

Every Day Miracles

How is your summer going? I do hope you have enjoyed the exceptionally hot, sunny weather, but if not, don't worry, nothing in this world lasts for long and as I write this, Manchester is cloudy and rainy again. I have just returned from spending another truly miraculous week in Assisi, but on returning home, I have been contemplating on how miraculous is each and every day of our lives, even the most ordinary of days. So as we move into August, I would love to share with you a few thoughts about celebrating the mundane, and how loving those moments, days, or even whole months when nothing special seems to be happening to us might be a key to finding lasting satisfaction with our lives.

Let us begin with our breath. Did you know that you take nearly 30,000 breaths every 24 hours? I find that thought pretty mind-boggling and I am so incredibly grateful that my wonderful body keeps breathing in and out for me without me hardly ever giving my breath a second thought. These days, I sometimes even feel as though I am being breathed rather than having to breathe and that each breath is a tiny miracle that gives me another wonderful moment to experience the absolutely mesmerising daily drama that is life on Planet Earth.

As my dear friend Vinod pointed out on our retreat in Assisi the other week, your breath is your most precious gift from God. You can last for up to around 40 days without eating anything at all (Please do not test that claim out on yourself!) and you can even last 3-5 days without drinking any water. But after not breathing for 4-6 minutes, you will suffer irreversible brain damage. So imagine how incredibly frightening life here would be if you had to remember to breathe all of the time!

The next everyday miracle we should all treasure is the miracle of dawn. Now of course, some sunrises are absolutely spectacular and their beauty simply takes your breath away. But what about those every day dawns that we hardly even notice? Have you ever lain awake all through the night and begun to think that dawn will simply never come? I still vividly remember a Ramblers' walking holiday I went on somewhere in France when I was in my 30s. I was sharing a room with a woman I did not know in order to avoid the extortionate single supplement – big mistake! Anyway, on that holiday I started to really fancy the group leader. Ha, another big mistake! I was so over-excited about that blossoming romance that I could not sleep a wink. I swear to you that the night felt endless because I could not even turn the light on and read because of the woman sleeping in the bed next to me.

Well dear friend, you will be pleased to know that dawn came in its own good time, but maybe less pleased to know that my subsequent relationship with Barry (I had to search my memory for his name) was pretty much a disaster. But I digress. The key point I am making here is that we should never take a single miraculous dawn for granted, even if our glorious sun rises up only to be completely hidden behind a thick veil of heavy clouds. Any of you living in Manchester or anywhere in Ireland are very familiar with those lovely dawns.

Then what about the everyday meals that we sometimes eat rather mindlessly? I suspect it is hard to really appreciate the miracle of food when we live in a society where we basically have far too much food rather than too little. Moreover, we can now have all kinds of food delivered straight to our door and it can be difficult to remember that it all comes from the earth beneath our feet – a gift freely given to us despite the fact that we mindlessly abuse the earth in so many different ways. I read a while ago that poor children growing up in inner cities have no idea that beef comes from cows or that bread comes from fields of wheat. No wonder then that they do not treasure the natural world all around them that sustains their life here.

So I think you get the picture. It is wonderful to feel incredibly grateful for moments of outstanding beauty or joy in our lives but, 'How can we really appreciate the miraculous nature of everything ordinary?

Well first of all, we all need to slow down. Whenever Gloria and I are out and about in our car, we are amazed at how impatient so many drivers are these days. Why are they in such a hurry? There is a theory that when we completely relax and surrender into the present moment, time actually slows down, whereas when we are anxiously late and in a rush, time annoyingly speed up. So next time you notice that you are hurrying somewhere, please pause, take one or two mindful, deep, calming breaths, and then resume your journey at a much more relaxed pace. I can assure you that you will probably still get wherever you need to get to on time, and even if you are late, the world will not collapse.

Next, we need to wake up each and every morning and as well as remembering to set our intention to have a peaceful day, we need to set our intention to notice the beauty of life that surrounds us 24/7. I clearly remember reading something by Nelson Mandela in which he described his great joy at seeing just one blade of grass poking through a concrete yard on Robben Island during the harshest time of his 18 years of imprisonment there. You and I are so incredibly blessed to be able to roam free day after day when there are over 11 million human beings currently being held in prisons all over the world, (I was so shocked to find that statistic). We have so little reason to moan and groan about our incredibly privileged lives and yet we still do, don't we?

Well this August, shall we agree to swap complaining for exclaiming? Shall we wake up each morning and set our intention to find something every hour of the day to really enjoy and celebrate? - a delicious cup of tea or coffee in the morning, a lovely chat with a friend at lunchtime, a well-earned 20 minute nap on the sofa at tea-time, a long, relaxing bath before bedtime. But please do not just read my list and instantly forget the practice itself. Please make a list of your favourite things and take time to really enjoy them for the next 31 days.

One final thought before I finish this month's message. I am now at the age when I can see that I do not have that much time left here. Now at first sight, thinking about our last day on earth getting closer and closer might seem depressing or even morbid. But strangely enough in my case, it is really helping me to appreciate how amazing it is to be gifted even just one more moment in time on our amazing planet. Hard core Buddhist practitioners spend a lot of time meditating on impermanence, including the impermanence of their own bodies. I used to think this sounded rather gloomy, but more recently, I am realising that gently contemplating on the fleeting nature of a life on earth can be just the stimulus we need to stop taking for granted the miracle of a totally ordinary day in our life here.

It only seems like yesterday that I was waking up to a brand new year: 2026, and now this year is already on the wane. On the one hand, this thought is a little scary, but on the other, maybe it can motivate us to make the most of the remaining 5 months of a precious year that will never, ever come round again.

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