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Michael and Vickie Leach (Courtesy photo)



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It's one of those movies you stop to watch again when clicking, no matter where it is at the time. "Peggy Sue Got Married" (1986) is all about time. And timelessness.

Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner), who is separated from her cheating husband Charlie (Nicolas Cage), passes out at her 25th high school class reunion only to wake up in the same gym 25 years earlier, wearing the same gown and locket.

She is 18 again but remembers everything, especially her stormy 25-year marriage to Charlie, her high school sweetheart. When he begs Peggy Sue to marry him after graduation, she tells him, "I may be crazy but I'm not crazy enough to marry you twice!" Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, the movie's mood evokes for me the Francis Thompson line about "marveling ... at all the sadness in the sweet, the sweetness in the sad."

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It's a lazy Sunday afternoon and Vickie and I are watching it from our recliners, whose leathery arms touch each other like an old married couple. Which is what we are.

Vickie, who has Alzheimer's, drifts into sleep, her head on my shoulder, mouth open, exhaling as if in meditation. I am, as always, entranced by this movie.

Charming moments like this exchange between Peggy Sue and her grandfather:

"When you and Grandma are gone," she says, "the family's gone. And I'll never see the cousins anymore."

"It's your grandma's strudel that's kept this family together."

"If you could do it all again, Grandpa, what would you do different?"

"Well, I'd have taken better care of my teeth."

And then there is this tender teaching moment from Grandma Beth (Maureen O'Sullivan). Over a haunting Ennio Morricone melody she comforts her troubled granddaughter whose amazing story she does not dispute: "Peggy Sue, right now you're just browsing through time. Choose the things you'll be proud of. Things that last."

Oh, that line! Peggy Sue has a chance to do things differently, to change her future. She looks at Grandma Beth and remembers what she cherishes. "I'm proud of my children. I miss them so much. Scott and Beth. I named my daughter after you."

Later, in a greenhouse with rain pelting them through a broken roof, Charlie persists in telling Peggy Sue how much he loves her. Peggy Sue is panicking: "I'm scared! I can't change anything. I can't help anyone."

He gives her a birthday gift. A locket. She opens it, looks at the tiny photos on either side, and falls to her knees. With tears in her eyes and a genuflection in her voice she says, "*Scott and Beth* ... where did you get this?"

"Who are Scott and Beth? Your mother gave me those. It's *you and me*. You know that."

"So are *they*," Peggy says. "I do love you."

Charlie falls to his knees and he and Peggy Sue embrace. ... Peggy Sue, 43 again, wakes up in a hospital bed. Charlie, grizzled and tired, is at her side. "I had a strange experience," she tells him. "I went back to high school and I spent a lot of time with you. And I kept trying to push you away. But you wouldn't give up."

"I'll never give up."

"I'd like to invite you over to our house for dinner on Sunday," Peggy says. "With your kids. I'll make a strudel."

Their teenage daughter Beth comes into the room and the three of them form a unified image. The camera draws back and we see that what we have been seeing is a reflection in the room's mirror.

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I have often fantasized what I might do if I had the chance to do it all over again. I'd take better care of my teeth. Since I missed the swinging '60s, choosing the priesthood instead, I'd for sure *live la vida loca*. I'd make as much money as fast I

could, so I wouldn't have to work for money ever again. I'd write the great American novel I once started but never finished. I wouldn't get married or have children again because I already did that and it can be really hard.

But would I? Like Peggy Sue, I browse the newsreel of my life and can see a changing moment when I was a priest. I wanted to be a priest to change things, to make people happy, but couldn't even make myself happy. I woke up one night in a lonely rectory, looking at the empty space next to me and thinking about how wonderful it would be to wake up each morning and see someone I love next to me.

I prayed to God that if he'd let that happen, it would even be OK if she got sick and was dying before I did; I'd take care of her and love her right to the end. I promised God: If I break my commitment to being a priest, I will never break my commitment to her. All of my history is in that moment, just as a tree and all its branches and leaves are in the acorn. I could not, would not, cannot change anything.

Like Peggy Sue, we are just browsing through time. The eye of our soul looks into the mirror and knows that everything is just a reflection of what has already happened, and happened at once. Ever since Vickie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's 17 years ago, I've been learning to live in a kind of timelessness, where there is "no play of passing shadows" (James 1:17). Time flies, slows, breaks things down. Timelessness stands still, brings peace, gratitude and assurance.

And so, finally, I pretty much just put one foot in front of the other, choose to do what needs to be done without thinking about it, and — can it be? — am having the time of my life.

[Michael Leach is editor of NCR's Soul Seeing. His newest book is *The Way of Suffering: Readings for an Enlightened Life*, which he had fun putting together with his buds James Keane and Doris Goodnough.]

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