

## *Numbering Our Days*

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Columbus, Ohio  
March 12, 2023

*Life is what happens when you're busy making plans.* —John Lennon

*Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.  
Each of us should strive to awaken. Awaken! Take Heed! Do not squander your life!*  
—Zen teacher, Dōgen

**Ancient Witness:** Psalm 90:1-6, 10, 12

I have often said that I view my sermons as “I-statements.” That is, I don’t presume to speak for anybody else. But it occurs to me that my sermons are also directed *to* myself. That is, they hint at something that, deeply in my heart, I know to be true. But the problem is, I’m not fully convinced! I don’t fully embrace it. So I need to hear it out loud. And I’ve found that when I preach *to* myself, this often best helps others.

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I heard a story about a man who calls this house and a little girl answers the phone.

“(Hello),” the little girl whispers.

“Is your mother home?” asks the man.

“(Yes)”

“May I talk to her?”

“(She’s busy.)”

“Is your father at home?”

“(Yes)”

“Can I speak with him?”

“(He’s busy.)”

“Is there any other adult there?”

“(Yes, there’s a policeman.)”

“May I talk to him?”

“(He’s busy.)”

“Is there another adult there?”

“(Yes, there’s a firefighter.)”

“Can I talk to her?”

“(She’s busy.)”

By this time, the man was starting to get quite concerned. “There seems to be a lot of activity at your house, what is everybody doing?”

“(Looking for me!)”

It's tough being a parent, but sometimes we become so busy in our lives that we miss what's really going on. Sometimes we can be so focused on *preparing* ourselves and our children for life, that we forget to *live* and miss the joy and pleasures of living.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk and author, once wrote:

*We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, a car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive.*

Today, I want to focus on the idea of how we can savor life. Perhaps this is the major spiritual issue. Jesus talked about the "abundant life" that is available to all people, and this is the kind of life marked not by thrills and adventure, not by material success and accolades, not even by health, friends or good fortune. No, the kind of fullness and abundance that Jesus wished upon the lives of all people is living with an awareness of the inherent goodness and preciousness each moment holds. It is a life marked by a deep peace and well-being regardless of the circumstances.

Today's reading from the Psalms has talk about God's wrath and anger, which I take to be more of a human projection, something we all do when we speak of God, than an accurate description of God. (Walter Brueggemann has called the Psalms "shouts to God," often expressing honest and raw human emotion.) And this Psalm also refers to sin, and when people talk about sin these days, they are talking in a moralistic sense. But from a biblical and spiritual sense, sin has more to do with being disconnected from life. So, yes, sin sometimes involves unethical behavior, what is right or wrong. But sin is also about being miserable and unhappy. It is about a life that is constricted, shallow and superficial, and it doesn't matter if one is religious or not. We just fall short when it comes to having a truly abundant life.

I remember one of my relatives talk about our text for today. And every year he would tell me how many days old he was on his birthday. So he might say, this is the 23,656<sup>th</sup> day of my life. O.K., so he was following the literal meaning of the Psalm:

*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (90:12)*

But we don't gain wisdom simply by adding up how many days we have been alive. What the Psalmist is saying, it seems to me, is that most of us live our lives as if they will go on forever. We think that there will always be time do this or that. But there's a certain kind of wisdom that comes when we really get it that our time is limited. We understand that every day, every minute, every second counts! It matters! It has value beyond measure!

It is one thing to know this intellectually. It is quite another to fully integrate this into one's being. Numbering our days means that we remind ourselves over and over again (because we keep forgetting) so that it becomes a part of us that our time is brief and precious. "The days of our life are soon gone," says the psalm, "and we fly away."

The writer of the psalm talked about God alone as eternal while human life is fleeting and transitory.

*Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God...*

*You sweep [us mortals] away, they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.*

Learning that our days are limited is a hard lesson to learn. Almost impossible. It is very natural to deny and resist the truth that “our years come to an end like a sigh.” That’s why, it seems to me, the poet talks about a wise “heart.” We may know something abstractly and in our head, but it needs to be incorporated into our being, into our heart. And if we do learn it, we will forget and need to relearn it over and over again.

And when this happens, the quality of our lives change. And we don’t waste them on small things that don’t really matter. And we focus on the things that do.

Several years ago, Tom Magliozzi died. He was one of my favorite human beings. Many of us knew him and his younger brother, Ray, as Click and Clack, the Car Talk guys, hosts of the popular and much loved NPR program for over 25 years. He is remembered for his playful wit and infectious laugh.

Tom and Ray both graduated from MIT and, as distinguished alumni, were invited to give the Commencement address in 1999. And there’s a part of this speech I want to share with you, when Tom is talking about his defining moment. He said,

*I was driving -- I lived in Cambridge at the time -- I was driving from Cambridge to my job in Foxboro, Massachusetts, and I was driving in a little MG. It weighed about 50 pounds and on Route 128 I was cut off by a semi and I almost, as they say, bought the farm. And as I continued my drive, I said to myself, if I had in fact bought the farm out there on Route 128, how ticked off would I be that I spent all my life -- that I can remember at least -- going to this job, living a life of quiet desperation. So, I pulled into the parking lot, walked into my boss's office and I quit, on the spot.*

He profoundly “numbered his days,” and was liberated. Earlier, he was, “trapped by the scientific, logic, left-brain life.” After this defining event, he recounted,

*I became a bum. I spent two years sitting in Harvard Square drinking coffee. I invented the concept of the do-it-yourself auto repair shop and I met my lovely wife. None of which would have happened if I had been using my left brain.*

Tom was free, and he developed a mantra that would keep him on this path that he and Ray would self-deprecatingly use to describe themselves on the show: “unencumbered by the thought process” (*non impediti ratione cogitationis*) “If you repeat this mantra,” Tom said, “what happens is everything slows down. Life slows down. Being unencumbered by the thought process allows you to identify and hear and see defining moments in your life, things that will change your life.”

There’s a favorite story of a fisherman who gets up before dawn as he had done so many times before. And as he is walking along the shoreline he trips over something. So he goes back and feels around and finds this bag of pebbles in the sand. He picks it up and takes it with him to his boat, occasionally taking out a pebble and throwing it into the ocean. Soon the sun starts to come up on the horizon, and he looks down at the few remaining pebbles in the bag. And he discovers that they are not pebbles at all, but precious gems!

And this is the human experience, isn't it? We go through most of our lives throwing our days away as if they were pebbles until we awaken, until it dawns on us that each day, each moment is a gem beyond measure. And so for the fisherman it was too late, but it was not too late. It's never too late to gain a heart of wisdom and discover a life that is full and abundant.

Because when this kind of wisdom comes we will not want to waste our days on trivial matters. Let's say that you look in your bag and see that you have only one precious, shining gem left, one more day. Everything that we normally worry about falls away. How do you want to live it? Getting upset when the robber takes your wallet? Of course not; it's not worth it. Go ahead and take it. Maybe you spend it with those you love, telling them, so they will never forget. Maybe you do some things that will help others, make a difference in the world.

You see, too, the difference that this kind of wisdom brings to the whole world—replacing pettiness, fighting and warfare with compassion, understanding and peace. In this sense, the wisdom or “the Christ” of God brings salvation and healing for the world.

Some folks, who have had experience with people in the process of dying, talk about the appearance of hearts of wisdom. I came across a book by a hospice nurse, Bronnie Ware. The book is called *The Five Regrets of the Dying*. And the idea is that those who are in the process of dying can have something to teach us, wisdom to impart.

“People grow a lot when they are faced with their own mortality,” she writes, “I learnt never to underestimate someone's capacity for growth.” And in her experience, she says, “Every single patient found their peace before they departed, though, every one of them.”

Ware asked her patients about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, and five common themes surfaced repeatedly. Perhaps acknowledging and coming to terms with one's regret enables one to truly find peace. It's not either/or but both/and.

Every male patient said, “I wish I didn't work so hard.” Women spoke of this regret, too. Missing time with their children or their partner's companionship were sacrificed on the treadmill of work. And so many would simplify their lives and make conscious choices to create more space.

Another regret was, “I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.” Ware writes,

*Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming.*

Sharing both positive and negative feelings raises relationships to a healthier level.

A third regret was, “I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.” We often get so preoccupied with the business of life that we don't give friendships the time and effort they deserve. “It all comes down to love and relationships in the end,” says Ware, “That is all that remains in the final weeks, love and relationships.”

My favorite regret is this one: “I wish that I had let myself be happier.” Or put in different ways: Why did I allow myself to be so unhappy? Why did I spend so much of my precious moments unhappy? The wisdom that comes with the immediate reality of our mortality, with learning to count our days, is that *happiness is a choice*. It really is! We really don't like to hear that because that makes us responsible for our happiness, instead of situations or other people. But it's true.

Finally, the most common regret of all, according to Ware, is “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life expected of me.” How often, in the name of practicality, do we play it safe and secure, giving up on our dreams? Instead of dropping our nets to follow the wild call of the Christ, we just keep fishing! Instead of listening to our higher selves we submit to our fears and anxiety.

Richard Rohr says that hospice workers have a term for this phenomenon that Ware is talking about. They call it “enlightenment at gunpoint.” *It is when we learn, against our will, to fall into Mystery, to fall into Mercy.* Why not practice doing it now? Why not completely and utterly fall into the Mystery now? Why not learn the lesson of these regrets before our deathbed? Why not number our days so that we gain a heart of wisdom? Why not enter that deep peace and unshakable joy now?

One can say that this is what contemplation is—we give ourselves over and fall into the Mystery, which is before thinking, before cognition. “Unencumbered by the thought process,” Tom Magliozzi would say with a laugh. We pry open our hearts to embrace this precious thing called Life. We yield to an immediate contact with Reality that is beyond all knowing and all emotion.

Learning to number our days can lead us to experience the Un-nameable, the Unknowable, and gain a wise and peaceful heart. For then our cup will overflow, and our lives truly will be abundant, joyful and full.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*