

Surfeit of significance

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 24, 1999](#) issue

One of my worst fears recently materialized in-of all places-the post office. It was lunch hour on a busy day. When I came through the door, ten people stood in line with cardboard boxes, postage machines and priority mail envelopes in their hands. All I needed were some pretty stamps, but since a return trip later in the day would obviously cost me more time than waiting, I decided to wait.

One problem I have always had with holding still is that my mind kicks into overdrive. Freed from practical concerns such as walking upright or steering a car, my brain takes advantage of the hiatus by thinking of all the things I have not done which I ought to have done, along with the things I have done which I ought not to have done. Perhaps it has something to do with my religious training, or maybe it is simply a sign of neurosis.

Whatever it is, I had a lot of time to do it that day. I have not given the dogs their heartworm pills this month, I thought. I have not checked out that gas smell in the kitchen, nor have I done anything about setting up a tax-sheltered annuity. I spend too much time at work. I do not spend enough time with my sisters. Before I know it, we will be three old women who have missed out on most of each other's lives. When will I get my priorities straight?

Needing a break from this train of thought, I began to read the FBI posters on the wall. By the time I had examined four or five of them, my own sins seemed small. I had not killed anyone, after all. I had not kidnapped anyone or robbed anyone at gunpoint. In order for my mug shot to show up in the stack, the accusations would have to be more existential: Grand Anxiety, First Degree Guilt.

"Next," the clerk said, and the line moved forward. This brought me even with a digital display of red numbers in a black box on the wall. The three numbers at the left of the display remained stable while the three at the far right flipped so quickly I could not read them. Checking the small print above the numbers, I discovered they represented the days, hours, minutes, seconds and milliseconds left in the present millennium. My heart beat faster as I watched the red numbers flying across the

screen. Whatever I was going to do, I had better hurry. Time was clearly running out.

"Next," the clerk said. My new position allowed me to view the various commemorative stamps I had come to buy. There were Bugs Bunny stamps and dinosaur stamps as well as ballet dancer stamps and Thornton Wilder stamps. I am partial to Chinese New Year stamps myself, but in order to reach them I had to pass over the stamps promoting organ donation and the new 40-cent stamps that include a contribution to breast cancer research. With my hand still outstretched, I saw the poster over the display: "These days, even the stamp you choose is a matter of life and death."

This struck me as unfair. I am willing to think about life and death in church, in the hospital and in most airplanes, but in the post office? Since when is the post office a place where one must confront mortality? And yet, the poster confirmed one of my worst fears: that every single choice I make is fraught with significance. My dogs, my retirement and my relationship with my sisters may still be saved, but every day brings new perils. Every time I crank my car, I worsen the greenhouse effect. Every time I eat a piece of bacon, I increase my cancer risk. I cannot so much as buy a stamp without tilting the balance of life and death in the cosmos. Who will rescue me from this body of significance?

I am not sure the answer is Jesus, since he is the one who taught me that nothing is negligible for those who seek the kingdom. If a mustard seed is not too small to embody the divine, then why not a postage stamp? After all, a huge chunk of Jesus' good news is the value he assigns to those who have suffered from insignificance. The gospel is that they matter. Their choices matter. They are partners with him in the redemption of the world.

Is this same gospel good news for those who suffer from significance? I believe it is, with the emphasis on partnership this time. I matter. My choices matter, but I am not the only chooser in the world. God is also choosing, and so are the billions of other people with whom I share this planet. For all I know, the ozone layer is also choosing, along with my own immune system, how to respond to the choices I and others have made. We are all in this significance thing together, whether we know it or not, making meaning that none of us can isolate as our own.

It is pure faith on my part to believe that this partnership leads to life and not to death. Clearly, it is something I have to remind myself of on a daily basis. When I do,

my boldface anxiety and guilt become lower case. The spinning red numbers on the clock become figures on a prayer wheel.

"Next," the clerk says, and it is my turn at last. I push the bright stamps with the Chinese writing on them across the counter.

"Happy New Year," I say.

"Beg your pardon?" the clerk says. I point to the stamps.

"It's the year of the rabbit," I say. "Happy New Year after all."