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Pay Attention to the Present!

"Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it."
Mary Oliver,
"Sometimes" [1]

"Pay attention. It's all about paying attention. It's all about taking in as much of what's out there as you can. …"
Susan Sontag
2003 Commencement Speech

In the last quarter of my eighth decade, Andrew Marvell's "winged chariot" gathering speed, it occurs to me that sometimes it's absolutely crucial to state the obvious – *there is not time enough*.

Which is a metaphysical observation, metaphysics being the branch of philosophy concerned with *being*. *Being* has a simple, one word definition: "existence." [3]

What is existence? Existence is everything.

What *is there not time enough* for?

Regardless of one's age, regardless of where one might be perched on the calendar of life's arc, there is not time enough to experience everything and, perhaps, not even time enough to experience any one thing completely.

What to do?

Pay attention.

Pay attention to what? To the present, for that's all you have. The past is gone and the future isn't promised.

What have the poets had to say about this? Well, as I have repeatedly said these past four years, the essential task of any artist in any medium is to make us more ***present-to-the-present***.

To help us grasp the *"is"* that *"is,"* so to speak.

To help us, to borrow a phrase, "Be Here Now."

In Book I of his ***Odes,*** the great Roman poet Horace said it first:

from Odes, Book I/11

You should not ask, it is wrong to know, what end the
gods will have given to me or to you …
How much better it is to endure whatever will be,
whether Jupiter has allotted more winters or the last …
be wise. Strain your wines, and because of brief life
cut short long-term hopes. While we are speaking, envious life
will have fled: *seize the day, trusting the future as little as possible.* [4]

"Seize the day" in the original Latin is *carpe diem*. *Carpe* literally means to pick or pluck, but it has been interpreted to mean "enjoy, seize, use, or make use of." [5] *Diem* means day, so a literal translation of *carpe diem* would be to "pluck the day (as it is ripe) – that is, enjoy the moment. [6] So, since life is short and the future uncertain, Horace exhorts us to live in the moment, which admonition has been variously interpreted over the millennia to mean either a hedonistic wallowing in momentary pleasure or a more enlightened and meditative contemplation of, short as it might be, the wonder of life.

It has also had more utilitarian usages. A long time ago, I worked for several decades at an institution whose motto was *Carpe Diem*. The institution's main entrance was a beautiful arched gate. One May, during graduation season, an enterprising about-to-be-alum with a bit of wit chained the gates closed, then hung a sign on them, vaguely in the shape of fish, saying, "*Carp-he die-em*: the fish died." More productively, for over 20 years the institution's administration and faculty interpreted *carpe diem* to signify "seize the opportunity." In that spirit, they built a robust and energetic institution focused on the pursuit of excellence. Then times and people changed and the institution spent almost two decades going sideways. Recently, however, it has exhibited a bit of that dynamic *carpe diem* energy.

In that "gung ho," seize the day spirit, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned a *carpe diem* poem, "A Psalm of Life." It ends with a quatrain straight out of a Rotary meeting:

from A Psalm for Life

Let us, then, be up and doing,
  With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing… [7]

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But what Horace really exhorts us to do is to *pay attention*; to focus on the journey; to not obsess about the past because it cannot be undone; to not daydream about a better future for it might come in an unwelcome shape; or it might not come at all.

Czeslaw Milosz saw that in "A Song on the End of the World":

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,

By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.

Warsaw, 1944 [8]

***

So, ignoring the past and future, Horace exhorts us to pay attention ***NOW!***

Horace might have been first, but as it turns out, there is an entire school of "*carpe diem* poetry" encouraging "people to focus on the present, (to) appreciate the value of every moment in life." [9] Such poems seek to help readers "understand/celebrate the present (rather) than focusing on the past or future." [10] At **Poem Analysis**, an interesting online poetry site, staffed by what appears to be a team of bright, young, and eager American students of poetry, they've even posted a list of "15 Best Carpe Diem Poems." Longfellow's and Milosz's poems make the list. Robert Frost's "Carpe Diem" tops it. Frost encourages two young lovers to "Be happy, happy, happy/And seize the day of pleasure" but he is not optimistic that they can do it.

Why?

Because Horace notwithstanding, Frost intuits that for most people, the present is too much – they want to escape it.

from Carpe Diem

… But bid life seize the present?
It lives less in the present
Than in the future always,
And less in both together
Than in the past. The present
Is too much for the senses,
Too crowding, too confusing –
Too present to imagine. [11]

***

If the present can be too much for most people, it wasn't for Edna St. Vincent Millay. She rejoiced in it. Her "First Fig" anchors the **Poem Analysis** list. Millay embodied the more extravagant incarnations of First Wave Feminism's New Woman. In a famous interview with journalist Nelly Bly in 1895, when asked by Bly what the New Woman would be, Susan B. Anthony replied, "She'll be free."

Millay took her at her word.

Graduating from Vassar College, she disembarked for Greenwich Village and then Provincetown to live an artist's bohemian life. Openly bisexual, Millay flouted convention. Her 1923 "Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She was the first woman to do so. Her biographer, Nancy Milford, thought Millay's "First Fig" the anthem of the jazz age F. Scott Fitzgerald described in ***The Great Gatsby***.

As J.D. McClatchey said in a ***New York Times*** review of Milford's biography, "Self-dramatization is at the heart of the erotic autobiography Millay made of her poems.[12] In their anodyne analysis, the young critics at **Poem Analysis** missed the poem's point when they said, "'First Fig' speaks about life's futility when one tries to make both ends meet." [13]

Millay would have found that analysis hilarious; she lived on the edge. She understood that figs carry serious symbolic power: fertility, sexuality and sensuality, female wisdom, self-discovery, spiritual growth, and "the concealed truths within individual hearts." D. H. Lawrence said, "And the (fig) tree smelled

of secrets. It smelled of the whole female world and its secrets. …" [14] For Millay, the fig symbolized the life force, the fire that both *gives* and *consumes* life. Although she'd pay for it later, in the *present* she reveled in the fire's "lovely light."

First Fig

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –
It gives a lovely light. [15]

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A generation or two older than Millay, not a New Woman, and someone who did not dance to the fire's "lovely light," Emily Dickinson also focused on the present. In being ***present-to-the-present***, however, she intuited an emptiness in her everyday existence. In "I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl" she focused on "Life's little duties" sensing that she's missing something. Acutely ***present-to-the-present's*** daily banalities, Dickinson felt life's greater possibilities sliding away into "Miles on Miles of Nought."

I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl

I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl –

Life's little duties do – precisely –
As the very least
Were infinite – to me –

I put new Blossoms in the Glass –

And throw the old – away –
I push a petal from my gown
That anchored there – I weigh
The time 'twill be till six o'clock
I have so much to do –
And yet – Existence – some way back –
Stopped – struck – my ticking – through –
We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man

Or Woman – When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh – upon –
There may be – Miles on Miles of Nought … [16]

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Almost always misread as seduction poems, the two – I'm not sure greatest is the right word – but certainly the most famous poems in the English language, like Horace in his first ***Ode*** and Mary Oliver and Susan Sontag in the epigraphs with which this ***Book Note*** begins, exhorting us to pay attention not to life's banalities but to its rich possibilities are Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time."

Now, I must confess that for most of my life that's how I've read them – very elaborate and elegant seduction poems and nothing much more.

I missed the point.

Let me connect a few dots. **Dot #1:** Recently, I have been reading a great deal of Michel Montaigne's essays. In her wonderful biography of him, ***How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer***, Sarah Bakewell notes that for Montaigne one answer to the question "How to Live?" is to *pay attention*. **Dot #2**: I just finished an essay in appreciation of Jefferson Educational Society co-founder Charles Brock. One of his heroes was John Milton. In researching Milton in Harold Bloom's ***The Best Poems in the English Language: Chaucer Through Robert Frost*** I flipped some pages to Andrew Marvell (Milton begins with M as does Marvell – no great thought here, just flipping pages). **Dot #3:** Reading Bloom's comments about Marvell's "Mower Poems" on the need to heed the everyday (they're more than that, but that's one of their themes") I turned the page to "To His Coy Mistress," read it again for the nth time and realized for the first time that it's not about seduction at all (or not only about seduction). It's about, **Dot #4** back to Montaigne and **Dot #1,** it's about *paying attention*!

Marvell writes there is not time enough to dally, for in dallying we risk making of our lives "deserts of vast eternity" (Emily Dickinson's "Miles and Miles of Nought"). So, let us seize the day, *carpe diem*, while our souls transpire with instant fires and answer Peggy Lee's "Is that all there is?" with a vibrant "Yes, this is all there is, but it's more than enough if we only *pay attention* and "*sport* while we may."

from To His Coy Mistress

Had we but world enough and time,

This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day …

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity …

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may … [17]

The complete poem can be found here.

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Of course, **Dot #5**, this led to Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," that famously exhorts us to "gather rosebuds while we may," because "that age is best which is the first," but "being spent, the worse, and worst/times still succeed the former" (Dickinson's "Miles and Miles of Nought" and Marvell's "Deserts of Vast Eternity."

from To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
  Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
  Tomorrow will be dying …
That age is best which is the first,
  When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
  Times still succeed the former … [18]

***

The point?

Pay attention.

This is it; this is your life.

Don't miss it dreaming of better days to come that might not come; don't wallow in nostalgic and antiquarian reveries of a past that probably never was and will certainly not come again. For, if there is one unavoidable truth beyond death and taxes, it is "you don't get to rewind the tape."

There are no replays, instant or otherwise.

Pay attention!

In our culture war riven and politically obsessed times, a first tip on how to *pay attention*: turn off the news, put down your iPad, and go outside. Saturday is the first of June and, as James Russell Lowell asked, "What is so rare as a day in June? It is then or never when our most perfect days come." [19]

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"Attention" word cloud" from Nootropics For Attention & Focus at brightbrain.com available here accessed May 25, 2024.
"Edna St. Vincent Millay Portrait (c.1920).jpg" at Wikimedia Commons available here accessed May 27, 2024.
"Emily Dickinson daguerreotype (Restored).jpg" at Wikimedia Commons available here accessed May 27, 2024.
"Waterhouse-gather ye rosebuds-1909FXD.jpg" at Wikimedia Commons available at here accessed May 26, 2024.

End Notes

1. Oliver, Mary. *"Sometimes"* in Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 105.

2. Sontag, Susan, *"2003 Vassar Commencement Speech"* quoted in Emily Temple, *"Susan Sontag on Being a Writer: 'You Have to Be Obsessed'"* at Literary Hub available here accessed May 25, 2024.
3. *"Being" at Dictionary available here accessed May 26, 2024.*
4. Horace, *"Odes/Book I/11"* at Wikisource available here accessed May 26, 2024.
5. *"Carpe diem", in Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, available here accessed May 26, 2024.*
6. Ibid.
7. Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *"A Psalm for Life"* in Longfellow: Poems & Other Writings, Ed. J.D. McClatchy (New York: The Library of America, 2000), pp.3-4.
8. Milosz, Czeslaw. *"A Song on the End of the World"* in Czeslaw Milosz: Selected Poems Revised. (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1973), p. 57.
9. *"Carpe Diem Poems" at Poem Analysis available here accessed May 26, 2024.*
10. Ibid.
11. Frost, Robert. *"Carpe Diem"* in The Poetry of Robert Frost, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1975), pp. 335-336.
12. McClatchy, J.D. *"Like a Moth to Flame",* The New York Times (Sept. 16, 2001) available here accessed May 26, 2024.
13. *"Carpe Diem Poems" at Poem Analysis cited above.*
14. *"Unveiling the Fig: Symbolism in Literature and Art" at Blooms In America available here accessed May 27, 2024.*
15. Millay, Edna St. Vincent, *"First Figs"* in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, Eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 19730, p. 492.
16. Dickinson, Emily, *"I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl"* in Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1961), pp. 104-105.
17. Marvell, Andrew. *"To His Coy Mistress"* is in the public domain, but it can be found at Arthur Eastman, Ed. The Norton Anthology of Poetry (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1970), pp. 351-352.
18. Herrick, Robert. *"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time"* is in the public domain, but it can be found at Arthur Eastman, Ed. The Norton Anthology of Poetry (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1970), p. 265.
19. Lowell, James Russell. "What Is So Rare as a Day in June?" at Poetry Nook available here accessed May 27, 2024.

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Charles Brock: An Appreciation

You're Invited: Asking Erie's Business Community to talk about Child Care written by **Karen Grimm-Thomas**

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