



Can you believe that 2023 has come to a close? The end of a calendar year and the beginning of a new one marks an annual season of celebration, appreciation, and deep reflection for many - I am no exception. It seems that with each New Year's celebration, the passage of precious time accelerates just a bit more for me, intensifying memories while adding urgency for future accomplishment. The fleeting sense of time reminds me of a lesson I was taught many, many years ago.

When I was a young boy growing up in Southeast Texas, I loved going for rides with my grandfather, "Papaw", in his rusty pickup truck. He would drive down miles of country roads, safely speeding up and slowing down while I stretched my little arm out of the open passenger window singing vintage country and western songs he had crackling out of the AM/FM dashboard radio.

One of my favorite games to play with Papaw was counting as many barbed-wire fence posts blurring past the rumbling old truck as I could. I would belt out numbers while he

controlled speed and kept me honest. My approach had been refined over time. I would focus as hard as possible and count in an almost anticipatory manner to account for the increasing pace of posts whizzing by the passenger rearview mirror.

Inevitably, the gnarled fence posts would blur together and speed by in a barely perceptible visual mist. When I couldn't see them anymore, I would lean back into the bench seat doubled over with laughter begging Papaw to mark his top speed, stop the truck, and prepare to start over. Looking back, I am astonished by, and overwhelmingly grateful for, the gallons of precious gasoline Papaw invested in his grandson's laughter.

After a particular ride one summer morning, Papaw pulled into the driveway and placed the truck in park. With the engine still idling loudly, he looked at me with a serious - almost worried - expression even an 8-year-old could notice.

When he sensed he had my full attention, he cleared his throat and asked in his familiar, gravelly voice, "You love those fence posts don't you, boy?"

I quickly corrected him, clarifying that I loved *counting* them, not the ugly old posts themselves.

After a wise chuckle and a Papaw-sized hug, he replied, "Sean, those posts are like birthday parties and Christmas mornings. Be careful not to get caught only counting them - focus hard on each one. When you become a crusty old Papaw yourself, birthdays and Christmas mornings speed by so fast it is easy to miss them if you are not watching closely."

In memory of my Papaw, I ask again: Can you believe 2023 has whisked by the rearview mirror? What a year of hope, triumph, and tragedy! Our Pepperdine family experienced so much together, it just doesn't seem possible that we are moving into a new season already. 2022, 2021, and even that crazy 2020 are so blurry that I have to work hard to draw them in focus.

Now, I see the fullness of 2024 approaching with all of its promise. It's a leap year, so we even have an extra day to embrace. As the Apostle Peter teaches, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Peter 3:8, NIV). So looking at 365 + 1 fence posts to cherish, enjoy, and memorialize is truly a blessing indeed. I am assured that my Papaw is looking down with pride and a little chuckle.

No matter what triumph or tragedy approaches just beyond the next country road curve, let us rest faithfully in the providence and protection delivered through the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I wish each of you peace, joy, gratitude, and love in the New Year. Let's make the most of each day it brings.

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