Opinion
Soul Seeing



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> For lack of attention, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.
>
> — Evelyn Underhill

When was the last time you sat at a traffic light, impatient for the light to turn green? Or stood in line behind slow-moving customers, wondering when they would finish so you could finally check out? Can you imagine *looking forward* to those inconvenient moments, welcoming them like little gifts throughout the day?

It's natural to become agitated with waiting, although with all the practice we've had, you'd think we'd have mastered the art by now. Granted, it's not easy, but if we can reframe these brief delays, viewing them as prayer pauses, our days can be transformed. We can find calm, peace and even glimpses of beauty in our waiting moments.

The capacity to attend to the graces in ordinary experiences can be nurtured by mindfully dwelling in the present moment. This requires us to slough off the clutter in our heads, those persistent thoughts and projected worries that occupy so much of our mental real estate. Every time we are distracted by future concerns or fret about past events, we can remind ourselves that God is with us right here, right now. Each brief parcel of time, especially when we are delayed, can be an opportunity to dwell in the "sacrament of the present moment," as 18th-century French Jesuit Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade named it.

Practicing this sacrament is what I call "Christian mindfulness," embodied by Brother Lawrence, a 17th century lay Carmelite who lived in a Parisian monastery. He viewed his monotonous kitchen duties as a form of prayer and taught others how to offer little glances to God throughout the day. This simple practice grounds us in the present, aware of the Divine in all things. We stay in touch with the beauty in the ordinary, everyday gifts of life.

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Brother Lawrence advised us to "get used to offering your heart to God whenever you can." He stayed with the simple act of "flipping his omelet while the dishes piled up in the sink, reminding himself that "practicing the presence of God" was the

essence of the spiritual life. Mundane kitchen tasks, he said, are ideal cues to anchor our thoughts in the Divine Presence. Instead of rushing through them to get to more important tasks, we can cultivate mindful silence and create prayerful moments. But I know that's much easier said than done.

St. Teresa of Ávila once remarked, "The Lord walks among the pots and pans." She and Lawrence suggest that we turn routine tasks of washing and cooking and cleaning into moments of awareness. We stay grounded in the now, take a deep breath and not rush through one task to get to the next thing on our "to-do" list. We keep our focus on this very moment, the gift of time right here, right now. We can stop and be grateful for this gift of today and God's presence here.

Our household duties could bring contemplative pauses in the day, times when we slow down and connect with the source of all that is good and true and beautiful. We transform chore times into calming breaks. I sometimes imagine myself in a monastery kitchen, carefully wiping the counters or cutting vegetables, listening to ancient chants wafting through the doors from the nearby chapel. (My monk friends tell me this is quite a fairytale.) In any case, slowing down and doing one task at a time is a balm for my spirit. I wish I'd been aware of these teachings many years ago, when my life had lots and lots of pots and pans. The lesson is clear: Doing chores with presence and intention is prayer.

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Harvard psychology professor Ronald Siegel notes that Christian contemplative prayer is considered a form of mindfulness practice by secular scholars. This is salient news for Christians because most writings on mindfulness fail to illuminate our Christian tradition as a source of wisdom. Much of the current research on mindfulness shows that the physical and psychological benefits are not insignificant. Inflammation is reduced. Immunity, calm and focus increase. The end caps of our chromosomes, our telomeres, are protected, too, which helps slow the aging

process. Who doesn't want those side effects?

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer provides a slightly different perspective. She recommends we take time to intentionally notice things, drawing novel distinctions. Take care to really look at the people we live and work with, paying close attention to the subtleties they express. This simple attentiveness will bring mindfulness to our day. As we observe the details of every person and everything around us, we are situated in the present and engaged in life. We experience joy because we are fully anchored in the present moment.

Bringing our awareness back to the present again and again, noticing the details of our surroundings, creates a sense of sacred space and expanded time. We see the beauty here and now. Within weeks, the feeling of being pressed for time — the primary cause of stress — will slowly dissolve. Waiting impatiently is just another way of saying we want the future to come sooner. Instead, we can feel at ease and tranquil, experiencing the presence of God and the joy of living more fully in the present, even while sitting at traffic lights.

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