



*Timing is everything. Many of you read this on Saturday, a day after it typically arrives at your house. This Saturday is August 17, which is both National Vanilla Custard Day and National Black Cat Appreciation Day – causes for great celebrations coast to coast. It's also my dad's birthday...*

...which, under normal circumstances, I might or might not mention here. But circumstances today are not normal. My dad is 90. And that feels like a big number when I hear it inside my mind's ear.

I got mad at my father this week, and I yelled at him. In a way, I stand by the essence of my argument, but it feels lousy that I made him feel lousy, nonetheless.

It's an unavoidable thing: The power dynamic between father and son – between parent and child – shifts wildly as we age. There's a real thing – medically-defined – called age regression. It doesn't necessarily manifest as alarmingly as thumb-sucking or clinging to a blanket. But as the world continues to evolve and advance rapidly and we simultaneously and naturally tire – physically, cognitively, emotionally – it's scary. And fear subconsciously reminds us of the flip side of wonder we experienced as kids. Kids imagine monsters and respond to their manufactured anxiety concerning the unknown. Perhaps, there's nothing more monstrous than mortality, which materializes and comes closer in the hazy darkness with each passing day.

When I was a boy and then a young man, I used a simple math equation to assuage my near-obsessive fear of death. I chose 100 as a constant, because it seemed like an aspirational-but-attainable terminal age. The "X" in my calculation represented my current age at the time. So,  $Y=100-X$ , with Y being my unscientifically estimated remaining life span. If Y sounded sufficiently large in my head (at 15, for example, Y is 85), I could immediately return to what I was doing, satisfied and strong. A month from now, Y will be 40. I can convince myself that 40 is a big number, if I ignore that the most recent 40 is, in some ways, an infinitesimal blur.

As mathematicians know, theorems have vulnerabilities. The problem with my equation: It doesn't account for quality. The "value" of the 96th year, arithmetically, is the same as year 8. But that's a woefully insufficient representation of reality. For most people, 10 was a lot more fun than 90 is.

At 10, the world is unimaginably large. Each new thing you experience amazes you. "The art of the possible" is an old phrase, both inspirationally and cynically used by politicians and public figures throughout modern history and employed in the entrepreneur's lexicon today. When you're 10, the art of the possible is painted in giant, brightly colored brushstrokes, applied to life's canvas with nimble, free-swinging arms. At 90, your hands are swollen, arthritically twisted. Your palette is muted. The character in your painting often stands small, unrecognizable, and alone.

When my dad was 10, he was an only child. So it was when he was 50. So it is now. His father died relatively young. He had a relationship with his mother that was complicated at times. These facts and 9 decades of life experience have shaped him into the person he is now. He is not the person he was at 80, nor 70, nor 60...nor 10. But that's okay. He's a survivor. And he's – like the best among is – is both imperfect and a good man.

It's hard, at times, to grant the people we love the grace to age in whatever way it comes. A man I know lost his wife of 60 years a couple of weeks ago. For the last four years of her life, she was in assisted living, never recovering completely from a stroke. He visited her daily, from 10 to 6, even on the days she wasn't really "there." Every day, for four years. I don't know if I could do the same, and it's shameful to possess that element of self-doubt. But this man – a man I see weekly at Mass – understands grace. I hope to consider his example the next time I feel compelled to yell at a 90-year-old man.

Just as your dominion seems limitlessly large to a 10-year-old, at 90 it has shrunk. Family, friends, acquaintances...many are gone. You can't get around well. There is more risk than reward in most endeavors. Your universe is reduced to the footprint of your home, if you're fortunate enough to remain in it. When the world is mostly an external abstraction, it's no surprise we forget how to behave in it over time.

My dad is 90 today. We don't throw a baseball together anymore. We haven't for a long time. But I hope he knows that there are moments when I regress in my mind, too...to when I was 10 and he was 40, and we are in our backyard. I make a throw that bounces before it reaches him and he suppresses his frustration and turns and runs after the errant ball lying in the distant grass. The art of the possible, then, is delivering a perfect strike on the next try. It's the envelope of cash that he continues to fill once a week to fund the education that will unlock my dreams. It's the comfort of knowing that we'll be doing the exact same thing at the same time the following day.

I forgive him for getting older. I hope he forgives me for wishing that he didn't have to.

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