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Arlington Street Church
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The Good Life

What is the good life?

Many years ago, I overheard a single sentence that has haunted me ever since. After worship, I stopped in at the Cafe de Paris, right across the alley, where Thomas Moser furniture is now. Katherine Alison, Ann Friend, and Joan Goodwin – three wonderful friends in their late middle age – were enjoying a leisurely lunch together, seated at the table right next to the door. As I entered the restaurant, I heard Katherine Alison say, “Of course, we were happy then, but we didn’t know it.”

I’m not sure I would have remembered her words, but, impossibly, by the next morning, she was dead of a heart attack.

What is the good life? While life is in us, let’s *live it!*

Death offers a clear vantage point on life. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross taught us to sit with people as they die and count their blessings, as it were; she described life as a string of pearls, the pearls being shining moments worth touching and cherishing before opening the hand and letting them go. I love this death bed practice; those who have blessed me with it have made me rich in memory and hope. The good life is a pearl necklace.

The story is told of Gustave Flaubert in search of the good life. Supposedly, one day, he came upon a peasant family, living on the land, and declared, with some envy, that they were living *dans le vrai*, or “in the true.” My guess is that the hard life of a peasant had nothing on the relatively soft life of that French author, and that, given the choice, he wouldn’t have traded places with them. Yet, clearly, he saw there something immediate and authentic. The good life is “in the true.”

“In [much of] Willa Cather’s fiction, the good life, or something very close to it, is lived by immigrant girls working at domestic jobs; grandmothers who have given themselves over to the happiness of their families; missionary priests; young men and women who are able to live outside themselves ... for something larger than themselves. The good life, [Willa] Cather makes plain, can never be the selfish life;” the good life is the unselfish life.

Author Joseph Epstein writes, “The first step to achieving the good life seems to be to forget about one’s own good life. I myself fear it may even preclude thinking too much about what constitutes the good life.”

Okay, don’t think; just feel:

We were happy then, but we didn’t know it.
The good life is a pearl necklace of shining moments.
The good life is life *dans le vrai*, “in the true.”
The good life is the life that is given away.
The good life precludes obsessing about the good life.

What is your good life?

Educator and Quaker activist Parker Palmer finds this question “piercing” and “disquieting.” “[It reminds] me,” he says, “of moments when it is clear – if I have eyes to see – that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments, I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And ... I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?”

Parker Palmer’s conclusion is that we are called to live life not from the outside in, but, rather, from the inside out. Listen, he instructs us; listen to your heart. “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it,” he writes, “listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.” Then *let your life speak*.

What good life wants to speak from *your* life, from our lives? *Listen!* Let’s turn our attention to the spiritual practice of paying attention.

Thanks to Rabbi Deanna Douglas, who sent this story to Kem, who gave it to me. This is the case for paying attention, for that deep listening ... or missing the good life.

Friday, January 12th, 2007, morning rush hour, Washington D.C.: Violin case in hand, “a youngish, white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap emerged from the Metro at the L’Enfant Plaza Station and ... [stood] against a wall beside a trash basket....” He took out the violin, positioned the open case at his feet, threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, and began to play. In the next forty-three minutes, as [he] performed six classical pieces, [nearly eleven hundred] people passed by.

Washington Post staff writer Gene Weingarten wrote a long piece about this – part news, part reflection. “Do you stop and listen?,” he asks. “Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation...? Do you throw in [some money], just to be polite? Does your decision change if he’s really bad? What if he’s really good? Do you have time for beauty?....

“On that Friday in January, those private questions [were] answered in an unusually public way.... [This]... performance was arranged by the ... *Washington Post* and filmed on a hidden camera, as an experiment in context, perception, ... [and] priorities.... No one knew it, but the fiddler standing ... at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing ... masterpieces befitting the grandeur of cathedrals and concert halls ... on one of the most valuable violins ever made.” What happened has much to say to us about the good life.

The violinist was 39-year-old Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed virtuoso. *Interview* magazine once said his playing “does nothing less than tell human beings why they bother to live.” He was playing a violin handcrafted in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari; the instrument’s worth is estimated in excess of three and a half million dollars. Three days before, Joshua Bell had filled the house at Boston’s Symphony Hall, where even the pretty-good seats were going for \$100. But on that Friday in January, Joshua Bell was just another street musician.

He began with *Chaconne* from Johann Sebastian Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D Minor, a gorgeous and spectacularly difficult piece. Three minutes and sixty-three people had already passed before anyone even seemed to notice: a middle-aged man altered his gait just enough to turn his head toward Joshua Bell, and then kept on walking.

At three and a half minutes, he got his first donation: a dollar from a woman who scooted off. Finally, at six minutes, someone actually stood against the wall to listen. All told, in nearly three quarters of an hour, a total of seven people stopped for more than one minute. Twenty-seven people gave a total of thirty-two dollars and change (including pennies) to a man whose talents command a thousand dollars a minute. That leaves one thousand seventy who didn’t even register that Joshua Bell was standing there, violin in hand.

Later, Joshua Bell said, “It was a strange feeling that people were actually, ah ... ignoring me.” He laughed at himself.

There were those very few people who didn't ignore him, though. John David Mortensen, a Department of Energy project manager, spent three full minutes listening to Joshua Bell – right up until he had to leave or be late for work. For the first time in his life, he gave money to a street musician. He knows nothing about classical music, but later, he said, “Whatever it was, it made me feel at peace.” As he listened, ninety-four more people passed by.

The next person who didn't ignore Joshua Bell was a three-year-old named Evvie Parker. On the video, you see an adorable African-American boy in a parka, holding his mom's hand. Despite being propelled toward the door, he keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell. As they exit, she has positioned herself between her son and Joshua Bell. Evvie can still be seen craning to look.

While “there was no ethnic ... pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to [listen to Joshua Bell], ... the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every ... time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and [listen].” And every time, a harried adult scooted them away. Poet Billy Collins once said that “all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, because the lub-dub of the mother's heart is in iambic meter.” Then, he added, life slowly chokes the poetry out of us. The poetry, the music, the beauty....

Exactly one person in those nearly eleven hundred recognized Joshua Bell. Stacy Furukawa doesn't know much about classical music, but she had been in the audience three weeks earlier, when Joshua Bell gave a free concert at the Library of Congress. Arriving at the Metro toward the end of the forty-three minute concert, she had no idea what was going on, she said later, but whatever it was, she wasn't about to miss it. Grinning broadly, she positioned herself about ten feet away, front row, center. “It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington,” she says. “Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people were not stopping, and not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him. Quarters! ... I was thinking, Omigosh, what kind of city do I live in that this could happen?”

What does the *Washington Post* experiment say about our ability to appreciate life ... to *live* the good life? Welch poet's W.H. Davies asked,

What is this life if, full of care
We have no time to stand and stare.

The good life takes time, and we're busy. “Americans have been busy ... since at least 1831, when ... young French sociologist ... Alexis de Tocqueville visited the States and found himself impressed, bemused, and slightly dismayed at the degree to which people were driven, to the exclusion of everything else, by hard work and the accumulation of wealth.” Fast forward to that day in the D.C. Metro, listen to your heart, and let your life speak: “If we can't take time out of our lives to [notice] and stay [even a] moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written – if the surge of [our lives] so overpowers us that we are blind and deaf to something [that magnificent] – what else are we missing?”

My spiritual companions, *yes*, for the love of life, I want you to join me in being haunted by this story, by these words, which I now commend to you:

We were happy then, but we didn't know it.
The good life is a pearl necklace of shining moments.
The good life is life *dans le vrai*, “in the true.”
The good life is the life that is given away.
The good life begins and ends with paying attention.

While life is in it, let's *live* it!