

Finn Janning

In Time, On Time, All the Time

"WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE, and why is it important?" I said, as my father folded a pillow on the sofa, laid his head on it and drew his final breath.

On the Monday morning that my father died, somewhere in Denmark, I was teaching an online university class, somewhere in Spain. Afterwards, I lay down on my bed, drained of energy. I closed my eyes and checked my breathing. It was agitated. My heart was beating too fast. Then it didn't beat at all. It was as if my heartbeat depended on my will. On whether I wanted it to beat. Or not.

Just as I was about to set the alarm on my phone to take a siesta, I saw that both my mother and my sister had called several times. I hadn't heard. My phone was always on mute. The reason was the death of my brother, years ago, when my mother and I were informed together by phone. Ever since, the muted phone has been my way of widening the gap between a call and my reaction.

I called my mother. She picked up and said, "Dad's dead."

I received the news lying down. I probably replied, "Oh."

Trying to get into a more appropriate position, I straightened up and shoved my legs over the side of the bed. I couldn't reach the floor. My legs had become shorter or numb. For a moment, I thought I was going to fall, but I still forced my body off the bed and got to my feet, as my mother ended the call with the words, "The doctor's ringing the doorbell."

I went into the kitchen, where my wife turned and looked at me.

"My father's dead," I said.

Four or five hours later, I told our three kids, "Grandpa's dead."

The words couldn't capture the reality. It seemed unreal. Which confirmed my conviction that things have to be written down to be real. To really exist. Maybe it's just because of my dyslexia that I have to see a word to be able to hear it.

I wrote, "My father's dead."



That sentence made me realize, with even greater force than before, that I was nobody.

Nothing but potential, a virtuality yet to be actualized.

I can describe myself, of course, as can other people. I can claim that I want something, to be something, become something, but all of that was, and is, often nothing but words of embellishment and self-congratulation.

What I realized was that, if I died, now and here, I would only be what I had left behind: thoughts, gestures, feelings, a way of being in the world, values, a possible physical presence and the warmth of my handshake.

Indeed, it's always other people who give a person their identity,

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whether that person wants it or not. Many find it unbearable that they can't control how other people see them, which is why they so eagerly and persistently narrate who they are.

I don't worry about fitting in. I have long since accepted that I was and am what others have made me, but also what they, individual people, will miss or have learned because of me.

In the same train of thought, a sudden fear of dying arose. I became afraid of dying. The thought hadn't crossed my mind since my brother's death. It wasn't my own absence that scared me but the absence of me, mainly in my kids' lives. I wanted to be there for them, because they needed me, I told myself. This assumption had nothing to do with their fragility. More likely, I wanted to make them as grateful as I had been for my dad.

This gratitude sprang from the fact that he was there. He was present. Curious. He was good at becoming the one he spent his time on.

For my father, it wasn't about him, and yet it was about him. He *showed* his singularity – unlike today's zeitgeist, when so many *talk* about their supposed genius.



As the funeral approached – slowly, because I couldn't fly from Spain to Denmark, having tested positive for Covid-19 the same day – an image of Michael Corleone appeared before my mind's eye.

In the movie *The Godfather*, the youngest son, Michael, doesn't want to be part of the family business. But when his father is shot and later dies, he steps up. He doesn't step into character but into existence. He steps onto the stage of life, stripped bare of the protective membrane of his father.

I had to do the same thing after my father died. It wasn't a question of desire or choice, but of necessity. It happened. All I had to lean on was what he had passed on to me that I found worth repeating. Only that which is worth repeating endlessly is worth doing once. It's that simple.

He did – and now I'm doing it, too, fully.



When the doctor rang the doorbell of my mother's house – a place that only a few minutes before had been my mother's and my father's – it was already too late.

Even if I'm not anyone specific – identities are nothing but fictions, anyway – I want to become the one who is never late. Or early. The one who is right on time. My father often said, "*It's important to be on time.*"

For years, I took it literally, as if it were a matter of showing up on time, when the point was to show up – in time, on time, all the time. To step into existence.

Even if I don't need to hang my existence on the peg rack of identities, and I don't dream of status or prestige, I know who I want to become.

Now, maybe more than ever.

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I want to be someone who leaves my children, my family and close friends with a feeling of gratitude. Because I was there – in time, on time, all the time.

It will only take one thing: a recognition or experience that I am not situated in time, but that time is in me. When that happens, no one, including myself, will ever feel left out.

My father taught me that place is essential, but time is even more important: it connects all places. In time, my father's body will disintegrate, become one with the soil, help a plant or a tree grow that will produce oxygen. The wind will carry that oxygen somewhere and fill the lungs of a human being, perhaps for the first time.

Who am I really? I'm no Don Corleone, and that's fine with me, as long as I'm somebody and someday will have been something to those who are and have been important to me.

If I am anything, I am the one who carries time within me. Nothing else. And that's plenty.