

Awake to life

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The narrator of one of Alice Munro's short stories described a middle aged woman this way: "Here she sat and saw her day as hurdles got through. Not much to her credit to go through her life thinking, Well, good, now that's over, *that's* over. What was she looking forward to, what bonus was she hoping to get, when this, and this, and this was over?" (*Selected Stories*, 1997).

Sometimes it's that way for us, I think. We live with the dull ache of low expectations: just get through the next thing, get it over with, move on to the next thing, and get it over with, too. Endure today, then tomorrow, and a series of tomorrows after that. We're not living our lives; they're living us. We might as well be sleepwalking, because we aren't awake to ourselves, to others, or to the wonders and possibilities around us.

It's not easy staying awake, though. You know that feeling you have after Thanksgiving dinner—stuffed, hardly able to keep your eyes open, and wanting nothing more than a long nap? I think something like that happens to our minds and hearts. They're overfilled with all the ideas, images, issues, and demands which come at us from e-mail, voice mail, text and Facebook messages, RSS feeds, snail mail, memos, reports, television, radio, billboards, magazines, newspapers, coworkers, family members, and strangers on the street. All these things work their way into our psyches, make claims on our capacity for awareness, and take away from our limited supply of time and energy.

We experience sensory overload. Our mental hard drive maxes out. Our emotional inbox gets full. We can't take in any more. We start to shut down. People talk to us, but we can't really listen. We read, but the words on the page bounce off our brains. We miss subtle clues, overlook important details, and fail to see nuance. We're numb, and drowsy from too much for too long.

That kind of drowsiness puts us at risk for missing the surprises of grace and serendipities of joy which are always happening around us. We don't have the inner

freedom to look beyond, beneath, and above the pressure of the immediate and the clamor of the urgent. We lack the interior space for anything new or delightful or peaceful.

When it comes to matters of the spirit, less is often more. Intentional self-emptying and cultivated silence instead of frenzied consumption of noisy and insistent media make room for authentic, rather than ersatz, fulfillment. Linger reflectively over our experience and not rushing to the next thing is a way to discover the marvels and mysteries hiding in plain sight. Listening with focus and love to the people in front of us now, rather than hurrying in our minds to all the other people we will meet with today, tunes us in to the music of their lives and to the melodies and harmonies of the Divine which echo in their songs.

I know these things are true, but I forget. When I do, I find myself back in the hypnotizing swirl which wants me to settle for the numbed passivity induced by *too much*. I want to remember, more readily and more often than I do, that taking in *just enough* is a way to stay awake. It's a way to *live* my life rather than simply to get through it.

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