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Beyond the Physical

Tim Curdt believes CrossFit workouts helped him deal with one of the hardest parts of his life: saying goodbye to his father.

By Tim Curdt

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All images courtesy of Tim Curdt

In a Q&A session at FilFest 2010, CrossFit founder Greg Glassman mildly scolded a delegate who said he had found little success persuading people to do CrossFit by reciting the stated goals of "increasing one's work capacity across broad time and modal domains" or making one more efficient at "moving large loads long distances quickly."

1 of 5

"No, no ... you're (screwing) up," Glassman interrupted in a video titled [Real Science](#).

Even though the formal definition certainly was accurate, a simple claim that CrossFit will make you faster and stronger and help you do more with your life would be much more effective. After all, the real persuasive power of CrossFit is in the doing. Get future clients into your box, put them through a WOD or two, and let them start experiencing the boldness and benefits of these claims for themselves with each gasping breath.

In the past year of my CrossFit life, I've been reflecting on another compelling truth of the CrossFit experience that seems to me just as powerful as any ever mentioned on the website, but it resists the pithy wisdom of a T-shirt and cannot be supported with the type of quantifiable evidence that in all other contexts CrossFit so rightly demands.

Why do CrossFit?

It can teach you how to help your father die.



The author (right) with his father.

Dad's Final Days

About a year ago I learned that my father's lung cancer had returned with a vengeance, spreading to his brain and bones. The doctors said they would try some sort of maintenance chemo for a while to keep the wolves at bay, but we all knew (even if my dad never wanted to admit it) that we didn't have long before the end.

My winter plans changed instantly. A father of four young kids under 10 with a full teaching and coaching load, I had to be more organized and efficient than ever, ready for calls in the middle of the night to come get my dad if he had fallen or couldn't get out of bed on his own. I depended on my wife more than ever to take care of our kids so I could spend the night at dad's, partly to make sure he had someone to help him but also because I feared missing out on his more lucid moments—which were rapidly decreasing—when we could simply talk together.

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I couldn't stop training. I couldn't miss a day, even if I had to throw the kettlebells in the back of the van so I could jump out at the park on my way to dad's and throw down a seven-minute triplet of pull-ups, burpees and push-ups before making sure he had someone to walk him to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

My dad was wasting away as the cumulative effects of a lifetime of bad choices (smoking, diet, inactivity) took their toll, and I had never been healthier. At 38 years old, I had begun earnestly pushing back the "walls of decrepitude," to use CrossFit HQ trainer Pat Sherwood's phrase, and the exhilaration I felt after finally stringing together 10 headstand push-ups momentarily eliminated the constant low-level nausea I felt while walking my father to his inevitable death.

One night I got a frantic call from my dad's wife begging me to come over because he had gotten up on his own in the dark, become disoriented, stripped off his clothes and was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, unable to get

up. As I began deadlifting my dad off the floor, he started to slip under my arms. I quickly had to throw my weight underneath him in a full squat and slowly, carefully lift my dad to full extension and walk him back to his hospital bed that hospice care had arranged for him. After I put him down and got him settled, I couldn't resist glancing in the mirror and congratulating myself for being prepared for the unknown and unknowable physical challenges that were now a stated goal of my training.

Immediately after that realization, I saw my dad's face still twitching slightly from the latest seizure as he drifted off to sleep, and my self-congratulatory mood quickly gave way to another more powerful emotion: shame.

I listened to my dad's choppy breathing and tried to pat down his disheveled hair. I couldn't forgive myself for momentarily viewing his lifeless body on the floor not as a human being, my daddy, worthy of simple care, dignity and respect in his neediest time on Earth, but as a physical challenge, no more than an awkward, heavy sandbag that would be a good way to measure my true fitness level.

Don't get me wrong, had I not been training with CrossFit my dad would have spent the night on the floor or had to wait for more help before he could get to bed and ease his pain, and it was truly a blessing I was able to take care of him so efficiently, but what haunted me was the way I had succumbed to the hubris and narcissism



Tim Curdt found his fitness increasing just as his father's health was slipping away.

so often associated with "ninja" CrossFitters on those devastatingly funny satiric skits on YouTube. I mean, did I really think that in the midst of so many daily reminders of my father's mortality I had in CrossFit found a path to physical invincibility?

I could hear Glassman's voice now speaking to me. No, no, I was screwing it up. To quote Robert Hayden, whose poem *Those Winter Sundays* had recently appeared on the main page as a rest-day offering, "What did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?"

By the grace of God, I was learning.

My father passed away a few weeks later, and being with him during his very last breaths was, next to the birth of my children, one of the most beautiful moments of my life.

More Than WODs

That spring after dad's death, I started to get ready for my Level 1 Certification. My school's professional-development program had agreed to help fund me to learn more about teaching the method to others, so I was able to sign up for the course and a few of the specialty certifications that would most directly apply to my work with athletes around the school. When I received the introductory reading, I thought that my year or so of workouts and of studying the *CrossFit Journal* had prepared me well for the seminar, perhaps too well. I felt comfortable with the nine basic movements. I knew the definition of fitness and the three metabolic pathways. I understood the benefits of high-intensity interval training and the drawbacks to specialization in any one field. Was that it? Would the seminar be worth it?

“Of course, we all end up dead anyway, but how you train can help you prepare for that too.”

—Pat Sherwood

It took Pat Sherwood about six minutes in his opening lecture on the CrossFit philosophy to eliminate any doubts I had about the certification's value, not just for my training but for my life.

"The real world does not give a damn about what you like or don't like to do in the gym," Sherwood reminded us. Any fitness program that is concerned with preparing people for real-world contingencies will constantly confront you with challenges that will force you to adapt and grow.

"We fail at the margins of our experience," he noted.

If your training isn't constantly challenging you with failure and forcing you to adapt, it's not doing its job. Pat reminded us that we only train functional movements at high intensity because these are the types of movements essential to elite athletic performance, saving lives in the field of rescue or battle, and keeping us out of the nursing home.

But it was what he said next, almost as a casual aside, that became for me the magic bow tying the whole CrossFit package together as a gift that could help me make meaning out of the last difficult year of my life.

"Of course, we all end up dead anyway, but how you train can help you prepare for that too."

It struck me as I drove home reflecting on Pat's comments that what was drawing me deeper and deeper into CrossFit was precisely the opposite of the cocky caricatures on the Internet that my friends were taking great joy forwarding to me. With that sinking feeling in my stomach every time I counted down 3, 2, 1... on my stopwatch and started something I wasn't sure I could finish, my workouts were becoming a necessary spiritual exercise for me, a memento mori, a humbling reminder of my own finitude and my ultimate dependence on God's grace to get through my day.

Physical and Spiritual Workouts

Now another beauty of CrossFit's system is that its principle of scaling applies spiritually as well as physically. For some people the feeling of physical exhilaration at hitting their first kipping pull-up or setting a new PR on Fran is as spiritual as it needs to be, and anything beyond that seems like unnecessary superstitious fluff. For some it's an opportunity to commune with the divine. But the fascinating thing to me is that CrossFit's unique ability to prepare us for the unknown and unknowable challenges

we all face in life has forged that rare type of community in our culture today where all of these perspectives cannot only be welcome but celebrated. Our best CrossFit trainers get this.

At a recent gymnastics cert, Jeff Tucker gathered us together at the end of the two days, had us sit down and asked us to analyze one final workout he posted on the board that was particularly brutal. A few of us bit and commented on the excessive strain on the shoulders, which gave him the opportunity to tell about his past experiences as a firefighter pumping life into a man's body after his heart had stopped.



What's better than taking three generations of a family to a ballgame?

One of the most important lessons this last year has taught me is that CrossFit's lesson of service can be as necessary to our last responders as it is to our first.



The author's father with a newborn grandchild.

Tucker had to pump for several minutes even after he had lost feeling in his arms, but what still mattered to him after all these years was that somehow he kept going in his battle to save the man. He ended the seminar with tears in his eyes, choking on his final words as he connected CrossFit's workout challenges with the challenges he faced every day as a first responder.

"CrossFit has always been about preparing me to serve others," he concluded. "I hope I've been of service to you."

One of the most important lessons this last year has taught me is that CrossFit's lesson of service can be as necessary to our last responders as it is to our first. Challenging my weaknesses so intensely physically expanded the margins of my experience spiritually and helped me not fail when I needed to succeed the most, when the large load I was called to help move was my father, and the long distance was his final steps into the arms of the angels.

I pray every night that the journey was quick.



About the Author

Tim Curdt is an English teacher and wrestling coach at St. Louis University High School, where he has worked for the last 15 years. A husband and proud father of four young children, Tim has been training using



the CrossFit method for the last two years and recently completed a year of professional development in which he earned a Level 1 Certification and attended several specialty certifications to help expand the use of CrossFit with his athletes and fellow faculty members at his school.

His students still can't quite figure out why he makes them squat engaging their posterior chain fully if they look bored while reading Homer or Shakespeare in class, but they wish he would stop. His three-year-old daughter, Gianna, can do a mean burpee if you ask nicely.