Alina Ashraf - Bayside High School

Space Prize Challenge Essay

A smile bright like the sun, eyes that shone like the moon, and the fresh glow of life that was once emanating from my mother's face all faded away as a waterfall of pain emerged from her eyes. This was the sight I had been witnessing for the past month: the effect of the inevitable. Death is scientifically defined as "the irreversible cessation of all vital functions". In other words, all of mankind is guaranteed to enter this eternal sleep. It's a fate that one cannot deny or beat, yet somehow no one is ever truly prepared for it and its effects.

Of all the losses I've experienced in my fourteen years of life, December of 2021 was a handful that opened my eyes to the reality of this temporary world. It all began when my father had booked a ticket to Pakistan to visit his ill mother. After undergoing a cycle of booking and cancellation of tickets due to his busy work schedule, he finalized his trip. Flight delays from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic extended his fourteen hour trip to nineteen. However, this was the moment he had spent months planning for. A five hour delay would be meaningless, or so we thought.

RING! RING!

1:00 in the morning and my mothers phone was in desperate need of attention. A call from my grandfather at this late hour was certainly unusual. Regardless, she answered the phone with the uttermost excitement, assuming it would be about my father's arrival. Minutes passed, and the smile that was extended from ear to ear became a quivering lip, unable to speak. Whilst I was deciphering the message that her facial expressions conveyed, my mother was faced with the news that my grandma, my father's mother, had just entered her eternal sleep. As if it couldn't get any worse than that, it was two hours before my father was supposed to arrive. The idea that my father had travelled 7,048 miles, ecstatic to spend time with the one who gave him life, only to find out hers came to an end two hours earlier was heartbreaking. The idea that he couldn't say goodbye, but more so, the idea that he could've been there if only his flight wasn't delayed was excruciating to accept.

In time, I had a conversation with my father.

"Dad, I get how much it hurts that you could've been there if your flight was on time.", I sympathized with him.

"I was on time. Yeah, I couldn't say any last words, but I held her hand for hours. I took part in her burial and funeral. I was able to see her and feel her with my family by my side and in her final moments. What more could I want?", he smiled.

A week passed and the phone rang yet again. The shift in my mother's facial expressions from elation to disturbance said more than words could. I came to find out that my 37 year old relative was hospitalized in critical condition due to an abrupt heart attack, and soon, I would come to find out that he passed away as well. A healthy, young man who had only lived 13,505

days and made 37 orbits around the sun's biological functions had given up on him, placing him on his deathbed as everyone prayed for more time and reminisced on the incredible moments we had shared with him.

The following days consisted of several families coming and going, the phone never stopped ringing, and the tears never stopped flowing as everyone was "sorry for [our] losses". I was living in this cycle of death, pain, condolences, repeat.

However, I noticed a pattern. Everyone who paid their condolences had something significant to remember about those who passed. Whether it's a positive attribute about their character, or a good deed they did that left a mark on someone's life, everyone has a legacy that keeps their name alive when they no longer can. I realized that our days in this world are numbered, and I cannot risk wasting a second of my life overthinking irrelevant inconveniences. Rather than focusing on editing the ideal photo for my Instagram, I should live in the moment and experience the photo as it is. I should spend time evolving to become the best version of myself, to create a meaningful legacy for myself to be remembered by. When I'm taking my last breath, nobody will remember the materialistic things, but what they will remember is the mark I leave on the world and their life. I learned to experience the world like it's my last day in it, which has molded my character, my actions, and increased my appreciation for even the littlest of things this world has to offer.

As I reflected on my father's words earlier, I realized that he had expressed gratitude for the timing of the events that occurred. He no longer focused on what could've happened if he had arrived earlier. He even realized that the cancelled flights were a blessing in disguise. If he had been able to travel months before, he would've had to find out about his mother's death through a phone call, and the regret of being unable to be there would consume him. The idea that time in this world is too valuable to waste it overthinking what you cannot change, and should rather be spent appreciating the good in the timing is one I'll carry with me forever.

Essentially, life's not too short, time is simply too precious. 7 billion people inhabit this little planet in the solar system that we call home, and we're all destined to the same fate. Regardless of how many orbits we're destined to make around the sun, each second that we have is a second more than somebody else. I realized that my time in this temporary world is precious, so I will experience each day in it like it's my last.