

## The Significance of Family Gatherings.

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I have more to say about work, but I want to change gears for a moment. A couple days ago, it was Miles' birthday. He turned 35, after being 34 for what felt like more than just one year. He's my brother, and for some reason it feels like he's been 34 for the past three years of my life. My sister, Arden, is home from the U.K for a month, which means that all five of us can spend time together... a rare commodity nowadays. We got together at my dad's house for a small, but sentimentally rich, inner circle family hang. I made yellow cake with chocolate frosting, which ended up being somewhat of a structural disaster, as we learned when Arden and my dad both failed to stack the two layers without ripping chunks out of it. To compensate, our rough-around-the-edges cake was accompanied by smooth vanilla ice cream, a classic LePell Koehler combo.

Every birthday we celebrate, one or more of us puts together a "math puzzle" using the candles on the cake. This relatively recent tradition started out of necessity, as many rituals do. For my dad's 60th birthday, we only had a few candles left when it came time to decorate the cake. Not nearly enough to account for all 60 years of life he had lived – but enough to *represent*, mathematically, or creatively in some other way – those years. I forget exactly what we came up with, but I remember Miles toiling over the birthday cake trying to figure out how to represent 60 years with only four or five candles. After some time, he presented the cake to the family, and we all huddled around it in thoughtful discussion over what the solution was. We knew it represented 60, but how? What was going on in Miles's head?

I think it says something about our family that we opt to avoid, even when unnecessary, the most obvious candle arrangements. It is exemplary just how much this family enjoys thinking. We enjoy being in our own heads just as much as we revel with similar minds too in frenzies of thoughtfulness. We chat about all matters of subjects: philosophy, the news, the daily goings on in our lives... It really doesn't matter what we talk about. And they never seem to last quite long enough, as we routinely find ourselves surprised at how late it is, followed by an obligatory "I should really get to bed soon." Of course, this sequence happens a good three to four times before people actually head off to sleep, and is probably better understood as a euphemism for "I understand that our time is limited with one another, and I am trying so hard to squeeze even just a couple more minutes in before I have to go." We just can't seem to get enough of each other's company. I cannot imagine my life without nights like these. No wild parties or levels of hedonism hold a candle, or 35, or 60 for that matter, to the wholeness I feel when we are all together.

I find these nights deeply rejuvenating. This is where I am my truest self... and I'd like to think my family feels the same. I know my mom does. After cake and ice cream, Miles, Arden, my dad, and I play a game together. Another staple of LePell Koehler gatherings. Our mom likes games too, but sometimes the process of learning a new game is just too much work for a night that is supposed to be calm and filled with sentimentality. I understand that, but Miles and Arden nevertheless urge her to join us. She protests, and instead sits on a nearby loveseat and periodically reads stories from decades past about us three as children, from a journal of hers, packed with memories. She is enamored by the book, allowing herself to sink deeper into the ink on the pages while we play... they are written in her handwriting, afterall. The book is covered corner to corner in her writings. She has sketched out boxes to separate new entries from old, making use of every square centimeter of the parchment. Some memories creep up the margin of the page, and curl over the header, again needing a line drawn to distinguish this entry from another. She moves into another room when she realizes we are too distracted with our cards. I feel this shift, and decide to move to be with her.

My mom is quite the writer. Millions of words probably, strewn across dozens of physical notebooks and digital word documents alike. She writes about her thoughts, her life, and who knows what else. She wants us all to read everything when she passes away eventually. Something I may not have the strength or resolve to do. Maybe us siblings can share the literal and emotional weight of such a task. Anyway, this baby book is just a taste of what lies in her arsenal, but its implications are admittedly somewhat daunting.

I feel embarrassed as she reads the passages about me. We say and do some pretty ridiculous stuff when we are little, I suppose. On one hand, I wish nothing more than for this documentation to be erased so that I may be mercifully spared of said embarrassment. But I am also recognizing myself in these stories, like a one way window through time and space, like in those interrogation rooms. I can see parts of myself when I was a toddler that still exist in me today. It makes me wonder how much can be gained from reading more like this.

September 13th ends with Miles, Arden, my mom, and I in the kitchen...talking...just talking. We are keeping my dad awake in his room next to us. Miles makes us all chuckle with a comment about how writing letters to people in the mail can mitigate otherwise exhausting social encounters. Our mom is especially cracked up by this, which makes me smile. But it's late, and we should all really be in bed by now.