

Moment-ousness: A letter to Derek

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

In my last letter I wrote about how decisions made in a moment—such as the moment when we decided to say yes to your coming into our home—can shape the whole of life, committing us in ways we perhaps never had in mind. And then the task of life becomes living up to the commitments made in a moment.

But moments can shape our life in other ways as well, and some of these ways can be rather terrifying. You'll recall, I'm sure, that last Christmas you gave me John Feinstein's book *The Punch*. It tells the story of just one moment decades ago in a professional basketball game when Kermit Washington instinctively wheeled around and drove his fist into the face of Rudy Tomjanovich, who was running toward him because a fight had broken out. Tomjanovich was seriously injured and could easily have been killed. Although he's been successful in life since then—he even coached a championship team—that single moment is always with him and shapes who he is.

Even more so, probably, the moment has shaped Kermit Washington's life. He will forever—and perhaps primarily—be known as the man who threw that punch. It's terrifying— isn't it?—to think that a snap decision made in a moment, or even just an instinctive reaction, could shape the course of your entire life.

True, this can sometimes happen in wonderful and fulfilling ways—as, for example, when we said yes to your presence. But it can also happen in destructive and horrifying ways. A moment can be momentous for quite different sorts of reasons.

I think this is one of the things that scares conscientious parents when their children leave home for college. Certainly it scares me. We know that you're still relatively young, with so much of life still ahead of you. We know that we won't be there to remind you “not to do anything dumb,” not to do something just because others are doing it. We've given you our best shot. We've given you our constant (!) advice and reminders. You've made it through all the moments of 18 years. Some of those moments have been momentous; they have decisively shaped the person you are. But none of them has been momentously destructive.

Now, though, you must begin to remember for yourself, without our reminders. You must judge when to say yes and when no, when to join in and when to go your own way. And part of the problem is that so much of our knowledge is retrospective rather than prospective. Quite often we don't know until after the fact what would have been the wisest course of action.

Let me give you an example. College students tend to experiment with drinking alcohol, and many drink far too much. What's really destructive, though, is that some become alcoholics. They never know—until it's much too late—how momentous was the decision to take the first drink. (Indeed, now we even know that some of them may, as it were, be wired to become alcoholics. They might have been fine had they never started to drink, but, having started, they are quickly enslaved by the habit.) Better, I think, just never to start. You can enjoy yourself in lots of other ways, and it's very sad to think that so many young people can't imagine themselves really having fun if they aren't a little high.

Of course, you can't spend an entire life just being cautious, never doing anything lest it might turn out to be one of those destructive moments. That would truly be paralyzing. Moreover, you're bound to make bad decisions occasionally. What then? Sometimes we can never undo the consequences of our choices, but we can keep them from shaping who we are. We do this only by stopping, by declining to make a second bad decision in order to justify the first. We do it by being sorry, seeking forgiveness, and trying to make right what we've done wrong.

All of this takes, I think, a certain faith. Faith that who we are is not fully and finally determined by the momentous choices we make, as if even our destructive decisions could not be redeemed by the God who rides the moment and is not ridden by it. Trusting that, you can live thoughtfully and carefully, but also decisively and joyfully.

Love,

Dad

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