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Do it Now

In these perilous times, I am inspired to a reconsideration of urgency. I imagine that the times always feel perilous to those who are living through them, and that urgency can always feel imperative. Nonetheless, in *these* perilous times, I invite you to join me in a reflection on just what could and should feel urgent to us.

What feels truly urgent is the call to wake up and pay attention, to live deeply and fully, as Henry David Thoreau said as he headed off to live at Walden Pond, to live *deliberately*. He wished to see what life had to teach, he wrote, “and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life,” he continued, “living is so dear... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...”¹

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Kem and I spent last week in Florida and got a pretty big dose of humanity-on-vacation. I will report to you that there is, in the madding crowd,² a lethargy that borders on depression: families trying, in vain, to be happy; people of all stripes looking for love and happiness in all the wrong places. They're moving slowly and aimlessly, indulging a myriad of addictions – spending, eating, drinking, on the phone, on the smart phone, watching TV – sometimes all at the same time. The only hurrying seems to be to the promise of the next fix.

From a spiritual perspective, this behavior is astonishingly empty. The words *desperate* and *discouraging* come to mind: literally, without hope or courage. It made me homesick for you, this spiritual community, this sanctuary of seekers. I am reminded to say again how profoundly grateful I am for you, for us. *Thank you.*

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, from Chapter 2, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”

² “Madding,” meaning frenzied; see Thomas Grey's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751):
 Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

And I am reminded to say again that urgency is never truly satisfied by *things*, but, instead, by living into vision of *wholeness* for ourselves and the world: a vision of how we can best love and serve, a vision of justice and peace both for ourselves and for the world.

We awaken urgency, we invoke a vision, and traveling the distance between the quickening and that shining goal begins with a single step; a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The theories of visioning or goal-setting are legion. One holds that goals should be established for no more than four days at a time. Another suggests 90-day goals: one season in which to achieve our dream. There are short-term goals and long-term goals and SMART³ goals and probably some not-so-smart goals. But I cast my lot with simply *taking the next step*, all the while keeping the vision before us.

Life coach Martha Beck also subscribes to the “next step” theory of moving toward our vision. She writes, “Taking things step-by-step means working – working hard, working scared, working through confusion and embarrassment and failure.

“I’ve met many people the world thinks of as ‘lucky,’” she continues, “and all of them operate this way. I’ve come to think that the main purpose of rumination is work-avoidance. Dwelling endlessly on the past keeps us from the wild, exhausting, terrifying tasks that create our right lives.”⁴

I was deeply compelled by a simple, hand-lettered sign on the wall of a Tae Kwon Do studio; it says, *Your goal is to become a black belt.*⁵ In other words, at every moment – though the rigors of hard training, trial and error, pain and failure; day in and day out, one step, four days, ninety days, all the days of our lives – at every moment, we have a vision at hand, a north star guiding us home to the fulfillment of our divine potential.

That vision, that black belt, has to be your own, my own – each of us has a version of that black belt. Enter the spirituality of vision: your goal, journey and destination, is to answer *yes* to your deepest calling. The mission is to “grow your soul;”⁶ to become *you*.

³ SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely

⁴ Martha Beck, “Yes, it was awful...,” at Oprah.com, 7/15/06

⁵ stevepavlina.com/articles/do-it-now.htm

⁶ Rev. A. Powell Davies, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”

Kay Ryan, the sixteenth poet laureate of the United States, wrote, “I remember lying in bed as a teenager, and deciding to hypnotize myself by saying these words: *Be what you are, be what you are, be what you are.* I said it hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of times,” she says, “the intention being to protect me from what I felt was going to take me away from myself. And to this day, I still say that when I think I'm trying to fit somebody else's expectations.”⁷ Be what you are.

Be what you are ... *now.* Back to urgency! Insurance magnate W. Clement Stone is reputed to have built his multi-million dollar empire on the directive to his employees to recite this phrase over and over again at the beginning of each work day: *Do it now.* With millions to make and nothing to lose, we could do worse than to try this ourselves, like a mantra throughout the day: *Do it now, do it now, do it now.*⁸

There's something else underlying thinking and acting, though, and that's the leap and sure landing in this very moment: the present. This gift – the present – is all we are given in any given moment, and it is enough. It is enough to begin here – right here, right now. It is enough to begin releasing the bonds of the past and fear of the future. It is enough – the present – and it is what is truly urgent, and truly worthy of our devotion.

Do you remember the little monkey's leap? This is my favorite passage from the *Ramayana*, a great Hindu myth. Prince Rama asks his monkey, Hanuman, “to leap across the ocean between India and Sri Lanka, carrying Rama's gold ring and a message of love to the princess, Sita, who is being held hostage by the evil, ten-headed Ravana.” Hanuman isn't at all sure that he can do it, and he has no idea what awaits him on that hostile shore. He thinks, maybe there's someone better for this job. But, in the whimsical translation of William Buck, “there was dismay and faint sorrow, and it was time to be strong.” Hanuman agrees to take the ring to Sita. Here he goes:

“He climbed to a high hilltop overlooking the vast ocean separating the two countries.... [He] held his breath and sucked in his stomach. He frisked his tail and raised it a little on the end. He bent his knees and swung back his arms, and on one finger gleamed Rama's gold ring. Then, without pausing to think, he drew in his neck, laid back his ears, and jumped.

⁷ Kay Ryan is author of the 2005 poetry collection entitled *The Niagara River*. Please see Oprah.com

⁸ stevepavlina.com/articles/do-it-now.htm

“It was grand! It was the greatest leap ever taken. The speed of Hanuman's jump pulled blossoms and flowers into the air after him, and they fell like little stars on the waving treetops. The animals on the beach had never seen such a thing. They cheered Hanuman, then the air burned from his passage, and red clouds flamed over the sky, and Hanuman was far out of sight of land.”⁹

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I want to close with a story by attorney Greg Yaris.

Just as Greg was finishing a big project in LA, looking for a break in the action, he received an invitation to join a tour to Israel. He said a spontaneous, last-minute *yes*, and scheduled his flight.

With less than a week to go, as he stood barbequing in his backyard, he called his father. As it turned out, Mr. Yaris was planning to travel from his home in Dallas to New York for a bar mitzvah the next weekend. Greg asked him if he wanted to connect during his layover at JFK.

He was telling his father about his trip to Israel; Mr. Yaris was interested in every detail. He said, “I wish I could go to Israel again.” In what Greg describes as “one of those rare moments of clarity,” he blurted out, “Why don't you come with me?”

Here's how he tells it: “He was stunned. I was stunned....

“My father played his hole card.¹⁰ 'The money – it's just too expensive.’

Greg isn't sure what impelled him to say It's on me, but he said it. His father said I'm in.

Greg “got online, and ten minutes and one large credit card bill later, [Mr. Yaris] had a seat next to [him] on the plane and a spot on [his] trip [to Israel.]” What had been a respite from work had suddenly become a father–son trip. They hadn't lived in the same town for thirty

⁹ quoted in Ram Dass and Marabai Bush, *Compassion in Action*, pp. 266-267

¹⁰ A hole card is “a card in stud poker that is dealt face-down ... that the holder is not obliged to reveal before the showdown;” “a hidden advantage or undisclosed resource.” Please see, respectively, freedictionary.com and yourdictionary.com.

years. Greg couldn't even remember their spending time alone together.

Off they went.

When they arrived in Israel, Greg wanted to take a nap; his father wanted to go out on the town. “And it was like that all week. He couldn't get enough.” Mr. Yaris loved every minute of what they were seeing, and who they were meeting. He would spend each dinner with a different table of people from their tour group. He was the most popular person there. “Seeing my father passionate about something so central to who I am, and doing it together,” Greg says, “was one of the highlights of my life.”

On Friday night, they went to the Wailing Wall. “For the first time in my life,” Greg says, “I danced to Lecha Dodi, [the song that welcomes the sabbath,] with my father and a hundred yeshiva boys. And I thought, G*d willing, maybe my children will take me here someday.”

The time flew, and then they were back at JFK. They embraced in parting from their unexpected and, in the end, spectacular time together.

Over the summer, they called each other often, talking about the trip. One especially beautiful photograph shows them in Tel Aviv, overlooking the Mediterranean, smiling.

In September, Mr. Yaris contracted a staph infection that landed him in the hospital. After weeks of penicillin, he was finally better. Two weeks after he got home, he was cleared to exercise. His first morning back on the treadmill, he died of a heart attack.

Greg Yaris concludes, “I miss him badly. I miss him three times a day, when I say Kaddish. I miss him in the odd [moments], when I should be working, or concentrating on my driving.... [But] I think back to what might not have been if I hadn't blurted out, 'Why not come with me?' If I had stopped to think how much this trip was going to cost. If I

had spent even a moment thinking, 'Do I really want to burden myself with my father,' one of the greatest opportunities of my life would have been lost.

“Sometimes,” he concludes, “it's better not to think. Sometimes, [we] just have to say Do it now. Because if [we] don't, [we] may never get the chance.”¹¹

Beloved spiritual companions, perilous and urgent, life invites us to wake up, pay attention, and live – really live – with hope and courage. Grateful for the sanctuary of this extraordinary spiritual community, may we live into our vision, answering *yes* to our deepest calling, and do it *now*.

¹¹ aish.com/jewishissues/israeldiary/Do_It_Now.asp