

TIME SPENT, TIME LOST, TIME ETERNAL

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It was just a few months ago that I began thinking about the idea of time in relation to my father's death. On several occasions, I've caught myself looking back at certain dates and then counting the days I had left with him before he passed away. From graduations, birthdays, anniversaries to last Thanksgivings, Christmases, and Easters, you can't help but notice this. It's a very discouraging thought, of course, but to stop there and look at the day he died is only part of the greater landscape, at least from where I sit. As I see it now, there are three specific realms of time as it relates to my father: time spent, time lost, and time eternal.

TIME SPENT

As I look at the thirty-two years I had with my father, I can say that I've had a lot of time with him. Without question, he was a very busy man. From his professional career to his endless giving to several non-profit organizations and individuals he personally mentored, he was always in demand. People wanted to meet with him and be around him. Being in his presence caused you to feel better about yourself. And after you spent some time with him, any problems you had seemed miniscule and manageable. He had this unique calming effect on you, a feeling that everything would be ok.

Even with such a demanding schedule, it never prevented him from spending time with my mother, my brothers, or myself. He always put his loved ones first. He made sure he kept his promises to you. Somehow, he understood the impact of a broken promise. As far as I can remember, there was only one time that he asked me if we could reschedule something we previously agreed upon. But even then, he shared that if I wasn't able to change our original plan, he would have kept our agreement.

The fact that he even remembered our commitment says something about him. I find this quality in my father to be very significant. It distinguished him from so many other men I've known. Why is this so significant? It places a high value on people. Without saying a word, he communicated that nothing mattered more to him than being with you. You mattered. You were special. He not only made every moment count, but he also made you feel that every moment with you was the most important to him.

As a result of his choices back then, I now have something to look back on. I continually revisit those memories he created for me. I have fond recollections of just the two of us and then, of course, with the entire family or with others. Wherever my father was, he created a moment you would always remember.

I should also mention that my experiences with my father were not great because I was a great son. It wasn't because I was particularly gifted in any area or brought something significant to the relationship. If anything, I was the learning disabled child. I was the one who was "handicapped." I was broken and very imperfect. On many occasions, I was sick and had to be hospitalized for various reasons. Yet, in spite of my limitations, my father (and my mother) still loved me. I wasn't disregarded and left to my own demise. So as you can see, my experiences were memorable because I had a great father.

While he was alive, he made choices that set the framework for my life. But the real significance of the man is that his life still impacts mine on a daily basis. You heard me correctly - I'm still affected on a daily basis long. Each decision I make and every action I take today is encompassed by the internal and external framework my dad (as well as my mother) laid before me as a young boy. That's the kind of father my dad was to me when he was alive.

TIME LOST

The moment my father passed away, I entered into a new time frame: time lost. Each hour, each day, and each year that passes, I am cognizant of the fact that I can no longer spend time with him. I can't go for a special dinner, drive in the car, or just wrap my arms around him to express my appreciation for the unique bond he created for us. I can no longer tell him something humorous or share a heart-to-heart story. I can't even discuss memories we once shared together. When I see a father and son together, especially a son that is close to my age, I usually stop to capture the beauty of what I see because something special is happening right before my eyes, something very magical and precious.

If you're like me, you've already used words such as "robbed" or "stolen" to describe this stage in your life. I can totally understand your feelings. Something wonderful was taken from you. Someone dear to your heart is now absent from your life. That person is gone and no longer around to fill the gaping hole you feel. Furthermore, if that special someone was taken at an early age, you might even feel "gypped" or "ripped-off," or you might use such words to describe the

short-lived life of the one who passed. However you choose to describe this time period, we can all agree that something went horribly awry.

Our expectations of what our future looked like are now shattered. The dreams you once had are but a mere fantasy and the relationship you once savored is now truncated. Like a pruned branch, something was severed. And now you're left with just the painful remnants of your loved one(s). From clothes, furniture, pictures, certain scents, and home videos, we hang on to these things because they keep the memory of that person alive. It's very hard to let go and come to terms with such a significant loss. Part of the reason for this difficulty is because we fear moving on without that loved one; and it doesn't seem morally right to make that choice.

As I've carefully thought this through, I've concluded that my moving on does not mean that I leave behind my father. Of course, I've experienced all the feelings I shared above. I was angry that my father was taken from my family, especially my mother. I felt she was robbed of her best friend, her spiritual companion, her lover. My brothers lost out on having a father by their side. Every milestone they make and every momentous occasion they experience, they cannot call their father and share their joys with him. They will never get to introduce their wives and children to their father or grandfather. They can't invite dad and mom over when they purchase their first home, nor can they partake in a homemade meal that's specially prepared for them. I still battle those feelings especially when I stop and think about them. But I must ask myself, "Is this where I want to stay for the rest of my earthly life?"

Over the past few years, I've grown somewhat from this personal loss. Has it been easy? Far from it! It's obvious that I can't spend time with my father. There's no getting over that and it's impossible to fully absorb the impact of such a loss. But in spite of this, with every situation I'm in, I seek to find a better perspective, a newer way of understanding my life now. When you turn a diamond on its side and allow the light to shine through, it's amazing the spectrum of colors that are radiated just by looking at it from a different angle. The vast colors can be so magnificent to even look at.

In like fashion, we can all learn to see even our worst situations in a new way. Nothing can remove your pain but shifting your attention to a different angle will open up something new for you - an opportunity for immense healing and growth. You may not be ready to explore this now and I certainly empathize your reasoning. But once I made the choice to move forward, I found remarkable opportunities to see each situation from a new perspective. Let me share how something that once brought me pain now offers hope.

Of those who have passed on, I firmly believe that the greatest gifts we have at our disposal at any time are the memories of our loved ones. Nothing comes close to bringing us nearer to them than the experiences we once shared together. Like a bookshelf, those recollections reside on the shelves of our heart. We don't need a membership to check them out; they're free for us to withdraw from and re-experience on a moments notice. Initially, many of our memories will elicit a sense of deep sadness. But over time, you will find that those same memories will now bring significant healing to your heart. You will smile, and you will cry. You will laugh, and you will mourn. You will dream of the days you once spent together, of the most intimate times you shared, of the words you once exchanged to express the bond and love you had for one another.

No one, not even death, can take those memories from you. None of us realized at the time that those special moments would one day come to our aid and provide a sense of relief and comfort to our broken hearts. I assure you, even when you experience what I call roller coaster emotions, something special is happening within you, something very divine. Even when you feel God is far from you (as I still do), I believe he is there reaching down and healing our wounded selves, often without our knowing it. Our emotions will dictate something wholly different, and it won't seem like healing at the time. But I can attest from my own personal experiences that real healing will come and that the days will get better. Those memories that once brought me pain now breathe life into me; and, in turn, speak life into others.

As a result of this process, with each memory I re-visit, something happens to me: I grow and become something I wasn't before. I walk away changed and different. Just the other day, I bumped into one of my mentors at Starbucks. We meet on a bi-monthly basis for lunch, but this time we unexpectedly crossed paths early in the morning. As he was waiting on line, we had a wonderful conversation about his daughter. As he left, I recognized that his presence, as short as it was, touched me even after he was gone. As a result, I e-mailed him to thank him for setting the tone for the rest of my day.

In the same fashion, I find that I'm still affected by my father's life and love for me despite his obvious absence. I can't meet him at Starbucks, nor can I send him an e-mail or speak with him by phone. However, when I think of it, he spent 32 years setting the tone for the rest of my life, and because of this, I can grow and still live life.

There is no question that this phase of time is painful. Besides dealing with loss, some of you may be surprised to know that even now, my faith in God is still quite a battle. There is a real tension there. If there was ever a time I connected with some of the early church fathers who

openly expressed their feeling of abandonment by God, I am there. I can willingly raise both hands and say, "that's me." Like C.S. Lewis, I can understand why he felt all those emotions after his wife, Joyce, was quickly taken from him after being married for just a few years. But even through this great tragedy, Lewis went on to influence millions of people through his writings. Although he is considered one of the greatest scholars of the 20th century, many skeptics came to the Christian faith because of this man's honest and thoughtful reflections. He is an example of one who experienced great loss, yet found tremendous opportunities to grow in spite of his circumstances.

Within this phase of time (Time Lost), I must accept the fact that I can't share time with my father any longer. To say that I miss him only hints at the feelings I have without his presence in my life. But even without him now, I live my life with the intent on making a difference in my world.

TIME ETERNAL

This last phase is certainly connected to my faith. Without offending anyone who has a different faith background or view on the afterlife, I am sharing something that comes out my Christian heritage. I respectfully understand that we live in a world with various faiths and religions. Some conclude there is no existence beyond today. But there are many who believe there is more after we physically die. I embrace the latter view. With that said, I will share the hope I have after God calls me home to eternity.

I remember watching a touching movie with my father when I was about six or seven. As to which movie it was, I have no clue. I just remember sitting next to my father in his black, leather recliner. My body was small enough to fit in the chair with him. At the close of the movie, the main character died. With tear-filled eyes, I looked up at my father and asked, "Why did he have to die?" I was confused.

The story didn't end as I wanted it to. It didn't fit into my limited view of life. Death was a foreign concept to me. My dad went on to tell me that we would all pass on one day and that even he would die at some point.

I told him that "I didn't want him to die." The tears surfaced uncontrollably as I tried to wipe my eyes. But upon hearing him say that even he, my hero, would face the inevitable one day, something hit a tender part of my heart. Although I was concerned about the character who passed away, I was now faced with the notion that my father would one day die. I couldn't accept it. It was like a sharp arrow went directly into my heart and out the other end.

My father immediately pulled me close to him. With my head buried in his chest and loud sobbing noises emerging from my mouth, he wrapped his arms around my frail body. I felt his love embrace me as he held on to me. And I held on to him with the hope that he would never leave me. It was there that I first learned that we would all die one day. Twenty five years later, that fear became a reality. That young boy who once held on to his father finally saw him pass away.

Although I am still in the phase of time lost, it is because of my faith in Christ that I have hope I will be rejoined with my father one day. I have no idea what that day will be like, but I have thought a lot about our first reunion. I'm certain tears will once again arise not out of sadness but from sheer joy that I am once again together with the man who made the greatest impact on my life. I imagine it will be a reunion like I've never experienced before. The closest I know of understanding that future celebration is with someone I cared for very much.

I met a very nice girl over the summer of 1994. As the summer came to a close, we knew it would be a challenge to carry on a long distance relationship since we attended separate colleges. Nonetheless, we decided to continue our relationship even though we would be several thousand miles apart. That fall was certainly one of the toughest times for me because I really wanted our relationship to succeed, and I knew, especially from my clinical training, that if this relationship was ever have a chance, good communication would be essential. We certainly worked hard and learned various ways of communicating, but it was nothing like being in person. No phone calls or letters could ever replace the presence of being with that special someone.

Late in the fall, plans were made for her to come visit me in Virginia. For several months, I planned for her arrival. I wanted to make her feel as special as I felt about her. Some of things planned were: a one day hike into the Blue Ridge Mountains, a special evening picnic with an amazing view to observe the stars, a song dedicated to her over the radio station, a time of tennis, a letter written just for her, special homemade meals, and several other things. Whatever I planned, it was to remind her that I missed her presence.

Finally, the day came. I had to drive an hour to pick her up at the Richmond airport. I didn't care how long it took. I just anticipated seeing her again after being apart for so many months. The moment I saw her, we just stood there and embraced one another. We were finally together again and that was perhaps the greatest moment of that weekend.

That's as far as I can humanly understand what my reunion will be like with my father. I'm confident it will be far better. But I have no idea what will occur. I just want to re-experience being

in his presence again and the warmth of his spirit. I want to give him a hug like I've never given him before, as a way of telling him, "I've missed you!"

What will that first "day" entail? (I use the word "day" even though eternity is outside the spectrum of time.) Will there be introductions to familiar and unfamiliar relatives? Will I meet our Lord immediately? Will there be celebrations of various sorts? I have no idea. There is so much mystery enshrouding our heavenly existence that we know so little. But what we do know is the assurance that death will not be part of eternity. Sickness and infirmities will be no more. There won't be any sadness. And we won't worry about losses. In my opinion, if we do have some sort of recollections of our past, it will be within the context of eternity so there won't be any reason to feel despondent. It will be a place of endless joy, a place where real and authentic love is fully experienced. The losses we now experience will be just a faint memory, if we do remember them at all. But that sense of being reconnected with my father is something I anticipate.

The fact remains that you and I still remain in the period of time lost. So what are we to do? Do we sit and look to the future, or can we do something now? Even though the quick answer suggests that we have a responsibility to do something in the here and now, it's still limited. Perhaps a better question to ask (one I continually ask myself) is, "How can I live each day, encompassing the totality of all phases of time?" In other words, how can I take my past experiences (both good and difficult), incorporate them into my day-to-day living, with the intent of influencing one person at a time, even after I leave this earth and into eternity?

We all have a responsibility to do something with our lives. I am well aware that all of us come from different backgrounds. Some have experienced things that are just unimaginable. However, when I meet people who have such complicated pasts and yet are making huge contributions in the lives of others today, I am quickly reminded that no one has an excuse. Whether you lost your father or mother, your brother or sister, your grandmother or grandfather, or someone who had a huge influence on your life, choose to take what you were given and give it away. Don't wait until you're retired to consider how you could leave a legacy.

Today, I speak to young people with all kinds of backgrounds. I challenge them, even at a young age, to begin thinking about their mark on this world and more specifically, their imprint on the lives they encounter each day. It's never too early to help young people to see beyond themselves. Unfortunately as adults, we have become too self-focused and not others-focused to see the importance of such a lifestyle.

Take time (yes, something none of us have within our 24 hours days) to reflect on your life. Focus on what God may have deposited into you. Whether it was through an experience you had, an affliction, a loss, the influence of a parent, a teacher, or a great mentor, see what you can begin to give away to others. Our lives were never intended to be held on like prized possessions. Our lives were given to us so that we could give them away to others, especially those who never had what you and I were given. Trust me - as you give of yourself, even as broken as you may feel, you will get so much more than what you originally gave away.

You may ask, "where is God through all of this?" You may be searching for a sign, an apparition to show you that He still is there and in control, even after losing your loved one. But I feel that our searching for such signs leaves us hopeless.

You might be shocked to know that your finding God is right in front of us. Just look into the eyes of the one who stands in front of you. Listen to the pains they carry. See the hopelessness they feel. See the scars of their past. As you see their scars, you will see Christ in the flesh. As you choose to give away yourself, you will begin to find God in the lives of the brokenhearted, the poor, the one's left for the curb. And even more mysteriously, in a world where most feel lost and purposeless, as you begin to give away yourself, you will begin to find who you really are especially as God sees you. Hence, it is within the giving of ourselves that we discover our true purpose.

PRINCIPLE: My father was a gift given to me. How I choose to invest my life today is my gift to my father. What will you do with your gift?