

I decided to post, as my first-ever blog, an article I wrote for a newsletter some three years ago. I was dealing with cancer, and the many thoughts one has when fighting for time and life...

My Words and My Time

Awhile ago, I was asked to write a piece for a newsletter. "Sure," I said, forgetting that I would actually have to write something.

So I took stock. I have been working for over 50 years. My last 22+ have been spent with Vistage International (previously TEC) and over 300 executives in the TEC/Vistage program, working with these men and women on their businesses and, in many cases, their lives. These experiences have led to my basis for serious reflection. On what's really important, and what's not such a big deal.

Pondering that led me to comment on two ideas, one a crucial "tool," the other an irreplaceable "asset," both woven into each of our lives. And to consider how I use each, how each is make-or-break in success, let alone relationships and happiness. When I pay attention to each of these, and get each right, I have a chance. And when I don't, I don't.

My Words

Trying to trump all the writings on the use and importance of words would be a fool's mission. Since I know I make "deposits" with well-chosen, appropriate words, and "withdrawals" with words that bruise, I will simply share an old father-son story about words, holes and a lesson...

There was a young lad, who as he grew up, was sent by his father to drive a nail into an old fencepost each time his father heard him use abusive language. As he grew up, he was sent to the fencepost to drive home scores of nails. In the process, he came to understand the impact of his words, and was allowed by his father to pull a nail out of the fencepost each time he chose quality language,

Eventually, the boy finally removed every nail he had driven into the post. On the day he was to leave for college, his father walked with him to the fencepost, carrying those same nails in an old leather bag. They stood together, both looking at the sack of nails and the fencepost. Finally, the long-ago boy, now a young man, said, "Dad, I'm sorry for those hard things I said. I understand now. And I'm really happy you let me pull out all those nails!"

His father laid his hand softly upon his son's shoulder, looked him in the eye, and said, "Son, you've done well. I'm proud of you. Now, before you go, look at the fencepost one more time. What do you see?" His son stared at the post for a moment, then said, "Nail holes." Therein, the father's lesson --- we can remove the nails, but the holes remain.

Not driving nails, and not leaving holes, is part of taking 100% responsibility for the impact of my words. Ensuring that they are clear and understood, considering how they may make others feel, and understanding what they do for and to people. If I wish to be effective, a leader, let alone create quality relationships, I must own every bit of what I say, how it is heard, and the "mark" it makes. These are my words --- how can it be the fault of another that I am not understood, or am "miss-interpreted," or wound people? That's nonsense! If I say it, I own it! I must both think and care before I talk.

My Time

As with words, we understand the basics of time. Yet we sense the clock spinning faster, how there seems to be much less time, and the seeming tyranny of it all. Time has become a villain, despite still getting the same 1440 minutes every day, and the choice as to how to use them. Which brings me to another story – about Jack, Mr. Belser, and the gift of time.....

Jack Bennett grew up next door to Harold Belser. Jack's father was always busy, so Jack spent hours as a youngster with his older neighbor. They built things. Jack listened to Mr. Belser's while he helped Mr. Belser with his chores. Finally grown, Jack left home to gain a college degree and pursue his own dreams.

In his mid-30s, and successful, Jack received a call from his mother. "Jack," she said, "Mr. Belser died. His funeral is Thursday." Jack sucked in his breath. He hadn't seen Mr. Belser for years. So why did this news stop him in his tracks? His mother interrupted: "Jack, did you hear me? Are you OK?" Jack reassured his mother, then said, "Mom, I will be on the late plane Wednesday. I'm coming back for Mr. Belser's funeral."

After the funeral and service, after everyone had left Mr. Belser's old house, Jack stood in the study with his mother, strangely troubled. "What's wrong, Jack?" Jack looked around. "There was a small gold box Mr. Belser kept on his desk. He'd never tell me what was in it, only that it was what he valued most." And it was gone. Jack looked around again, shrugged, and then they left.

Two weeks later. Jack returned home late from another long day at work, to find a small package his wife had placed on the kitchen table. The return address read, "Mr. Harold Belser." Jack stared at the package for a long moment, then opened it to find Mr. Belser's small gold box with a key taped to its top. And an envelope, which he opened to find a short note in Mr. Belser's shaky handwriting: "Upon my death, please forward this box to Jack Bennett. It's the thing I valued most in my life."

Jack carried Mr. Belser's gold box into the quiet of his den. As he sat back and unlocked the small box, Jack felt a deep sadness sweep over him. Inside the box he found a gold pocket watch. Jack unlatched the finely etched cover, and found these words engraved: "Jack, thanks for your time. Harold Belser." Jack was stunned. In all his years, the thing Mr. Belser had valued most was Jack's time. For some time, Jack sat quietly, tears in his eyes, holding Mr. Belser's watch.

Then he reached over, picked up the phone, and called his assistant at home. "Janet, I'm sorry to bother you so late. When you get in tomorrow, please clear my calendar for the day." Janet hesitated, then asked, "Is everything OK, Jack?" Jack smiled, and said, "Janet, I need some time with my son. Some time with my family." Jack paused, then added, "Janet, I want to thank you for all the time you give me. It means a lot to me."

So --- to whom do I gift my time? In different ways, there are many people in my life who are important to me. Family. Friends. Business associates. Members of my church. We all have our own roster of special people. My question is: Do I spend my time honestly with those I value? To me, "honestly" means that I gift enough of it to those for whom I care, and when I gift it, my focus is on the person with whom I am sharing time.

My WORDS and my TIME. I think they are a very big deal! If I could reach out to touch each of you, and give you a special gift for your lifetime, it would be for you to give those in your life the gift of words that shed light and build confidence, the gift of time that lifts those who look to you for guidance and leadership, and finally, the gift of unconditional personal ownership of both.