

GAINING PERSPECTIVES THE TOUGH WAY



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One thing I have learned during my 69 years on earth is that looking at death changes your perspective, especially when it's your life that is in the front row. I know because I was looking straight on at death, and you know what, the whole episode got my attention as it should. No one wants to die, even if you know for sure you are going to Heaven!

▶ A 2% CHANCE OF SURVIVAL

On February 18, 2008, I attended the memorial for a 19-year-old girl from my son's high school class. About

midway through the service, I lost all sense of myself and have no recollection of how I got to my son's baseball game that afternoon. I do not remember driving from the funeral at Second Baptist Church in Houston to my son's baseball game at Memorial High School.

How in the world was I able to not only navigate my way to the game but also apparently go home and change clothes after the service? Since all of my actions were told to me later, what I did and didn't do can only be verified by those who were around me that day.

The craziest things that happened in the sequence before actually going down from the heart attack ended up being a prelude that kept me from joining my many friends in Heaven. That storyline started with me talking with a father from

the other team that I did not know, whose wife was a nurse, who was watching from the stands thinking that something wasn't right. In her mind, she thought I was having a seizure and then watched me collapse. It was like getting hit by a bolt of lightning on a clear blue sky day. My daughter, walking up the steps for the game, saw me go down and caught my head before it hit the ground. She probably saved me from a traumatic brain injury.

The nurse saw me fall and sprinted out of the stands. She got the defibrillator, which was brand new and had never been used because it had just been purchased, and—for the first time in her 21-year career—shocked a dying person back to life in a public setting.

Fast forward a bit, I was eventually life-flighted to Houston's Methodist Hospital, where my doctor inserted a defibrillator and a pacemaker into my chest over the period of a week. You never know where the statistics come from, but I was told that my chances of living were less than 2%.

That is where my perspective starts to gather steam.

▶ STILL NOT SLACKING OFF

Apparently, I had caught a virus while on a golfing trip to South Africa many months before. In a very short time frame after arriving home from the trip, it became very difficult to breathe, and subsequently, the collapse of my left ventricle created a blockage.

Moving forward after the hospital visit, I did what I loved best—I went back to work. Why not, right? I had just come off the best year of my career, and I couldn't afford to slack off now.

In my world, my job was helping build a company that was giving away 50% of its net profit to charity every year. Knowing that I was doing work that was making a difference in many people's lives gave me a sense of pride and worthiness. And oh yeah, the money was very good!

Little did I know that God wasn't finished with his message to me. Within a few months of going back to the office, the financial markets started a downward spiral, and fear set into the company from every angle. About the same time, my father had his third stroke, and I was with him when he fell. He passed away that August.

Not long after we buried Dad, the Great Recession started wiping out the markets. The global economy spiraled downward in a dramatic fashion. As I was one of the more sea-

soned folks in the firm and always there for everyone, they kept coming to me looking for advice, answers, or anything to stop the financial pain. It was a brutal year.

People kept asking how I was holding up. I was fine, I told them—just fine.

I wasn't. I was hurting, and I was about to prove it to them all.

▶ HOW I LOST RESPECT AND GAINED PERSPECTIVE

Shortly thereafter, in the fall, a young woman who worked with me made a simple mistake, and I erupted on her. I lost all self-control, and it was ugly. When I cooled off, my business partner took me aside. "Mike, you're one of the best I've ever seen at what you do," he said. "But if you don't start treating people with respect, we can't be partners anymore."

His words hit me deeply. I was making plenty of money, so I knew I excelled in my profession. But was I excelling as a person? In the deepest parts of myself, was I excelling at being the human being God had fashioned to serve Him on earth?

Even as a child, I knew I was blessed. God gave me a good mind, and he gave me an incredibly athletic body. I was always a strong kid, so it was a surprise when I got sick in the fifth grade. The doctor diagnosed me with the Russian flu. He was wrong.

In fact, my appendix had ruptured. Within five days, I was paralyzed from the waist down. It took multiple months for the medical team at the hospital to pump out the poison so I could walk again.

Brushing so close to death at that young age gave me my first perspective shift. I learned that no matter how bad things looked, they would get better if I kept going. Did life get tough? Keep going. You're sick? Keep going. In pain? Keep going.

Perseverance was my new perspective. As an athlete, I persevered through three knee operations, a dislocated shoulder, a chipped hip bone, ulnar nerve surgery, and who knows how many concussions. But I knew that if I kept going, I could make it as an elite athlete. And I did!

In high school, I played quarterback on the football team. We never lost a game. In my senior year, the University of Kansas recruited me to play baseball and football for them. My first major accomplishment as a collegiate athlete was

blowing out my knee freshman year in football.

But I remembered my perspective, and I kept going. Little by little, I worked my way back to the top ladder for my position. The top, as you may have heard, is a precarious place to be. You're visible, but you know what—I liked that!

People noticed me, and they wanted me to notice them. All of a sudden, I was in demand for parties. For the first time, I became the life of the party, but not because of being a scholar athlete.

As an athlete, I was still performing sometimes at an elite level, but as a scholar, I started to decline. By my junior year, I realized that if I didn't quit alcohol and get my focus back on the things that mattered, I wouldn't have enough brain cells left to be successful at school or anything else. So I went cold turkey, and I haven't touched alcohol since. That equation works for me!

Quitting alcohol changed my perspective once again—people and friends became my priority, not parties or social and sports performances. That was tough, but I wouldn't be blessed today with a lot of friends, great family, and a wonderful piece of mind if that change had not happened. I am sure of that!

▶ TRANSITIONING FROM STUDENT-ATHLETE TO BUSINESS LEADER

As a student-athlete, I developed strong people management skills. I knew how to strategize, follow a process, educate myself about my opposition, and put together the pieces of an ever-changing puzzle. Subsequently, I was taught what it takes to be a winner.

That's a skill the business world values highly. Successful business executives are winners who work their tails off. Corporations need team players, not kingpins, and I learned the difference on the football field.

Not everything transferred as easily from athletics to business, though. For instance, how do you measure success? I'd always used a single metric—winning a game. The bigger the game, the bigger the win. The bigger the win, the bigger the success.

And when you're young, you tend to correlate your value as a person with how popular you are!

One reason I love and appreciate my time as an athlete—

it's a great way to learn how to deal with both success and failure. It teaches you to measure more than a single moment in time. You have to be a complete person. You have to build your character and the other areas of your life.

During my career, I hired a lot of folks. The interviews were always interesting because there is a tendency to give answers that you know are not truly how someone feels about the subject matter. I would ask two questions: Have you played a team sport? And did you play an individual sport?

Whether they played a sport or not didn't alter my hiring practices, but it gave me insight into the people themselves and how they operated. I suppose it revealed something about me, too: I like things to be done right and with high integrity. Finding out how someone stands up under adversity is so important for the team because you need to know if you can trust that they will do their role with the precision and refinement needed.

▶ A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MONEY AND POWER

I remember when I wanted to quit once though. I was ready to drop out of football in college. I called my dad to announce my decision.

"That's wonderful," he told me. "What are you going to do instead?"

"I'm going to play baseball and nothing else."

"Mike," Dad said. "You're in college on a football scholarship. How will you pay for school?"

"You'll just write a check to the college for me, right?"

You can probably guess my dad's answer to that question, so I won't repeat it here. I'll just say that on that day, Dad gave me another new perspective. This one was about money and decision-making.

Having spent my career in the finance world, I know the way money changes people and how it breeds a sense of entitlement and greed. I've seen people do things they didn't want to do—things they swore they'd never do—but they cracked under the extreme pressure of gaining money and power. Integrity cracks under the right amount of pressure. Money cannot trump ethics.

I've watched people chase money as far as they can, as fast as they can. Every time they do it, they wind up exhausted and unfulfilled. The author of Ecclesiastes (1:14) summed it up beautifully: "I have seen all the things that are done un-

der the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Money should never trump ethics!

▶ A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ETERNITY

Near the end of the movie *Gladiator*, Maximus says, “What we do in life echoes in eternity.” As a corporate executive, I too had to wonder, “What would be my echo in eternity?”

Sitting in my corporate office at Merrill Lynch or Invesco, that question never seemed relevant. In the hospital after I nearly died at the baseball field, however, that question seemed like the only relevant one to ask.

As mentioned previously, my near-death experience changed me at the heart level. In 2007, I enjoyed the best year of my career, and in 2008, it all went up in smoke. We can never get too comfortable. We have to stay attentive to what God is doing. That’s why prayer is so important.

Your conversations with God are where you can get quiet and strong in the deepest places of yourself. Isaiah 30:15 says, “In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”

After that nearly fateful time in 2008, my prayer discipline changed. My relationship with God is still spiritual, but it’s more personal. I ask Him directly, “What do you want from me today? You saved my life, so what do you want from my life on this day?”

To me, praying is like talking to a friend I trust. The integrity of prayer lies in its realism. It’s not something “out there.” It’s personal. God expects me to open my heart to Him. He already knows what I need, what I want, and what’s not going to go my way that day anyway.

The law of probability says that every day of your life, something isn’t going to go the way you want. I’ve learned to keep my perspective. When one hard thing happens, I don’t drop it in the mental basket where I keep nine good things. I would spoil all ten. Instead, I focus on the big picture.

I try to keep my perspective where it belongs.

Jesus addressed the problem of perspective in Luke 13:18. He had just healed a bent-over woman on the Sabbath, and the religious leaders rebuked Him for it. Jesus asked why the teachers of the law allowed a man to untie a donkey and lead it to water but not to set free a crippled woman. It’s a question of perspective.

Then Jesus asked them, “What is the kingdom of God like?

What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.”

If you are only looking at the mustard seed as it is, you’ll miss the tree that the mustard seed can become. I knew that I needed to become something more than I was. So I traveled to Cuba.

▶ MY BRAND-NEW HEART GETS A WORKOUT IN CUBA

East-West Ministries took a group of Dallas-based CEOs on a mission trip, and they asked me to go with them. I’m not a confident evangelist, but I very much wanted to visit Cuba. So I agreed to go with them, and I took my youngest son along.

When we arrived, immigration officials hounded me. “What are you doing in Cuba?”

We made it through the official check-in, however, and East-West Ministries took us to a church in a little community on the coast. The minister looked over the crowd of American CEOs, and then he pointed straight at me. “Come here.”

I walked over to him, knowing that whatever happened next would at least be interesting.

“I want you to walk across the street,” he told me, “and talk to the family that lives there. Ask them to come to church with you.”

Why me? I thought.

“I have been trying for three years to get them to come to church,” the minister continued. “I can’t get them to come, so see if you can.”

I wondered if God was talking to the right guy or if my gray hair had somehow made me appear wiser than I really was.

The minister assigned me an interpreter, and together, we headed across the street. I knocked on the people’s door, scared to death the whole time. I had never done anything like this before. Sure, I’d had leadership roles my whole career. I had been in Christian leadership groups my whole life. But to share the gospel face to face? That was new for me.

The entire family came to the door and invited us in after a brief introduction. At least a dozen family members and whoever else crowded into the main room. They all fixed their eyes on me. I was uncomfortable and entirely out of my skin. So I did what you’re supposed to do when you’re uncomfortable and out of your skin: I prayed. Just incredible!

Praying was easy. It was the talking part that was hard. *What am I going to say to these people?*

▶ WHERE GOD CHANGED ME FOREVER

I took a deep breath and started: “The minister from the church across the street wanted me to come by and say hello.”

I babbled for a while, but before long, I found myself telling this family the story of my near-death experience on the baseball field in 2008. I told them how it gave me a new perspective and how I believed God had a purpose for my life.

I didn’t share a fairy tale. Instead, I told them that I struggled. It was hard going through this. My life was affected in many ways. With my new heart, I couldn’t play tennis, snow ski, run, throw a baseball, or do most things athletic. I was so frustrated and angry in my heart, and it had boiled over to affect other people.

But then, I also told them that God had taken away my old heart and given me a much kinder and gentler heart. I explained that I believed part of my purpose was to come and tell them about my new heart that loved people.

The family started asking me questions. For the next hour and a half, the interpreter and I answered their questions and talked with them. All of a sudden, they all headed to the back room for a family meeting.

Alone in the room with my Cuban interpreter, I noticed him shaking his head. He was studying to be a minister, and he understood the family and the situation better than I did. “This is incredible,” he told me.

Minutes later, the family re-entered the room. “Okay,” they told me. “We’ll try church.”

I had no idea that my story could have that kind of effect on a whole family in a totally different country. Right away, I realized that I hadn’t done anything special. When I had my near-death experience, I didn’t go to heaven, see angels, or sit at the foot of God’s throne. I didn’t experience anything out of the ordinary. My story alone couldn’t have accomplished anything, but my story told with God’s power could change a family forever.

For the rest of the time we were in Cuba, I went door-to-door, just talking with the families who lived in that village. I told everyone my story of nearly dying and getting a new heart and a change in perspective. Not every family came to

Christ, but we did have meaningful conversations about our struggles and about God with all of them.

God changed me forever during my trip to Cuba.

▶ LIFE OF PURPOSE

After I finished my last role as CEO of a company, I knew I wanted to do purpose-driven consulting work for the rest of the time God gave me on earth. A friend of mine who owned a firm rang me up and said he needed some help.

“I’m going to give up all this stuff,” I said, referring to my corporate life. “I’ve had multiple heart attacks. If I don’t quit this, I won’t be here much longer because I am about to have another one.”

Not sure about all of you, but one thing I do know about myself is that it is really hard for me to accept that it is God’s plan, not mine. About a week later, Houston Baptist University (HBU) asked me to take a look at its entrepreneurship program called The McNair Center for Entrepreneurship and Free Enterprise.

The McNair Foundation instituted five of these centers at various universities across the country. HBU was home to one of them, and frankly, it was struggling. The school wanted to know why their center wasn’t thriving and—more importantly—what they could do about it.

Very quickly, I figured out that the center had been put in motion before its foundation had been laid properly. Consequently, the foundation was splintered and was not student-centric.

After I shared what I’d learned and my recommendations for the future, the provost, in a surprise move, asked me, “Would you be interested in being the interim director of the entrepreneurship program?”

I had never thought about doing something like this at a university, but it appealed to me almost immediately. At the McNair Center, we weren’t just teaching academic concepts to business majors. We were also equipping an entire campus with entrepreneurial skills. As someone who does a lot of coaching, I knew the job was the perfect fit for me.

Right away, I began pulling in students from across a swath of different majors, the student life people, and even the deans of different schools. At one point, I began advising the interim dean of the business school about how he could assume the role full-time. During one of our conversations, he stopped taking notes, turned to me, and said, “Mike, you

need to be the dean. Let me work with you and learn from you.”

Never once in my career had I dreamed of serving as dean of a business school. It wasn't even in the realm of possibility. Nevertheless, we took the idea—along with a plan to restructure the school and its operations—to the provost and the president.

To my complete shock, they agreed with the interim dean. I was the man for the job. They were certain, and back to what I said earlier, it truly is God's plan for us.

With all my God-given perspective, I now truly believe that God prepares you to make hard decisions. All my career and life experiences up to this point have prepared me to come here with a unique way of thinking. I don't think I'm special. I know that God uses me to tell stories that people can embrace. As a quarterback, I had to know all the plays and positions and be nimble and strategic against the other team. A dean has to do much the same thing. I decided to say yes to the deanship of the Archie W. Dunham College of Business.

Serving as dean has been fantastic. I lead the business school with the same skills I learned as a football quarterback and a corporate executive over multi-operational divisions. I just keep learning and growing, and I look forward to staying here as long as they'll have me, knowing that I am making a difference.

When I nearly died 14 years ago, it fueled my quest to be a better person and a better believer of Jesus's teachings. I felt like I got a second chance to do something meaningful with my life. God was gracious to give me that chance and let me work with a diverse group of students at a Christian university. As often as I can, I tell them that faith comes first, family comes second, and the firm comes third—and by the way, you better take care of yourself if you want to be effective for others.

Working with college students has given me yet another new perspective—the future doesn't look as young as it used to. In the U.S., people over age 64 will soon outnumber kids under 18 for the first time in history. That's going to radically reshape the dynamics of our country right alongside all the other social and economic factors getting attention these days.

Fresh, well-trained business leaders will be a critical commodity in the days ahead. At HBU, we are creating leaders who will build that future and do so with the perspective of Jesus Christ. I'm proud to be part of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MIKE ROME currently serves as the Dean of the Archie W. Dunham College of Business at Houston Baptist University. Prior to beginning his service as Dean at HBU, Rome served as Senior Partner at Allen Austin, where he was a central figure in the firm's growth, culture, and dedication to superior client service. Mike has a distinguished business career, having served as CEO and Principal at Chilton Capital, CEO of Texan Capital, Senior Partner at Bridgeway Capital, Executive Vice President of Institutional Marketing at AIM/Invesco, Senior Vice President of Capital Markets at Merrill Lynch, Executive Vice President of Capital Markets for Kidder Peabody, and Executive Vice President of Institutional Sales for Oppenheimer. He has also served higher education throughout his career, having taught courses in entrepreneurship at the University of Houston and serving on the boards of the City of Houston Higher Education Finance Corp., the University of Kansas School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the University of Texas Libraries System, and HBU's own Center for Christianity and Business. Rome received a Bachelor of Liberal Arts as a football and baseball letterman at the University of Kansas and has studied portfolio management at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and behavioral finance at Harvard University.

