

Bold Request

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Written in Starbucks, Commack, NY
Beautiful Blue Skies, Listening to John Williams
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It's taken me almost a year to write this one particular reflection but I finally found the emotional energy to write it. It's basically a very unique experience I had on one of the most grueling days since my father passed away.

It was about one year ago that I found myself sitting in my father's office and being so moved that I had to leave work for the day. Stepping into his office each morning and resting my hands on his desk was always a difficult exercise for me. Quite often I would have to hold back my emotions because I couldn't believe my father was never going to return to our house, let alone the office I now work in. I would never hear our dog, Kole, bark as he once did whenever dad returned home from work, nor would I get to see him dance as he did when father walked in the back door. I would never see mom and dad kiss again and offer each other their warm embrace. Even more familiar to me, I would never get the chance to hear his footsteps slowly climb the stairs in our home and find his smiling face peer through the door to my bedroom. He used to say when I was home from college, "How was your day, son?" How I wish I could hear him ask me that question again.

Most everything in the office is just as he once had it. Each object mirrors the father I knew: a very simple man, but a heart filled with eternal riches. Scripture verses, pictures of his family, his countless writings, and his favorite books (including the many bibles he read, cover to cover) now gather with dust. These items, which used to surround him, now encircle me. Although my father was an astute businessman, he really understood that earthly possessions pale in comparison to the things that stir the heart of God - people. That's why he never cared to impress others or be someone he wasn't. His

main desire was to obey his Lord, love his family and, then connect with people he met throughout his life.

On that particular day, as I began to recognize that my dad's life could be summarized by the things surrounding me, I just couldn't stay in the office any longer. I had to leave and take the rest of the day off to be alone. I decided to go to a state park which I found about a month earlier, located in St. James, NY. I love the fact that it's hidden from the main roads. Even when you arrive at the entrance, it is veiled to some degree. The entry is small and narrow and camouflaged by greenery. In fact it's so small that my car could barely fit into the entrance of the parking lot.

When I stepped out of my car, my entire body was numb. I didn't know what to expect or what would result from my getting away. I just knew I needed to stop what I was doing and address what I was thinking and feeling inside. With no one in the park (as far as I could see), I simply began to walk and openly talk to God. I expressed my utter frustration with Him, for his being silent and so apparently absent throughout this painful ordeal. I openly shared how grueling it was to watch my mother - who I dearly love and care for - suffer each day. Why should she have to experience so much heartache? Hasn't she gone through enough in her lifetime? And why should my brothers face the rest of their lives without their father; now they're fatherless and, in a sense, orphans. Why wasn't I chosen to leave this earth? Why wasn't I dealt that dreadful disease? When I look at my father and the influence he had with so many people, why was his life seemingly cut so short and not mine?

My walk continued until I entered an opening into a forested/heavily-wooded area. I didn't know where I was going but it really didn't matter to me...actually, nothing mattered that day except for unloading my frustrations, my pain, and my sheer brokenness. I didn't care about much, apart from the man I knew and loved. Now he was in the presence of Christ. I, on the other hand, stood in this remote area, watching

the sun penetrate the somewhat lifeless leaves still left hanging, almost as if they were exerting one last effort to stay connected to the branches.

As I watched the beauty of this picture and listened to the silence, I looked up at the deep, blue sky and pleaded with God to recognize and honor my father for the life he lived. I felt like an attorney defending his client, but I'm not sure how well I made my argument. Although his life was curtailed prematurely (at least that's one way of viewing this), he did much to show his profound love for God. He shared with me how much he loved the Lord and how he wanted to honor him with the life he was given. I watched his words in action on many occasions by his generous giving and his exceptional ability to reach out to others. On this day, I just stood there declaring the greatness of the man, even though I had no right to judge my father's actions, his motives, or his heart. Only God could give an accurate account of his life.

But here I was, his eldest son, outwardly talking in the middle of nowhere and begging God, first, to listen to me and, second, that my father would be given the treasures he so richly deserved. And the treasures from what I gather from scripture are not riches as you and I would come to understand them as, but heavenly ones - things far beyond what I could ever comprehend, and blessings so great that your only response would be wonder and awe. For some reason, I believe the treasures God will present to deserving individuals will be connected to people. I could be wrong though. I have been many times.

With tears in my eyes, I also asked that when my day comes and I'm called home to be with Him and rejoined with my father, I wanted to publicly stand next to my dad and proudly testify of the God-focused life my father once lived while on earth, hopefully before the entire heavenly host of angels and home comers. I'm quite sure by the time I get there, the Lord will have already recognized him, but I would like to still attest to my

father's life. For me, it's like being invited to a party to recognize and honor an individual, yet miss it entirely. Maybe I could still partake in something when I arrive.

Knowing my father, he would never allow me to do such a thing out of sheer embarrassment and more significantly, his humility. He wouldn't feel comfortable with this website, much less any discussions about him. He would always make it clear that it was Christ who transformed his life; that was his testimony.

But if I could speak for a moment as his son, it's that desire to publicly attest to and recognize my father for his willingness to lay aside worldly fame, earthly riches, and selfish ambitions to live a life of downward mobility – that choice to serve over being served, of giving up over getting more, of being last over being first. From the perspective I glean from his life, being a leader wasn't hoarding over or controlling others; it was recognizing that in order to truly lead, he would have to surrender his life and be willing to be led by the Lord, himself. And over the years, I began to see him slowly live out this wonderful principal.

Today, we recognize individuals for how much money they make, the possessions they obtain, the people they know or are known to associate with, the positions obtained, the clothes they wear, and the exclusive lives they live apart from others. I confess I get caught up in this worldly mindset from time to time. God is continually working in me in my weak areas. I'm simply a lifelong, human project and thankful He hasn't given up on me.

After my exchange in the woods, I decided to return from the path I once walked on. This led me to an open area where I could see for quite a distance. It was a beautiful view of sloping foliage as far as my eyes could see. The air was brisk, the sky was blue. Once again, I paused to continue my discussion with God. This chat was quite different because its focus was on the future – my family's and mine. I confessed my lack of trust in his ability to take care of us and his so-called goodness with my family. But I knew

enough that I was helpless to do anything on my own. It wasn't that I needed his help at that specific time in my life...I needed him, all of him, continually.

In a strange way, I also knew that I needed to be broken further than I thought I could possibly handle. You would think that losing my father did enough breaking, but for me, this was a personal thing between God and me. I wanted him to renew my befuddled thoughts and heal the deep wounds, to the point that my pride could no longer stand on its own. I wanted to surrender everything to him, but I knew that in this lifetime, I'm not sure I would be capable of doing such a thing, that is, completely surrender everything. I know we sing songs about giving Him everything and surrendering all to Him. But I'm not sure that it's fully possible while on earth, at least for me, that is. It would be a slow process for me, but with each passing day, I would hope that I was moving in the direction of giving more and more over to God, one less finger clamped-down on self, while one more finger anchors on to Christ. Bottom-line: my life was shipwrecked and I desperately needed the help of the Holy Spirit.

After I expressed this, I specifically began to pray for the significant people in my life, by name. The prayer flowed naturally and continued like a river moving downstream. I then asked God to help me clearly establish an authentic relationship with him, something I've never experienced with anyone else, a friendship that was grounded on trust, transparency and vulnerability; one that challenged me to grow and develop but also pulled me closer to him when I wavered. I wanted something real, something that lasted a lifetime and carried me into eternity. Furthermore, I asked that he clearly define my purpose and the mission he had for me in extending his love to others. I didn't want to waste my life on relationships that I didn't need to be involved in or, participate in activities that would draw me away from my God-ordained calling – that specific plan he had in his mind long before I was ever conceived in the womb.

I didn't know much then and still don't know much now, but there was one thing I was sure of – I wanted to know Jesus. And from that relationship, I wanted to etch a significant mark in this world, not because I felt so capable or so gifted, but only because of my love for Christ. Whether I felt I should have been the candidate to go home prematurely or not, I wanted to take the years left on my calendar and spend them well.

This went on for about an hour. For some reason, I felt my venting and heartfelt dialogue with God was done. So I decided to head back on the familiar path when something strange happened to me. As I shared I didn't see anyone around the entire afternoon, so it made the experience quite intimate and personal. But after walking over a few hills and some turns, I finally came to an overpass. Here was yet another impressive sight for me to observe and experience. At that time of the day, the sky was a pinkish-red and it pierced through the billowy clouds, descending magnificent rays of light towards the earth. Immediately, I felt I caught a glimpse of heaven. I can't describe in words what I saw but it really was brilliant.

Then something occurred, which has only happened a few times in my lifetime: I was moved to tears by the greatness and holiness of God. It was that ability to see clearly how small my life was in comparison to how great God is. My vision became blurry as tears welled-up in my eyes, but as my eyes refocused, something else happened – I began to sense something welling up within my soul – it was a very bold request. But this request was also somewhat of a vision also.

Everything around became instantly silent. The air was still. I then daringly went before God and made my plea. Knowing there would come a day when I would return home and be with Christ, I wanted to ask Him if I could possibly have a moment alone with him. I wanted the opportunity to take a walk with him along a beautiful river, an impressive mountain, or just a plain path. I would love to skip a rock with him, sit in front of warm fire on a beach, or even sit in silence watching the sun set behind a tranquil

lake. I wanted that opportunity to walk right beside him and just hear the leaves rustle as his feet hit the crowd. It was that intense desire to be with him, alone - with no one around, just the two of us.

Whatever time we had together alone, I wanted at some point to stand in front of him and look directly into his deep, penetrating eyes and ask him to show me his heart for the world, specifically his love for humanity. As I looked into his eyes, I could see (much like a crisp, Hi definition screen) exactly what he experienced on earth - the passionate tears he wept, his unconditional love for humans, his anger at what was wrong and unjust, his frustration with his own disciples and with the Pharisees, his contagious joy and laughter, the places he visited, those he chose to associate with (some of which were shocking to me), his fear in the garden, and his aloneness on the cross including the moment his earthly life was extinguished. This intimate view of his life continued on up to the moment I died. But for the first time ever, I understood his love and passion for people.

At the same moment, Christ then looked directly at me. After seeing all this, I felt so unworthy (and rightfully so) that even standing before this great King seemed so disrespectful. However, for some reason I didn't get on my knees. I felt he wanted to speak to me and look directly into my eyes. At the point our eyes met, besides the strong feelings of unworthiness before such a holy God, there was also this feeling of intense love and acceptance, something I hadn't ever experienced before at that level. There was something within me that I had always feared - his rejection, but throughout my life, I had known through scripture that he somehow loved me. Even though I knew this, I still wanted at that point to hear him tell me that he loved me.

There is something about "hearing" those words when it comes from someone you admire and trust. It has the ability to shed any fears or doubts you may have and places a large, emotional deposit within your soul. I can only understand this love from my

parents and a few others I admire and trust. But even that is minute compared to the love our Lord has for us. I admit I'm clueless to the love he has for me. It's hard to read about the love Christ has for us, when we have people who tell us they love us, yet, wound us by their words and their actions. Unfortunately, it's part of the world we live in. All of us are at fault for inflicting some form of pain.

But then there is Christ, One who loves us on a far greater scale, much superior than any of us will ever understand in our lifetime. His love is so pure, unadulterated, and unconditional that it sheds any fears we have of him, that even though we don't deserve this form of love, it still draws us near him.

That was the experience I had that day. I was humbled to say the least and even then, I didn't really understand what humility was. But for me, it was the understanding that Christ - who was perfect in all areas - chose to die for me: someone who was of no value to him, someone who had nothing to offer Him. There was nothing beautiful with me that I could capture his eyes or attention. I didn't have a gift to give, a talent to offer him which he needed. Throughout my lifetime I failed him. I betrayed him every time I chose sin over being holy. I felt so undone before this man I called Christ. Here I was weeping but for a different reason. It was that deep, and I mean deep cry to be close to Christ and be held by him and know he loved me.

I love drama. I'm amazed at how one can be transformed and become another character. Acting allows us to create scenes, to imagine and dream, to actually feel and enter into real emotions, to communicate inward passions so much so that others can partake in the experience also. It can cause us to think and change. "What does this have to do with our relationship with Christ," you may be asking yourself? My fear is that sometimes, even in our walk with Him, we can all partake in some form of acting with God and with fellow believers. Let me just say, I know how to talk the language in our

Christian community. I know how to “act” or fit the role that seems to be Christian. But that’s not what Christ wants from us.

He wants people who are willing to admit their need of him. Our Lord wants people who have pliable, soft hearts. He wants people who are willing to give up and hand over their lives to him (a very painful task for all of us) so that we can truly be people of purpose, of real substance, who want to serve, and ultimately, make a difference in this world.

Thought:

When I think of that desire to know and hear directly from Christ that he loves me, it’s a powerful image for me. There is something very special knowing you are loved by another person. It does something to you. It pushes you forward, and sometimes carries you over some very difficult terrain.

I’ve been very fortunate to have two, great parents who loved me. There were many instances in my life when my mother and father took the time to tell me they loved me. When I didn’t believe in myself, they did. They would say, “You can do this.” Their consistent love for me is perhaps the greatest reason I can carry on today, even without my father.

I remember something my father said to me during the last few days of his life. His comment took me by surprise. It was something I never knew he thought about as it pertained to me. It was one of those things that a son says to himself quietly under his breathe, “Really?”

Today, that comment helps me move forward. I regret that I don’t have my father around any longer to tell me “keep going son, don’t stop.” And even though I don’t have that special someone behind me, whispering in my ear that she loves me, I can carry on because of the love my parents demonstrated to me.

In the same way, there is this desire deep within me to know Christ like I’ve never known him before. I want to “hear” him say, “I love you, Justin.” I want to know I’m accepted by him, not cerebrally but in my heart. Conversely, I want to tell him how much I love him, even as broken and imperfect my love is. Christ doesn’t need my affirmation. However, it’s somehow wired within my DNA to want to express it to him. For me, this is really the heart of worship.

Perhaps you’re like me, struggling to know that there is really Someone who loves you, who accepts you as you are, and has a special - a very special plan for your life. Maybe you’ve never had a parent tell you they loved you. Or maybe they did tell you,

but their actions seemed to imply something different. So now it's hard for you to believe you're really special. Unfortunately, I can't write anything to remove those painful memories. I wish I could say something that would mend your broken heart and let you see your true self as God sees you. I can only tell you that God knows your pain, just as he knows my difficulties. He understands how much you long to hear the words, "I love you." And even though you may not hear his words audibly, he does. Scripture shows us that you're in his thoughts continually and I do believe he is actively engaged in our lives; we just don't always recognize his presence.

If I can encourage you with this, try this one exercise. Find someone you care for and take them aside - a time when you have their attention, and tell them how much you love them. If your married, ask your spouse, "Did anyone tell you today how much you are loved? If not, then let me be the first to tell you how much I love you." If verbal expressions aren't shared too often, watch how powerful those few words can have on that loved one. If you're a parent, tell your son or your daughter how much you love him/her. Ask them if they know who loves them. It may seem so foolish, but there will come a day when they're alone, when they feel abandoned or betrayed by someone they loved, and those words will be the very thing that carries them through that situation or may even bring them home, if need be. And if your single, you can always find someone to express your love (obviously be careful in how you state your words for fear that it gets misconstrued 😊). But even in your singleness, you can show your love for others. Love is the greatest gift you and I have at our disposal to give away. It has the power to breathe life into someone who may have lost hope.

I recall a time when I led a youth group in Virginia Beach, VA. I was in seminary, working, and trying to run this group of young people. At the youth meetings I led them in worship and then shared something from my heart which was relevant to their culture. After a year a half, I could feel the stressors sapping my energy. I was exhausted and slowly getting frustrated because I never had the staff I was promised. So I was left on my own to lead this group. It certainly wasn't the model I had for ministry.

After I fulfilled my commitment to the church, I decided to resign and took some time off. I needed it. But at the same time, I felt I didn't have much of an impact on the teens. But two years later, I learned something quite different. I was at a Halloween festival hosted by one of the local churches. It was a huge event and thousands of people from all over the Virginia would come and bring their children. There were Xtreme-game activities, hay rides, homemade foods, and a plethora of things to enjoy with the family.

As I was walking in the darkness of the fields, I literally bumped into a few kids. I recognized one of the boys and he recognized me. He was in the youth group I led a few years back. He shared how my leading that group changed his life. At that time, he shared that he was going through a very difficult time, that he wasn't walking the life he

knew he should have led, and really lost hope in a lot of things. But he shared that his life took a dramatic change as he watched me in the back lead that group. He said he was now walking with the Lord. I was so humbled by his words. I thanked him, but I'm not sure if he realized how much it meant to me. I walked away stunned and told the Lord I didn't realize that what little I did would have an impact on one life. God somehow uses what little we have and turns it into gold.

I share that story not because it included me. That wasn't my objective. My intent was to show you that God can use us to touch a life, one at a time. But let me be very clear, it starts with Christ, not us. He must be the center. And as we grow in this relationship, we will learn to love others in a much more authentic way. May God remind you today of how much you are treasured and deeply loved. And even when you don't hear his voice, may you remind someone today that you love them. You may never know until eternity what kind of impact it had.