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CHAPTER 1

FATHER TIME AND FATHERHOOD

I am lying in bed with my daughter Grace, who is three years old. She has just fallen asleep on my arm after our usual ritual of stories and songs. It is 1:00 in the afternoon, and I am thinking about how to spend the next hour or so. Grace is the youngest of my children, and she will be the last one. Her older brothers Ben and Drew also took naps with me when they were this age. (I can hear the parenting experts complaining to me about the dangers of sleeping with young children – don't worry, my children sleep alone at night, in their own beds!)

Ben and Drew are in school for most of the day. Before long, Grace will join them. I have been lucky enough to care for all of my children for some part of the day ever since they were born. But soon they will all have busy schedules during the day (thanks to school), and my flexible work schedule won't make much of a difference. We will go our separate ways early in the morning and come back together again late in the afternoon.

As I lie in bed with Grace, I think about what to do for the next hour or so. I could answer email, work on some papers whose deadlines are approaching, or make progress (quietly!) on one of the many home improvement projects underway in every single room in our house

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(a fact that my wife recently pointed out to me; thanks for that, Becky). But I could also stay here and take a nap with Grace, or just enjoy the experience of watching her sleep.

The reasons that pull me out of bed are all about Father Time: I'm worried about completing projects on time, anxious about being efficient, and hoping to be productive so that I can relax this evening. If I had indefinitely many hours in each day, I would not be faced with such choices, because I could do everything at some point. Father Time imposes limits that force me to make choices, hard choices that reflect, and partly determine, my values. In this essay, I discuss what fatherhood is teaching me about the nature of time.

The Present Moment

People often say that there is no use crying over spilled milk. But sometimes there is a point; maybe crying over spilled milk today will help me to avoid spilling more milk tomorrow. It is important to consider the past carefully in order to learn from it. Sometimes we also need to consider the future carefully. Planning for the future is an important part of life and something that all parents try to teach their children (with mixed results, of course).

But dwelling on the future can become overwhelming. We can be paralyzed by worry or we can get lost in fantasy. With regard to the past, we can become so stuck on pleasant memories ("glory days") or so paralyzed by regrets that we become insensitive to what is happening in the present moment. If we dwell on some past or future event over and over again like a tape loop, we can create a mental habit with momentum, a habit that takes away from our present attention even when this is unwelcome. So we must be careful that our attention in the present moment is not completely taken up by our attention to the past or the future. After all, only the present moment is real; past moments of time no longer exist, and future ones do not exist yet.

Or at least this is what St. Augustine thought. He argued famously that only the present moment is real.[1] Past times, he said, no longer exist, and future times do not exist yet. The only real moment, then, is the present one. We experience past times in memory and future times in anticipation, but only the present moment can be experienced directly. This is because only the present moment is real.

The contemporary Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast seems to agree. In our peak experiences, in which we feel most alive and present, we experience a distorted sense of time:

> Our sense of time is altered in those moments of deep and intense experience, so we know what now means. We feel at home in that now, in that eternity, because that is the only place where we really *are*. We cannot *be* in the future and we cannot *be* in the past; we can only *be* in the present. We are only real to the extent to which we are living in the present here and now.[2]

Even if St. Augustine and Steindl-Rast are wrong about the unreality of past and future times, they are right to point out that we experience the present moment very differently than we experience past times (through memory) and future times (through anticipation). The present moment is available to us in a direct and vivid fashion. But sometimes we are so preoccupied with past or future times that we fail to notice what is happening in the present.

Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever discovered, after the fact, that you did not fully experience something wonderful because you were either too preoccupied with the past or too focused on the future? I confess that I have missed many wonderful meals, movies, conversations, and milestones in the lives of my children in just this way. For some reason, I have a mental habit of responding almost instantly to the demands of the past or future regardless of what is going on in the present. Maybe my preoccupation with past and future times gives me a sense of control that is lacking in the present, since I can conjure up memories or anticipations at will. I'm not sure. But I am determined to develop more control over the objects of my attention, so as to not let my life pass me by in this way.

Simpler animals apparently do not have this problem, because they do not have the ability to fixate on past or future times in the same way. Snowball, my children's pet rabbit, never seems to be lost in thought when a piece of celery comes within range. And my children themselves have a share of the rabbit's focus on the present: it is hard to persuade them to wait until later to have a snack, for instance. Perhaps there is something valuable in this ability to ignore the past and the future. Maybe I have something to learn from my children in this regard, like the ability to see things freshly and with wonder.

Sterner on Returning to the Present

In a highly practical and provocative book, Thomas M. Sterner argues that it is possible to return to a childlike focus on the present.[3] As I understand his presentation, there are two main strands to his argument. One of them starts with the observation that we all experience total immersion in the present from time to time. Drawing upon a concept from Zen Buddhism, Sterner describes this state as "beginner's mind." When we do things for fun, for instance, we focus almost exclusively on what is happening in the present moment. If you want to see a case of complete and total immersion in the present, just watch a child play a video game. Sterner also claims that the distinction between work and play is an arbitrary one. What we call "work" and what we call "play" depend on cultural conventions, personal choices, and habits of language. He concludes that as long as we remain immersed in the present moment, we can enjoy doing almost anything, even those things that we typically consider unpleasant work.

The second strand in Sterner's presentation complements and illuminates the first one. It involves the distinction between focusing on the process as opposed to focusing on the end product. Sterner notes that if we focus on the end product, then our minds are on the future, whereas if we focus on the process currently underway, then our minds are in the present. If we shift our goal away from arriving at the end product as quickly as possible and instead make our goal immersion in the present process, we can be content in the present moment without worrying about the future or regretting the past. (My children demonstrate this pattern by focusing on the process of eating the ice cream cone, not the end goal of finishing it.) It's not that we should forget the end goal altogether. In fact, Sterner claims that we should use it as a kind of rudder to steer our activity in the right direction. But our focus should be in the present, on the process in which we are engaged.

Sterner describes several examples of this process oriented focus that are helpful to consider. The first involves Japanese piano makers, who focus completely on the process of making the parts of a piano without regard to considerations of time or efficiency. A worker in such a factory might spend all day working on one part and not find this frustrating, because the goal is to engage in the process of finishing a part, not to produce as many parts as possible. This approach results in the manufacture of very high quality pianos, not to mention highly contented workers who require almost no supervision.

A second example involves Sterner's own experience as a veteran piano tuner for concert pianists. One day he was expected to tune three concert pianos in a single day. Frustrated by the prospect of a very long and tedious day ahead, he deliberately slowed everything down, focusing on each task one at a time, expecting the day to drag ahead indefinitely. Much to his surprise, as he focused on the present moment and ignored the end product, he found himself really enjoying his work. He continued doing this all day long, simplifying each task and working as slowly as possible, only to find that he had completed tuning all three pianos hours ahead of schedule. He has been able to repeat this result regularly, noticing the difference in cases in which he is expected to do the very same tasks over and over again, such as tuning the same concert pianos.

This kind of focus and simplicity is alien to contemporary Western culture, which celebrates the person who accomplishes more than one task at one time. The allure of multitasking is almost irresistible for me when I am home alone with my children. I have changed many diapers, prepared many meals, and solved many problems over the years while also working on other projects at the same time. My children are still young, yet I regret already not focusing during the times I am doing activities with them. I even wish that I could revisit them at younger ages, to appreciate them for what they were at the time, instead of impatiently hurrying them along to the next developmental stage for the sake of my convenience.

Perhaps because it is so highly valued in our culture, multitasking also has an addictive quality. We experience some kind of thrill in connection with doing many things at once, and this makes us feel empty when we have only one thing to do. Technology encourages us here by providing machines everywhere that we can use to do work or to communicate with others. Unfortunately, this means that we are often literally unable to focus on just one thing, because we cannot be content with it. We cannot do any single thing all by itself without feeling restless, inefficient, and unproductive.

Once again, we can learn something from children, who find it unnatural to try to do more than one thing at once. In the same way that my children have time limits for playing computer games and watching television, often I need to separate myself from information technology in order to focus on the present moment. I need to put away the cell phone, step away from the computer, turn off the television, and stop the music in the background.

Of course, our educational experiences, work expectations, and the messages we receive from the media also play roles in developing a focus on end products instead of processes. In the media, for instance, we are often bombarded with images designed to highlight the difficulties of parenting successfully, together with a solution that is cheap and readily available in the form of some product or service for sale.[4] How many times have you seen children making a mess of something on television, only to see their mother swoop in with the latest cleaning product to save the day? These images play on our product oriented focus, which takes perfect parenthood as an end product that we think we should have already attained.

My response to these images is that becoming a good parent is itself a process, just like the process of a child's growth to maturity. And if we focus on this process instead of the final product, we can let go of the disappointment of having failed to achieve perfection already. As Sterner points out, our own ideas of perfection are constantly evolving over time. Perfection is always moving away from us. Perhaps we should revise our idea of perfection so that it is relative to a particular time or stage of development. In this sense, a flower is just fine at every stage in its development and not just the final stages. As parents, we can admit that there will always be more progress to be made at any point in the future, no matter how far away. We will never arrive at a state that cannot be improved upon. This should diminish the impact of the media images in question.

Sterner also claims that when we experience impatience, frustration, or worry, this is a sign that we are focused on an unrealized product instead of a present process. My worst moments as a parent fit this pattern perfectly. They have all occurred at bedtime, when my obsession with the final product of sleeping children (in their own beds!) has led me to be harsh and unreasonable. If only I could have appreciated what they were experiencing at that moment instead of focusing on the unrealized goal, I could have avoided saying and doing things that I will always regret. Perhaps this would have meant some very late bedtimes on some occasions, but it would have prevented some truly regrettable moments and probably would have resulted in earlier bedtimes on other occasions (in the same way that Sterner's deliberately slowed-down experience as a piano tuner did). I will try to follow the advice of Sterner and St. Augustine by appreciating the difference between the past, the present, and the future. Another source of help lies in different views of the nature of time itself, to which I shall now turn.

Clock Time and Experienced Time

What is time? St. Augustine said famously that he knew exactly what time was until someone asked him to explain it.[5] In the modern Western world, we typically view time in terms of what Steindl-Rast calls "clock time." According to this view, time is a limited commodity that is always running out, like a spilling juice box that cannot be refilled. Time is linear, extending from the past through the present and into the future. The passage of time is uniform and can be measured objectively by clocks.

The Western idea of clock time, a limited commodity that is always running out, leads to the idea of the efficient use of time, the idea of "wasting" time, and to much anxiety and regret about how we spend our time. These ideas make it difficult to recognize the importance of living in the present moment. They also make it more difficult to emphasize quality time rather than a quantity of time. Let me explain these ideas by contrasting clock time with an older view of time that I shall call "experienced time."

In the ancient world, the concept of an hour was very different than it is today. An hour of a day was defined in terms of the activities and opportunities that were appropriate then. In this sense, an hour of a day was not a specific length of time as measured by a clock at all, but rather a vague portion of a day defined in terms of how it is usually experienced. As Steindl-Rast notes, in the same way that the experienced seasons of the year do not always correspond to their officially defined dates ("Is it summer already?"), the hours of the day, in this ancient sense, depended on the actual flow of life, including the rising and setting of the sun, but not on the number of minutes that passed.

Given this ancient sense of the concept of an hour, we can imagine a different sense of time itself. Instead of being a long line that is always getting shorter, like the last piece of licorice disappearing slowly into my son Ben's mouth, time can be viewed as a cycle of similar activities and opportunities, a cycle that is relatively independent of clock time. Let's call this "experienced time." Unlike clock time, which proceeds at the same rate objectively all the time no matter what is happening, experienced time seems to move quickly or slowly depending on what we are doing. Waiting for my children to finish using the bathroom seems to take forever, for example, but laughing at my son Drew's funny faces makes time fly, even on a long road trip. If my wife Becky has been at the office from nine until five (a rare occurrence, thankfully, for both of us), then

the day seems like it lasted longer than eight hours of clock time. However, sleeping later that night seems to take no time at all.

So clock time involves the objective, mechanical measure of time independently of what is experienced, whereas experienced time concerns the ebb and flow of life independently of what the clock says. Which kind of time is more important to us? As a father it is my job to attend to the basic needs of my children, including food, shelter, clothing, security, attention, play, and hygiene. Because my children are still young, these basic needs divide the day into segments organized around certain activities. For example, there is breakfast time, play time, snack time, quiet time, nap time, dinner time, and (finally!) bedtime. Although some parents schedule these activities rigidly around specific clock times, we all know that there is a rhythm to them that varies from day to day. Sometimes nap time comes earlier rather than later. Sometimes snack time cannot be postponed any longer. Sometimes it is not clear when bedtime will actually arrive. As Steindl-Rast notes, in a monastery, monks must be ready to drop their tools and move on to the next task when the bell rings to signal a new hour of the day. In the same way, parents must be responsive to what is happening in the present. We must be able to drop what we are doing in order to attend to the needs of our children. (Of course, in my house, instead of a bell ringing, we have different grades of shrieking and screaming, which only the experienced parent can distinguish with accuracy.) So experienced time seems to be more important to me, as a father, than clock time.

Of course, clock time is an important tool. It is necessary for coordinating one's activities with others, for instance. But even if we are not parents, we all seem to care more about experienced time. In order to see this, suppose that you have contracted some rare disease, and you are told that drug therapy is needed for you to survive. Imagine that there are two very different drugs that would cure you, each of which will distort your sense of experienced time in a different way, and each of which will be very painful to administer. Here is the difference between them: drug one will cause you one solid hour of clock time of painful discomfort, but it will distort your sense of experienced time so that this hour of clock time will appear to take only five minutes to pass. By contrast, drug two will cause you only five minutes of clock time of painful discomfort, but it will distort your sense of experienced time so that these five minutes of clock time will appear to take an entire hour to pass. Which drug would you choose to take? Assuming that all other things are equal, of course we

would all choose drug one. This shows that experienced time is more important to us than clock time.

To put things differently, it's the quality of our time that counts, not so much the quantity. Who would choose to live for a hundred years of boredom? Wouldn't you rather live a full and complete life that occupied only a short amount of clock time? Fatherhood is teaching me that the most satisfying way to spend my time is to live in the present, not to think too much about the past or future, to focus on the process and not the end product, and not to worry too much about clock time.

So as I watch my children play soccer, or wait with them in the lobby at the dentist's office, or help them do homework, I have to remind myself that this is part of the only time we have together. Sometimes it seems to creep along imperceptibly, but sometimes it flies. Technology is making it more difficult to draw the line between being at home and being at work, and making it fashionable to work just about everywhere and all the time. Years from now, when I look back on these times, I want to remember being present with my children, not frantically trying to do other things while they happen to be in the same room. Let's hope I can make progress before they are completely grown and out of the house![6]

NOTES

1 My discussion of St. Augustine in what follows comes from his *Confessions*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), book XI, chapters XIV and XXVIII.

2 David Steindl-Rast and Sharon Libell, *The Music of Silence* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 12, italics in the original.

3 Thomas M. Sterner, *The Practicing Mind* (Wilmington: Mountain Sage Publishing, 2005), pp. 37–42. My description below of Sterner's views is based on this work.

4 It must be admitted though, that our society's standards for being a good mother are considerably higher than those for being a good father. For a humorous but highly insightful discussion of this, see Ayelet Waldman, *Bad Mother* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

5 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, book XI, chapter XIV.

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