

## Calculating a Life



Who knew calculators could come in so many iterations?

While cleaning out my dad's office recently, I came upon several things likely to be found in the office of not just an engineer, but an engineer's engineer. There were packets and packets of graph paper (so much graph paper!) in various sizes and dimensions. There were four old computer towers, more than one printer, LOTS of manuals and diagrams, the requisite mechanical pencils (and extra lead fillers) and reliable erasers, and several calculators. There was the calculator embedded in the ruler, and another embedded into the inner left flap of the leather-bound portfolio with attached pen. There was a solar-powered calculator, one powered by the overhead light, and one whose energy came from water! And, of course, there was the fancier and more reliable Texas Instruments workhorse: the TI 81 (clearly several steps beyond the TI 35 my high school Trig and Calculus courses had required). My engineer father never had an excuse not to be able to calculate something!

A friend commented, after viewing the recording of Dad's Celebration of Life service, which I had designed, "It's clear that was a lot of work. You're a bit of an engineer yourself."

At first blush, most people (including myself!) would probably not see much in common between my dad—the data-driven engineer's engineer—and me—the softer sciences humanities enthusiast. And after assessing what was represented of his life in the many drawers, shelves, boxes, and closets in his office, I even felt a slight sense of superiority over him. I didn't still have unopened mail from 2018 cluttering up MY office! I didn't have boxes of outdated catalogs taking up space in MY office closet. I had enough sense to get rid of old, no-

longer-used computers. And why in the world had he held on to things like a paper stating the print head cleanliness from his Epson 450? Chalk it up to his being an engineer, I sighed, as I added it to the ever-growing pile of paper recycling.

But after slogging through Dad's clutter for a week, I returned home and found that my decluttering eye was now trained on my own office, which was far from pristine (despite my comments above!). I knew it needed its own reckoning of reduction, so I decided to devote 2024 to not only shrinking Dad's cumulative mess, but to minimizing my own as well.

My first stab, for evaluative purposes only, was a quick glance at the contents of just one of my filing cabinet drawers. There was a booklet of solo *E♭* alto saxophone arrangements of favorite hymns I'd purchased in the early 90's when I briefly dabbled in sax lessons from a member of my church who was a school band teacher. I've barely even thought about saxophones in the ensuing 30 years. Donate to Good Will! I found a folder of maintenance records from cars I'd owned between 1994 and 2003. I'm now on at least my third car since 2003 ... I think I can get rid of those records! I had a folder for each of six airline frequent flyer programs, including AirTran (does that even still exist??). Preflight Airport Parking also had a folder and I KNOW they aren't still around. Regardless, all of that info is now readily available online so there's no need to kill more trees to provide the incalculable reams of paper required to maintain hard, printed out, copies of everything. Into the recycling!

And I really had to chuckle when I set up dad's printer, which is now mine. After filling the four individual ink wells (because, of course, Dad didn't have a printer that used disposable ink cartridges!), I made a copy of the print head report (which did indicate that multiple cleanings were needed; good to know!). Yep, looked just like the one from Dad's files I'd thrown out. Just as I was getting ready to do that with mine, I saw that the printout also had the number of color, B&W, blank, and ADF (Automatic Document Feeder) pages, as well as the sum total of pages, that had ever been printed by that particular printer. Hm ... that actually *could* be helpful information. I mean, ink cartridges are ridiculously expensive. Might this type of printer with its refillable ink wells be more cost effective in the long run? The only way to know would be to crunch the numbers, keeping track of how many printed pieces of paper I got out of each inkwell refill and compare that to what I was getting from my old printer with its cartridges. So, rather than recycling that report, into the printer file it went instead.

Good Lord ... maybe I *am* more like my dad than I realized!

Regardless, the cleaning out of both offices has shown me that a lot can be learned about someone by the things they choose to accumulate. Three main subjects emerged as I slowly surveyed Dad's stockpiles: a local Makers Group, Green Energy Ohio, and the Buckeye Winnies. These were groups that Dad was able to more fully commit to once he had retired, which is roughly the time he took over the "blue room" (my sister's and my old bedroom) as his office.

- ❖ The Makers Group allowed him to keep his engineering mind sharp and to socialize with other like-minded "engineer types." He made several things but the

crowning achievement, in my mind, was a 3-D printer, which had also required classes so as to learn how to program it to print what he wanted.

- ❖ Green Energy Ohio fed his passion for saving the environment and leaving the world a better place. He had organized multiple solar tours, learning so much in the process that he had frequently counseled others who were considering converting to solar power. He devoted so much time to them that they named him the Volunteer of the Year in 2014.
- ❖ And while he and Mom had owned their Winnebago for a number of years prior to his retirement, it was once his schedule opened up that they were really able to fully enjoy it by taking many long trips to Key West, the west coast, the Grand Canyon, and the National Grand Rally in Iowa. He served as president of his local chapter for years and hordes of files in his office were devoted to research he had done on campgrounds, parks, restaurants, tourist sites and other recreational offerings near to where they would be camping each month. That RV and the experiences associated with it brought much enjoyment to both Mom and Dad.

Once I moved to the endless piles, files, bags, and boxes (SO MANY BOXES!) in the basement, Dad's "accumulated life" expanded to the years prior to his retirement.

- ❖ Canton Calvary Mission—where he had served on the board and tutored underprivileged kids
- ❖ Newton House—a halfway house for alcoholics where he had also served as a board member, overseeing a *major* structural renovation of the building
- ❖ Lots and lots of paperwork around a co-worker who had become disabled with a debilitating paranoid schizophrenic diagnosis and when his own family had washed their hands of him, Dad had stepped in as Power of Attorney, taking care of him
- ❖ Church of the Savior—almost too many areas to list: materials from Sunday school classes he'd taught and youth group programs he'd overseen; activities he and Mom had used with Methodist Mates; a ton of plans/drawings/proposals for various building improvements the church had undertaken during his time serving as a trustee
- ❖ Numerous notebooks and minutes from meetings of the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church when he had apparently served on some board for them

Can we calculate the sum total of Dad's life from these artifacts? Maybe not the sum total, but the end product is fairly complete, surprisingly, giving an astonishingly accurate picture of the person he was.

Barely having started the "archeological dig" in *my* home, I can survey what's visible of my own "accumulated life" from the office chair I'm sitting in to write this.

- ❖ LOTS related to storytelling, of course—pictures, books, my annual freelance gig notebooks (the last 18 years of which are on display in my office while the earlier ones

reside in my closet) as well as each year's binder for the Academy for Biblical Storytelling, of which I've been the dean since its inception

- ❖ Theology—most of the books in my bookshelves deal with God in one way or another, often overlapping with storytelling
- ❖ Art—I have a plethora of art supplies noticeably on hand as well as a number of finished artsy projects hanging on the walls/windows and displayed on shelves

Is there more to my life than these artifacts would suggest? Sure. But this isn't a bad summation of what's been most important to me, both by vocation and avocation, for the last several decades.

Considering this "life summary" of priorities, I'm reminded of the statement by Sojourners' Jim Wallis: ***Budgets are moral documents.*** "Any budget is a moral statement of priorities, whether it's a budget created by an individual, a family, a school, a city, or a nation. It tells us, mathematically, what areas, issues, things, or people are most important to the creators of that budget, and which are least important." I realize that budgets aren't the same thing as what consumes our time but there are some overlaps. At the very least, both show what we prioritize.

Budgets are usually revised—sometimes completely rewritten—on an annual basis as circumstances change and passions evolve. Maybe, each year, it would also be helpful to audit the way we spend our time and live our lives. This is largely what the Lenten journey is about—taking stock of our existence and analyzing the direction we're heading, making necessary shifts and changes as needed for healthier relationships and lifestyles.

And while an appraisal of the mementos we choose to accumulate perhaps isn't needed *every* year, it should probably be done more frequently than once a decade ... or two ... or three ... or ... Because I think we can all agree that there's really *no* reason to hang on to defunct airline records or unopened mail from 2018!