**Time on Your Hands**

**Three Meditations on Time and the Art of Living**

I hope you are all well. They’re wiping down the shopping carts at HEB and making sure that we keep our distance from one another. We’re all washing our hands and using hand sanitizer probably more than ever—and don’t touch your face, you never know what’s on your hands that can make you sick. One thing that’s really on our hands is time. Living with social distancing, isolation and quarantine, we are waiting for things to return to normal. Right now, my son and his family and my brother and his wife are in quarantine, even though they have no signs of having the virus. We all have time on our hands, as we wait for the “curve to flatten” and for the time when we can get back to our normal routines.

We live our lives within the dimensions of space and time. We have a world to know and explore—a “space”; and we have a season—a “time” in which to experience it. From birth, we develop an awareness of space. We see it, hear it, and touch it. We spend much time and money designing and building the perfect space and we learn to be comfortable in it. But time is subtler. We’re less familiar with time and more ill at ease. We find ourselves fighting time, pressed by time, surprised by how quickly time passes or bored when time slows down. We wonder how much time we have left.

The writer of Ecclesiastes (chapter 3) writes:

*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:*

*A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;*

*A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;*

*A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*

*A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

*A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*

*A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

*A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.*

*What profits a man who work for things that give him no pleasure?*

*I have seen the suffering, which God hath given to the sons of men so that they may be strengthened through it.*

*God has made everything beautiful in his time: but no one can fully understand what God is doing from the beginning to the end.*

How can we live meaningfully throughout this time when our life is disrupted, when our plans have changed, when we watch helplessly as our savings are depleted, when we worry about those who are suffering? God has given us lifespan governed by days, months and years, regulated by the cycle of the seasons, by the rhythms of life. Our time includes this time. Instead of fighting time, how can we put time on our side?

I’ve written three meditations for you: (1) Time and Waiting; (2) Time and Love; and (3) Time and Suffering. Perhaps you can read this with your spouse, a friend, or someone you love. Perhaps read one every other day for the next week. There are questions at the end of each section that you can use for reflection or to discuss with a loved one.

**1. Time and Waiting**

One day two big turtles and one little turtle decided to have a picnic on the river bank. They packed a lunch basket with sandwiches and headed for the river. When they arrived, it began to rain. The two big turtles ordered the little turtle to return home for an umbrella. The little turtle agreed on the one condition that the other turtles would not begin eating the sandwiches until he returned. Then the little turtle left and the two big turtles began to wait. A day passed, then a week, then a month, then a year. Still there was no sign of the little turtle. Finally, one day, one of the big turtles said to the other, “He’s not coming back, I think we should start eating without him.” Immediately, the little turtle stuck his head out from a nearby rock and said, “Touch that sandwich, and I won’t go a step farther!”

That little turtle hadn’t even left and those big ones hadn’t even begun to wait.

In the landscape of time, few places are less comfortable than the time of waiting—the time we mark waiting for some person or event to arrive at some undetermined moment in the future. Periods of waiting are stress‑producing. We stake our identity, our sense of security and well‑being on the future, on concerns outside our control. Hooked, we dangle helplessly on lines of doubt and anxiety. Think about waiting while a loved one is undergoing serious surgery; waiting to find out the results of a biopsy; waiting for healing through a time of illness; waiting for a college admissions committee or an employer to answer an application; waiting for a letter from a distant loved one; waiting for someone to finish something we need to do our work; waiting for the dentist; waiting in line; waiting in traffic; or waiting through this time of COVID-19. Periods of waiting are stress‑producing. We wait for love, we wait for work, we wait for news—spending our time distracted by what might or might not happen in the future.

There was a man named Willie who had an uncle who was a rich oil baron. Willie was one of the baron’s few surviving relatives and so he spent year after year concerned about how much money his uncle was going to leave him and waiting for him to die so he could find out. Every once in a while, he’d drop a hint around his uncle about being remembered in the will, but most of the time Willie just wiled away the time wondering about how much he’d get and worrying that the amount wouldn’t be enough to do what he wanted to do.

Well, finally the oil baron died and Willie gathered with the rest of the family to hear the attorney set out the bequests. The will was opened and the lawyer began to read: “To my cousin Nancy, I leave my ranch. To my brother George, I leave my bank. To my neighbor and good friend Oscar, I leave my oil stocks. To my sister, Ellen, I leave an office building in Dallas. And to my nephew Willie, who always wanted to be remembered in my will, ‘Hi, Willie!’”

In reality, Willie’s no worse off now than he was before. All he’s really lost is time—the time he spent waiting anxiously for the future, the time he spent imagining what he might be with his uncle’s money, the lost time he could have spent becoming somebody.

How can we live well in a time of waiting? Here’s the key. To get past our anxiety about the future, we need to learn to extend our identity in time. Here’s what I mean.

Our personal identity cannot be finally determined by observing ourselves at any single moment in time, whether that moment be past, present, or future. We are not solely the product of some experience, good or bad. Nor is our identity finally defined by any single event or accomplishment in the future. In the end who we are does not depend on whether we get a certain job, or marry a certain person, or get into a certain school, on whether we fail or succeed. There is nothing in the future, nothing for which we wait, that is definitive for determining who we are or who we will become. Rather, no matter how old we are, we are still “a work in process”. To extend our identity through time is to remember that who we are is an on‑going story—a story which develops through time, beginning in the past and continuing into the future.

Our ability to extend our identity through time can inform our fears, ease our anxiety about the future, and strengthen us to make something meaningful and life‑giving out of whatever the future holds. Our extended story will include good days and bad. There will be times of elation when, as the prophet Isaiah said, we will mount up with wings as eagles. There will be times of energy and activity when we will run and not be weary. But there will also be times of suffering, when all we can do is walk and not faint, barely putting one foot in front of another to make it through the day.

I recently bought a new watch. For a long time now I’ve worn a digital watch, the kind that shows the hours, minutes, and seconds by light emitting diodes that flash illuminated numerals. When we look at a watch like this. we see only a particular time of day, 11:37:40 or 9:13:32, a single bit of time, precise to the second, divorced from its context in the broader picture of the day. But the watch I’ve just bought is like one of those older watches with the round face. The numbers 1 to 12 go around in a circle and the three hands point to the hours, minutes and seconds. When we look at a watch like this, it speaks to us not only of the present, but also of the past and the future. We can see when we woke up, when we will work or play or rest, where we have been and where we wish to be or must be. Digital watches flash only the exact time; they demarcate only that particular island of time in which we happen to be stranded. But the old watches persistently remind us of our existence in a continuum—of our existence in the story of the day and so extend our identity in time.

We are not just what we are at any particular time, stranded in the past, present, or future, whether we love that time or hate it, whether we enjoy that time or fear it. Rather, we are a story, a story that extends from the past through the present into the future, a continuing story formed in the conversation between our experiences, whether they have been easy or difficult, and the voice of our own soul.

**Questions for thought or discussion:**

What’s causing your stress right now, during this time of the virus and low oil prices?

What might make it difficult to think of your life as a story?

Has there ever been something that you wanted, that you’ve waited for, that you didn’t get, and then later thanked your lucky stars that you didn’t get it?

What level of confidence do you have in your own ability to create your life? What experiences do you have with recovering from a setback or learning from your mistakes?

What could you do now to create a better life for yourself and your family?

What’s stopping you?

How does it help to know in the depths of your soul that your destiny is fixed in the love of God?

**2. Time and Love**

Early in the 16th Century, Maximilian I, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was so busy, he didn’t have time to attend his own wedding. He sent an ambassador to the ceremony in his place. After the service, the ambassador effected a proxy consummation of the marriage by briefly placing his naked foot, duly manicured, bathed and anointed, in the bed where Maximilian’s bride lay. For all its pomp, the ritual proved quite ineffectual. The young bride was not impressed. Within a few weeks, she formed a new relationship with a more enthusiastic and accessible lover.

To this day, this story stands as an example of the fruitlessness of love taken for granted, of love abstractly proclaimed, love unsupported by action, love unrenewed by care. Love takes time because love requires the full attention of all that we are. Love calls us to focus the energies our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength on the one loved, whether the beloved be family or friend, our neighbor, or our own self.

Love requires this kind of total commitment because love is a mystery. Love cannot be understood with the same kind of mechanical thinking we’ve used to create our technological world. In the world of technology, we speak of telecommunications—communications that are distant, instantaneous, impersonal, intellectual and programmed. But the communication that makes for love is different: it’s close, slow, personal, passionate and imaginative. The things we associate with love—beginnings and endings, crises, turning points, our need for closeness and distance, intimacy and solitude, make love unpredictable and mysterious. Because love is mysterious, we can be married to someone for fifty years and still be learning about them.

One elderly couple was celebrating their golden wedding anniversary. The husband was so moved by the occasion that there, in front of all their family and friends, he wanted to tell his wife just how he felt about her. And so he called for a toast. “To my dear wife,” he said, “after fifty years I’ve found you tried and true.” Everyone smiled, except his wife who was a little hard of hearing. “What did he say?” she asked. So he repeated himself, louder this time, “AFTER FIFTY YEARS I’VE FOUND YOU TRIED AND TRUE.” “Well, let me tell you something,” she shot back, “after fifty years, I’M TIRED OF YOU TOO!”

Because love is mysterious, an understanding of our loving relationships can be achieved only through time, through an on‑going commitment of all that we are to the loved one. Two skills are necessary to deepen love through time.

1. The first is patience. Patience is the acceptance of others and ourselves through time; the on‑going ability to bear the complexities of love; the resolute will to suffer the ambiguities and imperfections of our partner and ourselves.

Agatha Christie once wrote, “An archeologist is the best husband any woman can have. The older she gets the more interested he is in her.” She has a point. Think about an archeologist’s slow attention to detail, his joy in finding only fragments, her ability through only bits of information to imagine the glory of the whole picture, their total commitment to the process of discovery, no matter how long it takes. Love requires that kind of patience.

Sometimes we set impossible expectations for our relationships. We’re supposed to be clear and honest in expressing our feelings. We’re supposed to be good communicators, expert listeners, full of empathy. We live with the illusion that it’s actually possible to understand ourselves and others. And so, we surf from one pop psychology book to another looking for the answer to who we are and what we need to do to make our relationships better.

The truth is that most of us are a thick soup, a tangled web of memories, fears, confusions and intricacies. Rarely do we have a comprehensive understanding of all the social, genetic, biological, emotional and spiritual factors that exist behind our words and deeds.

Love requires the patience to accept the complexity and irrationality of ourselves and others through time. The patience to consider beautiful the multicolored kaleidoscope that makes up the personality of the one we love and the patience to consider it our mission to spend time appreciating and learning about it.

I have a niece whose name is Erin. When Erin was a little girl, she had her share of dolls and stuffed animals. Today, through modern technology, children don’t have to be satisfied with dull, lifeless dolls, but can experience the thrill of owning a lifelike replica of a baby that can walk and talk, slurp and burp, cry, sigh, and laugh, wet itself and get diaper rash. Well, Erin had her share of these mechanical marvels; but one day, when my sister Lynn asked her which of her dolls was her favorite, without hesitation, Erin said it was a little rag doll Lynn had made for her when Erin was two years old. The doll had won her heart, not by doing anything spectacular, but simply by being itself.

This is love. We may try to develop a skill, or an appearance, or talents, or an education to impress others so they’ll love us. But we know we are loved when someone looks beyond all that, sees our imperfections, sees our complexities, sees our simultaneous need for intimacy and for solitude, takes all that mystery and says, “I accept you. I will stand by you, and I will love you forever.”

When we walk on the beach and watch a sunset we don’t call out, “A little more orange over to the right please,” or “Would you mind giving us a little less purple in the back?” No, we enjoy the different sunsets as they are, as we patiently accept the souls of the people we love. Love is patient.

2. Now a second skill helps us love through time. The skill is kindness. Kindness is love in action. Kindness means taking the time to use our human power to back up our loving emotions with words and deeds.

Kindness may be confrontational. It’s kind to bring into conflict one whose behavior is destructive for oneself or others. But most often kindness is the positive, active expression of our affections and hopes for the one we love.

In his autobiography, Up from Slavery, Booker T. Washington writes about how he experienced love in the kindness of his older brother. The shirts worn on the plantation by the slaves were made of a rough, bristly flax fiber. As a young boy the shirt was so abrasive to Booker’s tender, sensitive skin that sores opened on his shoulders and back that caused him a lot of pain. Seeing this, his older brother started to wear Booker’s new shirts until they were broken in and smooth to the touch. While no words were spoken, Booker experienced love in his brother’s kindness.

The role of kindness in loving is central because feelings, our emotions, follow behavior. When we are treated in a loving way, we feel loved. Imagine one day, sitting down with your husband or wife and identifying one thing he or she could do for you that would make you feel loved. One way he could touch you, one way she could help you overcome a bad habit, one activity you could share together that would make you feel loved. Now suppose your partner took the time to do what you asked, and suppose you had this conversation not just on one day, but one day each week for a year. At the end of a year you’d have learned over fifty behaviors, fifty acts of kindness. Together, you’d have a repertoire of kindnesses, a group of actions all on target for making you and your loved one feel loved. Imagine the intimacy in a relationship where people treat one another like this. Feelings follow behavior. Acts of kindness practiced over time deepen intimacy. It’s never too late to start. Love is kind.

There was a little boy whose six‑year-old sister was near death, a victim of a disease from which he himself had made a miraculous recovery two years earlier. Her only chance of recovery was a blood transfusion from someone who had had the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

When he was brought to the doctor’s office, the doctor asked, “Johnny would you like to give your blood for Mary?” The little boy hesitated. His lower lip started to quiver, but then he straightened himself, smiled and said, “Sure, Doc, I’ll give my blood to my sister.”

The transfusion took place, and as Johnny’s blood siphoned into his sister, you could almost see new life come into her. The procedure was almost over when Johnny’s little voice broke the silence, “Doc,” he said, “when do I die?”

Only then did the doctor realize that earlier, when Johnny had hesitated, when his lower lip had trembled, he had believed that in giving his blood to his sister he was giving up his own life! Yet in that moment he had still made his decision.

Love is patient. Love is kind.

So may we also love.

**Questions for thought or discussion:**

Do your family relationships suffer for lack of time?

Do you find the disruptions caused by problems at home affecting your work?

Why is it difficult to be patient with the weaknesses of your spouse? What do you need that makes it difficult to be patient with the weaknesses of your spouse?

If your spouse could do one thing for you this week that would make you feel loved, what would it be?

If you could do one thing for your spouse that would make her/him feel loved what would it be?

How much time would it take for you to do one act of kindness for your spouse today?

The Bible tells us that we are the “image of God.” What does it mean for you to be the “human face of God” for your spouse? What could you do to become more of that gracious presence to your spouse?

**3. Time and Suffering**

The power and creativity we exercise over life is finite, but through the experience of suffering we can be transformed.

The power and creativity we exercise over life is finite. We’re all aware of this.

I recently read a story about a woman with cancer who returned home from the hospital in the weeks before her death. She had an eight year‑old daughter, who one afternoon, listened quietly outside her mother’s bedroom as the doctor and her father spoke. She heard the doctor say, “The time is now not too far off. Before the last leaves have fallen from the trees she will die.”

The next morning the father came to the breakfast table to find that his daughter was not there as he had expected. His heart broke when he finally found her out in the front yard, picking up leaves that had begun to fall and using a thread to sew them back onto the limbs of the tree, hoping to prolong her mother’s life.

Despite our best efforts, our most valiant, loving and creative acts, in this life our ability to ward off the reality of pain and loss is finite. There’s the inevitability of death, our own and that of our loved ones. There are other endings: the loss of good health, broken or ambiguous relationships, lost opportunities, financial losses and bankruptcies, changes that make us leave what is familiar and comfortable, uncertainties that bewilder us, failures that haunt us, bullies who abuse us, weariness that overtakes us, social realities that both anger and frighten us. It’s a universal reality that the power and creativity we exercise over life is finite. In this life, we will all experience some form of pain, some deep existential challenge.

But it is also the fundamental affirmation of life that through the experience of suffering we can be transformed.

To understand this. we must first unlearn our most common definition of the word “suffering.” Suffering is not the same as experiencing pain. Sometimes when someone dies quickly and peacefully, we hear it said, “At least he didn’t suffer,” meaning his death was painless and quiet. This is not the definition of “suffering” I’m using here.

The word “suffering” comes from two Latin words: “fero,” which means “to carry” or “to bear,” and “suf,” which is a form of “sub,” which means “from beneath” or “below.” To suffer means that we come up under something and bear it, that we carry it to the point of understanding. Suffering is not the same as pain, it’s something active that we do with our pain.

We have options for dealing with pain: we can interpret pain as a contradiction, a denial of life, an ending of all that matters for us and so, hopelessly, we can despair before it. We can anesthetize ourselves against pain, with drugs or alcohol, or any number of diversions. We can ignore pain, stoically denying that we’re hurting. We can use our pain as an excuse for feeling victimized, for blaming others for our predicament.

But to grow through pain, to be transformed by it, we must suffer it: we must bear it courageously; keeping it in our awareness, using it as an opportunity for an honest exploration of our own soul; we can share it with those who love us, who will bear our burdens with us, and so deepen our intimacy; we can carry it intentionally, while it carves in us a place for a new self‑understanding.

What we learn in the movement of time is that the way of suffering can be for us an initiation through pain to a new reality, to a new identity, to a new future.

In his book, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries, the great historian of religion Mircea Eliade describes a tribal ritual in which a twelve‑year old boy is taken into the bush and covered with blood. His skin is pierced. During the night he’s taken into the forest where he hears for the first time the sacred songs of the tribe. The next day his eyes are bandaged and his ears plugged and he is led by an adult wherever he goes. Through all this the clan mourns the boy as if he had died. But at the end of the ritual the boy is given a new name and returns to the clan as an adult. Eliade writes “The boy dies to childhood—that is to ignorance and irresponsibility. That is why his family laments and weeps for him. For when he comes back from the forest, he will be another; he will no longer be the child he was. He will have undergone a series of initiatory ordeals which compel him to confront fear, pain and torture, but which compel him above all to assume a new mode of being, that which is proper to an adult.”

Suffering, this process of bearing pain to the point of understanding, is a profound form of initiation. It is an initiation to a new identity, to a new self‑awareness, less secular, less ego‑centered, and now more open to new levels of feeling, to new love, to deeper joy, and to a more genuine, a more spiritual way of living in the world of space and time. Beginnings and endings enfold into one another in a mysterious way. The pain of an ending is of one piece with the exhilaration of a beginning. The reality of this mystery raises in us a sensitivity to and appreciation for the sacred dimension of ordinary life. Pain is not just an ending. Throughout the length of our days, through suffering, life emerges out of death.

One day, a man made a long pilgrimage to a holy city. As he neared the city he saw, looming above the streets and smaller buildings, the walls of a great and beautiful cathedral, the ultimate destination of his journey. But when he finally arrived in the city, as he searched through the dark, narrow alleyways and busy marketplaces, he could find no entrance to the sanctuary. Time and again he asked directions from the townspeople, but they, being schooled in a newer faith, seemed neither to know or to care about his concern. Finally, he was directed to an older man, schooled in the old faith, who told him that the cathedral had for a long time ceased to have a formal entrance, but could be entered in many ways, through any of the tiny shops or narrow houses that surrounded it. But in the end this revelation gave the pilgrim no help. For each house or shop he entered seemed so dark and squalid, so alien, its occupants so forbidding and deprived, that this way of entry seemed incapable of opening to the grandeur and freedom of the sanctuary vault. In bitterness, the man left the city and sought an easier faith.

The power and creativity we exercise over life is finite. We will know pain and loss, we will confront things that make us uncomfortable, realities that seem like dead ends. It will appear as if the way toward freedom, toward life, is blocked. But through the experience of suffering, through the choice to suffer, to carry our pain, our weariness, our frustration, our illness, our loneliness, our anger, or our grief, through our choice to carry it to the point of understanding, we can be transformed.

It’s not an easy path. We might long for an easier truth. But for those of us who seek peace, love, joy and genuine life, it’s a truth on which we can depend.

**Questions for thought or discussion:**

In your experience, have that times of grieving or loss been productive or destructive, or a mixed bag? What might make the difference?

What does it mean “to carry something to the point of understanding?” How do you do this?

Have you personally experienced positive changes in your own life as the result of having to suffer the loss of someone close, or as the result of having to face a difficult situation or illness?

What practically and specifically has helped you turn a tragedy into a victory? Have you been helped by someone? Have you helped someone else through something like this?

What difference does your faith in God make in making it through or living with suffering?

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