

Well-Earned Hyphen

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6/05/04

On April 10, 2004, as a way of celebrating my father's 58th birthday, we decided to go to the cemetery. From the day we buried him to this particular day, I had not been back to visit. I actually tried a few times but had to turn back; it was simply too painful. I have enough reminders of my father's life around me each day that the thought of visiting the place where we last left him was just too much to bare.

But now was the time for me to go and visit with my family. What I didn't anticipate was just how painful it would actually be. Upon driving onto the cemetery grounds, my eyes immediately filled with tears and, if I thought that was awkward, I couldn't stop tearing up.

How could it be that this was the place we laid my father to rest? How is it that he no longer was with us? Why so sudden? Why couldn't my father be home this year for his birthday? What happened to that special meal we were supposed to share together to celebrate his life? Why were we robbed of this time together? I had lots of questions but found no answers. All of these thoughts encircled my mind and so many memories seemed to flicker by, one after the other, reminding me of the greatness of the man I came to love, respect, and grow-up with.

I stood there with my family, arms around each other's shoulders, viewing a simple sign staked in the ground (the tombstone hadn't arrived yet). This small indicator reminded us of who we were standing before: a humble man who asked for nothing but gave away himself; by far, the greatest gift a person could give away. How uncomfortable I felt as I stood there hovering over this small sign. Here was a great man with only a small sign indicating that

he existed on this earth. It seemed too simplistic, too ordinary for an extraordinary man.

There was something that still troubled me even more - that hyphen. Here I was standing in front of my father's burial plot and seeing my father's name with the years, "April 10, 1946 - July 17, 2003." I certainly noticed the large, looming dates. How could I not miss them? In fact, as we walked between the tombstones to get to my father's plot, my brother and I noticed the dates on each epitaph. So many young people left this earth quite young. We were shocked.

But, still, our focus was on the years, the beginning and the ending, and not that dash. That dash seemed so small and so irrelevant, just a small blip etched into the stone. Shouldn't the dash be the focus instead of the two dates? Shouldn't I focus on the "in-between" and not the finality of a life? Obviously, that dash didn't come close to portraying my father's life.

In my father's case, although his time spent on earth was quite brief, he lived a very full and meaningful life. Everyday was new and exciting for him. With all the challenges he faced, from his perspective, each day was a wonderful adventure, another day to not only make a difference in the life of another, but a significant difference. It was an opportunity to leave his imprints upon the heart of another and, in his case, his touch reached far beyond one person. Whether it was his family, his place of work, or his commitment to helping other organizations, my father chose to make the best use of his time. I remember reading a story in college which really stuck with me as a reminder of this lesson.

A young boy had just gotten out of elementary school and was heading home on the school bus. As his bus approached his house, he noticed his

grandmother lying flat on the ground in the front yard, close to many of the bushes. The boy, scared and worried, jumped off the bus and ran directly across the yard to see if his grandmother was ok.

Surprisingly, the boy noticed that his grandmother was quite calm. Expecting to see the worst, he saw someone composed and in control. He asked his grandmother if she was ok. She shared that she lost her balance and fell to the ground and, therefore, wasn't able to get up without the assistance of someone else. And since the boy's parents weren't home, she decided to make the best use of her time by weeding the bushes that were within her reach. What a lesson in seizing the day, better stated, seizing the opportunity even when it appears bleak.

That story has impacted me to this day. That was first time I had learned the Latin phrase, "Carpe Diem." However, although I may have never heard the phrase before, I was learning this powerful lesson from my parents since I was a child. Both of them sought to make the best of their situations and that attitude permeated into our lives.

Over the course of this past year, I've enjoyed meeting people who knew my father, firsthand. The unique stories they shared and the deep admiration and love they expressed for him not only makes me proud of the father I had, but they also inspire me to seize my life and take hold of every moment. As a result, I don't look at difficulties as road blocks, but as opportunities to make a difference, not so much with business or opportunities for career advancement, but with people. I want my difference to have eternal ramifications, not just immediate ones.

Let me share one of the stories I heard about my dad. When my father worked at NYU, there was a time when his office was directly located within

one of the veteran's hospitals. During his lunch break, there were times when he would go out with a group of individuals. As the group would exit the building, it became commonplace that my father would get separated from the group. Often, they would turn around and find my father helping a veteran or someone with a physical handicap through the front entrance. This wasn't on one occasion. It appears this happened quite often.

What makes me appreciate these stories is that I would have never known this about my father unless someone else shared them with me. He would never tell me what he would do for others. Often, his focus was on how I was doing. His giving wasn't something extra; it was woven into the very fibers of who he was.

My dad has definitely inspired me to make a significant difference in my world, to not settle for mediocrity, and to honor God with my entire life, whether it is seen or not seen. What matters is not what others see or know of my life but what God knows. In fact, even my "doing" or busyness doesn't excite God. It's what lies within my heart that is important to him. God desires a humble person, one who has completely surrendered his/her life to his purposes and willing to be used to serve him and others.

I was recently asked to speak at a church and reflect on my father's life. I decided to begin my research in scripture, the same book my father used to start his day with. My attention quickly went to a closer examination of the life of Noah. What intrigued me the most was this phrase found in Genesis 6:9 "**...walked with God,**" which was in reference to Noah. What makes this phrase so unique is that it's only used with one other person in scripture - Enoch. There are plenty of references in scripture as to others walking before

God or having the heart of God, but this idea of walking *with* God is only given to two individuals.

In keeping with the idea of making a significant difference in one's world, I asked myself, "How did Noah make a difference in his world?" I found four areas where he made a difference: 1) his family, 2) creation, 3) future generations, and 4) with God.

Because of Noah's integrity and righteous life, his family immediately benefited and was spared the tragic flood. "The Lord then said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.'" (Genesis 7:1). It's amazing how our lives can impact those around us, especially our family.

Creation benefited because God told Noah to bring two of every kind of animal, male and female. We can certainly make a difference in our communities and our immediate surroundings.

Today, we benefit from Noah's righteous life. God made a covenant, a promise to never destroy the earth by a flood, a promise he has kept to this day. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (9:11). In fact, the rainbow is a reminder of that solemn promise.

Lastly, Noah made a difference with God. God intended to destroy the entire human race, but because of Noah and his walk with God, history was changed. "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:8). We read in II Chronicles 16:9 that God is looking throughout the earth for those who will partner with him.

It's amazing that God desires to partner with us, but he's specifically looking for men and women who are loyal and willing to commit their entire

lives to him. Surrendering our lives is not an easy task for us because we fear losing our entire identity. However, I would contest that when we surrender our lives to Christ, we actually become more human. Thus we don't lose our selves as you and I would think, but we actually become more authentic and better capable of connecting with others. And as a result, we have the ability to make a significant difference in the lives of others.

As I reflected on the life of Moses, I began to see that my father made a difference in many of these same areas. I can say a lot of things about my father, but I can only look at his actions and see if his words complemented his lifestyle. Unfortunately, not many individuals have lives where their internal life is harmonious with their external life. My father certainly did.

I recognize I have a model, a standard to follow and live by. I don't feel, unfortunately, capable of meeting that high standard. The reality is that on my own my strength, I am inadequate to live a life that is holy and righteous, where my heart is congruous with my outward life. But with my eyes truly focused each day on the One who is completely authentic and real, I can make a difference in this world. In other words, I must choose to spend time each day with God, meeting him in the Word to know his heart, coupled with prayer and, perhaps even more important, time just to be silent and listen, something I confess I struggle with. I remember talking with Tony Campolo, Eastern College sociology professor. He shared that he spends his first waking hour in bed, alone with God and totally silent. From his standpoint, he feels it is more important to listen to God than spend that whole hour talking about a lot of things. What a fresh perspective that was for me.

This is the life I desire to live. With whatever time I may have left, I choose to make a significant difference in the lives of others, but now my impact

is directly connected to my walk with God. It's not what I think I can do that makes the difference; instead, my impact is directly correlated to my relationship with God, the One who gives me worth and value, even when I am of no value to Him. Thankfully, God chooses to use us not because of us but in spite of us.

Thought:

What about the hyphen in your life? Will the dates on your tombstone simply stand out more than the dash? Are you making a difference now or are you waiting 10-15 years to somehow find the time? Are you willing to live a life that is extraordinary now or is ordinary fine with you?

I encourage you: step out from what you deem most comfortable. You don't need to be famous to make an impact. First, yield/surrender your life to God and tell him your heart. Let him know that you need him more than you think you need yourself. Let go of your pride and ask him to show you how you can make a difference. And be persistent with your request. God desires us to continually seek him daily. Make that relationship your number one priority, even as difficult as it may seem at times.

Let me encourage you that you can make a difference even with the most simple gifts you possess within you. Try this: tell one of your co-workers how much you appreciate them. Be specific. Don't be vague. Tell them how they have made a difference in your life. Sometimes, just placing your hand on that person's shoulder is a way of saying I appreciate you.

Or, tell your loved one, whether it is your spouse, your child, or significant other, not only how much you love them, but tell them specifically why you love them. The more specific you are with your words, the greater the meaning it will have for that specific individual.

Even in our technological age where e-mail is one-click away, go to the store and select a special card. Take the time to write that person and encourage them with your heart. Even if it's your spouse, mail it to them instead of leaving it on their pillow. Catch them off guard. You're right, it costs something and it takes time. But isn't that what makes the difference - you going out of your way to remind someone of their special presence, how their life touches yours in a very unique way. And what's more significant about this, you never know what it will do in the life of that individual. It may simply change their life completely.

Be a **difference-maker** - it has eternal ramifications.