

The Short List: Some Thoughts on Time

Is there a subject more charged than that of time, especially among parents? It is the source of many of our conversations ("How are you?" "Busy!") and much of our guilt. Time is also a subject that has been too much on my mind lately, leaving me feeling a little short of breath without knowing exactly why. Maybe it is because, of late, we have known way too many people coping with untimely, tragic deaths. Anytime someone younger than you dies unexpectedly, it tends to make you squint at your life and your choices and to wonder whether you are going to be granted much more time to continue making them. Maybe it is because my middle child started Kindergarten and my baby boy is turning 4, and it is finally dawning on me that the phrase I have heard endlessly for the last seven or so years, something about "enjoy this time because it goes so fast," may, in fact, be sound advice. When my kids were younger, I would smile politely to all the well wishers who said this to me while thinking they did not really know what they were talking about. Some of those days playing Tea Party and Polly Pockets did not exactly whiz past. I am starting to see that the days at home can stretch long, but the years rush right by. Now it is just me and my youngest together all day and I find myself holding on to each moment with both hands. I find it easier now to nestle into the time spent with my son. Even apart from him, I find myself spending more time doing things I enjoy and less time trying to convince myself that I enjoy something that I really do not enjoy much at all. There is nothing like having a child to make you realize that your life is very important and very short. Maybe the key to all this time management talk is to have a really short list of things that are important to you; things that bring you ultimate pleasure. And when you get too busy to engage fully in those things, maybe it is just a cue to back off and shorten the list some more. When my list gets too long, my kids fall apart. There is one thing I have discovered I need to do as a parent, at least to my three kids at their present ages and stages. It is this: Avoid rushing, absolutely as much as possible. It takes planning ahead, but not a lot. Just adding three minutes to the process of getting in and out of the car can make all the difference in the experience, and it has improved my relationship with my children in a big way. My kids are simply no good at hurrying. My oldest daughter gets panicky; my younger daughter slows down even more, no doubt for the attention it inevitably grants her; and for my youngest, it just squashes all his fun. He quietly hurries along but not without flashing me a look that says "You are a party pooper." After some reflection, I realize he is right: Rushing makes me the ultimate party pooper. I suppose I am no good at it either. I want to teach my kids about the proper use of time: I want my kids to let something inside them determine their pace. I want them to know the joy of focus and of making conscious choices about how, where, and why they are spending their time. I want them to know the joy inherent in each moment and how to hold it there and savor it without squashing it by rushing through it. I want them to have short lists, with each item carefully and consciously chosen. That is what is so appealing (and sometimes misunderstood) about this notion of the Simple Life. It is not that you shun things that are nice. It is that you are not a slave to anyone or anything or any series of payments. It is that you have the time to sit long on the sofa and talk to your kids, and pet your dog, and check in on your in laws, if that is what you wish to do, and to create whatever you wish to create. At the end of the day, I want my girls to remember a mama who dressed in cozy sweaters, and always had time for a long cup of hot chocolate and to talk in depth about anything at all. Who had the time to write and think and share and to just be. And I do not have to rush anywhere to do that. Each of us has the time to do all the things that are important to us, as long as each of those things truly deserves a place on your short list. And the only person who has any sort of say about the items on that list is you.

About the Author

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