

Desired things

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue



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In 1927 Max Ehrmann wrote *Desiderata*, a prose poem that began with the words “Go placidly.” It was extraordinarily popular in the 1970s but seems today to have returned to the obscurity from which it came. I sat down in Lent and tried to distill a 21st-century *Desiderata*. Here it is.

Be humble. Remember what it took for you to be here. Think of the imagination of God that brought creation into being; there could have been nothing. Think about the many layers of evolution that it took for you to get from being a twinkle in God’s eye to the living, breathing being that you are. Reflect on how many of your ancestors clung to life to the point where they could conceive the one whose birth eventually led to yours. Realize by how fragile a thread their existence hung, and how the miracle of your birth is made up of a constellation of other miracles. As you contemplate your parents, and come to terms with both their ordinariness and their fallibility, remember that without them you would not be here at all.

Be grateful. Lord Mountbatten said of Gandhi, “You would never guess how many people it takes and how much it costs to keep that man in poverty.” But it requires a myriad of angels to keep any single one of us in the life to which we are accustomed. We take for granted that others toil in fields and slaughterhouses and

travel the earth to bring food to our grocery stores; all we do is produce a card and pay for it. We assume someone will work night and day to make roads and vehicles and bring oil out of the ground so we can move around. We seldom ask whose sweat produced our shoes, our computer, or our shirt (which we boast about having bought so cheaply), and when we get a bargain we scarcely pause to consider which link in its supply chain got no reward.

Be your own size. There are 300 billion stars in our own galaxy and a hundred billion galaxies in the universe. Before you tell everyone not to start the party until you arrive, take in the enormity of that reality and your tiniest part in it. Before you say to someone, "Do you know who I am?" ask yourself, in light of the scale of the universe and its venerable age, "Who exactly am I?" Look at the earth, which you share with so many living beings. Many of the tiny ones scurry and multiply in hidden ways that make it possible for you to breathe, heal, digest, and sleep. Realize how you take for granted that the sun will rise tomorrow. If it wasn't so, what could you do about it? Your life rests in an ecology that you will never live long enough to comprehend, much less thank.

Be gentle. Remember the physician's mantra, "First, do no harm." In the words of William Blake, "We are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love." There is so much that we've never even paused to imagine. When we look to right and left, we see others who know as little as we do. People tend to do the best they can with what they have and what they know. A little compassion, a little generosity of heart helps us look to our fellow creatures with gentleness rather than bitterness, anger, or condemnation. How often have you commented on what another person said or did with horror, fury, or scorn, only to find yourself, ten years or ten minutes later, saying or doing the same thing? Be sparing with your scorn, lest it rebound on you and make you lamentable in your own sight.

Be a person of praise and blessing. Recognize that if God had not called Abraham, there would be no covenant; if God had not brought the Hebrews through the Red Sea, there would only have been slavery; if God had not restored Israel, there would have been perpetual exile. If God had not dwelt with us in Christ, we wouldn't know we were children of a heavenly Father, made to be God's companions, empowered with the Holy Spirit. If Christ had not died in agony, we would not have discovered that we mean everything to God. If Christ were not risen, we would not know that our future is in God forever. If the Spirit had not come, we would not know the joy of this good news. And if we didn't have the gift of baptism, we couldn't enjoy all these

wonders through the church. We were made to be companions to God and a blessing to the creation. No more and no less.

When you have taken these steps of humility—an awareness of God, of neighbor, of the universe, the weak, and the church—turn over the coin of humility and see that you have been washed in the Jordan, anointed by the Spirit, crowned as one of God's kingdom of priests, and clothed with power from on high. Wash one another's feet, be the servant and slave of all, make every act of your life a sacrament of love to others and praise to God. Your existence is a miracle, and your redemption is amazing grace. And never cease from singing.