

Your Rear-View Mirror

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(Starting to feel like fall, 63 degrees)
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MTV has a reality show entitled, "Real World." The show brings together young people from all parts of the country with various backgrounds, personalities, and worldviews. The mixture of people is really what creates the dynamic interactions between the house members, forcing the rest of the world to peer in and look at how these ordinary people live with each other.

Each season, MTV locates a place somewhere around the country (including one episode from London) to create a home for these individuals. It's amazing what they do. They'll take a home, a warehouse, or some unsightly structure and transform it into the most exciting place to live.

I can't say that I've followed this particular show or most reality shows in general. However, as I was flipping through the channels, I ran across this most recent episode of MTV's Real World. This one caught my attention so I watched several of the ½ shows in sequence. Although I can't say I embrace the values expressed by all the members, I was intrigued by one particular episode. Let me explain.

The setting is Austin, TX and its Valentine's Day. Danny, one of the house members, is shopping with his roommate Nehemiah. Danny has a date planned for Melinda (a.k.a., Mel), another housemate, later that evening and definitely wants to impress her; however, he'll have to amaze her with a small budget. As Danny and Nehemiah are out for the afternoon, Danny's father calls and leaves a message with one of Danny's roommates, requesting that he call him and that it was important.

When he returns to the house, it's obvious he's excited about his date with Mel. Who wouldn't be? He hands Mel a dozen roses and anticipates a great evening with her. Little does he know that his life will radically change in just a few minutes. When he finds out that his father called earlier, he knew something was wrong. Sadly, his intuition was correct. As his father shares, Danny hears the words any son would dread hearing from a parent. His father says, "I've got some bad news...your mom died...she died this morning, Dan. She died of a heart attack..."

It's heart wrenching to see this unfold especially in front of millions of viewers. What made it worse was that his relationship with his mother was already conflicted. It appears his parents are divorced or at least separated, which already complicated the situation. Feelings of guilt quickly surfaced as Danny realized he never got to say goodbye to his mother. And the fact that he was in Austin, TX for the reality show and not with his mother in Massachusetts made him feel horrible.

I immediately knew why I connected with this young man. Like Danny, I had similar feelings of guilt for being away from my family. For me, I was away from my family for several years because of my extended academic training. But now I questioned that decision. I felt selfish in every sense of the word. I even questioned every decision I made during my father's illness. Did I make the right choices with each physician and administrator? Were any of the failed hospital procedures because of some oversight on my part? What did I do wrong? For my entire life, my parents took care of me when I was ill or near death on some occasions, and now it was my turn to step-up to the plate. This was my time to come through for my father. It was my window of opportunity to do something. From a human perspective, I was racing against time and felt in some way responsible for his safety, care, and return to good health. Of course,

I had to do whatever I could to give my father the best of care, but ultimately, my dad's life was in God's hands, not mine or even the finest of physicians.

Yet, in spite of my understanding, I still carried strong feelings of guilt associated with the process of seeing my father quickly pass before me. At the moment he expired, I felt like I failed him. Not only did I feel like I disappointed him, but also my family. Here I was, the eldest son, the one expected to lead us through this crises period, and yet I let them down. Just for my own sanity, I went to the lead physician on the floor and asked her if there was anything else I could have possibly done to change our outcome. I needed some reassurance, if any, that I did everything possible. She assured me I did. Her words offered some form of momentary comfort, but it wouldn't suffice for the days and months ahead.

That's why I could relate to Danny and his situation. At that moment he was told his mother died, the word "reality" took on new meaning for him. He questioned every decision he made prior to his being on the show. But there really wasn't anything he could have done to change the course of his mother's death. Hindsight is a great teacher and it offers us much to glean and grow from. We can always question decisions we've made in our past, but it's impossible for us to predict what events are ahead of us.

I do wonder sometimes how we would live if we knew exactly the events that would take place in our future, including the day of our death. Would we live more in fear? Would we live more fruitful lives? Would we stop living (in the broader sense) or would we live more? We would make take more risks or be more conservative? We would spend more time with those we love? We would return to those we've hurt and ask for their forgiveness, while we have the time? Would we lead our lives with a greater sense of compassion and humility? I believe we would find more meaning in almost everything we

experienced and those we came into contact with? Things that once seemed so menial would now be treasured and valued. The brevity of life quickly puts things into perspective of what is important, and for each person, it's different.

Unfortunately, there are many who are bogged down by an immense amount of guilt. You may have lost your spouse, your lover, your best friend, and you feel somewhat responsible for their death. Or, maybe you've lost a son or daughter to a tragic car accident, a horrific illness, or some terrible turn of events. That precious life, which once sparked life into to your heart, is no longer living. Their little smile, their unique behaviors, their zest for life, and very innocence made them so lovable. Just having their little arms wrap around your body made your day. Maybe it was the words, "I love you mommy" that made you feel like living. Now, that precious life is no longer around. Where life once oozed from every corner of his room, it's now silent and lifeless - a dim reflection of your heart. As a result, the shackles you now carry are so strong that you don't know how you can ever forgive yourself, even if you did nothing to cause the death of this loved one. In fact, in some strange way, it feels good to be a martyr.

Let me first say that you're not alone. Others carry these secret feelings of guilt also. It's a heaviness that's hard to describe to others, often making you feel all alone. And no matter what you say to others, you never really feel understood.

When we truly love someone, we must recognize the great risk we take - that potential of being hurt. And the deeper our love grows for one another, the greater the risk. I thought about this idea regarding the relationship I had with my father. As my feelings of loss grew in intensity the months following my dad's death, I questioned if having a relationship with my dad (like the one I had) and experiencing the intense pain afterwards was better than having little

to no relationship and not having those painful feelings. Before I could finish my thought, I knew my answer. I would never trade the relationship I had with my father. First, many children go to school each day, not knowing their father, or if they do, he's not present in their life. If they could do something to change their circumstances, they would do anything to have such a relationship. This leads me to my second point. When I first recognized that I never deserved such a relationship, it gave me a new understanding and appreciation for my father. I sincerely feel that if there is anything good in my life, it's a direct result of my parent's choices, their sacrifices, and unbending love for me. More specifically, the role my father played in my life will only be fully appreciated the day when I'm called home. Then, will I fully understand the impact of his relationship on me.

Perhaps you haven't lost someone to a physical death, but you're experiencing loss in an entirely different way - via a broken marriage, a shattered friendship, or simply through a grave misunderstanding. And you feel responsible for the severing of that special bond. The truth is that in any relationship - even when one party clearly makes a poor choice - there are two individuals involved and both are somewhat culpable for the breakdown. But what can one do to move forward?

The only way I can answer this is based on the relationship I had with my father. With the feelings I had with letting my father down, I thought about what my father's response would be to me. And I believe his response to me is the same response I would share with you. Obviously, I can't ask him how I should feel about the six weeks that took place in the hospital. But what I can do is look back over my years with him and see how my father dealt with me in other situations, whether they were mistakes I made or just opportunities to learn a wonderful lesson.

First of all, my father always made it clear that when you give your very best to something, that's all you can ever ask for from someone - nothing more, nothing less. Perfection was never in my father's vocabulary. He looked at the heart, the same model our Lord uses to measure the heart of person. When I didn't give my very best to something, my dad clearly pointed it out.

Second, being a man of grace, my father was never one to hold a grudge or bring up past mistakes. When I made a mistake, even before I asked for his forgiveness, he already forgave me. Even when I felt I needed to confess further, he would simply say, "I've already forgiven you. Now move on."

You see his focus wasn't on the mishap, but on how I might grow from a given situation. He was more concerned about my own character development than the mistake itself. Developing his son through guilt was never a tool in his toolbox. His best tools were love and forgiveness. And I believe if he were here today, he would share those tools with you.

In the context with my father's illness, I had to look at the situation in its entirety. When it comes to our health, we can obviously do things to help or hinder our health. We can even make choices that increase our chances of getting sick. But with my father's cancer, there was no clear understanding as to why he got this illness. He didn't smoke or drink, nor did he eat poorly. The doctors shared that only 1% ever gets diagnosed with this type cancer. And as of today, there is no clear understanding as to its origin. So, I had to first accept that I had nothing to do with his illness. Being the eldest son, I felt responsible to be on top of my father's illness, get him the best of care, watch over my family, and personally be at his side as much as I could. Was I perfect at all of these things? Of course not. I can only say that I gave my very best under the circumstances - the same principle my father instilled in me as a young boy.

The thing that brought me closure to this issue comes from my father's last words to me: "Remember, from the very beginning I said that this is in the Lord's hands. We must trust in him." Now his words ring more true to me than the day he died: that EVERYTHING is ultimately in God's hands.

This does not remove my pain of not having my father around, but it does encourage me to not shoulder that burden of guilt anymore because God is in control, not me. And if we believe God is sovereign and that he is good – even amidst the most puzzling of circumstances – then we must relinquish the guilt we seem to hang on to so well.

This is my encouragement to you as it is for me. My words will never remove your pain. They obviously won't bring your loved home. But if you're willing to place your trust in God, life can be manageable and I believe you can enjoy life once again on a different level. Even when you question him, He understands your heart far better than you do. He doesn't want you to hang on to that guilt. Just hang on to him, even if it seems like you're hanging on to a shoestring of faith. That's enough for him. Let it be enough for you. That's grace.

Principle: I find it interesting that the size dimensions between a windshield and a rearview mirror are quite significant. The rear-view mirror gives us a view of what is behind us. It helps us to see if someone is passing us to the right or left, or if someone is directly behind us. This mirror is essential because it makes us aware of our blind areas. On the other hand, our front windshield covers the entire width of our car and is right in front of us. It's several times bigger than the rear-view mirror, and its main focus is to provide us with a clear vision as we move forward. Both items are important to our overall vision, especially as we drive our vehicles. However, engineers of car manufactures clearly knew that the front windshield was much more critical than the rearview mirror and, therefore, had to be much bigger.

The same analogy could be made with our lives. We are continually moving forward each day, and yet we all have a past. We have memories that bring about wonderful feelings, and we also have painful memories that bring us pain

and hurt. But for some reason, our vision is quite skewed because sometimes our “rear-view mirror” is much bigger than our front-windshield. As I see it, it was never intended to be that way because Christ gave us a new perspective – one that removes away any form of guilt (our rearview mirror) and replaces it with his pure love (a new windshield). However, we must understand that this is a process we learn to walk through our entire life. Although this was done on the cross, our transformation is a lifelong process. Thus, our challenge rests on where we place our focus - our rear mirror or our front windshield?

When we learn to “see” forward and not backward, will we be able to “grow” forward and see life with a clearer, much better perspective.