

Mike Metzler Relay for Life Speech

June 13, 2015

Moment of Silence

Hi. Thank you for having me. I'd like to begin by asking us to take moment of silence to reflect on and remember all of those we know affected by cancer.

Moment story

THANK YOU.

I happened to time that moment on my phone, and it was exactly one minute. Sixty seconds.

In today's day and age, our moments, our collections of minutes, seem to go by a little faster because even though we have all this technology, we're somehow a bit more pressed, a bit more stressed, and we'd like everything quicker. Those considerations compelled me to reflect on our moments.

There's a wonderful story we have in our family related to moments. When our son Luke was a little tyke, he asked me if I could help him with something, and I said "in a moment." A while later when I called to him and said I was ready to help, he came running into the room with arms stretched over his head victoriously shouting "Yes! Yes!" He was leaping all over the place and pumping his fists. When we asked him why he was so excited, he said, "I know how long a moment is! I

know how long a moment is! It's 2 minutes and 14 seconds. You said 'in a moment,' and I timed you, and it was 2 minutes and 14 seconds! That's how long a moment is."

That was the time Luke learned what a moment was. When children learn things, or think they learn things, it's a beautiful moment indeed.

So here I asked for a moment of silence, and I gave us 60 seconds -- exactly 1 minute, and I think there may have been some of us who, during that minute, were saying, "Wow, this moment sure is going a little long." A few of us may have looked up, wondering when I was going to end this moment. It may have been a surprise to realize that there really is a lot of time in a minute -- in a moment. And imagine how much time that really is for us to reflect and think deeply about the cancer challenge if we choose to spend our time that way. And how much time it could provide for us to make headway if we really concentrated our moments. How much time it could be for the bigger, stronger, faster computers to do their calculations and make connections and comparisons that are going to do all the grunt work it takes to solve this cancer problem moving forward. It might be good to determine how in our lives we can spend our moments working to eradicate this monster. It would be time well spent, certainly, and it could be effective time. And it begins with minutes. It begins with moments.

And imagine that moment from the perspective of one who is battling cancer. Imagine how much they'd long for a stress free moment. Imagine how much they'd long for a few extra moments to just be. To just live in peace. A lot of us talk of cherishing moments, but these people know that feeling deeply and sincerely. And they long for those moments that we often take for granted.

And so, I ask us to consider our moments....

Heroes?

In addition to considering our moments, we are here today to consider our heroes.

I've never really warmed up to the game of trying to identify the heroes among us. We put humans up on a pedestal only to have them come toppling down to show us just how human they really are. Hailing heroes is a practice that's fraught with problems and more often than not becomes a fool's errand.

But while I'm not a huge fan of the noun "hero," I somehow prefer the adjective "heroic." It may be making a distinction without a difference, but it seems to me that we've all leaned into a heroic act at some point in our lives, and for many of those among us here tonight, heroism has become a part of your daily existence.

You've been affected by cancer in some way, and you've chosen to face-off with it as a patient, a family member or a friend. You've mustered up whatever will you had to combat this evil disease. As a patient, you said I never asked for this burden, but I'm up for the challenge. As a supporter, a family member or friend, you said how can I help? You put others needs before your own. You've been selfless.

In short, you've all been heroic.

Have you heard of this guy from Greek mythology called Sisyphus? Mostly he's just got a fun name for tongue-twisters. Try saying Sisyphus three times fast. (Go ahead! Or you could try "Sisyphus celebrates Festivus!")

Well, some see Sisyphus as a bad guy – too cunning and proud for his own good. Others, like Albert Camus, see him as a sort of absurd hero. Either way, the story goes that Sisyphus got himself in trouble with the gods, and they punished him for all eternity to rolling a huge boulder up a steep hill, only to watch it roll back down again, where he would have to start over. It is a brutal struggle just to get up the hill, and it is made all the more brutal to get the rock to the top, watch it rest for only a moment, then teeter, then roll back down for another round. Camus was fascinated by the time between rounds. The time when Sisyphus would have to watch his struggle go for naught, then head back down and begin the struggle again. Camus thought THIS was the moment when Sisyphus became superior to his struggle, when he became stronger than his rock. When he became conscious of how hard it was, but he would begin again. He became, dare I say, heroic.

And I think that we all have these heroic moments when we KNOW it's brutal, and we know it's a steep hill, but we consciously choose to push forward. We choose to be heroic at that most important moment, the decision time, where we decide to press on. To walk on... To RELAY on.

When we put those heroic moments together, we can indeed become stronger than our rock.

Cancer Commercial

Speaking of heroic moments, I saw a TV commercial recently that I found compelling. There's a father in bed, weak and gaunt and struggling with cancer. His wife is with him, and his son is watching from the other room. The father lifts himself up from bed, frail and slow, takes his wife's hand, and they begin to dance. We then hear a lilting female voice singing "Que Sera Sera... Whatever will be will be," as we watch the couple slowly turn. And then a slide comes up on the screen saying, "What will be doesn't have to be." I thought it heroic for them simply to dance in the face of their adversity. In the less than 30 seconds it took, I found the son heroic as he stoically watched.

But the struggle to make sure "whatever will be doesn't have to be" is an epic one. In Ken Burns' documentary about cancer, they show all these U.S. presidents -- president after president after president -- standing at the podium exclaiming that they're going to put an end to cancer. But the nemesis persists decade upon decade. So how do you tackle something this big and with this much complexity? I think you do it little piece by little piece. Little moment by little moment. It may just come down to individuals choosing how they spend their moments.

So, as I watched this commercial... I was focused on the power, beauty and salience of the moment, but those making the ad were focused on a message of preventative measures, or in a broader sense, they were focused on our actions.... And I thought, that's good. We fill our moments with our actions, so it's wise to reflect on that. ON how we spend our moments and what actions we take.

For most of us in this struggle, this endeavor, we genuinely want to help make it better. I think we just want to find a way to be of use. And that reminded me of one of my favorite poems. It's by Marge Piercy, and it's called "To Be of Use." It goes like this...

To be of use

BY MARGE PIERCY

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

This “work” that we’re engaged in tonight is very real, and it is of great use.

**I must admit, however, that I find it hard to be of use when I’m in such pain.
When I wallow... something that’s far less than heroic. But it’s part of my
existence now.**

I find myself crying in my mind all the time. When playing basketball with buddies, when watching movies, when having dinner with friends and family. Even when I appear to be laughing, I'm crying. I'm broken. I'm beaten. I'm depleted in a way that I sense is irreparable. I'm sure there are people who have figured out how to move past a dismantling blow like this, but it's not me. And as tough as this has been for me, it was way tougher for my daughter, Hannah. When she first heard she had a tumor in her brain, she had more pain than I'll ever know. When they dug out that tumor, radiated her head, pumped her full of chemo and steroids and all kinds of other drugs, she knew pain. When she put on more weight than she could

handle. When her body alternated between diarrhea and constipation, fevers and chills. When she was flat on her back strapped to a radiation table, vomiting into the mask that secured her head to the table. When she needed special glasses because her right eye was folding up into her head and causing vision problems, she knew pain. When she could no longer write, no longer tap keys to text her friends, no longer speak...No longer smile. That was pain!! And she faced it with a quiet and dignified form of heroism that I'd never seen before and thought I'd never see again.

Yet, I soon realized that that kind of heroism is evident in everyone battling cancer. Patient. Family. Physicians & nurses & staff. Friends. All heroic. And it's important to note, I think, that it's a group heroism..... Because when you're being battered, you muster up your own strength, but you need help. You need to lean on others. You need support. You need Community. And that's what this event is all about. It's about community. You're here to help. You're here to support. You're here to lift up those who are hurting. And that is heroic. In the face of your own struggles you're going to become emboldened to battle and try to make things better, of course. You're going to try to overcome. But stepping into someone else's battle is truly heroic. That's something you don't have to do, but you do for the sake of others.

There's another word for it. It's called LOVE, and it fills the air in a place like this on a night like tonight. In fact, I found one of Hannah's poem's from her freshman year about LOVE. It's called, appropriately, "Healing Words". And I'd like to share it....

“Healing Words”

by Hannah Metzler

There are words like love.
So simple and caring,
but desired and powerful.
Four simple letters
balancing on the edge of a tongue.
It circles through every hug,
dances on the lips after every kiss,
fills a heart with kindness,
evaporates pain,
flows through speech
like a trickle of water
down a stream,
sparks emotion and feeling.
The only real thing
that can mend a heart
smashed like a broken vase.

I know when I feel like a broken vase, I turn to you, family and friends, and I look for love. It is so incredibly reassuring to know that you are you, that you are here, and that you are heroic when we need you to be. And for that, I and so many others, are grateful.

PLAN B

Just last week I read a Facebook post by the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, who was grieving the loss of her husband, Dave, who died recently in a fluke accident. She spoke of leaning on friends, which is, of course, essential. She also spoke of trying to come up with strategies and alternatives to have her close friends fill that void in their family where a father and husband used to be, and she found herself crying to a friend, "I want Dave. I want Option A." Her friend responded with one of the most pure and poignant and powerful pieces of advice I've ever heard. He put his arm around her and said, "Option A is not available. So let's just kick the shit out of Option B." Sure, the language is a bit rough and coarse, but its honesty and recognition of the important teamwork involved in efforts like this ring very true to me. He's saying we're in this together, let's take the options available to us, and let's be heroic. He's saying "Let's win this moment on this day!"

Kerouac's Mad Ones

I'm reminded of the many admonitions out there to make the most of each moment and each day, and how that attempt can be heroic for so many of us. To "Carpe Diem" or to "suck the marrow out of life," as Thoreau put it. To make a conscious choice to stand at the bottom of that insurmountable hill and choose to try to push that heavy rock up against all odds and expectations. I think this notion of embracing each day and living fully in every moment approaches a sort of heroic madness – a good kind of madness – a kind of mad determination that we can all aspire toward. And I think it's best captured in a literary passage from Jack

Keruaac's "On the Road" that was part of a mural I asked one of my students to paint on my classroom wall some years ago. It celebrated a kind of madness that is in its own way heroic. It goes like this...

"The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"

It would be great to be one of these mad ones. To seize every moment of every day heroically. But few of us can sustain this point of beautiful, rich madness, where we burn, burn, burn each and every day and make people go Awww. Most of us are just normal and regular folk. Most of us are just Sisyphus pushing rocks up hills.

But we CAN aspire. We can hope. We can strive. We can choose to get up, dust ourselves off, and start rolling again. If cancer took away our Hannah's smile, we can choose to SMILE. If people need our support, we can choose to RELAY.

And that is very much leaning toward the heroic, I believe.

So, let's strive for that kind of heroism. We can't snap our fingers and eliminate cancer right here and right now. We can't bring our loved ones who have succumbed to cancer back. I can't bring my Hannah back. That's Option A. It may be our first choice, but it's unavailable to us. We do, however, have Option B. We have tonight, and we have each other. So, let's choose to kick the shit out of this

Option B we have before us here. And let's begin making choices each and every day to inject a bit of madness, a little bit of crazy hope, a bit of striving beyond what we believe possible into our daily collections of moments.

In doing so, we can all be heroic and exclaim, "I did it all, and I swear I lived."

Thank you all for your love & support. Thank you all for being here. And thank you for listening.