

Celebrating The Gifts In Our Lives

A Reflection of the Past 40 Years

It's hard to believe I'm 40! I feel like the character Sally O'Malley from Saturday Night Live who wears red spandex pants, jumps all around, and says, "I like to kick, stretch, and kick. I'm 50. I'm 50 years old!" The only difference is that I'm 40 and I wear black spandex. (Ok. That's so not true...the spandex, that is.)

To say that I am more than overwhelmed by the birthday wishes, e-mails, and phone calls today doesn't even come close to how touched I am. The outpouring of kindness has been more than I ever expected. I want to respond to each one, and I will in time.

For the past three days, I've intentionally taken time off from work to reflect on the past 40 years of my life. It's been a wonderful time of gaining some past perspective with the next ten years in site. Many of you came to mind during this process which, in turn, birthed the idea for this reflection.

With that said, this writing really isn't for me as it is for you. For those who know me, you're aware of how much I enjoy being with people. If I could, I would prefer meeting each of you in person so I could look you in the eyes and share how your life has affected me and given me more meaning than I had prior to knowing you. But, obviously, that would be impossible. So the next best thing is to sit down and pen my thoughts to paper with the hope that you will understand my heart. Let me first warn you. My words will fall short of all that I would like to express but perhaps you'll capture enough to know how special you are to me.

A LOOKING BACK

As I look in the rearview mirror of my life, it is quite an experience to relive many memories that come to my immediate attention. Some of my fondest memories are summer vacations at my relative's farm in upstate NY with my mom and two brothers. As early as 4 years of age, I would wake up at 5am, get dressed all by myself, and walk down to the barn to watch my Uncle Gino & Uncle Tom milk 250+ cows. At that age, the number of cows in a barn seemed miles long to me. This little boy ran free among them and the abundance of palatial fields. Acres of green beauty covered the earthy grounds like a beautiful wedding dress that rests softly against a woman's

skin. Personally, I believe this is where my love for the outdoors began. I am grateful my parents gave me plenty of opportunities to appreciate nature.

I was also privileged to have a wonderful education. I attended plenty of schools along the way – public, private, two boarding schools, four colleges/universities, and several other institutions. I had wonderful teachers/mentors who personally invested in me. Whether it was philosophical, spiritual/theological, or psychological discussions, a bit of wisdom, or even a skill set, I gained something no text book could ever pass on to me.

At an early age I was exposed to the game of soccer. I fell in love with the sport much like a young boy loves his favorite blanket. I played year round, created lifelong friendships, and was fortunate to be in several regional championships. It wasn't so much playing the sport that mattered as compared to what the sport brought me - a sense of comfort.

Having been diagnosed at a young age with a learning disability, I already felt different from the rest of my classmates and it wasn't a good difference. Like Mr. Hooper would ask on Sesame Street, "Can you guess which one of these groups doesn't belong?" That was me. I didn't fit in with my peers or belong in academia. (I find it funny that I would end up spending fourteen years in higher education and call it home for a time.)

On the athletic field, my peers accepted me. I was free to excel and achieved things I never knew I could do. But once I stepped off the field, I was no longer accepted. Little did I know, God was showing me that many people across this globe feel that way each day. My dream of one day being a professional athlete would come to an abrupt end, ironically, on a baseball field during my senior year in boarding school.

One of my favorite films (Field of Dreams) has meant a lot to me on so many levels. Besides the theme of men fulfilling their dreams of playing pro ball, there is a character named Archibald "Moonlight" Graham who I identified with very much. As a young man, he had a brief stint in the majors but ended up becoming a doctor. Near the end of the film, Moonlight finally got that opportunity to play with former baseball players on Ray Kinsella's ball field, the place where past players showed up at night to fulfill their dreams.

In one poignant scene, Ray's daughter falls off the bleachers and is no longer breathing. Moonlight sees this and immediately moves toward the foul line. He knows that once he steps off that field, his dream will end permanently. Without a moment's hesitation, Moonlight steps over the foul line and transforms from a young ball player to a doctor once again. He quickly attends to Ray's daughter and helps restore her breathing. In a previous scene, Ray asks him why he left baseball for medicine. Graham answers that he'd rather save lives as a medical doctor than scrounge through the minor leagues again. Obviously, his words became real as he saved this young girl's life.

That story somewhat parallels my life. Just like you, I had a dream. For me, it was to be a professional athlete. There's nothing wrong with having such wishes. We all need them in life. They give us energy, drive, and passion to do something great.

But, in looking back, I firmly trust God was showing me on that field he had something far better planned for my life.

MOVEMENT FROM “THE MOMENT “TO LEGACY BUILDING

I find it interesting when I hear about men going through mid-life crises. They change their attire, purchase new toys, abandon one relationship for yet another, and basically act an age they're not. (Watch. Before you know it, I'll be getting Botox shots all over my body. If only they could Botox my brain. Now there's an idea.)

During my late 20's, I took my first doctoral level leadership course. It was a one-week intensive class, but it was something that radically changed my career goals and where I wanted to focus my passions. A big shift for me was the idea that people, not programs, mattered; that relationships, not information, transformed lives; that as for genuine growth, it wasn't what I studied but who I studied under.

Notice the common element here? People.

Just a few years later, I would experience a domino of significant family losses, the first being the passing of my grandfather. This was my father's dad and I was very close to him. What was perhaps more meaningful to me was the privilege of standing right next to my father (with my arm around him and tears in his eyes) and seeing him say goodbye to his dad. I watched my father mourn that loss and, as I drove back to graduate school, I had plenty of time to ponder the significance of his loss as well as mine. Little did I know that just two years later, I would be standing by my father's bedside and saying goodbye to him. He was only 57 years old. And then over the course of three more years, I would lose two more close relatives, plus another dear mentor of mine.

I share this not to elicit any pity because I don't feel sad as I do miss their presence. Of course I miss these loved ones dearly, especially my father who was my model mentor and trusted friend. There is not a moment that goes by that I wish I could call my dad and share something with him.

As significant as these losses have been to me, their passing has also been a huge reminder as to the truly important things in life.

After taking that one week intensive class, I vividly remember sitting down with my father and sharing what I learned. At the age of 28, I was already discussing the value of people and the

notion of *legacy building*. This was the idea that what we left behind in this world wasn't so much the tangible things we purchased with money or the great assets we've accumulated, but the deposits we inscribe on the hearts and minds of others.

What I loved most about my father was he didn't really teach in the traditional sense of the word. He simply lived-out what he believed. He loved people just as they were, with no prerequisites to being loved by him. With me, his values weren't so much taught as they were "caught!"

As I sit here and reflect on that meeting, I am reminded of his challenge about legacy building. I guess I could talk about dad and say he was an entrepreneur and well-respected by those in government, the business sector, his community, and his local church.

But what I find so telling is what people tell me today about him. Almost 99% of the conversations I have with people have nothing to do with his accomplishments, his awards, or milestones. It's always about how he significantly impacted their lives. Each one felt they were important to him. And they were.

Back then, my father was talking with me about how to leave a legacy. Since his passing, he's been showing me how – one life at a time.

MY THANKSGIVING TO YOU

With today being my 40th birthday, I find that I have much to be thankful for in my life. I have come to realize that in a real way, I am here because of you. For many of you, I've been blessed to know for a good part of my life. Some of you, I've known for just a season. And others, I've had the recent joy of getting to know. But all of you (and I emphasize all) have touched my life in some way or another.

On birthdays, we often give gifts to one another to celebrate the life of a person we love and cherish. But today, I have already received my gifts. They are not wrapped in tissue paper or bows; rather, the gifts I'm talking about are real people such as yourself.

Sadly, it's taken me some time to see that these gifts take a lifetime of opening. They must be handled with care and carefully unwrapped. And the giver must be appreciated not only for their gifts but for their very life as a gift to others.

If I could sit with you now, I would want you to know how special you are to me. For some reason, your life has intersected mine. Some of you have been schoolmates of mine. We studied together, ate at the mess hall, played on a team sport, or simply shared a special moment together. Others have been friends outside of academia. Others have been co-workers or

colleagues in my field. Either way, our lives crossed at some point. And, with that, I am grateful that God would allow me to meet you.

So, yes, I am getting older. I'm getting gray hairs, a lot less hair up top, more wrinkles, and my body doesn't rebound like it used to. Like most people, I am very conscious of these things. And honestly, I don't like getting older. I love my youth and hope to stay as healthy as possible. But the truth is, but body is slowly deteriorating. It's a fact we must all face in this life.

There is, however, one area in particular I hope will continue to soften with the years I have left, and that's my heart. From what I've seen, some of the greatest men I've know were confident, yet their hearts were filled with compassion for people. I am far from these men, but if there is one thing I hope to grow in, it's learning to love better as you've demonstrated to me.

Thank you for teaching me to value the important treasures in life – people.