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Keys

J. Emerson Kimmel
Cedarville University

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J. Emerson Kimmel

Keys

With increasing alarm, I am beginning to notice how old I am getting. There is a time in the bloom of youth (which some would argue that I am not yet past), when age is of no consequence whatsoever. The profoundest thought pondered on one's birthday is whether that package is really the remote-control car I asked for, or whether it's the skateboard I didn't know I wanted.

I find that now as my birthday approaches, I am riddled with apprehension. As a year slips by me, instead of the care-free thoughts of youth, I ponder questions of my meaning and my purpose. "What are your goals?" I ask myself. I suppose it is really not my questions that bother me, but the blank stares that are my answers.

But all of this is merely background to my real point; the point that I will labor upon until you become disgusted with my rampant cynicism and crawl back to your Candy-Land houses to eat pie and drink tea and think of nothing but how beautiful the sky is and that you would love to go for a walk with the Tin-man.

On my most recent birthday, I received a new key chain. Never-mind the obvious frugality of the purchasers which, of course, did bother me slightly. What really bothered me was the fact that I actually did need a new key chain. It amazed me (much as big explosions or falling buildings do) that the number of my keys had actually outgrown my present key chain. It caused me to reflect upon how uncomfortable my present key chain was. It was large and metallic and if it had ever borne any type of design or message, that was long since worn off. And glancing down at the shiny new leather key chain in my hand, I realized that I really did need a new key chain.

And to be honest, that made me feel extremely old.

I had always noticed growing up that everyone older than me had more keys. As a child, I noticed that the high school boys always had two or sometimes three keys on their chain, which they would spin on their fingers as they walked, so the girls would know that they had a car.

My father had a single key chain with a tremendous amount of keys. He had keys to doors that he wasn't sure even existed anymore. He had a key for the truck, a key for the car, a front door key and a back door key. Side door keys. Keys to lock boxes and safety deposit boxes and boxes of metal under the

bed that my mother always said were fireproof. Keys to his mom's house and keys to my mom's mom's house. Keys to his work and keys to his work truck.

That was just dad. My mom, wise as she is, had split up the number of keys on her chain. Now she had two chains! Her keys were for much the same things as dad's, but her chains also included lots of little keys to jewelry boxes and luggage.

She explained once, "So I only have to take the keys I need." Seems reasonable enough.

If that wasn't enough keys, there is also a bin of ceramic in my house that is entirely devoted to miscellaneous keys. (And, apparently, interesting paper clips.) These are keys whose acceptable use is still hotly debated in my house. Often could be heard conversations such as:

"Honey, I need the keys to so-and-so's house to feed the dog."

"It's up in the bin."

"I know, but which one."

"The copper-ish looking one."

"Honey... They're all copper-ish looking."

"It has tape on the top with their name on it."

It was at this point that my father would take the bin and dump out its entire contents onto the floor or the table and start rummaging through the nameless keys and interesting paper clips.

"Alright, there are four like that."

Now, my mother being a somewhat short-tempered woman, would stomp her way into the living room, grab what to me seemed like the first key she came to, thrust it into my father's hand and say,

"Here, now was that so hard."

My father would grudgingly put all the keys and interesting paper clips back into the bin and go to so-and-so's and, hopefully, enter and feed the dogs.

The most amazing key memory that I could share with you is that of my grand-pop Charlie. He was, to the best of my knowledge, an engineer of some sort. During the war, he helped construct airstrips in Iceland. Maybe not as illustrious as storming the beach at Normandy, but a whole lot less dangerous too.

Grand-pop Charlie was also an avid golfer. And not just your average run-of-the-mill, "I can swing a club and hit a ball" golfer either. A good golfer; the kind that has a rack full of golfing trophies and memberships to country clubs around the state. That kind of golfer.

Charlie did not just have a key ring or two. He did not just have a bin to throw keys into. No, my grand-pop Charlie had a whole rack devoted exclusively to keys! As I remember it, there were 7 pegs on the rack, each of which held two or more separate key rings, all full of keys. Key rings from all over; Pizza

Hut, golf clubs, banks, real estate agents, engineering conventions. If ever there were a monument to man's involvement in his world, I think it would be my grand-pop Charlie's rack of keys in bronze, right beside the flag that flew at Fort McHenry in the Smithsonian.

So, on my birthday, as I pulled my old ring of keys out of my pocket, I was reminded of all these things. The Pizza Hut key chain was now mine, and I had practically filled it up. I had keys to three different cars, a house key, a dorm key, a work key and bike lock key. And I was only turning 21!

So it was in this way that I realized that the older I've become, the more keys I have gotten. And the more keys I have gotten, the more responsibility I have gotten. When I was a child and all I had was a house key, my responsibilities were easy. Come home, unlock the door, come inside. It doesn't get much simpler.

But now look at me. I take care of three different cars. I take care of the house sometimes. I take care of my dorm room at college. I take care at work that things don't get stolen. I take care of my bike. Each of these had become my responsibilities. Not because of the keys themselves; the keys are just the proof of my importance. No, the responsibility came strictly with age and maturity.

Then my thoughts turned to my parents, who, from the looks of their key chains, juggled an amazing amount of responsibility. They were even responsible for things they weren't even sure they had keys for. And yet they did it and did it well, because they were older and more mature. All these responsibilities weren't theirs at my age. No, when they were my age, they probably had the same amount of keys as me. But now, since they are 25 years older than me, they have accumulated quite a stash of keys (not to mention interesting paper clips).

And my grand-pop, whose preponderance of keys would crack even the hardest skeptic, already had on his wall a monument to the life he has lived and the responsibilities he has held. Each one of those keys was one facet of a man's life whose span was well over the allotted three score and 10. A man who fathered five children and had eight grandchildren and, to date, one great-grand child named Hannah (who is as cute as an Egyptian peanut).

These were my thoughts as I made the ceremonial key transfer from my old ring to my new ring. I imagined my ring becoming more full as the years progressed. I imagined a wife and a house and kids and grand-kids and great-grand-kids and a couple of cars and a safety deposit box and bin for my keys and a rack for my keys and couple of metal boxes under the bed that my wife swears are fireproof and maybe a club membership at the country club if it ever becomes

fashionable to get as high a golf score as possible.

Then I dropped my brand new key ring and keys back into my pocket and sighed to myself blandly, and thought

“What the ——?! I’m only 21!”