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MAKING *Each* *Moment* **COUNT**

I received an e-mail titled “Something to Think About.” It offered an imaginary reflection that I found profound. Let me share my version of this story with you.

There is a national contest that offers as a prize a personal deposit of \$86,400 into your private bank account each day for you to use as you wish. However, there is a set of rules attached to the prize.

The first rule is that “everything that you didn’t spend each day would be taken away from you. You are the only one who can spend the money. You cannot transfer money into some other account.” So, each



morning you wake up, the bank opens your account with another \$86,400 for that day only.

The second rule is “the bank can end the game without warning. It can close the account and you will not receive a new one.” Think about this. What would you do? My guess is that you would spend this money care free, perhaps buying everything and anything you wanted. You would fulfill not only your own needs and desires but also those of special people in your life: your family and friends, all the people you hold dear. You would probably give money to some worthy causes such as Alzheimer’s, ALS, cancer, and coronary research to assist with ending these diseases and associative illnesses. Ultimately, I imagine you would find yourself giving money to people you don’t even know because \$86,400 a day is a lot of money to spend.

What we need to realize is that this game is in fact reality. Each of us has this magical bank account offered to us daily. It is just not something of which we are aware; we cannot see it. This bank is really time. Each morning, we wake up and receive 86,400 seconds as a gift. When we go to bed at night, any of those seconds that we did not use or that we wasted are lost; they are not credited to us. Any time that we haven’t lived that day is lost forever.

However, every morning the account is refilled. It is up to you to decide how to spend those seconds. And the account can be taken away from you at any moment without warning.

It is up to you to decide how to live, how to spend those precious 86,400 seconds. We need to take care of ourselves and enjoy life. We need to spend some of those seconds on people we love. We need to spend some of the 86,400 seconds making a difference in our world and in the lives of others, living fully, open to surprises, and celebrating the sacredness of ordinary daily interactions and events.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord," and those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, it's morning!" How we wake up each day and how we spend our precious 86,400 seconds is our choice.

There are some people who hold onto negative moments, who go through life whining. Some people even like being sick so they can complain about it. Think of the seconds, minutes, and even hours that are being wasted and are lost forever. These people are forfeiting the potential of living each moment and seizing every minute.

The late Indian Jesuit and spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello tells the story of the master who claimed that a major reason for unhappiness in the world is the secret pleasure people take in being miserable.

The story goes that a friend said to his wife, "Why don't you get away and have a good time, sweetheart?"

"Now, dear one, you know perfectly well that I never enjoy a good time!" was her annoyed reply.

There are people who do not open themselves up to new experiences, to adventure, and to opportunities for growth. They choose to remain closed, holding on to their own narrow perspectives and opinions no matter how erroneous or fallacious. Not only do they miss the potential and possibility waiting to be discovered in those precious 86,400 seconds but they also waste that time.

De Mello relates another wonderful story that illustrates such a person:

A woman was walking down a street and suddenly stops a man, saying, "Henry, I am so happy to see you after all these years. Dear, you have changed so. I remember you as being very tall, and you seem so much shorter now. And you used to have a pale complexion, but it is so ruddy now. How you have changed in five years!"

The man finally spoke up and said, "But my name isn't Henry."

The woman calmly responded, "Oh, so you changed your name, too!"



No matter what the reality may be, some people cannot accept another view. Narrow-mindedly, they go through life with blinders and are simply unwilling to take on another perspective. I know we cannot please

everyone. Even God can't do that! But we can make choices to find the gifts in each of our precious seconds every day, to look for opportunities of growth and possibility that will stretch us and broaden the circle of our relationships. We can find the blessings and joy, the sacred and the sacrament, that fill so many of our seconds. We can truly live and celebrate each and every one of them.

We can be people who believe in ourselves, appreciating the gifts and talents with which we have been blessed. We can choose to be people who are concerned for others and spend some of our precious seconds each day being connected with them, even being responsible for them. All of us can put some energy into our world by acknowledging others and appreciating their gifts and talents. That may mean simply making eye contact and smiling at a stranger, a simple but valuable use of a few of our 86,400 seconds.

2

Smiles **AND BELIEFS**

What a difference a smile makes! It can change a mood; it can create a feeling of happiness and fun. When we smile at another person, we send a message of inclusion, an invitation to be part of whatever is happening. We even help our own emotional level when we smile.

James Laird, a professor of psychology at Clark University, conducts research that explores feelings: how they arise, affect behavior, and may be controlled and organized. Laird conducted a study that had participants move their facial muscles in such a way as to create a frown—without calling it that or doing anything else to create a negative attitude. The participants



in the study reported feeling angry. When he had the participants move their facial muscles in such a way to replicate a smile, they felt happier and laughed more easily.

Scientists have realized that facial expressions precede feelings and play a role in generating them. If you ask a person to smile, the person soon begins to experience the pleasant feelings associated with that expression. When you smile, you breathe through your nose and exert pressure on the veins in your face, bringing air into your nasal passages that cool the veins and the blood flowing through them. Smiling also changes the direction of the blood flow inside your face, which then causes the temperature of the blood to drop. The cooler blood enters the region of the brain known as the hypothalamus and causes the release of chemicals that can suppress pain and nurture well-being. In essence, smiling instructs our brains to feel good. If you smile, your brain does, too. You feel happier.

People feel lighter after laughing. (Maybe Weight Watchers should include that in their point system!) Studies indicate that when we hear sounds of cheering and laughter, our brains get ready to smile. Even if we fake it, it works! If we *act* happy even if we don't *feel* happy, we end up having a better day. Smiling increases our happiness chemicals. The next time your telephone rings, smile before you answer it even if you don't feel like smiling. By the tone communicated in

your voice, the person on the other end will wonder what you've been up to!

Related to choosing to smile is choosing how to view the world and ourselves. All of us have an internal GPS. We are seekers, searching for direction and trying to find our way. We listen to our inner voice and make decisions based on possible choices and internal messages we give ourselves. It would serve us well to listen intently to our inner voice and to be sure we are not holding negative messages. The research indicates that 80 percent of our self-talk (the messages we speak to ourselves in our heads) is negative. This influences our views and perceptions.

When we are unhappy, we find unhappiness everywhere. Recently I heard a fable entitled "The House of a Thousand Mirrors." There was a happy little dog that learned of this abode and decided to visit. When he arrived, he scurried cheerfully up the stairs to the doorway of the house. With his ears lifted high and his tail wagging happily, he looked through the doorway. To his great surprise, he found himself staring at a thousand other happy little dogs with their tails wagging just as fast as his. His smile, stretching from ear to ear, was greeted with a thousand great smiles just as warm and friendly. As he left the house, he thought to himself, "This is a wonderful place. I will come back and visit it often."

In the same village, another little dog who was not happy as was the first one decided to visit the house.

He slowly and laboriously climbed the stairs. With his head hung low, he looked into the door. Reflected back were a thousand unfriendly looking dogs mirroring him. He growled at them and was horrified when a thousand little dogs growled back at him. As he left, he thought to himself, "This is a horrible place, and I will never come back here again."



What we look for, we find. We can be stuck in the negative. We can feel victimized holding onto unpleasant past events or present circumstances. At these times, we are not fully alive. Imprisoned by our own thoughts and feelings, we are inhibited, chained to false perspectives and negative attitudes. We are unable to choose to live fully; we only exist, going through the motions of living. However, if we have no control over the *life-draining* events in our lives, if we simply cannot change them, then we must change our *response* to those events and transform our experience into a *life-giving* one.

At times, our perspective on or our orientation to the world blinds or blocks us. There is a story about a beggar who had been sitting by the side of a road for more than thirty years. One day, a stranger walked by.

"Spare some change?" mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap.

"I have nothing to give you," said the stranger. Then he asked, "What are you sitting on?"

"Nothing," replied the beggar. "Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember."

"Ever looked inside?" asked the stranger.

"No," said the beggar. "What's the point? There's nothing in there."

"Have a look inside," insisted the stranger.

The beggar managed to pry open the lid of the box. Struck with disbelief and astonishment, he saw that the box was filled with gold.



Our minds are powerful things. More than one hundred thousand chemical reactions go on in our brains every second. Scientists tell us that we have been blessed with natural happiness-enhancing drugs. These drugs are just waiting to be released to every organ and cell in our bodies. Endorphins are the brain's painkiller. They are three times stronger than morphine. Dopamine promotes alertness and a feeling of enjoyment. Serotonin calms anxiety and relieves depression. We are a walking drug store!

We have the power as well as the possibility to increase our level of happiness and joy. Studies indicate that everyday activities such as gardening, listening to relaxing music, stroking a pet, smiling, singing,