

God, Old Men, and Circles

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Quiet and content, we sat in the booth, sipping ice water and waiting for Mom (and our sushi). The cold glasses left circles of condensation on the table. I'd been wanting to ask him for a while, but I was unsure if I really wanted to hear the answer. But I knew that with Mom's arrival, the window for stout, manly conversation would end.

So, raising my eyes from his starched white shirt, I met my dad's gaze and summoned the guts to ask.

It came out in a torrent of unorganized thought and curiosity, all revolving around the realities of adulthood. I explained how my life up until that point had come in thrilling, new, 4-month packages—not long, 10-year stretches—and how that scared me. Above all, I wanted to know how faith fit into the world of the eight-to-five, how I was to relate to the Living God in an environment as mundane as the workplace.

The gush slowed to a drip and ended with something like, “Does it get old? Boring?”

For a moment, my dad furrowed his brow. His answer did not take much searching out.

“Yeah. It does.”

In fatherly candor, he shared some field notes from middle age. The image he painted was not morbid or wholly dismal, but it was a far cry from the violent joy of early-twenties manhood. He referenced an essay that I'd written and shared with him a week ago. The revel of a young man, it described a life full of color and passion, the joys of an indestructible body and an idealistic soul. It articulated my yearning to pour out my life working for some great cause, raging against some formidable evil, the bent toward revolution and martyrdom, the heart that in its essence demanded the music all the way up and the windows all the way down.

But there, at Fuji Kim's, in moderate tones, I heard my father explain how things were different. He explained how the happy rage did not last forever, that zeal and thrill were not the norm for middle age. The pleasure he once took in his daily labor, any connection it had to a greater cause, were swallowed up with the comment, “I get more satisfaction out of mowing the lawn than going to work.”

It rang in my ears.

I contemplated my dad, faithfully, patiently, living in a loop.

Wake. Coffee. Prayer. Work. Home. Sleep.

Repeat. Repeat.

Repeat.

Around and around in a circle, one month, one year, one decade at a time. It was this gray season that stretched before and loomed over the man across the table. It was this season that I'd heard rumors of, that I'd distantly dreaded, that I now faced as a very far-off, but inevitable reality.

Mom arrived and joined us. With a quick smile and a quicker hand, we put away the stout, manly things. But even as we shared, laughed, and ate, I imagined I could see, out of the corner of my eye, that youth-dripping, reveling essay sitting on the table. There, in bright white paper and rich black ink, it sat—my dad's glass soaking a circle through, naturally, slowly, to gray.

A week later, 500 miles from Fuji Kim's, my junior-year summer was underway. By God's grace I had obtained an engineering internship at a firm in downtown Nashville. The people were great, the work paid well, and the office chairs were comfortable. I was on track to do the very thing I'd planned and studied for, in the very city I wanted to call home.

Like previous summers, things were different than they were during the school year. There were 9-hour days spent in the same chair, khaki pants that stayed clean for days because they never saw sweat or dirt, bureaucracy that wore away the connections between means and ends and slowed down even the best of the intentions. All these marks of professional adult life were not new to me. I had felt the same flat rhythms in other internships, in other professional worlds, over other summers.

What was new was not the coffee maker or the cubicles, the collared shirts or the Monday meetings. What was new was what these things meant. Previously, they had represented an interruption – a drab eddy between stretches of white water. Now the same tame things came not an interruption, but a foretaste. This time, the eddy foreshadowed the years ahead – a slowing, a stillness, a swirling, around and around in a circle.

It scared me. I had come to Vanderbilt on a mission. In one sense escaping the domesticated faith of the Bible Belt; in another sense, deployed after a decade of spiritual training, I had come to school with a calling. I wanted to meet die-hard Christians and also become real friends with people who thought radically differently than me. I wanted to pour out all my heart, mind, and soul to speak up for truth, fight for justice, engage with deep brokenness, and serve to bring reconciliation and healing. I came to college to be spent in the cause of eternal things, to be consumed by the purposes of the Master who loved and called me. Life was vivid in college; it had a trembling weight to it. It had clear direction to it and a fire driving it.

Did all that fade with age?

The summer in Nashville was a small-scale experiment to answer that question and the dozens of others that it splintered into.

It began in May.

Every morning I would wake up, go on a run in the dark, eat breakfast, pray, go to work, go home, go to bed. The same commute, the same coffee, the same cube, the same bed—day after day. Easy, comfortable.

Wake. Run. Breakfast. Coffee. Pray. Work. Home. Dinner. Sleep. Repeat.

The questions multiplied. All the grit and strength and fervor of youth, all the things God had equipped me with to please him in my twenties—would He withdraw those graces as I served Him in my forties?

The routine slipped into June, simplifying, at least in my mind, to:

Coffee. Prayer. Work. Sleep. Repeat.

Were passionate joy and happy rage just for a season? Would they be surrendered in gratitude for something else later? Was it the worldly comfort of the suburbs and the tameness of the office that took these things away, or the lapse of hormones, or the hand of a wise and good God?

July blurred by, and day after similar day into August.

Coffee. Prayer. Work. Sleep. Repeat.

Repeat. Repeat.

Repeat.

The questions dug deeper and deeper. Would God be disappointed on Judgment Day if all I had to return to Him were decades of the same tame and flavorless life, spent in a gray office chair?

Would He be pleased, could He be satisfied with that? Could I be satisfied with that?

Answers multiplied less quickly.

I didn't *hate* the summer. Parts of it I even savored—especially morning coffee. Like my dad, I took it black—no frills, no cream or sugar. I drank it slowly when I could and tasted its plain and unsweet richness. Its smell also came as a simple pleasure, morning by morning, and I looked forward to the ritual.

Sometime in June, I set my mug down on an open journal that I used to record prayers. Because of a small spill, when I lifted the cup away, I discovered I'd left a coffee mark – the same familiar mark I'd made on plenty of napkins and pieces paper in the past. I saw the shape every morning, plainly there, in a prayer journal, and I came to admire it. I noticed its detailed complexity more and more, until I convinced myself that the plain, brown circle was beautiful—but only in a very underwhelming way.

I came to like it so much, though, that I bought a poster board a week later and started collecting coffee marks, made on purpose, from every morning's coffee ritual. By August I had dozens, all forgettable—some with very good, expensive, coffee, some with very bad coffee, some light, some dark, some large, some small. But just circles, mostly the same grayish-brown.

With some work, some rough arrangement and subtle lines, I got them to point to something—not perfectly, but generally to the right, mostly up. Individually the circles were underwhelming, unable to point to anything. But collectively, with a little aim and on a much larger scale than many beautiful things exist, they could, at the very least, point to something else.

The summer's experiment was mostly inconclusive. I did *not* discover how exactly a man's soul ages and settles, what that will look like for me two decades from now, or how to be sure I receive that season rightly—but I did study circles. And I learned that they are not totally unredeemable.

They can, at the very least, in a rough way, point to something—even something higher and bigger than their tiny, flat shape.

There is hope in this.

In some ways, my heart has not changed. Twenty years from now, I hope to God I'm sharing the gospel in Saudi Arabia and laboring to bring clean drinking water to underdeveloped communities. My preference still is that the happy rage lasts until the day I breathe my last and that every year between now and then drips with the sweet color of youth that soaks every moment of my life right now.

But if not, if instead my Master calls me to labor for Him in an office with comfortable chairs, and I instead share the gospel with my suburbanite coworkers, if the days run together in routine and ritual, and excitement wanes for the steadier strength of age, I will not be undone. If circles, when arranged rightly, can point to something greater than themselves, I can do the same, even with ten-year stretches of an eight-to-five life.

At the end of it all, I cannot know how my forties will compare to my twenties or predict what life will look like at that stage. But God can, and He promises to be pleased if I simply live the life I'm given as unto Him.

He will be satisfied. At the end of it all, I can be satisfied with that.