

Waiting For Me

Clocks intrigue me. I have five or six hanging on the walls of my little cave where I write and ponder the universe. None of them keep the same time. My favorites don't even work. There's something about a stopped clock that means more to me than anything as mundane as the correct time. At this stage of my life I don't need to be reminded of time passing as much as I need encouragement. That may have always been true.

I brought a clock home from a flea market last month and centered it in the middle of my desk, where it did absolutely nothing but sit there glowing in the pride of its century old craftsmanship, a 12 inch high pendulum clock with a white face of Roman Numerals behind a glass door. I didn't wind it, but let it sit silent. It brought back memories of my father, who once rebuilt a similar old clock.

After a few days, I opened the little door on the front, wound the mechanism, set the hands to the correct time and gave the pendulum a tiny shove. The clock went tick, tock. In a few moments, I reached in and stopped the pendulum. I closed the little door, leaving the clock silent, and sat there thinking about the man who had provided me with so many lessons, some unwittingly. More important, he had been present, in the best sense of the word.

The clock Dad rebuilt when I was in high school ticked louder than most as it sat on the mantel in our living room. In the small flat, my brother and I were annoyed by the ticking at night, and would get up after everyone went to bed and silence the clock. Dad restarted it each morning without comment. As I turned from the mantel one night after stopping the pendulum, I saw my father sitting in the dark in his easy chair.

"It was keeping us awake," I said.

"It's not very loud," said Dad.

"I can start it again," I said, without much enthusiasm.

"Never mind," he said, "leave it stopped. It's a nice piece to look at, but we've got other clocks to tell us the time."

"OK," I said. Wanting to leave before he changed his mind, I said, "Gotta go. I have a geometry test in the morning."

"You'll do well," he said.

"I'm not very good at math," I replied

"I mean you'll do well in life," he said.

I've always remembered that exchange. I wonder if my father realized how much I valued his encouragement. It was so much more helpful to me in those days than a lecture about buckling down and keeping my nose to the grindstone.

Dad let the clock on the mantel stay stopped. The hands said 11:34 for the next twenty years. Our little family joke whenever anyone asked the time was to answer, "eleven thirty-four." When the mortician was ready to dress Dad's body before his wake, he asked for his jewelry. I handed him my father's old watch after setting it to 11:34.

Perhaps a stopped clock serves our real needs better than a working clock. A clock in motion is a taskmaster. It sets the pace and counts the hours. A stopped clock has wisdom, it does nothing but wait.

I'd like the clock sitting on my desk to be like the one on our mantel in my teenage years, silent and wise, its pendulum stilled from constantly swinging left and right like an ego's incessant hunt to find its own selfish purpose. My father's clock didn't count the time and it didn't pester me with the lateness of the hour. It didn't note my wasted days while I sought the purpose of my life. When I wasted time and at first refused to accept my burdens and my gifts, it allowed me to cope with life at the speed of my own heartbeat. It waited for me like an old friend or a mentor ... like my father, who stood back armed only with hope as I searched out my own paths.

My father and I walked different routes on our journeys through life. He knew that would be the case, so he seldom offered advice while I hammered out my plans and lived my own life. He trusted I would find my way. I have indeed found my way, but I sometimes hear his gentle laugh from farther up the path as he waits for me to catch up.

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