

Sacred Necessities: Gifts for Living With Passion, Purpose, and Grace

Terry Hershey

The struggle to lead an authentic life can be difficult in our fast paced world. Terry Hershey has given us a thoughtful book intended to slow us down and help us focus on that which enables us to lead a fully human life. Much of what Hershey talks about requires us to give up control. We must give up our societal norms and surrender to God's grace.

The ideas that he espouses are not unique to him or even new, although he presents them in an accessible, pleasing way that can make us look at them anew. These sacred necessities can be found in elements of the world's great religions. Their cultivation cannot only enable us to live fully human but can point us to the divine. Consider the Judeo-Christian concept of Sabbath. The concept of Sabbath, a day of rest, has two rationales in Judaism. One school of thought maintains that we rest on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day, and we are to follow God's example. The other train of thought holds that we release others and ourselves from work on the Sabbath as God released the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Everyone requires rest; rest brings us freedom.

We can also experience the divine in our everyday life through the art of attentiveness. Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes frequently of the need to pay attention to each moment of the day, to do each act with awareness, be it washing the dishes or tending a garden.

Practice this...

Grace and these other named necessities may be free for the taking, but they require work on our part, particularly for those of us living in such a materialistic, accomplishment oriented society. Consider the following suggestions:

- List ways that you personally practice the art of paying attention. Do at least one of them each day.
- Practice letting yourself be an empty vessel, ready to be filled with grace in some unexpected way. Consider stopping for a few moments of quiet throughout the day or using a technique such as centering prayer or Buddhist meditation.
- The author uses many quotations and stories to illustrate his points. Compile a list (or add to your existing list) of quotations that speak to you. Share these with your reading group or a good friend. What makes these particular quotes or stories important for you?
- Remember to make connections! How do you connect the ideas in this book to those of others you have read? Does your faith support this?

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- What activities do you engage in to avoid being still, alone, quiet?
- What other sacred necessities would you add? Do you agree with Hershey's list?
- Do the nature and garden references speak to your experience? If not, what does?
- The garden is a fruitful place for the author in more ways than one. While one can be attentive anywhere, are there any particular places that allow you to more easily stop to pay attention? How can you bring that into your everyday life?

- How do you accept moments of grace without justification or merit—with difficulty, ease, or something in between?
- What role do we have to play in grace? Would you perhaps rename this necessity vulnerability or receptivity, as the author mentions (p. 103)?
- What connotations does the word “useless” have for you? Discuss Henri Nouwen’s admonition to learn to become useless (p.106).
- Hershey advises us to appreciate the journey instead of merely the destination. Use the questions on p. 147: In what ways do I treat my days, my relationships, as a journey and not as a destination? In what ways am I living a rounded, whole life with integrity? In ways is my life infused with passion, purpose, heart, and grace?
- Consider the importance of a supportive community in the struggle to act in such a counter cultural way. Hershey lists friendship as a sacred necessity. We could view community as an extension of friendship, as a place where we are nurtured and grounded, supported and lovingly challenged. How do we develop this kind of community? Where do we find it?
- Control vs. risk. Am I willing to give up control and risk failure, emotional hurt? What are the rewards of surrendering control?

On the Web

Terry Hershey has an extensive website containing information about speaking engagements, seminars, and a plethora of stories. Check it out at www.terryhershey.com.

For a brief interview with the author about writing and reading, visit <http://www.terryhershey.com/recent-interview.htm>

Visit the SBA website at www.avemariapress.com to contact us. We invite you to give us *your* stories of sacred necessities to appear on our website or in a future edition of *Spiritual Book News*.

About the Author

This book reveals what is essential to know about author and motivational speaker Terry Hershey—he is passionate about gardening, golf and his son, he takes time to be useless, and he loves life. For the typical resume information, see the last page of the book or visit Terry’s website.

Questions for the Author

How has our hectic accumulating, weighing and posturing kept us from knowing our real selves?

We live in a world where we’ve traded wonderment and amazement for consumption. We’re preoccupied and distracted by accumulating, accomplishing and arriving. The cultural implication implies that our identity is linked solely to productivity; as if we are owned by the fear of dying without accomplishing everything on our to-do lists.

I like to remind people that we lose much if we have no aptitude for idleness. GK Chesterton once said that to go against the flow of cultural assumptions would be "like standing on our heads." Although there's no need to blame the culture, for more often than not, this flow makes

up the whitewater cascading through our own minds. Either way, I say that it is time to give the judges and scorekeepers the day off.

Considering that we are a society driven by the lists on our palm pilots, what are the first steps a person might take to slow down, to develop a simpler life style, to rediscover their soul?

Sit still. Literally. There is nothing magic here. It's about learning to pay attention. Centuries ago it was called the "Sacrament of the Blessed Present." It acknowledges that there are two spaces in our lives. In the one there is activity, productivity, accomplishment, achievement, busyness, and a fair bit of stress. In this space we have our calendars, our pagers, our cell phones, our palm pilots and our to-do lists. In this space we work, we achieve and we produce.

But there is another space. This is the space for stopping. For reflection, contemplation, meditation. In this space is born prayer, music, poetry, friendship, amazement, awe, wonder, and if we are fortunate, unrepentant napping.

It is the permission to practice Sabbath. Or sanctuary. Or sacred place. It is how (and where) we rediscover wonder (or Amazement). It all takes root in the soil of the simple sentence "I never noticed that before." I am welcoming, inviting life in, not allowing internal censors and judges to scrutinize, making certain that this moment passes muster. In moments of amazement, we render our internal scorekeeper mute.

And permission means that we begin with the voice of Grace in the midst of our current lifestyle, situation, or conundrum. Truth is we can't change anything until we love it. We can't love anything until we can know it. And we can't know anything until we can embrace it.

In that Grace I have the permission to sit still. I can tell you that when I listen to the voice of Grace, I relax. I give up my need for control I pause to relish the notion. And I can tell you that when I do pause, I begin to see and hear God's voice of grace around me. I can tell you that this time of year the sun lingers in the south western sky just enough longer to make a difference. And that on a day like today, that difference takes you by surprise. Today the air smells of spring, the earth exudes a warmth. So I remove my coat, and shake my head in disbelief. Off to my left, the forsythia shrubs are in full bloom. Along with miniature narcissus, the forsythias have the spring stage to themselves, and the yellow appears backlit, an electrical neon, bold and unapologetic, making no attempt to blend in. There is little else to evaluate, so I lean back on the deck chair and drink it in, and a weight is gone, somehow lifted.

What motto do you live by?

It's difficult to improve on Rabbi Abraham Heschel's reminder that "the higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments."

Why is our culture biased against stillness?

I like Milan Kundera's phrase "the pleasure of slowness." But there's the rub. Pleasure in slowness is not easy to find. Yes, slowing down reduces the noise. But slowing down goes hand in hand with stillness. And eventually, silence. And in this culture, we seem undone by silence. Or we're leery at the very least. For silence, or so we are led to believe, is an unwelcome void. Even more, it is an indictment. Which means that to the enterprising western mind set, it is an

invitation to get about the task of filling whatever it is that may be missing. Silence, it seems, provides us a ready-made market for some must-have, can't-miss, too-good-to-be-true product, designed to give us those hours of fun (or useful productivity) that we were apparently needing.

What's at stake here—with this sacred necessity of stillness—is not another "to do" list, but an invitation to savor the pleasure of slowness, moments of stillness, even silence, letting them work their magic. In her book *Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrich talks about the concept that space can heal. That space—created by silence—represents sanity. For silence can be a fullness, rather than a void. It can allow the mind to run through its paces without any need for justification. It can let us recover—grab hold of—those parts of our self that have been so scattered, so disparate, throughout the week. “We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us, that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life, life because of our quiet.” —Yeats. Or as a friend told me, "It feels like my life has been saved and I wasn't even aware of any danger. I see the stillness as a necessity, demandable, honorable. This is not sinful, or indulgent, or wasteful, or undeserved."

Silence can let the particulate (of daily nuisances) sift down to the bottom. Letting all that is toxic flush away. It fills our being with pure air, that blast of unadulterated oxygen straight to the head. It's all about what we can notice--and see--when we slow down, and let the silence descend. It's about paying attention. Which is, Jim Harrison used to say, the only game in town.

Does your son still do the big leaf dance?

Yes, although there is always some new variety. Yesterday he spent the day dressed as Pedro, a young man who traveled with Christopher Columbus, and last night he led his cousin in a sing along and dance with the Beatles' "All you need is love." I'm hoping that he is never weaned from this sense of wonderment about life.