

The Grass Isn't Always Greener ...

It seems that no matter what season of life we are in, we want to be in a different one. God wants us to appreciate where we are.

Perhaps you remember *The New Yorker* cartoon in which two monks in robes and shaved heads are sitting side by side, cross-legged on the floor. The younger one, with a quizzical look on his face, is facing the older, who is saying: "Nothing happens next. This is it."

That's exactly what it means to live in the here and now. We aren't waiting for something else to occur, we aren't distracted by anything around us, and we aren't trying to escape mentally to another time. We are "mindfully awake." Paying attention. Savoring the moment for all it's worth. We are fully alive!

I once heard Diane Sawyer say on television, "The most important thing in life is to pay attention"—and I would agree. But how often are we able to achieve that? Not often enough, unfortunately. Nevertheless, our richest times in life are those when we are completely present, consciously heightening our awareness because our journey has brought us here—and we choose not to miss it.

I feel this when I'm engaged in rich, meaningful conversation with an interesting person. Questions are enticing, listening is acute, and eye contact is direct. I love that; such focused attention makes me feel alive. I also experience this feeling when I'm alone in an art museum or lost in a good book.

When I'm all there—or rather, all here!—I never want the moment to end. It's wonderful. It's the "it" to which the wise old monk referred.

About a year after my mother died in 1971, my dad and I were invited to the wedding of a mutual friend. Daddy was living with my brother, Chuck, and his family, and I picked him up so we could go in my car. At 78 years old, Daddy wasn't driving anymore.

Since we had plenty of time, I suggested we stop off for coffee at a place along the way where we knew a couple of the waitresses. There we sat, dressed to the nines and sipping coffee in a little short-order restaurant.

After a while it began to rain, and we decided to let the weather clear up before traveling on. We settled back in our chairs and talked about childhood—Dad's and mine—and about Mother and his love for her through the 40 years they were married. I thanked him for being such a great dad to me and my two brothers.

When the rain became more intense, we gave up the idea of going to the wedding and nestled into one of the sweetest times my dad and I had ever had. We had always been close, but never more than that night. We were totally connected conversationally, not distracted by anything and absolutely in the moment.

Would that we were able to maintain that kind of connectedness all the time, with others as well as with ourselves. It's hard, almost impossible. So often we want to be somewhere else. We look at the "now" we are in and have this illusion that if we could just inch or leap forward on the journey, our lives would be richer or better or more "together." We don't want to be here.

Why is this? Why are we so rarely satisfied? Were we simply programmed to be this way, or is it that we just don't know ourselves or God well enough to recognize what truly satisfies?

JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY As I look back over my life, I see

that there are many times when I wasn't satisfied; I couldn't live fully in the moment. I was looking for the next thing to bring me fulfillment and, of course, I wanted that fulfillment to be permanent.

One of the hardest periods in my life was in the mid-1980s. It ultimately became one of the most transforming times because I was willing to attune myself fully to the here and now—even though it was painful. It turned out that my own discomfort contained critical information that formed a pathway to the next leg of my journey. But it was very hard to be as vulnerable as I needed to be to see the real roadblock.

In August of 1985 I experienced some heartbreaking misunderstandings with close friends. At the same time, I was trying to make a major decision—whether or not to take early retirement from Mobil Oil Corp. because of an impending collision between my “real” job and lots of speaking engagements.

I eventually decided to turn over all the turmoil to God. As days and weeks passed, it seemed as though I heard in my head, “Write things down.” So, I did.

The first thing I wrote was a letter to myself, in which I poured out all the feelings I had been dealing with for months or, perhaps unknowingly, for years. I cried out to God about the loneliness I felt and also about the anger, fear, regret, inadequacies, fault-finding, dread and despair.

When I finally stopped writing, it was as if the burden had started to lift. Everything that had been inside was now outside. I had dumped it all on the only One who could handle the whole truckload.

I soon saw positive things happening. For one thing, I came to the realization that my most annoying problem was me.

How could I be my own problem? Simple: I wanted control—of

everything—and I resented the fact that God wanted control, too. My desire for control outweighed my desire for connectedness, even with Him.

I felt lonely because I had attached all the desires of my heart to a tiny circle of friends and companions from whom I wanted all my needs met, and they just happened to have lives of their own! I had completely taken my eyes off the big picture of what God had in store for me.

I didn't want the life I was living; I wanted some pie-in-the-sky existence that wasn't possible. For some reason I was holding out for it before I would permit myself to be happy where I was.

The second thing I wrote, on September 1, 1985, was a list of goals: all the things I felt were important in life—for now and for later. My first objective was to determine if and when I could retire from Mobil Oil. Since the list was figured on a three-year plan, I aimed for a September 1, 1988, retirement date.

My list included other goals as well—large and small—each with its own objective to stretch me and enlarge my borders. Nothing was too “out there,” but all the goals required discipline—something I was lacking when I felt so frightened.

After the list was completed, I noticed it was entirely about things, not people. Hmmm, it seemed I was still disconnected from my deepest need.

The third thing I did was what rounded me toward home plate. I had been to a Mobil management meeting at which I came across a thought-provoking article on plotting your lifeline in a magazine called the Executive Female. It included instructions for charting one's life journey, including both personal and career experiences, on a graph, using plus signs for positive events and minus signs for negative or painful events.

I began plotting, and some interesting data quickly emerged.

What I saw was that for the most part, I had enjoyed a good life—happy childhood, meaningful relationships, professional singing, successful career, strong God-consciousness, writing books, travel and so on.

On the minus side, however, were three very difficult experiences that had indented my soul. One related to early problems with my mother and the hurt and sorrow that had been between us. The second was a traumatic move from Texas to California in the 1970s. The third was this current time of loneliness, brought on by insisting things go my way.

As I looked at the chart, I realized something that changed me deeply from that moment on: It was those three painful experiences that had given me my greatest strength and fiber—what I most needed to mature. Through them I was forced to rely on the Lord and deal with reality for what it was. In short, quit griping and grow up! The very things I hated had been the making of me. It was as if I took off a blindfold and walked into the light.

Though I had enjoyed all the good things in the plus category and had had lots of fun, there was no suffering or heartache there—nothing to build character or to provide the rich fodder needed for becoming a balanced adult. Nothing to extract from me the deepest, most revealing, and most transforming truths about myself. These painful experiences had actually helped me the most to become the person God wanted me to be.

When the exercise was finished, I felt I had hit a home run. I felt truly alive and had the guidance I needed to finally take constructive action in my life.

WILLING TO BE VULNERABLE

The soul in each of us is imprisoned until set free by Jesus Christ. We all have shells around us, protecting us from being

eaten alive by the pain of life. And when those shells break, we believe we are at grave risk of being hurt, depressed or even dying on the spot.

To prevent this pain and loss, we guard ourselves by retreating deeper and deeper into the shell, being available only to what is pleasant, predictable and safe. But every person I've ever known who really had something to give has been burst open by the explosive force of God's soul-transforming lessons. Each has been willing to be vulnerable to the truth about himself, to admit behavior patterns that are destructive to his own soul.

If we aspire to pay complete attention to the present, we must get out of our own ways. Living fully in the here and now starts deep inside as we allow the self-protective shell to break open so the liberating grace of God can flow in to heal and renew and establish genuine meaning in our lives.

On September 1, 1987, I retired from Mobil Oil Corp.—one year earlier than planned. I also had achieved almost everything else on my goals list. Most important, some of the relationships I had agonized over were restored—and they weren't even on the list!

For a short time I worked as vice president of public relations at Insight for Living, the international radio Bible ministry of my brother, Chuck, but I soon found I spent more time traveling and speaking than I did working in the office. Once again I “retired” from an office job and began trusting God to meet my financial needs on His terms.

In 1995 I received an invitation to speak at several conferences the following year. The conference organization, now known as Women of Faith, was founded by author-entrepreneur Stephen Arterburn and was designed to be a source of encouragement to women across America. Steve wanted women to get away from their routines for a weekend to have fun,

sing and worship the Lord with other women.

Steve asked Patsy Clairmont, Marilyn Meberg, Barbara Johnson and me to be speakers. The next year, we were joined by Thelma Wells and Sheila Walsh.

Every time we spoke at another venue, we experienced fresh excitement. We could sense God was doing something. Thousands of women were discovering what it meant to be a “woman of faith,” to trust God with their desires, their families, their problems, their lives.

Over the last seven years we have spoken to 1.5 million women. Who could have imagined it? I, for one, never dreamed God would swing open this door.

We never know how things will turn out, do we? Feeling stuck or overwhelmed makes us despondent and causes us to stay put a lot longer than we need to.

For me, writing that letter to myself so many years ago taught me things I’ll never forget. Once I saw my effrontery and self-centeredness on paper, I could finally decipher the magnitude of my control problem. I knew change was necessary—and with Christ, possible.

God has shown me that wherever I am in life can be my very best place. I had no idea all the things God had in mind for me. That list I made in September 1985 was only a drop in the bucket to all He had in mind for my journey. And I’m still movin’—enjoying every minute of the here and now!

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