

Tick Tock

I stood in an antique store last week and had one of those moments when the world grinds to a stop and the room gets quiet and your mind is sucked back into the past through some kind of hole in the cosmic fabric. There, high on the wall was an old pendulum shelf clock with a large white face of Roman numerals mounted behind a small glass door, just like the one my father rebuilt fifty years ago and placed on the mantel in our living room. That was shortly after his doctor told him to lighten up and get a hobby. What he really needed was Prozac, but it wasn't available yet. In time the drug would diminish more melancholy among the Irish than bales of four leaf clover. Or barrels of Jameson's.

I don't know where I got this concept. I probably made it up, but I always thought that deep inside each of us sits a ticking clock. Really smart people like Jung or Aquinas had other names and a different vision for what they called the soul. But I picture a clock ticking away, urging us to find goodness, identity and our real self. The ticking reminds us we have only so much time. The sound is not always loud. It is often weak, as if the clock had gone on ahead and is waiting patiently for us somewhere farther up the trail.

My father's clock banged loudly as he reached his middle years. His friends called it mid life crisis. Jung might have said Dad's psyche was fighting myths and finding reality. I don't know what Aquinas would have said. He was a strange guy. But I think Dad's clock was ticking away with impatience. And it didn't plan to let him alone until it got his attention.

"Cousin Ben," said my mother "has a wonderful hobby ... fixing clocks. You're handy, Ed, and Ben said he has an old clock and parts to get you started."

"I was planning to buy a telescope," Dad answered.

"They're pretty expensive," said my mother.

The use of that phrase always ended any buying discussion.

Cousin Ben lived twenty miles down the river in the small city of Herkimer and he was far from being a likeable character. Ben was somehow related to my grandmother, who lived with us, and Dad considered it time off from his upcoming stay in Purgatory when he took Grandma down to visit with Ben's

wife, who we called Aunt Mary. The rest of us in the family often went along if we were trying to work off future time in Purgatory for one sin or another. As teenage boys, we were always behind in our accounts.

The next Sunday afternoon we piled into the old Ford and set out for Herkimer ... Mom and Dad, Grandma, my little brother Jesse and myself. Dad let me drive. Older brother Bert had months before gone off to join the Navy, providing some relief to both he and my father from their stormy relationship. As we pulled out on James Street I managed to roll our right rear tire over the curbstone. When the wheel slammed back down on the road, Grandma's head hit the ceiling of the car and Mom almost ate her cigarette. Eleven year old Jesse made the most of it, of course, gleefully bouncing all over the back seat and yelling "Mayday, Mayday!" I could hear my father's grunt of disapproval.

"Do you know how much tires cost?" he asked.

"I'll pay for any damages," I said, much too flippantly.

"You don't have any money," said Dad witheringly, like a tire losing air.

At sixteen I chafed against my father's control and there wasn't much he could say or do I wouldn't argue with. My smart mouth led to many confrontations and when his mood darkened he became more autocratic, heating the space between us to a high emotional level. As his depression deepened that summer, our egos were constantly banging up against each other. He had exploded and walloped me for my insolence a month before. Dad seldom hit me, and that would be the last time he tried. I turned on him and put up my fists. Although he could have wiped the floor with me he backed off, rather than have a knock-down fist fight with his son. He turned and walked away, as he had done with my older brother Bert the previous year. I might have felt victorious, but instead I felt defeated. Alone and angry, the small victory of defending myself turned sour and I came away with an odd smoldering hate for him that only a son recognizes and only a son gets over.

The night before our drive to Herkimer, Jesse and I lay in our beds casually pitching brotherly insults back and forth in our shared bedroom. After a lull when we had run out of crudities, Jesse said, "Why don't we hear from Bert much anymore?"

"He's busy saving the South Pacific for IBM and Xerox," I said, having just read something about it in Time Magazine.

"The last time he called, Dad didn't talk to him," said Jesse.

"Dad's been a little funny lately," was the only response that came to me.

“Why do you think Dad gets upset all the time and yells?” asked Jesse

“He’s dealing with a lot of things, I guess,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Jesse. “especially *you*.”

Jesse struck too close to home. I had begun to realize I was a major source of my father’s worries. My arrogance and slipshod attitude were affecting my school work and relationships. I failed classes and had recently been fired from an after school job for mouthing off to the man who hired me, a friend of Dad’s. But although my culpability was slowly dawning on me, my gut reaction was self serving and swift. I immediately became enraged at the kid.

I leapt out of bed and flew across the room, caught my little brother up by his tshirt and slugged him in the shoulder. I slugged him again ... somewhere ... as he tried to wriggle away from me up against the wall. And then Jesse did something he’d never attempted before. He turned on me and punched me in the face.

Astonished, I straightened up, wondering what to do. He was still small enough to pick up and throw across the room. I stood there in my t-shirt and boxer shorts and suddenly saw me as my father, losing control of those around me. My rage turned to fear. I did not want to be like my father. I wanted to be perfect.

“What the hell are you talking about, you little jerk!” I all but shouted.

“You’re the jerk,” hissed Jesse. “You’re always arguing with Dad and causing trouble around here!”

“I’m a man and he won’t admit it,” I shouted in his face.

“No you’re not,” he laughed. “You’re an asshole!”

I was astonished my normally adoring little brother would say such a thing to me. This was the kid who laughed at all my jokes, thought all the girls I liked were pretty and told me I was a genius when I brought home report cards that indicated otherwise. I was deflated. I walked back across the room and sat down heavily on my bed.

When we pulled into Ben’s driveway the next day, he was waiting for us on his front porch. The little man scampered down the steps and began talking before we were out of the car. He was still talking later when we were leaving ... sooner than we’d planned, as it turned out.

Ben was a round chatty little fellow, an uppity know-it-all who to me was more than just annoying. On every visit to his home, Dad would dissolve in front of my

eyes from a strong and decent man into a fawning subordinate who appeared overly anxious to please. I suppose reasonable people would say my father was just being sociable. But at sixteen years of age I observed Dad with a magnifying glass, searching more for his warts than his strengths, ready to pounce on his every fault. And the way I saw it, Dad was too agreeable with Ben, even when the little man was insulting.

It's true that Ben and my father were from different worlds, and I suppose that put Dad at a disadvantage. Ben was from a Protestant family of substance. My father came from a poor Irish Catholic tribe. Growing up, he had slept with four brothers carefully arranged on a double bed and a cot in the living room of a decrepit old rented house, dreading his father coming home and falling down drunk in the doorway in the early morning hours. His mother sent the five boys and their two sisters out looking for the old man on payday, hoping to find him before the money was spent on alcohol. Home life was synonymous with hunger and violence, with broken furniture and sometimes broken bones. As a teenager, my father watched his mother die at a young age from poverty, coughing up blood and staining the kitchen table cloth that was all he had to clean her face.

Cousin Ben started out in his family's successful insurance business right after college and was promoted to president of the agency within five years. He later inherited the firm and spent his days collecting the premiums from old customers and friends. He led a fairly comfortable life.

Although there was certainly nothing special about Ben, to my father he represented what can be called authority, that class of people who pulled the strings in society, who had the money and the power and who rated high in my father's universe because they were the people who could get you a job or a loan or a promotion. If they noticed you at work or in the fraternal clubs or churches of that era, and if they wanted to help your cause, you were sure to be as agreeable as possible in return, to acclaim them publicly and to somehow pay obeisance when it was possible to do so. You were never listed as a friend, nor were you considered a servant. You were simply one of the grateful numbers of choir members who sang their praises and assuaged their egos.

At sixteen Dad left home and found menial work as the Great Depression spread across the country. He saved and proudly bought himself tools and workman's clothing and then found better jobs. He thrust aside his self doubt, accepting without question the advice of employers, churchmen and older friends who helped him to reach his goals. He often sought the authority of others and sometimes their protection. It was good business, and may have substituted for the total lack of structure provided by his family. But as he listened to their advice and counsel, the ticking of his own clock became weaker.

On that Sunday afternoon, Ben got my hackles up right away when he complained about one of his business clients coming from “a long line of dumb Irish ancestors.” We were seated in the small sun room in the back of Ben’s house and I looked over at my father. He was watching me. His eyes told me nothing, but I knew he would prefer me to not react. He was probably thinking about a few weeks before when I told Ben that Martin Luther, practically Ben’s patron saint, was a lush and a whoremonger after Ben referred to the leader of my father’s church as “that Nazi Pope of yours.” I could not have cared less if Pius the Twelfth played Pinochle with Hitler. I was upset that my father didn’t defend his faith. And that he would allow Ben to speak to us in that manner.

Dad wasn’t timid, but he was a gentleman. At the time it didn’t occur to me that had my father answered Ben in kind, our social relationship would have ended and Grandma would lose the opportunity to visit the only other family she had. I think Ben probably knew that; it was part of his calculus for keeping the upper hand.

The three of us moved into the dining room where Ben had set an old box on the large ornate oak table, richly polished to a high sheen. In the box was the clock for my father, or rather the pieces of a clock. To me, all the little gears and wheels and springs looked like someone had disassembled a set of automobile brakes and thrown the parts into a cardboard box. I could almost sense my father’s back stiffen. He looked at Ben.

“Is everything in there?” Dad asked, with only slight sarcasm edging his voice.

“Yes, sir,” Ben replied. “But before you restore it, you’ll need some lessons in clock repair.”

“Uh huh,” said Dad. My father worked on newspaper presses and was quite mechanically inclined. What he didn’t know about clocks he could certainly figure out.

“Sort of like an apprenticeship, Ed,” said Ben.

“All in one afternoon?” said Dad. I could hear the anger building in his voice. I don’t know how Ben used the word “apprentice” in his line of work, but in my father’s it meant the lowest of low, a real dummy. If the light had been better in the dining room, Ben might have noticed my father’s neck turning red.

“Oh, more than an afternoon!” said Ben. “You can come here Sunday afternoons and work with me in the basement for a couple of months. I’ll start you off cleaning a lot of old pieces I’ve been meaning to get to.” Ben chuckled to dull the barb of the arrow as he shot it.

“Even an Irishman,” he said, “should be able to handle that, Ed.”

I remember looking over to my father for his reaction and I saw him flinch. Years later he would tell me the relatively mild insult had struck him hard, reminding him of taunts of a different nature he’d suffered from his father. I’ve always thought his soul brought him to a place that afternoon he had been avoiding. There in the box lay a clock in pieces, appropriately enough, ready to be put back together. Even the dark oak table in front of us may have been reminiscent of the rich and beautiful desks Dad stood before when he swore his allegiances to the powerful, those to whom he would nod his head and curry favor in order to have the kind of life he wanted. His bargain with them ... for that’s how he viewed it, made so long ago when he was young and poor ... no longer stroked his pride.

My father would eventually adjust his bargains to match his values, and he learned to grant more authority to himself than he accepted from others. But on that afternoon in Herkimer, he was just beginning that leg of the journey. As he tried to make sense of his emotions, the awful gnawing in his gut was literally making him sick. For the first time in years he would not be agreeable. He would not submit. Not to this little Protestant prick across the table from him who wouldn’t know decent manners from a stick up his ass.

Out in the kitchen, the women busied themselves with lunch, their laughing voices carrying through the door to the three of us as we stood around the table. I watched Dad raise his eyes from the box of parts and let his gaze wander over to the window and then through the glass into the distance, as if he was looking somewhere for strength. Or counting to ten. Quickly, he brought his eyes back and looked down again at the box. His mouth twisted into a hard line and he looked like he was about to explode. I began to fear he would pick up the little man and throw him through the window.

Not even a tone-deaf blowhard like Ben could miss the minor chord now vibrating throughout the dining room. The chatter of the women dribbled to a stop as our silence blared out into the kitchen, and in a moment the entire house was as quiet as a tomb, except for the grandfather clock ticking in the hall.

“Ed ...?” I heard my mother call. She did not get an answer.

“Well, Ed,” Ben finally began. “Perhaps we”

“I thank you for the clock, Ben.” said my father. “But I’m afraid we have to get back home sooner than we planned.”

“Oh, now” said Ben, “there’s no need to”

“I’m not feeling well,” said Dad. “We’re leaving.”

We were in the driveway and loading ourselves into the car less than a minute later. I said nothing at first. I was surprised my mother or grandmother offered no comments. Women often try to fix what is not ready to be fixed.

Dad carried the box of parts to the car. He got in the passenger side, a signal for me to drive, and sat staring straight ahead, the box planted on his lap.

Ben fluttered around outside the car like a small bird, offering one comment or another to each of us as I started the engine. Dad avoided eye contact with him, but nodded his head when Ben said he hoped my father would feel better soon. Dad appeared as agreeable as a muzzled bull. Anger welled up inside me and I wanted to tell Ben off.

When the little man danced around to my side of the car, I looked up at him and spoke with contempt written across my face.

“You know what, Ben?” I snarled.

An iron clamp seized my right elbow and squeezed so hard I almost fainted.

“Uh,” I said through clenched teeth, “thank you and good bye.” My father let go and I slumped back in my seat. Under his breath Dad said with a fury, “Don’t ever speak for me!”

I put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway a bit too fast, scraping the bumper on the pavement when we hit the street.

No one uttered a word as we drove up Route 5 toward home. Near Ilion, my father asked me to pull over near a railroad siding.

I expected him to heave the box of parts out the window and tell me to drive on. But instead, he got out, placed the box on the seat and walked 30 feet or so into the grass. He knelt down and threw up.

Small womanly nurturing sounds came from the back seat, but neither my mother nor grandmother got out to attend my father. That told me they understood what was going on. I can’t say I did, not then, not fully. I turned to the back seat and said, “Gee, he really *was* sick!” No one answered.

In a few moments Dad returned and told me to drive on. Two or three miles went by without a word being said by anyone. Finally, I could take it no longer.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked.

“Yes,” was all he said.

“Maybe I can help you with the clock,” I said. “I mean clean the parts or

something while you figure out how they go together.”

“Don’t worry about it, “ he said curtly. The brusque manner hurt. While I thought nothing of dismissing him when I wanted to, I didn’t like his dismissal of me.

The more I thought about Ben, the angrier I got. Why couldn’t we just put Grandma on the bus once in a while and ship her off to Herkimer? Why did I have to watch my father demean himself when we went to visit Ben?

“You should have told him off,” I said.

My father’s hand shot out sideways and almost ripped the shirt off my chest. I slammed on the brakes and pulled the car to the side of the road, cries from my mother and grandmother coming from the back seat.

Dad threw open his door and pulled me by the front of my shirt right across the seat and out on to the side of the road. Hot tears came to my eyes as I prepared to lose our first real fist fight. He spun me around and threw me up against the side of the car. His face was a mask of anger. I shouted into it, “You should have told him off, goddamn it.!”

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” he shouted back, his spit spraying into my face.

I took a breath, choked and took another. “I don’t know,” I said. I looked down at the ground. “I don’t know who I am.”

His face relaxed and he straightened up. Then he grabbed me and hugged me, for the first time since I had been a little boy. A bear hug.

“I don’t know, either,” he said.

That night my father telephoned Ben and apologized, something I thought was totally unnecessary. But at sixteen I knew nothing about apologies.

Over the next week, Dad worked on the clock at his tiny workbench in the cellar after supper each night, while the rest of us sat in the living room and watched television. He had the mechanism together and working in no time. He sanded the wooden case and gave it three coats of varnish. When the last coat was absolutely dry, he brought the clock upstairs and placed it on the mantel in the living room. He wound the clock, set the hands to the correct time and gave the pendulum a tiny shove. The clock went tick, tock. It seemed rather loud.

When Jesse and I settled in our beds for the night, the ticking noise drifted down

the hall to our bedroom. Jesse wondered if Dad should have put more oil in the clock.

“It’s not a Chevy,” I told him.

“I can’t sleep,” Jesse moaned from across the room. “Go tell Dad to stop the clock.”

“You go tell him,” I said. “And mention that a telescope would have been a lot quieter.”

But after a few minutes I got up and headed down the hall.

In the semi darkness of the living room, lit only by the street light from outside, I stepped up to the clock, opened the little door and stopped the pendulum. I moved the hands ahead to 4 a.m. so it would look like the clock had given up the ghost in the middle of the night. I felt like a burglar in our own living room. Carefully closing up the clock, I turned to go back to bed. My father sat across the room looking at me.

"It was keeping Jesse awake," I said.

"Me, too," said my father.

"You did a nice job fixing the clock," I told him.

“It’s not perfect,” he said, “but I gave it my best.”

“It’s better than I could have done,” I said.

"I'm sorry that I didn't let you help me," he said. "I really got wrapped up in it. It felt like something I had to do."

I wondered if calling Ben the night we brought home the clock parts had also been something my father felt he had to do.

“Why did you apologize to Ben?” I asked.

“Because I was wrong,” he said. “I stomped out of a man’s house without having an honest conversation about why I was angry with him. And I should have had it long ago.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He said he knew he had a big mouth and it was a problem. He told me no one else visits them any more.”

“Will we?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Aunt Mary is the only relative Grandma has left.”

Grandma died the next year and after the funeral we lost track of Cousin Ben and Aunt Mary. But they stopped by the restaurant when we celebrated my parents’ 30th wedding anniversary a decade later. I recognized Ben as soon as he stepped through the door. He hadn’t aged that much in ten years and he remembered me by name. He surprised me, saying he often recalled our conversations with pleasure and always thought we were a lot alike. I didn’t get upset. He may have been right. When I asked if he still fixed clocks, he smiled and looked away while saying, “only my own.”

Ben’s pile of parts, assembled by my father into a noisy clock, ticked away on the mantel for over thirty years. It sold at a garage sale when my parents moved to a senior apartment. After my father died, I was sorry we let it go.

So last week I brought home the clock from the antique store, after getting the young clerk to climb up a ladder and hand it down to me. It sits ticking on my desk as a reminder of the man who overcame the ordinary troubles of life to become a wonderfully ordinary father to me. He never became perfect. Neither did I.

As I grew to manhood, he allowed me more control over my own destiny and seldom gave advice without my asking for it. When I struggled to accept my burdens and find my gifts as a young man, he stood back armed only with hope and let me search out my own paths, allowing me to cope with life at the speed of my own heartbeat. He waited on the path for me. He may still, for in addition to the sound of my own clock, I sometimes hear another softly ticking up ahead.

Thanks to my late father, Jack, for the loan of some of his character for this story. Jack was anything but submissive, so I could use only parts of him to build the fictional Ed in this tale of mid life blues ... if that’s what it is.

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