

Chapter Five

Be Present

When Albert Einstein's wife died, his sister Maja moved into his house. For 14 years Maja freed the world's greatest scientist to do vital research while she occupied herself with household chores. Maja attended to the daily necessities of life while Albert pondered the universe. In 1950, Maja had a stroke and went into a coma. Giving no sign of comprehension, or recognition of his voice, Albert devotedly read Plato to Maja two hours each day.

People may have thought it was a colossal waste of time for such a brilliant man. Albert was brilliant enough to know the power of being present.

My friend Lynne knows that power as well. She serves as a court appointed special advocate. Acting as the eyes and ears of the court, CASA's as they are called, agree to spend one hour a week with children in foster care. When Lynne's assigned child moved hundreds of miles away, she still went to see her. Lynne like Einstein, understands; when it comes to embracing a generation into greatness, ninety percent of it is just being fully present.

Dr. Anne Kelly, a Southern California oncologist is wonderfully present with her patients. When my stepdad who was fairly deaf was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, I watched Dr. Kelly get face to face. She makes sure he can read her lips. Dr. Kelly is rare in medicine. I have been with my dad in doctor's office's where they have treated him like a moron.

Once a great teacher encouraged an inquirer to see. The young man said, "What am I supposed to be seeing?" The wise teacher replied, "To truly see, you must be truly here. You are mostly someplace else."

To embrace a generation into greatness requires that we see what is before us, that we are truly present in a moment, that we resist the tendency to be mostly someplace else.

If we understood the value of the person in front of us, being present in the moment might be easier.

Over two decades ago, I taught maximum security kids in Juvenile Hall. Many of my students had murdered people or committed other crimes that made them too great a risk to send to the normal on-site school. After a year of close observation of teenagers who were gang members of the Crips, Bloods and Skinheads, I

came to the conclusion that more than drugs, more than poverty, more than poor housing, the absence of dedicated, devoted adults in their lives was the greatest contributor to their devastated lives.

A Non-Relative Adult Makes All The Difference

I am not simply talking about parents, (and I mean no minimizing of their strategic role), but non-relative adults who will set aside their own busyness, to be fully present to the young people they encounter. People who are awake, listening, picking up subtle clues, people who give others the dignity of full-on attention, even if it's brief and transitory.

For some, this present-ness will mean finding a place in the myriad of volunteer possibilities like Big Brothers, Big Sisters, for others being present may mean just focusing in the moment on whatever young person comes across your daily path.

A short time ago I was privileged to film a young Mother Teresa named Heidi Baker. Heidi works in Mozambique and cares for thousands of children. One of many impressive things you notice quickly about Heidi, is how present she is in the moment.

The distinguishing characteristic of most great people is that they are fully present in the moment. By that standard, and many others, Heidi is truly great. She wins your heart in no time flat with her authenticity and smile. Heidi lavishes her life embracing a generation into greatness in garbage dumps, slums and war ravished streets.

There Are No Ordinary People

C.S. Lewis says it best. "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations-these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit-immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." 1

Embracing a generation into greatness means prizing the fact that there are no mere mortals, no ordinary people. We must seize moments with others and imbue those moments with the dignity due an everlasting splendor.

Just A Loving Glance

Sometimes just several minutes of someone being fully in the moment can linger for a lifetime. I remember an occasion of great discouragement several years into my married life. My husband Joey was in the military, and we were stationed for several years in New England.

I had transferred into a college that was offering a new major; music theory and composition. I was a junior and the school was having a hard time deciding what I needed to take to graduate.

I was friendless, experiencing extreme culture shock as we had just come from Micronesia into one of the worst snow storms New England had recorded in fifty years.

At this enormous low point of my life, I remember a beautiful young woman tapping me on the shoulder in a conducting class, looking me straight in the eye. She simply asked how I was, but for me it was like the whole universe was looking at me fondly through her eyes. I don't even remember her name. The whole encounter was probably less than 2 minutes, but here I am sitting in Starbucks 30 years later, telling you.

It would be terrific if you read all these stories and immediately called up a great organization and volunteered your time. But some of you don't have any more hours in a day. It takes all you have just to keep all the plates in your life spinning. If that's your story, let me encourage you, a lifestyle of being fully present, in your regular routine carries extraordinary possibilities for empowering someone to take courage and persevere.

Ask Questions and Listen Attentively

Make it a habit to never meet a young person without asking something significant about their lives and then listening with complete attention. Lock your eyes and heart on their face. Avoid the perfectly human tendency to gloss over introductions. You are meeting someone of incomparable worth. Take them in, hear their story. A question I often ask, is "So what is your dream?" They'll be pleasantly shocked you're actually interested. You'll be surprised at the depth of response.

I was twelve when a songwriter hero of mine, stopped and noticed me. I was standing in a crowd around her, not knowing what to say, and she parted the crowd, and told everyone I would be a great writer someday. (You get to decide in the next few chapters if she got that part right).

Audrey Meier went on to write me little notes occasionally. She didn't spend enormous amounts of time with me. But she impacted my world because she treated me with uncommon dignity.

Although there was probably 40 years between us, Audrey acted as if I was her peer. After I married, she met Joey and I occasionally for lunch in Santa Monica and we'd feast on cheese blintzes. She regaled me with her mistakes, her joys, her temptations. Audrey overflowed with life. She was a refreshing blend of earthiness and spirituality.

Audrey was immensely talented, funny, embracing. She was like all great people completely in the moment. What I remember most was that I was a real person to her. While many people were clamoring for her attention, she turned instead and embraced me. Audrey's embrace modeled for me the power of generativity.

Audrey now lives forever embedded in my story. She taught me how to be present, how to notice, how to not miss the moment. I feel immense gratitude toward her.

Beware The Barrenness of Busyness

Someone once said beware the barrenness of busyness. The more technology advances the more barren of soul we become. I believe this cultural defect; is one thing our Asian and indigenous friends can help us overcome.

Joey and I were caught with some friends in a flash flood in Manila. I remember how completely at home everyone acted in the face of this interruption to our very important schedules.

We sat around a little store and ate a big fish and told each other funny stories. The whole world stopped and no one in the room felt anxious. We, who as one Asian remarked, wear our god on our wrists, were sad when the waters finally subsided, and we went back to our ever so strategic schedule.

Embracing a generation into greatness requires a learned attentiveness. It's an art we can spend a lifetime developing. To truly see, we need to truly be, in the moment.

Ponderings

1. In what ways does busyness in your life create a barrenness of soul?

1. How you ever felt the deliciousness of someone being fully present and attentive to you?
2. Where in your daily routine can you be more present to the young in your life?
3. Have you ever asked someone their dream? What did they say?

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Harper One, 2001, pp.45-46)