



Grace In The Gray Areas

Hurry Up And Slow Down

By Karen Kullgren

I've had enough--haven't you? Life shouldn't be nonstop frenzy. It's time to slow down. I reached deep down inside myself and set it in motion--or, rather, in slow motion. Like any life change, it's a work in progress, a daily practice, and some days I am better at it than others. Here are some lessons I've learned, tools I've taken up to help me slow down.

We women talk a good game about taking care of ourselves, but when it comes right down to it, it falls way down on our priority lists, behind family responsibilities, work and other obligations. And somehow we still feel guilty about it. Suzanne Braun Levine points out in her new book *Fifty Is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood* that this applies to women of any age. "Reclaiming our time, our concentration, our privacy is a first step toward doing unto ourselves," as we are always doing unto/for others. Putting ourselves first really just means putting ourselves up as high on the list as everyone and everything else.

The bottom line is that our bosses are never going to tell us to slow down. The strapped nonprofits where we volunteer are never going to say, "Don't worry, we'll find someone else for the committee this year." Our children are never going to say, "Don't worry, you take a bath and read a book. We'll play quietly here by ourselves and won't bother you." We are the only ones who can do it. We are the only ones who can calm ourselves in the middle of the storm long enough to make changes in our routines and changes in our attitudes.

"Hurry is a form of violence exercised upon time," said Donald Nicholl, a religious scholar. We need to stop doing violence to precious resources like time, our physical and mental health and our spirits.

If we don't identify our own big-picture life priorities and live accordingly, we will spend our lives in a constant state of reaction and heedless hurry rather than creation with intention and purpose.

Lowering or releasing our expectations may be shocking notions to overachiever Americans, but they're the only paths to serenity. "Let It Be" and "Let Go" are worthy mantras.

Remember, we can't really control what happens, only our response to it.

Everything doesn't have to be perfect. Accept "good enough" (including from ourselves and others).

We need to stop over-committing ourselves. Or as Braun Levine puts it, "'No' is Not a Four Letter Word." Sometimes to protect our own need for a slower pace we have to say "No" to others. Other times we have to say "No" to ourselves--our need to please, our desire to help, our urge to fix things.

Traffic trials, daily annoyances and pet peeves are so not worth our attention. "Don't sweat the small stuff" may be trite but it's true. Don't wait for a nasty wake-up call (a health crisis, a job loss, etc.) to put things in perspective.

Stephen Covey (*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, First Things First*) offers a transformative parable that I have gone back to many times over the past two decades when I've felt myself slipping out of balance. Take a big jar and try to put in sand, little rocks and big rocks. It's very easy to fill the jar first with the sand and little rocks--but then there's no room to put in the big rocks. So in your life's jar of finite time and energy, put the big rocks in first, the things that mean the most. Only then should you put in the little rocks and sand--the activities and issues in your life that are secondary, even dispensable.

Covey also urges us to practice discernment between the urgent and the important.

Reducing consumption isn't just eco-friendly, it's also a way to lighten your load. The less we bring into our homes and our lives, the less we have to tend to it rather than tending to ourselves, our relationships, our communities. Think twice about that tantalizing item on the shelf or on your computer screen. Is it worth adding as baggage to your journey through life?

Time management and endless striving for organization aren't real solutions. I suspect that the push, external or internal, to become more and more organized and efficient is just a fool's errand--an attempt to make order out of chaos, to have the illusion of control over the inherently unruliness of work, of relationships, of parenting, of life. Just "manage" your time, like your closet, by filling it with less stuff.

Buddhists focus on our need to be present, mindful and "in the moment." I'm all for that. But maybe sometimes we just need to stop some meaningless task and let our minds be carried away to the woods or the lake. Maybe, after all, we sometimes need to get out of the moment, not be in it.

A quote I keep from Gandhi reminds me, "There is more to life than increasing its speed." In one of life's little paradoxes, one of those gray areas that so fascinate me, by slowing down we often actually become more effective. In addition to creating space for things like reflection, growth and joy.

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