

Pausing Before We Act: A Form of Prayer for All of Us

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Almost every night I read my partner Phoebe to sleep. I recently finished reading her a book by psychologist Alexandra Horowitz entitled, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes*. In the book, Horowitz asks what it would be like to pay more attention to the world around her than most of us pay on a regular basis, and answers the question by taking a series of walks around New York City and other cities with experts who will help her see in different ways. Horowitz's walking partners include her 19-month-old son, a geologist, a typographer, an illustrator, an entomologist, a field biologist, an urban sociologist, two medical professionals who can diagnose health problems just by looking at someone, a blind person, a theater sound designer, and her dog. The book is quite incredible because the reader learns along with Horowitz just what a rich and amazing world is out there that we so often fail to see.

I found that just reading the book made me want to stop and notice more. For several days I was mostly housebound because of the intense snow in Colorado Springs and so I worked from home. My regular office is in a basement and has no windows, only the same bleary artificial light day in and day out. My home desk lets me see out of windows facing several directions. And during the snowy days I made a point to look out the window nearest me frequently each day and watch the snow fall. It was beautiful, and it changed frequently: from heavy wet snow that almost looked like rain to large flakes blowing around in the wind, and from gentle white flashes against the blue of my neighbor's house to near whiteout conditions. I'm grateful that I was able to notice the simple variety of snow over a few days of winter. Nothing dramatic. Just life at its loveliest.

Right now, during my visits to Flame of Life we are in the middle of a sermon series on practices that help us live more ethically. For me, thinking about ethics is part of a larger question, namely how we are to promote the flourishing of all human beings on the planet. This larger question follows naturally from our affirmation of the first principle, namely the inherent worth and dignity of all people. If we all have inherent dignity and worth, we are all worthy of thriving. As the lyrics of the hymn "For All that Is Our Life" remind us, "all life is a gift which we are called to use to build the common good and make our own days glad." Building the common good is about helping other people thrive and making our own days glad is contributing to our own thriving.

I've spent a lot of time in this sermon series on preparing ourselves to build the common good, mostly because my understanding is that this was the original topic of interest. I still believe that today's topic, pausing before we act, is a practice that can build the common good by helping us become more attentive to others and to how we can serve the world around us. However, there's always some risk in focusing exclusively on learning how to take care of others better, which is that it sounds like a lot of work, and dreary work at that. If the hymn is correct, building the common good and making our own days glad have something to do with each other. Can ethics be joyful and not merely a slog? Today, I am going to claim that this is the case by taking a different approach. Instead of focusing on all of the work that goes into learning how to pause before we act, I want to talk about all the delight that comes out of actually doing it. Pausing

before we act can, I believe, be a way of making our own days glad. Here are three ways it can increase our gladness. First, pausing before we act can allow us to take stock and be grateful. Second, pausing before we act can allow us to encounter beauty of which we were not previously aware. Finally, pausing before we act can allow us to make decisions about what we are about to do that might improve, not just others' lives but also our own. And in keeping with my desire to keep today's energy gentle, we will focus on song lyrics for the first two topics and on today's reading for the third.

Pausing before we act can allow us to take stock and be grateful. This is an important reason why many people include some sort of gratitude practice as part of their spiritual discipline. I choose to post one or more things I am grateful for on Facebook every night, and taking the time to do this has led to some interesting experiences. I'm the sort of person who can be on the go for hours at a time without stopping, but every night when I stop to post what I call my Facebook gratitudes, I really stop. Sometimes I have to sit there for whole minutes thinking about my day and wondering what to write. I don't do this perfectly every night, of course, but on the whole, this is one of the slowest, gentlest, most thoughtful, most reflective parts of my day. And in a sense, it doesn't even matter if I posted something good or not; it's the process of trusting that I have at least one thing to be grateful for every single day, whether it's just being alive, or the weather, or my friends, or something I did, or something like music that restores my spirit.

In one of my favorite songs, "Grateful" by John Bucchino, the singer is grateful for the most simple and mundane of things: a roof over his head, a warm place to sleep, a heart that can hold love, a mind that can think, friends in a city of strangers. Wouldn't most or all of us in this room say that we have these things as well? Perhaps we are already grateful for them, which is a great blessing if it is true. But we can't really experience our gratitude unless we pause between the various things that we do to simply be aware of what we have. It may be too simplistic to say that when we are doing things, we are often focused on outcomes or on the future or on what we don't have yet. But I don't think it is too simplistic to say that stopping and taking stock is about focusing on what we do have on what is not incomplete, on what is already sufficient unto the day.

The song "Grateful" has an interesting backstory. John Bucchino wrote it as part of an off-Broadway revue called *Urban Myths*. It is sung by a man with AIDS lying on his deathbed. Let's just let that sink in a minute. A man suffering from the ravages of AIDS and about to die is singing about everything for which he is grateful. And he certainly has time to pause before he acts; he's so sick that his life has become increasingly about the pauses between the actions, and it looks like he's about to head off into the great permanent pause where actions are no more. But his lover, who has been in denial about his impending death, and who has gone so far as to swear that he won't cry because then maybe his beloved won't die, is profoundly moved by the song "Grateful." The song forces the lover to pause and to see the reality in front of him and to be angry and sad and, yes, grateful for his beloved. And he cries. He weeps over the nearly dead body of his partner. And miraculously, his tears, previously held back stubbornly in a frenzy of action and a failure to pause, have healing properties. As his tears land on his lover, the Kaposi's Sarcoma that has destroyed the man's body melts away and his lover regains his life and his health.

Is this realistic? No. Bucchino did, after all, call the revue “Urban Myths.” But I think the story offers marvelous food for thought: if we are sufficiently present to acknowledge the things for which we are grateful, our life will be rich and full even in its final moments. And we can be healed by practicing the presence of gratitude whether or not we are cured.

Pausing before we act can also allow us to encounter beauty of which we were not previously aware. Alexandra Horowitz begins her book *On Looking* with the following words: “You missed that. Right now, you are missing the vast majority of what is happening around you.” Now to some extent we need to be able to focus and concentrate to get things done; as I worked on this sermon, I ignored pretty much everything else. But it’s one thing to miss things strategically because we are on a deadline and another thing entirely to miss them because we simply don’t pay attention. What beauty, what marvels, what wonders would we see if we paid attention?

UU singer/songwriter Peter Mayer has an answer to that question in his song “Awake.” Here are the lyrics:

Clouds are swift. Rocks are ancient. Mountains are high, oceans great.
Winds are restless. Trees are patient and you, my child, are awake
Waves are crashing, rivers churning, planets twirling, stars ablaze.
Storms are raging, atoms whirling and you, my child, are awake
To perceive these wondrous things, to count the beats of a blackbird’s wings,
To tell a story and dance and sing.

All the splendors of creation are very happy that you came
Because they needed someone to see them and you, my child, are awake
To perceive these wondrous things, to count the beats of a blackbird’s wings,
To tell a story and dance and sing.

Seeds are hopeful, dewdrops fleeting, oak trees are crooked, redwoods straight
And they are not known to the sleeping but you, my child, are awake.
You, my child, are awake. You, my child...

What’s happening here? Mayer is singing to his child but I believe he is singing to the child in all of us, the child who was in fact awake before the challenges and harshness and obligations of life made it seem impossible to stay awake. I think of this song as one big pause, or perhaps better, as a set of pauses taken on a regular basis throughout life. Mayer has slowed down and stopped enough to see, and to feel a part of, this amazing, majestic, wild, ever-changing planet. And if we would wake up, we would not merely have the opportunity to encounter all the splendors of creation. We would have the opportunity to respond to them by telling stories, by dancing, by singing, or in other words, by celebrating and sharing the good news.

It is not merely the natural world that Mayer wants us to awaken to but our entire lives, indeed the very fact that we are alive. Mayer’s beloved song “Holy Now” includes the chorus “Wine from water is not so small but an even better magic trick is that anything is here at all so the challenging thing becomes not to look for miracles but finding where there isn’t one.” That’s lovely, but what does it mean for us on a day-to-day basis? If we are in fact awake, if we pause

between actions to encounter beauty of which we were not previously aware, what will we see? The answer could include almost anything, but here's Mayer again, also from "Holy Now":

Read a questioning child's face and say it's not a testament. That'd be very hard to say.
See another new morning come and say it's not a sacrament. I tell you that it can't be done.

Two things to notice here. First, Mayer hasn't listed anything terribly unusual. The faces of children learning and growing are around us all the time. And another new morning? That's just life going on. It happens to us every day, until it doesn't. But that's the whole point. It is that which is most ordinary which is also most holy. Holiness, by this way of looking at it, is not about being set apart, which is the understanding we find in the Hebrew Bible. It's about interconnectedness, the interdependent web in which we live and move and have our being. And here's the other important and related point about those two lines: Mayer has chosen unusual words to describe usual things. A questioning child's face as a testament. Another new morning as a sacrament. Yes, these are terms that relate to the idea of holiness, but in plainer English they also suggest that the ordinary becomes extraordinary when seen with the right kind of vision. We are surrounded by the extraordinary. We ourselves are extraordinary. Everything is extraordinary. Everything is holy now. As long as we see it that way. As long as we can pause long enough to see it that way.

Pausing before we act can also allow us to make decisions about what we are about to do that might improve, not just others' lives but also our own. Consider today's reading, with a few lines by author Jodi Picoult and an extension by our old friend, anonymous. Here's the reading again:

"In the space between yes and no, there's a lifetime. It's the difference between the path you walk and the one you leave behind. It's the gap between who you thought you could be and who you really are. It's the legroom for the lies you'll tell yourself in the future. Right now, your future might still be different. No lies, few regrets, much satisfaction. The space between yes and no is still there. What will you do with the lifetime-sized gap between yes and no? You can still choose yes. You can still walk the path of treating others with the dignity that is rightfully theirs. You can still be the ethical, caring person you seek to be. You can still avoid having to tell yourself lies in the future. In the space between yes and no, there's a lifetime. What will you do with that lifetime?"

That pause before we act is precisely the space between yes and no, and I agree with Picoult that there's a lifetime in the pause. Many of our actions are of relatively little consequence; I might not work too hard at pausing before I go to the bathroom. But some of our actions are more important because they are about choosing either the best or the less-than-best action. The space between yes and no is when we decide to be generous or greedy, compassionate or judgmental, self-loving or self-destructive. We go for the yes or we retreat toward the no. And the lifetime in the pause is not about how many seconds the pause actually lasts. It's about the self we move a little closer to becoming in that space between yes and no. It's about what we are more likely to do next time based on what we choose to do this time, and therefore it's about the gap between who we thought we could be and who we turn out to be in practice.

When I first read Picoult's lines, that business about "the legroom for the lies you'll tell yourself in the future," I thought, I can't use this. What does that even mean? Finally, it occurred to me that it's possible to read the line, not as a claim that all people misrepresent their past, but as one possibility of several that will define who we are down the road. Yes, that space might be filled with lovely excuses about why we are about to do the wrong thing. It might be laden with overly earnest regrets about a past that isn't the past yet because we haven't even gotten to it – but we know exactly what we are about to do and it's not a good thing. The space might be filled with defensiveness because we are about to do something that we know is not good for us or for someone else but we know that won't stop us doing it.

These kinds of responses are, I think, what Picoult means by the "legroom for the lies you'll tell yourself in the future." And they are not the only possibilities. If we pause before we act, we can act differently. If we act without thinking and without being willing to contemplate our acts we can't act differently. Plain and simple. That lifetime-sized space between yes and no could turn us into a truth-teller under difficult circumstances or into a liar when lying is easy. It could be the moment when we admit a hard truth about ourselves or the moment when that hard truth gets pushed so far underground, we would need a hundred shovels to unearth it. You know what can be found in your lifetime-sized space between yes and no; I don't. But I do know that when we don't pause before acting, that lifetime-sized space gets compressed down to a nanosecond and there's no yes or no, only do. Minus the lifetime we don't get to create our life, only to respond to everything going on around us.

The iconic UU poet Mary Oliver once asked, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" We have not one opportunity to answer that question, not a hundred, not a thousand, but as many opportunities as we choose. Every time we pause to take stock of what we have and experience gratitude for it, every time we pause to notice beauty, we may not previously have been aware of, and every time we pause to decide what our options are in that lifetime-sized space, we are answering Mary Oliver's question yet again. We are doing something amazing and powerful with our one wild and precious life. I hope we choose to pause, and I hope our choices lead us to wonderful experiences and ways of being in the world. So may it come to pass. Amen and blessed be.