

The Power of the Pausing

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As I get older, each “New Year” seems to bring less and less that is new. This realization leads me to wonder if I am simply sleepwalking through my life, living a pattern, rather than a life?

Lately, I have noted that I even use my free time in predictable, patterned ways. For example, when I don’t know what to do next, I invariably pick up a book to read or become absorbed in some activity on my computer.

In an effort to temporarily break this pattern, I resolved to forego any contact with printed matter, including computers, during the seven-day period between Christmas and New Years Day. Realizing that I was confronting a kind of addiction, I called this experiment my “fast.”

The first thing I noticed was how abstaining from books and computers afforded me with wonderful stretches of time to simply pause and reflect on the various events of my days. For example, on Day 2 of my fast my oldest daughter Genny said, “Dad, you really look old.” Normally, this comment would have been lost in the shuffle of a busy day. But now I had time to pause and allow myself to feel and see my “oldness” and as I did this interesting questions arose:

- Do I “fight” against the aging process?
- Does Genny believe (or deny) that she, too, will one day grow old?
- What do I most fear about growing old?
- What would loving aging—i.e., loving life in all its phases—look and feel like?

As my fast continued, the novelty wore off and I began to feel agitated. Indeed, by Day 4 I was behaving very much like an addict who had been denied his fix—in my case denied my books and computer! In response to my orneriness, my partner even requested that I end my fast. But then, I had an idea: What if I assuaged my frustration at being denied my “fixes” by doing something I had never done before?

So it was that I spent an afternoon making a rustic wooden toy for my baby daughter, Katie. This activity lightened my mood. I was happy again. But I quickly realized that my happiness was the result of my having done something—i.e., that my real addiction is to doing and that to feel good I need to be doing or producing something all the time. Even now, in writing this column, I realize that I am attempting to show some tangible “product” for my one-week fast. Argh!

Of course, doing per se is not bad. But when our lives consist only of doing we become automatons, that is to say we become human “doings” rather than human beings! In my case, it is only by pausing regularly throughout the day to reflect on the events of my life that I am able to gain perspective and in this way to bring awareness to my doing.

Indeed, it is through pausing and paying attention that I wake up and discover the juiciness in my life. This is particularly true when I pause with the intention of expressing gratitude. For example, when I was complaining about winter recently, a friend suggested that I make a list of 200 things that I like about winter. In effect, this friend was inviting me to pause and appreciate winter rather than to rush and complain about it. In my pausing I realized, to my surprise, that there are many, many things that I do love about winter: e.g., snow crunching under foot, ice glistening on twigs, hot tea, rich rosy-hued sunsets; crackling fires, outdoor walks, mittens, snow angels...

In sum, what started out for me as a little experiment has ended up reminding me of how easy it is to get lost in the tyranny of doing and how punctuating my days with generous pauses can bring sparkle to my life. For it is through this act of frequent pausing that I give myself the opportunity to search under my seemingly humdrum daily routines for life's deeper meanings and sweet epiphanies. The choice is as stark as it is daunting: to sleep walk or to awaken?