

## **PRETENDING TO BE HAPPY**

Last week was the 13th birthday of my youngest son, Jackson. One evening a few days before, I was engrossed in writing on the computer when my wife reminded me it was Jackson's bedtime. He was in bed reading, waiting for me to kiss him goodnight.

As I walked down the hall towards his room, my brain was filled with thoughts about the article I was working on. I was on autopilot and all I could think about was what I would write when I got back on the computer. For some reason, I stopped and stood still. Somehow, an extraneous thought had popped into my consciousness from nowhere.

It seemed just a moment ago when he was a little boy. Now, in just a few days, Jackson would become a teen-ager. The time was not far off when he will be too big a kid for me to kiss him goodnight. The time was not far off when he will not be down the hall at all.

There will come a time - and terribly sooner than I would realize - when I would give anything to have Jackson down the hall, in his room, waiting for me to come and kiss him goodnight. I would give anything to have a time machine, to be able to come back in time to just this moment right now, to be able to have him there in his bed in his room, to kiss him good night just one more time.

I was immobilized by these thoughts. Then I realized that I did have a time machine of sorts - that of my imagination. I imagined that it really was years in the future, that Jackson was grown up and gone, that all I had were the memories - and then a genius friend invented a time machine and let me use it to transport myself back into time to this very minute.

Were that to occur, instead of walking down the hall on mental and emotional autopilot, I would be indescribably, deliriously happy and grateful. Walking down this hall, opening Jackson's door, and seeing him there once again would be impossibly thrilling. So I pretended that's what was happening right now. Suddenly my experience was transformed. I got so excited proceeding down the hall. When I opened his door, there he was. He looked up from his book and said blandly, "Hi, Dad." I stood in the doorway transfixed at the simple sight of him, and with forced nonchalance, replied, "Hi, buddy..."

I sat on the edge of his bed and we talked for a few minutes. I was doing a good job of acting normal and he didn't suspect anything. He related an escapade of his at school, explained how boring his science teacher was, and how cool the book was Mommy had given him to read (the current bestseller "Blink"). I hung on every word. He turned off his light, gave me a hug, and said "Goodnight, Dad." An ordinary moment that had happened hundreds of times before. But this time I would never forget it as long as I live.

Life lasts but the snap of a finger. Then it is gone, forever. There is so much in each of our lives that passes by as if it never happened at all, that we appreciate only when it's gone and too late.

There is something very precious in being able to appreciate a moment at the actual time you experience it, to transform it into an experience of magical gratitude.

It's funny that the way to do this is to pretend something is not real in order to give it a heightened reality. To pretend the present is in the past, that what you now possess you no longer have. To pretend to be happy in this way is not to fake your happiness but to enable you to find joy in what you once took for granted.

I shared my time machine mind-trick with Joel Wade, and suggested it would make a good column for his The Virtue of Happiness series. He said nope, that I should write this all by myself. So I hope you don't think I'm encroaching on Joel's territory here, but I had to share this experience with you. Every moment with Jackson now is one of wondrous enchantment. And if I ever slip into autopilot again, all I have to do is take that time machine into the future where he is no longer there - then take it back to the present again.

Feel free to use my time machine to re-experience those you love. You can use it any time you want.