

Lessons Learned

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I know this note is belated for posting but may be worth sharing. On June 12th, 2010, during the memorial service held in honor Professor Tekie Fessehazion, I stepped to the podium to deliver an impromptu speech, which did not do justice to the momentous event. I wanted to share with the audience the thoughts that raced through my mind when I was sitting at the funeral parlor along with hundreds of mourners. I started musing: What if Professor Tekie, just for a fleeting moment, regained consciousness, pried the casket open, stepped to the podium and began to address the his mourners thus: “I am humbled and deeply touched by your coming in great number to bid me farewell. You were instrumental in anchoring my sense of belonging, sharpening my conviction and crystallizing my mission. You have enriched my life by your friendship and alleviated my pain by your compassion. In my final days, some of you held my hands to impart me vigor and vitality. Some of you whispered earnest prayers to bring me back into consciousness. Some of you wept in silence, with tears streaming down your cheeks. Oh how you showed me so much kindness! And today, you have graced my exit by your presence, prayers, eulogies and requiems. As you mourn my departure, I want to entreat you: take heed of the purpose of your living so that when the time comes for you to pack and leave you could say: I have reached the end of my journey and accomplished my mission!” There is no denying that I was in a state of trance while such a cogent message permeated the funeral parlor.

I came to visit Dr. Tekie before he died. Unfortunately, he had already slipped into unconsciousness, his eyes closed and his chest heaving. I was in utter disbelief and awe-stricken, for I too am mortal. How is it possible for life to change in a heartbeat? Indeed, how is it possible for the mental faculty to be ravished and the memory to be diminished in such a haste? I desperately wanted to cling to some vestige and mused: “Would it be possible to bequeath Dr. Tekie’s brain for safekeeping or for jumpstarting another intellectual or scholarly pursuit?” Alas, I was jolted and rebuked by reality. “Get a grip!” Hijacking brilliance or blazing shortcuts to academic excellence are not possibilities we can plot. The making of a scholar is a protracted process. It is an arduous journey embarked upon at daybreak.

Allow me to tell you a story. It was early Monday morning and the TGIM (Thank God It Is Monday) chorus was faint at best. I for one was not among the singers. My inner voice was muffled and my mood subdued. There was nothing to perk me up. As I entered the elevator, I was greeted by a coworker who was cheerful and upbeat. My inner reaction was: “You want to flaunt that demeanor? Get Real!” But for the sake of maintaining a small talk, I asked him how he was doing. His reply totally blew me away. He said, with a voice exuding conviction, “Mike!”, that is the nickname he gave me for fear of mangling my Eritrean name, “I am here when a lot of people did not wake up today!” It was a profound message. Today, as we mourn the loss of our beloved friend Dr. Tekie, we must recognize and embrace life and good health with gratitude for they are unmerited, undeserved and unexplainable gifts. How we shortchange ourselves by not relishing the goodness of life.

One Saturday afternoon, I was busy vacuuming around the house. During the process, I was totally immersed in my thoughts and occasionally talking to myself. Exacerbating my odd behavior, I was huffing, puffing and grunting. My daughter who happened to be in one of the rooms, heard all my commotion and hollered “Daddy...!” in upward resonating voice. Startled, I snapped out of my oblivion and replied rather angrily, “What?” Then my daughter asked me, “Are you grunting?” I retorted, “I suppose I am!” Then my daughter put it bluntly, “Oh Daddy...! That is not a good sign!” I could not help but make fun of myself saying , “I know, I am growing old!”

The fact of the matter is that change creeps on all of us. There is not much we can do to keep aging at bay or to arrest youth and vitality from slipping away. Plucking gray hairs and smoothing wrinkled faces fail to dissemble the transformation we are undergoing. We want to command time to stand still and to entreat the moment to linger awhile. Albeit in vain. With every fleeting moment, we draw nearer to our grand finale. We are nothing but transients and temporary sojourners. We ride on a conveyor belt called life and get unloaded like a cargo that reached its destination. At the end of our trip, we disembark. No feet-dragging! No lease-extending! The intent here is not to portray a gloomy picture of life. Rather, it is to point out that life, despite its finiteness, is worth living. The rationed time span of our existence is meant to be utilized purposefully and not squandered by drifting aimlessly. As the message in “*The Janitor*”¹ put it, “It does not matter if you live two thousand years or twenty. What matters is how you fill the space between the dates on your gravestone.” We have a mandate not only to improve ourselves but also to impact peoples’ lives positively. Where there is ignorance, suffering and strife , we are meant to educate, ease the pain and make peace. We are meant to be agents of constructive change!

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to bid Farewell to Professor Tekie. Because of him, we have learned invaluable lessons. I would like to leave you with a quotation from an Eritrean song called ማእግር or *Broad Shoulders*: ከለኻን ከለኻን ዝከኣለካ ግብር! *Do everything you can while you are alive and have the resources to make a difference!*

¹ *The Janitor* by Todd Hopkins & Ray Hilbert, 2007, Published by Thomas Nelson, p. 134