

Month Twelve

Being Present and Remembering What Really Matters

*Don't die with your music still in you.
--Wayne Dyer, author/speaker*

Thirty days before my wedding day, my mother died suddenly from congestive heart failure brought on by an unexpected case of the flu. She was healthy, active and in her fifties. The loss was unexpected and hit hard, following the sudden death of my father four years earlier and my brother four years before that.

I am a different person because of these losses. They say losing a parent has a life-changing effect on you. The change for me was and is in *how I see the world* and *who I decided to become in the world*.

I had a career client whose brother had died the year before of cancer. It had prompted Robert to reevaluate his life direction and perspective. Another client, Emma, had survived a malignant brain tumor, and the experience had lit a fire under her to find and express her true life purpose.

Most of us have, at some point, been touched by a life-changing event. It may have been a birth, a death, a divorce, an illness, a job loss, a financial challenge, an act of terrorism or a natural catastrophe. (My inbox and voice mail were flooded with calls from new clients after the 9/11 tragedy. The incident was an awakening to many to pursue the life and/or career they really wanted to be living.)

If real growth is to come from a major life transition, the question to ask yourself is *how has or will this experience change how I live and who I am in the world?*

For me, the premature loss of immediate family members left me with a sense of urgency and clarity about how important it is to really live the life *you want to live* and *the life you should be living*.

I love the question Stephen Levine addresses in his book, *A Year to Live: Living This Year As if It Were Your Last*. What if you knew this was your last year on the planet? How would that awareness change your perspective and the choices you make on a day-to-day basis?

Would you treat your spouse differently? Would your conversations with your friends change? Is there something you would take action on that you've been postponing until the time is right? Would you interact differently with your children?

When most people are asked the question "how would you live this day (or year) if you knew it were your last?" they respond, they would *be more present in their relationships and in all that they do*.

My son loves nothing more than to be out in nature exploring (something I loved to do as a kid with my brothers, as well).

My friend Diane and I took our boys to a local state park. The sun warmed our backs and heads and the nearby waterfalls soothed our ears as we walked slowly over the rocks, following Jonah and Noah, letting them guide us to whatever natural treasure they happened to discover.

Our boys became mesmerized by the shells they found on the edge of the creek bed leading to the falls. We spent the next two hours there, sorting, exploring, feeling and collecting the beautiful shells.

While some of the stones look very similar to me, Jonah always points out the subtle differences between the color, size, texture and variation in his gems.

Walking along the creek, as I glanced at my watch and my mind rushed ahead to dinner plans and work emails I needed to return that night, my son looked up at me, smiling and holding out a beautiful purple shell in his small hand. "Mama, isn't this the mostest beautiful rock you've ever seen?" he said.

How often do we pause to be present and really enjoy the beauty of a moment or place? Will we be present enough to recognize these gifts when they're extended to us?

Being more present in our relationships--particularly with our partner and children--has huge benefits. When we're present with those around us, we're able to experience openness, connection, joy, playfulness, spontaneity, compassion, empathy, gratitude, wisdom and enhanced communication.

In *Slowing Down the Speed of Life*, author Richard Carlson shares that several serious consequences follow from busy-minded, speeded up parenting. Some of them include:

1. You become habitually reactive instead of responsive.
2. You take negative behavior personally rather than seeing the innocence.
3. Little events become front-page news.
4. You miss the good times.
5. You lose sight of your compassion.
6. You expect too much from your children.

When I feel pulled between the demands/challenges of life AND focused on how I can be more present in my everyday life, I find it helpful to pause--often--and ask the following questions:

- Am I living in the past, present or future? (If I'm feeling stressed, I'm either living in the past or the future. There is no stress in the present moment.)
- A year from now, will this really matter?
- In this moment, what is most important?
- Does this REALLY have to get accomplished today (this month, this year)?
- What is my intention for the day? What kind of day do I want to have?
(I ask my son this in the morning before preschool, helping him to begin to connect how his thoughts impact his experience and the kind of day he has.)

Finally, be gentle with yourself. We live in a 24/7 culture that is overly focused on multi-tasking and producing. Most of us were never taught that *being* is just as important as *doing*. Slow down. Take time to really soak up life.

I think most mothers will agree: we *want* to teach our kids that we value them for who they are, not what they do.

Guided Journaling Exercise: Hitting the Pause Button

Schedule a twenty-minute break to further explore this topic. Have your journal nearby to record any additional ideas or thoughts that come up around this topic. Share your answers with a friend or your partner.

How would I live this year if I knew it were my last?

When I'm very present with my child(ren), how does this affect how I parent?

Do I find myself living in the past, future or present most of the time?

I know I'm living in the "present" when I feel (complete).

Take Action: Exploring What Matters Most to You in Life

Set aside twenty minutes for the following exercise. If you'd like additional writing space, you can use your journal to record your answers. Put on some uplifting music (e.g. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*) while you work. This can be an intense exercise.

You have just learned you will never see your children again.

However, the child(ren) will receive a letter from your husband tomorrow about what was most important to you in life.

Close your eyes, take some deep breaths. Rise above your sadness, and with a sense of urgency, passion and purpose, reflect on what you most want your children to remember and know about you.

Begin the exercise using the guided letter below.

Today's date _____

Dear _____ (your child's name),

I'd like to share with you a few things that were really important to Mom.

Mom was very passionate about

Some of the things she loved to celebrate in life were

Her favorite quote or book or author (and why) were

She always made time for

If she had a free day, she'd spend it

Her motto or slogan for life was

She loved to teach you about

She sometimes got tears in her eyes when

She got angry when (injustices, etc.)

She often volunteered her time to

She most admired

It was important to your mom for you to really know who she was. I hope this letter helps you understand what an incredible, magnificent person she was and how much of her will always live in you, too.

Love,
Dad

Self-Renewal Tip for the Month: Take a Gratitude Walk

Go for a short twenty-minute walk (alone or with your family) in your neighborhood or on a nearby greenbelt. Stretch a little and then raise your arms over your head a few times, breathing deeply and filling your body with oxygen. Start walking and observe your environment: the tall trees, the changing sky, animals, neighbors, your house, your community. Then slowly share aloud (and, if present, have your family members share) five things you're each grateful for. If this is easy, you can keep going and listing additional things. We do this a lot in my family when one or all of us is in a grumpy mood. (Either on a walk or just at the kitchen table before a meal.) It's amazing how moving into a state of gratitude can help shift a negative mindset or low mood.

You can also take out your journal when you're feeling down and spend five minutes writing--nonstop--listing everything in life you're grateful for. If you find it hard to get started, begin with small things: a hot shower, Toll House cookies, clean sheets, green grass, etc.

Recommended Resources

- *You Can Be Happy No Matter What: Five Principles Your Therapist Never Told You*, by Richard Carlson
- *Loving What Is: Four Questions that Can Change Your Life*, by Byron Katie, Stephen Mitchell
- *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life: How to Create a More Peaceful, Simpler Life from the Inside Out* by Richard Carlson, Joseph Bailey
- *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, by Eckhart Tolle
- *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as if It Were Your Last*, by Stephen Levine
- Rent *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (www.whatthebleep.com), a documentary exploring the connection between what we think and how we experience life.

Reflections on Being Present and Remembering What Really Matters

Use this space to expand on your thoughts and feelings around this topic. See “Tips on Journaling” at the end of the *Guide* for support if you're new to journaling.
