

“Last Time-Next Time”

Our lifespans are ephemeral, but most of us take care to mark sundry watershed moments: birth, baptism, coming of age (and a driver’s license), graduation, engagement, marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, death. And a thousand other trifling or sober moments in between. And while these commemorations tend to rush us from one juncture to the next, they also add the illusion of breadth. Sometimes we even forget we’re going to die.

This last November, when my wife and I celebrated our eleventh year of marriage, we went to our first home in Lambertville, NJ, which remains a haven for artists and hipsters. It was a groovy place to spend our first year of marriage, but that did little to stem the tide of our furious battles to subdue one another. We often grin now, remembering the fights we had. Those poor souls who lived on the other side of the paper thin walls.

We almost didn’t make it.

And then along came Noah, our first child, and loving him reminded us of the forgotten grandeur and strength in one other. His namesake spot-on, Noah’s birth was a turning point, a

refocusing on what was and is good. We put aside petty and loved, strong. Now we have four such markers, each beautiful son a new lifeline and burden, a reminder that life is a grind, but inside the toil is sacrament, that mystical finding of the worthy, true, and eternal.

At the beginning of the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie “Conan the Barbarian” the hero is captured and enslaved. He spends his childhood and adolescence chained to a grinding wheel, around which he drudges continuously year after year. For someone rather introverted and not infrequently self-absorbed, parenting can feel like this wheel of pain. Will it ever end? The sleepless nights, the fights, the screaming, the constant stream of random broken objects, the dirty diapers, the messiness, uncleanness, insolence, the trying to recall long-forgotten skills necessary to finish the homework that I am more interested in completing than they are, the curious forgetfulness to remember or complete any assigned task, however minute. Did I mention the lack of sleep? Well, it’s worth *at least* two mentions.

Through all of this, I am expected to guide from a position of personal bewilderment. I mean, I’m supposed to grow my boys into something great, and I can barely keep putting one foot forward and leaning on the beam. At least Conan got ripped. My slogging has the opposite effect: my body is sliding the other way, the chest oozing toward the belt.

But the holy is there too, if I’ll remember the soul burning behind the sad or giddy eyes of my boys.

My dad blessed me like that. He was distant at times, especially in regard to sports. Pops was not an athlete, and being around other fathers who were made him feel insecure. He was unable to help me, and this made him feel useless, as a father and a person. I get this now. I know already that my sons will outshine me, and this is daunting. How can I, such a broken

person, lead them? Pops was solid when it came to what mattered most, so my memory of his love is a steady guide.

Once or twice a week he would pull me close and give me one of his bear hugs, and then he'd tell me how much he loved me and how proud he was. And he told everyone else how precious I was too, so there could be no doubt.

It is just now nine years and two days after my father died suddenly and unexpectedly of a massive heart attack. Abrupt deaths of cherished people have a tendency to magnify the good and shroud everything else. Indeed, I spent the first few years sentimentalizing my father and only later began to feel the burden of remembering all of the weak or neglectful parts. He was awesome, but he could be pretty crappy too. This summarizes most of us, I guess.

Pops wasn't perfect. He had flaws galore, and unfortunately I have most of those with a little extra on the side. But he also never stopped trying for others, and for himself.

Mom, my siblings, and our extended family and friends continue to remember Pops on those significant days that one cherishes almost like sacred duty. The annual days are his birthday and death day and we memorialize these collectively, and this shared knowing is a sort of catharsis.

But those other times, the personal ones, are perhaps most poignant, bringing both joy and pain. These moments are savored and suffered alone. They confess to a communion of parent and child that was joyous though sometimes marred. And they bear witness to real loss. Like morning dew, they cool and glisten for just a moment, and then evaporate.

These are the last time-next time events of life. Most hit you right out of the gate, and it is overwhelming. The last time you were picked up from the airport, he was waiting to carry your bags. Now your mother and siblings are there to carry you while you cry like a babe in the

terminal. The last time you rode in this truck, he was driving. The last time you walked up this driveway and beheld the magnificent beauty of his garden, you asked him to explain his artistic and earthy tactics of shrub and tree, root and flower; he was beside you, breathing the same aromas and hearing the same chirping birds and drifting of branches in the breeze.

The last time you carried these bags upstairs, he was following, asking if you needed any help, and was there anything special you'd like to see or do while in town. The last time you went to sleep in this bedroom he was sleeping downstairs, lying beside your mother, who now sleeps alone. The last time you drank black coffee from this blue mug, he'd poured it himself, and it was a perfect brew. The last time you sat in this office, he was sitting at his desk writing a confession of love for God and family and his failure to be the man he wished, and he kindly asked if you'd lend him a little more time to reach the depth of his confession. The last time you ate in this dining room, he was reading that confession to his wife and children and his courage and tenderness filled the room with tears of reparation and hope.

The last time you called that number and heard him tell you to leave a message at the tone, you knew he'd listen and call back. This time you said words from a deep place and grieved dense tears of mourning into an empty line. You have an old phone somewhere with a contact you can't reach because you couldn't remove the name.

Your mom wants to know if you'd like any of these sweaters, slacks, pants, shoes, hats, gloves. The last time they were covering him: chest, back, arms, legs, feet, head, and hands. The last time you sat in this leather chair in this living room, he was sitting across the room looking back at you, smiling. The last time you saw that toy train set, he was on hands and knees playing with your then two-year old son. The last time you ate on this patio, he'd made salad and filet mignon, the latter grilled to perfection.

The last times you spoke with each of his consoling, dear friends he was clapping their backs and shaking their hands, a broad smile on his face and theirs.

The last time you saw his body he was standing; there was color in his cheeks, strength in his limbs and a gleam in his eye. This time, after everyone left the room you lay over the casket and tried one more time to feel that weight, but his barrel chest felt hollow and when you kissed his cheek the strange chalky taste of the embalmer's base stained your lips.

The last time you purchased a suit you were fifteen, and he took you to the tailor at Culwell and Sons in Dallas, Tx, where his father took him when he was a boy. He's probably smiling, knowing it took his death to see you so dapper once again.

The last time you were speaking from behind this pulpit was a long time ago, and he was sitting in the front row, proud. Now you're the proud one. The room is full and a screen is broadcasting your eulogy to an overflow audience. The last time you sang on this stage, he was leading, but no one focused on him, because he was looking to God, humble.

The last time you were finishing up a landscaping job it was summer, he was beside you and sun rays were beaming. This time is February, a few days after his passing, and you wanted to see all of his work complete, so you volunteered to help plant those last trees. The ground is hard and muddy and freezing. You climb into that hole and hack at the stubborn earth until you can't feel your hands.

The last time you returned to the airport for departure, there was a delay. He walked your giggling son back and forth for nearly an hour while you and your wife haggled with airline desk clerks. You were happy then because you got to spend one more day and in retrospect that extra day seems like maybe you won the lottery.

Then you go back home and back to work, and the last time-next times come at you slower. But they come at random times so they catch you totally unprepared, and sometimes this gives you a lift and other times you are crushed. You wish you knew when they were coming, so you could savor them more, because each memory only comes once.

That last time you had a haircut was the morning of your wedding, and your aunts from both sides watched as he offered fatherly wisdom while making you appear handsome by the skill of his tender, loving hands. The wind was blowing out over the Gulf of Mexico and the trees were dancing to the rhythm of nature's song. This time your sister cuts your hair, and you feel a deep gratitude that she is also his child, and also for her kindness.

The last time you wore a tuxedo, he was there with your brother, adorning and adjusting your garment, the dotting valet preparing you to meet your beloved. The last time you heard these words, he was saying them to you and your wife at the altar. Now you are trying hard but failing to alleviate his absence, reading those words, verbatim, for your sister and her husband.

The last time you smelled Grey Flannel cologne, it was on his lapel sometime in the 1980s. Now it is on yours, and you start to wonder if your sons will remember what you smell like when you're gone.

The last time you ate at Manon, on Union Street, in Lambertville, NJ, was nearly a decade ago. The décor hasn't changed. It's sort of a Van Gogh vibe, dark blue walls and ceiling with stars and swirls, low-lit so it feels intimate. The last time you had to go into the bathroom to read the menu, because back then you didn't have a phone with a flashlight. Now you are sitting by the window. Last time you sat across from your dad and your wife sat across from you mom at a table of four across the room. You didn't know it was a BYOB, so you and your dad had to walk down the street to get a couple of bottles of red wine. Your dad bought a bottle of Bogle

Merlot, you don't remember the year, but you do know you liked it and always look fondly upon the brand as a result of the moment.

Ten years ago you were in this space with your father, though you had nearly forgotten in the interlude, but now that moment feels palpable. You can almost see your father laughing at that table of four, and a great heaviness sits upon you, because that laughing man is someone else's father or brother or lover, making special memories for someone else. You ask God to bless them, and to help them remember this. When you leave, a young couple just starting out takes a picture for you and your wife, and for a second you feel the weight and fear of that first year, and you wonder if they will last.

You hope your own boys will remember the good moments. You hope you are giving them enough. Will they laugh together and reminisce about your quirky ways or will they think 'good riddance' and be done with you? Will they pray for your soul every day as you pray for your father? Will the residue of your love still bring them joy even after you are gone, or will you leave them with heavy burdens to unpack and work through, alone?

Sometimes I try to think about the future last time-next times, so I can prepare. I knew we were going to Manon, and tried to meditate on the moment before it came and went. We were having dinner at Carmines, in New York City, when we told Mom and Dad that we were expecting our firstborn. I haven't been there since, but I think about that one sometimes. The memory is still clear. Many others are waiting for me, and I welcome them. A touch from my father, gentle or harsh, is still a touch. And I miss him.

A great many people don't believe in God or the spiritual. Even (or perhaps especially) for the person of faith, the mystery is disconcerting. Sometimes you just can't figure out a good reason to believe. But the power of unseen but real connections between souls, even those

separated by death, jolts me toward belief. How is it that something faint and distant, something long over, moves me to tears? I am weeping now. Electric signals, I know, I know. There is power in the enigmatic realm of our souls, certainly more than remains in my aging flesh and blood or this wood and steel desk or these plastic keys upon which I type. And these memories - these sudden, firefly, shooting star recollections- give me hope.

The last time I spoke to my father he was high on meds and could barely speak. I knew I was going to see him again soon (I planned on going to help my mom with recovery after his surgery, but a second, later surgery went bad), so I rushed to get off the phone. I beat myself up over that a lot. But now I look forward to the next time we speak and it fills me with joy. If I am honest, and I'm trying to be, sometimes I feel like rushing toward that day. I'm not talking about a strait leap across the divide, I wouldn't do that. It's more like careless neglect of my body. My departure will create a bounty of last times for my sons, though, and I want to be around. Lord, have mercy!

In the meantime, I am looking - sometimes ahead, sometimes over my shoulder - waiting on the looming last time-next times, when for just a brief moment, I will brush up against the presence of my dad, and even though I'll weep, I know that I will smile.