

The Gift of Time

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My sister is a third grade school teacher in a small town in Indiana. They start back to school in the middle of August in the Midwest. The other day she was telling me about one of the fourth grade teachers who had her students purchase appointment calendars to keep track of their schedules. She told them that this was a way to start the school year off right, a way to stay organized and on top of things. These weren't kids' calendars that record holidays and vacation days, the ones you used to be able to purchase with pictures of the seasons. These were regular date books that adults use to track their appointments on a weekly basis. As is often the case when I hear stories like this, I said to myself, "Oh my! What are we doing to our children?"

Maybe it's not what are we doing to our children. Maybe we should think about our own attitude toward time. After all, whatever we value, we project upon our children. Is time something we think we can control and master? Or does time get the better of us because we forget appointments or always seem to be running late? Does our forgetting make us feel somehow less worthy? On the other hand, if we happen to be punctual, do we feel more in control of life? How we answer these questions has a great deal to do with how we protect or push our children into adulthood.

Have you ever noticed that when adults have gaps in time or "free" time that it starts to make them a little nervous? People seem to quickly justify why they didn't do anything on a given day, as if they will be asked to produce evidence of using time wisely. What does it mean to use time wisely? Is being productive a better use of time than resting if you are tired? Is doing homework for three hours after school a better use of time than playing outdoors?

I used to think that I could push myself through my tiredness and that "play" was reserved for later. I felt successful if I was able to accomplish everything on my "to do" list. Often I would wish that if I had just a few more open spaces in my date book, then I would be able to slow down enough to get control over my life, have time to visit with friends more regularly, more quiet time to spend with my family. Funny thing is this never seemed to happen, or if it did, it only lasted a week or two while on vacation. Life quickly resumed its pace once I was back in my daily routine. Then I developed a rare illness that required major surgery and a long recuperation time. It was only then that I was forced to slow down.

When people get sick with a serious illness, suddenly their relationship with time seems to change. The illusion of control gets shattered, and the reality that we don't have all the time in the world can no longer be pushed away. Illness exposes our vulnerability as human beings. None of us will ever get enough time in this life. What's ironic is that the people who seem to be at most peace with time are the ones who are living with a terminal illness or ones who were spared death and are seeing each day as a gift of time.

What would happen if all of us started to live each day as if we had just received a precious gift? How would our priorities change? How would we begin to encourage our children differently? What would we teach them about values and relationships, success and ambition?

It's the beginning of another school year. September always feels like a new beginning. What do you want the rhythm and pace of this year to look like? How you decide will not only shape your children's attitude toward time, it will also create a sense of permission for what they will come to identify as their self worth as they move forward into their futures. Remember, one reliable measure of what we value is how we spend the gift of time.

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