cultivate relationships with others.

It sounds so easy, doesn't it? Well, to be honest, it's not. When I think of the challenge I have in keeping relationships I have with those I love and know, this isn't easy. But as I shared earlier, relationships are meaningful to me and a core part of my being. They've helped me become who I am today. So this idea of having a relationship with God is an even more difficult task. I can't see him physically; I can't "hear" his voice as I do with those I speak with in person or by phone. Yet, I can on some level still seek to know and truly understand him through scriptures and by my experiences. By the way, when I use the word "know", I'm not using this in the strict sense as to mean intellectually know, although it does include our minds. I use the word "know" to include the idea of an intimate relationship such as one knowing another person in a very close relationship. It implies a relationship built on trust whereby even the most personal details are communicated and shared freely without fears of rejection. The reality for me is that I yearn to know Christ just as he knows me, but I struggle to fully trust him.

Does that make me question God and his presence in my life? No. Are there times when he feels far removed? Of course but then I would be basing a lot of this on my feelings. Remember, even Christ asked that his cup be removed, referring to his crucifixion, yet he still went to the cross. Does one conclude that God, his own father, abandoned his son? No, because we have several eyewitness accounts that he returned on earth. We obviously know through scripture God had another more significant reason for Christ going through what he did on the cross.

As for my father's passing, I've pondered and yes, even questioned God's role in my father's infliction and why he took him home. Did he abandon my father much like it seemed as he did with Christ? Humanly speaking, it certainly feels that way. Many times I felt abandoned and even betrayed by this God and, you know what, there are times when those feelings still come to mind. But then when I reflect on Christ and his experience on the cross, I can also say, "God, you had another reason for my dad leaving us so soon. I may not understand now and certain I won't understand this until I'm called home. But I need you. Help me when I fail to trust your hand."

I wish I could feel as if I'm some spiritual giant as others are. I'm not. The only thing I can share with you is that I desire to grow in a much deeper relationship with Christ, as much as it is a struggle for me. Shortly after my dad passed, I took many long walks alone. Bewildered by what happened, all I could say was, "if anything good could come of this experience, may it be that I learn what it means to have a real relationship you (God), even if it means starting from scratch." I still feel this way. More significantly, if I can truly experience a genuine friendship with him, I trust I can better connect with others and share a deeper relationship with them.

I believe the success of my father's ability to connect with others was his ongoing walk with Christ. Each day he carved out time to "meet" with him, whether it was in

prayer, reading scripture, or just listening to his life. I honestly believe his effectiveness in reaching-out became greater as he grew with his time with the Lord. But this took time and a willingness to submit his life to God, a daily yielding of his self.

Thought:

Has the word *relationship* become a catch phrase we flippantly use today to describe two individuals dating? In my faith, is it used so often that we've forgotten ourselves what a relationship with Christ really means? Do we encourage others to "have a relationship with Jesus," yet, we really don't know how to have one with him?

I know I have struggled with this. For the past five years, I've especially questioned the kind of legacy I would leave behind. Will my impact lie just in the writing on a tombstone, or will it rest in the hearts of others I meet each day? Since my dad died on July 17, 2003, this underlying question continues to knock on my heart and it seems to get stronger with each passing day.

One of my favorite movies which demonstrate the power of one individual impacting many is "Mr. Holland's Opus." It's about a man who dreams of making it big by writing a great American composition. In the meantime, he accepts a teaching position at the newly renamed John F. Kennedy High School in 1964. We find out early in the movie that he has no desire to be there. He simply takes a teaching position as a music teacher, but this is only temporary, at least as he sees it.

Over time we see a transformation happen with Mr. Holland. At first his job is seen as a means to reaching his real passion: composing. His heart isn't really with the program or the kids; yet, in time, we see that he slowly begins to find his job rewarding. Even when his lectures and assignments don't fire his pupils' passion for the subject, he helps his students see that playing music is supposed to be fun – it's about heart and not the notes on a page. Even when his students don't care about music appreciation, we see him continually nurturing and encouraging his students to succeed. He believes in his students and develops a strong loyalty with the student body. One of the strong ironies we find in the movie is that Mr. Holland's son is deaf, making it impossible for him to ever appreciate the musical talent his father had.

Unfortunately, Mr. Holland never got to see his dream of creating a masterful composition become a reality. After 30 years of teaching, we find out that the school has to make some budgetary cuts and one of the programs chosen to be cut is the music program. His career and his life appear to be over. Everything he once dreamed of seemed to be irrelevant and wasted; nothing mattered anymore.

Near the end of the movie we find Mr. Holland sitting with the football coach discussing his pending future. We find Mr. Holland quite vulnerable, so much so that he admits he's scared. As Mr. Holland questions his life, he shares something which I believe is really the way many people see themselves:

It's almost funny. I got dragged into this gig kicking and screaming and now it's the only thing I want to do. You work your whole life. You work for thirty years because you think that what you do makes a difference. You think it matters to people. Then you wake up one morning and you find out...well, no you've made a little error there...you are expendable!

After this, Mr. Holland's wife and son come to his classroom to take him home. As he nears the exit, Mr. Holland hears something in the auditorium. As the doors open to the auditorium, we find a room filled with many of his former students. Each student was representative of a life that was changed because of Mr. Holland. We even find that one of his students who struggled with playing the clarinet and low self-worth was now the governor of the state. At one point she counters his underlying beliefs with this statement:

Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life and on a lot of lives I know. But I have a feeling that he considers a great part of his own life misspent. Rumor had it he was always working on this symphony of his. And this was going to make him famous, rich, probably both. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous, at least not outside of our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he would be wrong, because I think that he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame. Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life.

Every time I watch this movie, tears quickly come to my eyes. For one, it reminds me of my father, a man who believed he was a very ordinary man, when, in reality, he was quite extra-ordinary. I don't believe my dad ever knew how many lives he touched. It wasn't about numbers or credentials; it was about living a life of obedience, fully abandoned to God.

As I look at that room full of students, I believe there will come a time in heaven, when my father will turn around and see the vast number of lives he touched. I believe he

will hear these words several times, "Because of you, I'm standing here in eternity with you and now I can enjoy eternity with my creator. Thank you."

I know I will be one of those individuals thanking my father. I'm just starting to see how much my father lived for others, especially his family. As my awareness increases, there is a deep sense of appreciation that I want to express to my father. Maybe the time I have left on earth will afford me a certain maturity and greater appreciation for my dad, and may it grow in such a way that when we meet in eternity, I may truly be able to say, "Because of you dad, I'm here. Thank you."

As I'm challenged to see how I can make a difference in the lives of others (even when you feel as if you're expendable or of no value), I also encourage you to see how you could make a difference. As my father has taught me, **one life can truly make a difference**. So can you.