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When Is the Last Time, the Last Time?

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New Year's Day is almost always associated with a kind of "annual bucket list," i.e., a list of things you intend to do, or of things which you intend to stop doing. You remember the "bucket list" made popular by the movie about two men who were diagnosed with terminal illnesses. They went around the world doing all the things they had always wanted to do but never got around to doing.

In preparation for my high school class's fiftieth anniversary in June, 2011, we designed a web site. One of the message forums was about "bucket lists." My list is different from the movie; mine has to do with revisiting important people and events in my life rather than looking for new experiences. In part, my response stated:

"Because I deal with death and dying every day...I have given some thought to this subject. I thought that the movie of the same title was amusing but my approach would be very different. Rather than including new and novel things I want to do before I die, my „bucket list“ includes revisiting places, events and people whom I have known. If I knew that I would die, I would not rush around the world, but I would write my wife, children and grandchildren a letter of blessings which would include my hopes and dreams for them. My list would include thanksgiving for having known and loved them. It would include things which I would like for them to continue in my absence. Some of those things would involve faith, some family, some friends and some favorite things...

"My list involves the hope that I will die „well“...(which) means to me to die with grace and dignity...to die with no unresolved bitterness or unforgiveness...to die with the knowledge that I will have said everything I wanted to and needed to say to all those I love and care for..."

I concluded: "If I know I am dying, some of you will receive at the least a phone call and some a personal visit. You may not have been an active, physical part of my life over the past fifty years, but many of you have made contributions to my life which I would wish to acknowledge in filling my „bucket.""

Perhaps the "bucket" is just a modern version of the "cup," of which the Psalmist declared "my cup runneth over?" Have you ever realized that phrase, "runneth over," does not so much address the abundance of the content of the "cup," but of your estimation of its value and your gratitude for what is in it? I could sit and name many things which I have never done or received, but my estimate would still be that my "cup runneth over." Remember, the reality of a cup that "runneth over" is a condition of your perception, not some objective standard such as a

bank account, or an inventory of possessions. The Psalmist judged that his cup was spilling over. We have no idea the volume or amount of its content, only of his perception.

We Never Know When it is The Last Time

There is another way to state this same idea. It goes like this, “We never know when the last time is the last time, so we make sure that every time is a good time, so that if it is the last time; it’s OK!” If we live with a “last time” mentality, we will not live with a maudlin, preoccupation with death or dying, but with the celebration of the life and the moment which we have. There are some things of which I am certain. One of them is that the last time, I see or speak to my son, the last words I will hear from him are, “I love you, Dad.” Why? Because every time we talk, whether at the clinic where we work together, at home or elsewhere, the last thing he ALWAYS says is, “I love you, Dad.”

It may seem to you that such would become trivial and meaningless. If that is your response, you have never had an adult child whom you love and who loves you. And, as wonderful as this is, and it is, your “cup” is a spring like a fountain if you have eight grandchildren who spontaneously say the same thing, EVERY time you interact. It may seem strange to believe that words can occupy space and thus “fill” a cup to overflowing, but they can.

“Last times” are a part of all of our lives. I remember the last time I saw my father alive. It was Monday, October 3, 2005. He had just been moved from the acute care hospital to a long-term care facility. It was obvious that his life would soon be over but surely not yet. He did not want to eat so while we continued to offer him nutrition, we did not force feed him. When I walked out of his room that Monday, I knew that he was dying but surely it would not be now. On Friday, I got the call, “Daddy, has taken a turn for the worse.” I left my office within minutes because for years I had prepared for such a moment. I had always told my associates, I will do anything to help you meet your family obligations because I know the day will come when I will stop what I am doing, where I am doing it and I will say, “I will be back when I am back.”

That October 7, 2005 day, I headed home to pack quickly but received the follow-up call which said, “Daddy has died.” Nearly packed and preparing to leave, without thinking of what I intended to say, I voiced these words, “Ask them not to embalm him until I get there.” The words surprised me and I did not understand them until three hours later when I arrived at the funeral home in Natchitoches, Louisiana and was taken to the “preparation room,” where they were awaiting my arrival before starting the processes required for burial.

As I held my father’s hand and prayed, I realized why I had made such a novel request. His body had assumed the temperature of the room, so it was cold, but it was soft and life-like. I had always enjoyed holding my father’s hand when we drove or sat. My mother occasionally suggested that it “didn’t look right” for a boy to hold a man’s hand. I would smile and continue to hold his hand, or to touch his shoulder. Now, I was certain that I was holding my father’s hand for the last time and sad as the moment was, it was a good time, so in that it was the last

time, it was OK. His hands had always represented his power and provision for me, my brother and my mother. To this day, my favorite picture – which is appended to this article – was taken by my brother of my father’s hands.

Thinking about “last times” is not a macabre preoccupation with death; it is a rationale for how to live your life. You live in a way which you would live if you knew it was the “last time.” If you live in this celebratory manner, investing each day and each event with the value of “last times,” when it is the last time, it’s OK. The reality is that the last time I saw my father alive, I did not speak to him. He was asleep and I said to the sitter, “I’m not going to wake him up.” I briefly thought as I drove from Beaumont to Natchitoches, that I wished that I had awakened him that Monday, but the reality was that we had had hundreds of “last times,” because every time was lived as a “last time,” so when it was, it made the “last time,” recently passed, OK.

I have had many “last times” in my life and they all did not revolve around the death of a loved one. And, I have had many experiences which will be, as my life some day draws to a close, revealed as having been the “last time.” In 2012, you and I will both have experiences which will become a “last time,” though often at the moment we will not know it. So my resolution for the New Year is to treat others and to treat events in such a way that if one or more is “a” last time; it having been a good time, when it is discovered to have been the last time; it will be OK.

In my life I have had two prescience moments when, I think, providentially, I became aware that a present contact was the last I would have with an individual. Both took place after having left the person’s presence and both resulted in my turning back and speaking to them about ultimate reality and of eternal matters. Neither was facing death nor a life crisis, but as it turns out, within three days both were dead. I am glad to have learned to live with the sense of “last times.” In reality, if you are kind to everyone because it may be the last time; if you are generous with others because it may be the last time; if you express your true and loving feelings toward others because it may be the last time; if you are patient with others because it may be the last time, and it turns out not to have been the “last time,” then the next time, in addition to continuing to practice your “last time” approach to life, the moment is enhanced by the gratitude that the “last time” was not.

You can look for new adventures in life, and for some that makes life rich, or you can reach for your cup which is running over and catch some of the droplets of life, relive them and rediscover the miracle that your life has been. And, if you look upon your life and think that you have fewer droplets than someone else, celebrate what you have; cherish what you have had; and, you will transform that bucket into a cup, which indeed “runneth over.”