

When All is Said and Done

II Corinthians 13:11-13

Perhaps I'm just being a little sentimental on this Father's Day, but I've reached the stage of life where I spend more time looking backward, than looking forward. I'm not being morbid. All things being equal, I should have thirty or more years left in my mortal existence, which is ample time to knock off plenty of items on my bucket list and for people to grow weary of me. But thirty years doesn't seem quite as everlasting as it did for me three decades ago! I have clear and fresh recollections of what I was up to then, which at this point doesn't seem quite as long ago as it should!

Some of this existential musing, I suppose has to do with where I am in life—in the “sandwich” period between taking care of your children and then becoming a caretaker for your parents. With Wendy's dad began his precipitous decline a few weeks ago, we both became appreciably aware of how the wise elders who seemed to possess a firm grasp over their worlds are giving way to those who appear more childlike and helpless as each day passes. How quickly the man we once knew changed, as do the conversations we have with him. This is all part of the reality of aging, as we know. The proverbial “bell curve” of life leads to different stages on its downward slope toward decline and utter dependence.

That said, my sentimentality over Father's Day is also because I'm much more conscious of the influence of my own father upon me (particularly in the way my life seems to parallel his). Though he died a few years ago, the gentle, thoughtful, caring father that I loved, I remember not by his last years impacted by Alzheimer's, but more

as he was in his late fifties, which just happens to be where I am. I recall I was coming into my own in my career and identity as a young dad when my father was my current age, mentoring me. It makes me wonder: was he aware at the time that my lasting impression of him would be of that particular age and stage? So now what does that mean for me?

Since I'm at that same point in time, I've been thinking about my own lasting legacy upon my family, as it should begin to show up in the worldview and outlook of our daughters (who, may I add, seem to be doing perfectly well without any mentoring on my part). What sort of influence have I had upon their lives? What image sticks in their mind of me as their father or stepfather? Do they view me at a certain age, or in a particular situation, or will they remember an element of my personality or character? I've never asked them those questions. I probably should, in case I need to be more conscious of how they perceive me. When all is said and done, what image or memory will they carry in their heart of their father?

A few years ago, Wendy bought me a book with the intriguing title, *Not Quite What I Was Planning*. It's a collection of six-word memoirs by various writers, ranging from the famous to the obscure. The idea stemmed from the legendary tale that Ernest Hemingway was presented the challenge to write a story in six words. He came back with this: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Some literary critics considered it his best work.

The editors of this particular book presented the same challenge to an online audience a few years ago, asking people to write a memoir of their life in six words. They received thousands of

responses. Some were profound, others cheeky and sarcastic, but most provoked reflection on what people conveyed about their own lives—their sense of themselves—condensed to six words. Here’s a sampling:

- *Savior complex makes for many disappointments.*
- *Extremely responsible, secretly longed for spontaneity.*
- *Wolf! She cried. No one listened.*
- *Followed white rabbit. Became black sheep.*
- *I thought I was someone else.*
- *Amazing grace: born naked, clothed others.*
- *I was born; some assembly required.*
- *Sweet wife, good sons—I’m rich.*
- *Found true love, married someone else.*
- *Macular degeneration. Didn’t see that coming.*
- *Atheist plus Methodist make Jewish children.*
- *Found true love after nine months.*
- *Brought it to a boil, often.*
- *Wandering imagination opens doors to paradise.*
- *Mormon economist marries feminist. Worlds collide.*
- *Dabbler in much, expert in none.*
- *I couldn’t protect me from myself.*
- *Atheist alcoholic gets sober through God.*
- *Girlfriend is pregnant, my husband said.*
- *I live the perfect imperfect life.*
- *It was worth it, I think.¹*

¹ Quotes from Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith, eds., *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, Harper, 2007.

I'm sure I could entertain you for the balance of my time just reading more of these, but I think you get the gist.

So what would you declare about your own life in six words? It could be a very interesting and insightful exercise. For me, it depends upon my mood or situation; as most people know me, I could easily say: "Beautiful wife, four daughters doing wonderfully!" or "Love sports when my teams win," or "Professional peacemaker; hoping it will work!" But when I thought about it more, as I see myself, I settled on this: "Open heart still yearning for wisdom." When all is said and done, I may leave this planet with an abiding trust in God's grace and presence in life, but also with lots of questions currently unsatisfied with incomplete answers. The more I age, the more I realize I'm a child of wonder.

Looking back, I've pondered what my father would have said to me. What would have been the six-word declaration of his life? Then again, true to form, he didn't focus so much on his own life and, instead, would have likely offered some encouraging words for mine. I've sometimes thought what intuitively leads me to consider Philippians 4:4-9 to be my favorite passage in the Bible is that it sounds like something my dad would have said to me: "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure...think about these things." He was a man of consistent encouragement, not deflating criticism. I rarely recall a stern word from him, even when I was a disappointment. I've always admired that in him.

Similarly, my father's voice echoes in our text for today—the short concluding verses of II Corinthians: "...Put things in order...agree with one another, live in peace...". I could well imagine

him making these his final words, if he had been able to utter anything on his deathbed. When all is said and done, he would have forgiven every mistake and flaw in our character and would have encouraged us to think positively and be kind to one another. It made me realize I came by my peacemaking instincts naturally.

What intrigues me about this particular text is that, for all that has been written about the Apostle Paul and what he believed and stood for, much of what he had to say in the end was meant to be encouraging to his audience, with an appeal to unity, similar to the way my father practiced ministry. Scholarly debates will rage well into the future over the influence Paul had upon the primitive church and its impact on us even in the 21st century. That's quite a lasting legacy, almost equal to the influence of Jesus' own teachings (in some cases, perhaps more)! Everyone can pick their favorite passage and Pauline theme, each of us are free to accept or dismiss the moral authority of anything he has written and passed along as Scripture, but as I see it, when all is said and done, the Apostle Paul was interested in fostering hope in the early followers of Jesus to reconcile their hearts with God and be the best they could be, in spite of their disagreements, differences, personal histories and conflicts—just like a family. That's not surprising, given the nature of human relationships, particularly those brought together to serve a common purpose and reflect a religious ideal.

I won't take the time to explore very deeply the underlying reasons for his concluding admonition here in our text, but suffice to say, if you read through the entirety of II Corinthians, you will note that Paul wasn't particularly pleased with some of the troubles,

problems, and attitudes that existed in Corinth. Not only were there conflicts and relational casualties (as happens in any community), but he himself was repeatedly targeted for being inadequate as a spiritual father-figure in their lives. It's hard for us to imagine that now, given his legacy and reputation. Despite all he had done to give birth to faith, Paul was viewed as inferior to the real "stars" of the Corinthian church. He wasn't as eloquent or charismatic, perhaps. Maybe he wasn't particularly appealing or attractive as a man. It could be he seemed all too human—all too human to be fully appreciated for what he ultimately meant to them.

This often happens with those who give birth to new households or communities. Initially, fathers are admired or held up as the source and generator of life—the one who helped bring life into existence—be it the father of a child or as the father of a movement, community, or nation. Because of what they represent, they often seem larger than life and are treated with a great deal of respect and authority.

However, once the children stand on their own two feet, once the admirers rise to parity in power, the human realities often become more recognizable; the short-comings and weaknesses of the father (or father-like figure) are cited and diminish the glow of adoration, and separation and critical distance begins to form between the father and his children. Often that is the point when father-figures become the target of complaint for all that has gone wrong in their child's life. A father normally will not be able to live up to the image a child has formed and projected upon him. A lot of damage can be done in the relationship during this period, for however long it lasts.

In the irony of life, not until the child reaches the same point can he or she fully empathize with the age and stage of a parent or the challenges faced in guiding them through childhood. I see it often and experience it as well: a measure of reconciliation takes place (or should take place) when a child can reconcile his or her expectations against the reality of who their father is as a human being and be at peace with it.

Through the last half of the text of II Corinthians, the Apostle Paul tried to justify himself to those who criticized his leadership and character—those who expressed their annoyance with him at one time or another, or with whom he was angry and disappointed. Yet, when all was said and done, in his final words inscribed for this letter, what he sought in them came down to a few words of encouragement: “put things in order, encourage and agree with one another, live in peace...greet each other with a holy kiss [as if all was reconciled and well again, cherishing relationships]...”. I suppose, it was essentially what fathers of any type seek in their children: reflect the hope I have for you in how you treat one another, and value our life together as I have.

That could well be the lasting legacy any father would (or should) want to see reflected in his children: that all would be reconciled and brought to a new place in their relationships, reflective of the love that is felt for them from the beginning. In many respects, that’s where our legacies on earth lie as parents, in whatever sense of that word applies—in how those who are related to us and who are a part of us reflect, value, and protect the love that has already been invested, so that it will continue and flourish well into the future.

It could be summarized in yet another six-word memoir: Love, as I have loved you. Doesn't reconciliation through the mercy of love help to satisfy many of our unanswered and troubling questions in life?

When...all...is...said...and...done—again, six words of a lasting legacy. May our remembrances today be graced with the best thoughts and affection for the fathers of our lives. May they all live and rest in peace.

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