

A Dream of Ample Time
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Reading

from *Bird By Bird* by Anne Lamott:

I remind myself nearly every day of something that a doctor told me six months before my friend Pammy died. This was a doctor who always gave me straight answers. When I called on this one particular night, I was hoping she could put a positive slant on some distressing developments. She couldn't, but she said something that changed my life. "Watch her carefully right now," she said, "because she's teaching you how to live."

I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I am dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" Then I can decide to read Wallace Stevens for the rest of the morning or go to the beach or just really participate in ordinary life. Any of these will begin the process of filling me back up with observations, flavors, ideas, visions, memories. I might want to write on my last day on earth, but I'd also be aware of other options that would feel at least as pressing. I would want to keep whatever I did simple, I think. And I would want to be present.

Sermon

I preached this sermon a few years ago, and felt moved to share the message again – a little different from the first time, but not much.

Have you ever felt like the guy in the cartoon who is standing at his desk, phone in hand, looking at his appointment book? And he says to whomever it is on the other end of the line, "How about never, is never good for you?"

And how often is the reply to "How are you doing?" one word: "Busy."

What are we doing to ourselves? What is happening to our time?

I was visiting in the hospital. My day was full. My week and month were full. And there, on the wall near the nurses station was a print. It was a pen and ink and watercolor print of a beach house. The house was simple, there long enough to have become part of the dunes. The house and the beach stood as distant invitations; and so did the title of the print: "A Dream of Ample Time."

So many of us complain of being time-deprived these days, but I wonder if our yearning is *not* for more time, *not* for more hours in the day or more days in the week or more years in our lives. I wonder if, rather, our dream for ample time is really for more spaciousness within the

time that we already have. I wonder, too, if it isn't more meaning within time that we seek. Spaciousness and meaning.

So, how do we find more spaciousness and meaning within our hours, days, and years?

Anne Lamott reminds herself to live as if she's dying... since we are all indeed "terminal on this bus" as she puts it. That's very Buddhist of her actually. Buddhists meditate on transience and death as a way of learning to experience full presence here and now. And as Anne Lamott puts it, whatever she would do on her last day she "would want to be present." Wouldn't we all.

I've known enough people over the years who knew that they were dying – perhaps some of you have as well – to have finally realized that the central life question may not be so much *what* you want to do with your time remaining (not that that question is unimportant) but rather *in what spirit* you want to do whatever you do. However close to dying we are, how *present* will we be within the moment and for each person in our lives, how fully will we experience the unfolding, eternal moment?

Now and then an event brings you fully into the moment with no extra effort required. And simultaneously immediately resets your time-use priorities.

A number of years ago I received a phone call during a ministers' meeting in another town. One of our children had fallen off the slide at school and was in the emergency room with a possible back injury.

Did I need to take even a minute to weigh the most effective use of my time that afternoon? It was of course instantly clear what to do, how to reorganize the day. There was *ample time* for what mattered most. I just hadn't noticed.

Fortunately the stay in the emergency room was brief; we were home by dinner, little the worse for wear. But we were reminded again of what matters, we were reminded again of the fullness of our lives in each moment.

Each one of us has had personal experiences, not all with happy endings, which have drawn us to fuller awareness in the moment. 9/11 had this effect – for a little while anyway – on our whole nation. For a *little* while... because we so easily slide back into our usual habits, habits which lead us to back to that feeling that we don't have enough time, that everything is rushed... and that it will always be that way.

But we don't need to wait for life to grab us and shake us by the collar into fuller awareness and more complete presence in time. We really don't need to wait.

We can practice. Anytime. Wherever we are. Anne Lamott's – and Buddhism's – reminder that our stay here is temporary is one form of practice.

There is a brief poem by the ancient Zen master, Wu Men, which suggests another kind of practice:

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.
If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life.

The key line is of course "If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things." Well, how do you know what's necessary and what's unnecessary? This seems as if it might be as hopeless to figure out as it is to figure out which books to keep on your shelves or which clothes to keep in

the closet. A clouded mind can't be any easier to straighten out than a cluttered closet... and could well be harder.

But I think that this may be the wrong way to think about what it is that clouds our minds. Because it occurs to me that it is not the seemingly endless "to do" list that clouds our minds, clouds and clutters our minds because some things on the list (but which ones?!) are unnecessary. Instead, it might be qualities like worry and anxiety, fear and regret which are the unnecessary things that cloud our minds and prevent us from experiencing this, *this*, season as the best season of our lives, as the season with ample time already... and we just hadn't noticed. ("See the lilies of the field," Jesus preached, "they neither toil nor spin...")

I'm not suggesting that worry, anxiety, fear, and regret are not states of mind that we won't experience quite appropriately and understandably in the course of our days and our lives. I *am* suggesting that we can get stuck in these states of mind, even on pretty good days. I know I can, and I expect many of you may too. And then time will *never* feel ample, the days *never* feel long enough.

Not long ago I was in the midst of one of those stretches of one thing after another, and I found myself in that place of yearning for ample time, reaching for that place in the appointment book which was blank.

But now and then I would catch myself, and realize what a disservice I was doing to myself... and to the day – the days which writer Annie Dillard once reminded us are themselves gods, sacred. I was in danger of forgetting that everything that *needed* to get done would get done, and so needed no worry to help them along; I was in danger of forgetting to breathe into whatever moment or meeting or event I was in; I was in danger of forgetting I could also breathe and be more alive during the in between moments, enjoy (enter with joy!?) the walk across the street to the Meeting House when the sky was stunningly blue, enjoy the conversation I was having *now*, experience *this* moment unclouded (or at least less clouded) by anxiety and worry about all that still needed to be done.

If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life.

And this, however many seasons we have lived and may yet have to live. Time already ample enough, already spacious enough.

All this said, there is wisdom too in carving out actual periods of time apart from the to-do list, apart from the press of events and responsibilities, literal spaciousness in time. It might only be a few moments in the morning or evening, moments just sitting, or just sipping your tea or coffee, or reading a poem, or listening to the birds, or even the lawnmower in your neighbor's yard, or moments in between items on the to do list when you just sit at your desk and breathe, that's all.

Or it might be an entire day now and then. When is the last time you actually made a sabbath day for yourself? Whatever one's faith tradition or spiritual orientation, there is no denying the wisdom of the sabbath. Wisdom in stopping for a time (no errands! no calls! no e-mail!) stopping and allowing life to filter back into your bones and heart *at its own pace*. God did it! God rested after six days simply because it was good to rest, not because he needed to. (He was *God* after all.) So we might as well give it a try too. Summer may or may not offer more such opportunities for us; but for the health of our souls we need to *create* such opportunities when we can, any season.

And... I don't know about you, but there's one more way in which I experience anxiety about "ample time." I look around and see all that needs to be done in the world, near and far. Do we have time to head off global warming before the worst of its effects set in? Do we have time to regain some moral leadership in the world? Do we have time to address so many issues of injustice? Do we have time to create large enough circles of peace?

And so, more personally, the question comes home: am I using my own time as effectively as I could in relation to so many issues about which I feel so strongly?

Talk about anxiety and worry! Talk about a question to which the answer is probably *not* the eternal beach house with nothing to do.

Yet even so, here, too, this question of "ample time" is not really about the number of hours in the day or days in the week or in our lives. It is about making the time that we do have meaningful. And this means, in turn, that the question of how we use our time will always be there. Of course. For though we can practice being more fully present to the time we have whatever we are doing, there are still and always will be decisions to be made as to how to use the time we are given, how to be most of use with the gifts we have been given, how to serve our heart's passion most effectively.

And sabbath time, whether a few minutes each day or a whole day or even weeks now and then, can help us not only to fully re-enter the spaciousness of *each* moment with less anxiety and worry, but can also help us reconnect to that which is (and those who are) most important to us, so that how we *are* in the moment *and* what we *do* in the moment will both be most in harmony with who we *are* in our lives – here, now, always.

Finally... as we re-enter the moment through sabbath time and all the time, may we also re-discover that we are not alone, that we are indeed connected with one another profoundly – how often need we say it – in the interdependent web of life. So that what we each do and who we each are *is* added to the tapestry of love and care that we are all weaving together.

Time enough? In the end, actually, it is not for us to judge or know. We can only enter the time – the ample, spacious, potentially meaningful time – enter the time we have with whole hearts, with all that we are, with tender care, with love.

How about always? Is always good for you?

So may it be.