

Spending Our Lives

Benediction: Abraham Joshua Heschel

In our daily lives we attend primarily to that which the senses are spelling out for us: to what the eyes perceive, to what the fingers touch. Reality to us is thinghood, consisting of substances that occupy space; even God is conceived by most of us as a thing. The result of our thinginess is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing.

Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.

Homily:

This title, “Spending our lives,” is taken from James Fowler’s provocative question: “What in your life are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best energy?”

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It is a question that includes how we spend money which is hugely symbolic of our values, but also how we spend actual time, the finite days of our lives.

I seem to have developed a tradition at this time of year to write a sermon about how we buy presents and how we run after bigger and better gifts than we gave last year and how that doesn’t work out very well. This year too I started out ruminating about the coming holidays, our culture’s rushing, buying, wrapping, getting ready, double checking, making more lists, and charging headlong into all kinds of preparation. We so often charge about, and are anxious and there is precious little time left over for savoring those moments of genuine connection with those we love which we are spending all that energy hoping to create. All that time shopping and cooking and we lose the magic because we were too busy to be present.

We are hoping of course to bring pleasure with our thoughtfulness and creativity because we chose something so clever and appropriate, by

preparing elaborate parties and meals and too often the time of actually connecting and being with another gets lost.

I'm saying "we" because I imagine this happens to some of you as it does to me.

Hurry up and get there. Get the shopping and cooking done. Gifts for all the required people. Attend the gathering and even there, even at the holiday dinner table, be remembering what else needs to be done.

I thought about making a request that you keep things minimal, spend less money and try to simplify the next month of activities. But, on reflection, I remembered how often you teach me the way and you already know that "more" is not better and "lavish" is not more meaningful and in this community we are already quite careful about our choices.

And, as one of our members reminded me, sometimes the right thing to do is to do something lavish for someone you love. Who am I to say that that would be wrong? I myself have been the recipient of many lavish gifts and I treasure them. I don't mean gifts costing lots of money. More often a lavish gift to me is a gift of time, I would not want to discourage such a gift.

I try to give small adventures to my family. My grandchildren do not need more stuff. More stuff would only be lost in all the other stuff.

I don't think our culture at this church is into extravagant buying sprees for keeping up with that spendthrift Jones. So why subject you to another rant? Each of you could extol the rest of us as well as I can on that subject.

And, this year, this season, we are all being cautious about spending. With the huge financial correction going on, we're waiting to see what happens. You don't need me to tell you to pay attention.

So, this morning I'm not taking on the issue of spending money but spending our lives.

What do you suppose drives us to our frantic busyness that is made so obvious at the holidays? We say we don't want life to be about rushing. We want life to be about savoring, especially savoring time with those we love and the beauty of the world.

I know for me the second reading about the massage therapist who gives away her time and cannot rest and the people on the vision quest who are afraid of what they will see and are afraid that they will not see anything, point to the fears that arise in me when I face unstructured time. I name that fear, “loneliness.” There is a very uncomfortable sense of being alone which arises when I first stop being busy. I can keep myself very full of activity to avoid facing that emptiness and the sadness that wells up. Unstructured time, which sounds so desirable when we are rushing about, is actually difficult.

Imagine that you have an hour before your next appointment. How would you spend it? Checking off something on the list or watching the sunset? I know my MO is to do something that needs to be done or fill the time with something superficial like a television story. It is hard for me to sit and savor.

I have arranged my life so that I have many things to keep me busy. I never get to the bottom of my to do list. I have chosen a profession that can fill all of my waking life and actually my dream life as well. There is never a moment when there is nothing to do. Or, a time when there is nothing I should be doing. I am diligent about my work. I understand Jen and her internal disciplinarian Helga. I have an internal cast of hundreds ready to pounce and shame me if I neglect something I feel I should have taken care of.

I have chosen well. I am clever in my choices. Clever but not very wise.

I am afraid of the experience of loneliness. When I discovered the poetry of Rumi, and in particular his “Love dog” poem, I recast my loneliness and tried to think of it as something like a badge of my spiritual development.

Now, can you believe that? How embarrassing to admit that particular seduction. I can be competitive even about spirituality. Is nothing safe from my ego? Evidently not.

Here is the Rumi poem: “Love Dogs” I think I read it to you once before.
Love Dogs

One night a man was crying Allah! Allah!
His lips grew sweet with praising,

until a cynic said, “So!
I’ve heard you calling our, but have you ever
gotten any response?”

The man had no answer to that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage.

“Why did you stop praising?” “Because
I’ve never heard anything back.”

“This longing you express
is the return message.”

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them. ‘

Give your life
to be one of them. ‘

I was hoping my loneliness was a sign that my heart was opening. I was hoping that my discomfort, OK, pain, was a sign that I am really progressing. If it hurts it must be good for me. If it really hurts, it’s probably even better.

There are my puritan roots showing again.

Luckily for me, and you, I have an extraordinary spiritual director, Megan Wagner who gently calls me on such fantasies.

A spiritual director is rather like a therapist. Megan has a therapist's skills, but we may talk about life from a more cosmic point of view and in languages that spiritual traditions use. Megan speaks many spiritual languages. When I hoped that my loneliness was a spiritual hunger like Rumi's, she helped me to distinguish that the discomfort I have is a more likely an ordinary fear of ordinary loneliness. It is a contracted, uncomfortable place that too often I try to fill with entertainments, silly diversions and food.

Sometimes I feel rather frantic to find a diversion that takes me away from being alone with myself.

Wayne Muller says, "We are terrified of the painful grief that is hot to touch, sharp and piercing, so we keep moving, faster and faster, so we will not feel how sad we are, how much we have lost in this life: strength, youthful playfulness, so many friends and lovers, dreams that did not come true, all that have passed away. When we stop even for a moment, we can feel the burning, empty hole in our belly. So we keep moving, afraid the empty fire of loss will consume-us."

That sure sounds like something to be afraid of.

But I know another truth and that is that if I can make myself stay in the quiet long enough after the initial welling up of anxiety, there is something Buddhists call spaciousness that opens up. I know it will be there. I've done it before. In fact, it has never failed. Spaciousness is the experience of not being caught by fear or loneliness or anything. Nothing feels more safe or nourishing. Spaciousness is as lovely as floating in a warm ocean.

So why is still hard to settle into the quiet? I waste so much of my life resisting that transition. And every time I deliberately change a pattern in my life it is a transition.

I forget and remember over and over that there is something on the other side of living by distractions.

When we get below the rush and clutter, we have the opportunity for what Martin Buber named an I-Thou relationship of mutuality and reciprocity. I-Thou is not a means to some other object or goal, it never has to do with a to-do list, it is an experience of something eternal and changeless, a connection, more real, more nourishing, more healing than the shallow, busy place where we so often live.

I don't want to live in the superficial. In the façade of things. I want to experience whatever it is beneath the mere appearance of things. Less façade and more, I think the popular word is "authentic." (I apologize for being trendy.)

So here's the recommendation to all of you who keep especially busy from Thanksgiving through New Year's. I don't expect you can suddenly give up your to do list so add this to the list:

Time sitting in the dark with only the lights of the tree on, if you have a tree. If you have a menorah, sit in the dark as the candles burn away. If you don't have either, choose some music and sit in the dark listening. A gentle adagio is most helpful. Being in the dark definitely helps. You could sit outside and look at the sky.

It's nice to sit in the dark and the quiet with others but talking is to be discouraged. It's too easy to be distracted by a recitation of all there is to do.

Do this several times at least.

What emerges from the dark and the quiet could be called love. Love of life. Love of your own very particular life and love of all of creation. It is not other than a prayer of gratitude. I believe you will remember those times in the dark more vividly than all the parties and all the gifts and all the times when you rushed to make life good. Life is good.

Spend more of your life savoring the good, the true and the beautiful.

Add that to the list.

Good luck and Blessed be.