

## **Don't Wish Your Life Away**

Alison Wohler, January 3, 2010

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Once upon a time there was a 14 year old girl who, like others her age, was prone to thinking the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. First, she wished she was shorter. She'd been taller than everyone else her age for her entire life. She wished she had dark, curly hair instead of the straight blond hair she did have. She wished she was one of the popular girls instead of one of the smart girls. Sometimes she wished it was Friday when it was only Monday. She wished her last name began with something other than A so she didn't always end up sitting right in front of the teacher's desk in almost every class. That's why Miss Warner, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra teacher, was always able to listen in on the conversations between the girl and the boy next to her, named Bill Albers. Because of their "A" names, they sat next to each other a lot. Later, the girl would marry a "W" man and change her name. One day Miss Warner must have had just about enough of this girl's whining and complaining and she told her so. "Don't wish your life away, Alison" said Miss Warner.

That is a direct quote. I must have been open at that very moment for the wisdom of those words, because they in some way have been with me ever since. I remember Miss Warner as being about 90 years old, but more likely she was probably just a few years older than I am right now. I know she didn't teach many more years after I had her as a teacher. I hope it wasn't something I did...

Do you have little bits of advice like this that you have remembered all your life? Not that I always followed that advice, but I was grateful that this teacher, who I thought didn't like me at all, must have thought enough of me, after all, to want to change my wasteful ways of thinking. I catch myself, still, ever since that day, when I recognize that I am doing it again – wishing my life away.

It's so easy to do, isn't it? We start wishing our lives away right from the start. My little three year old grandson is determined that he is growing up quickly – the first thing he had to show me when I arrived for a visit last weekend was his new "big boy bed." He'll be six feet tall, out of college and introducing me to his big boy friends in the blink of an eye.

I am so bad at not wishing my life away. There are things in the past I wish I had done differently. I can think of very specific moments with my children when I really wish I had NOT said or done what I said or did. I expect you are thinking of some of these moments yourselves... Regrets, and guilt, are ways of wishing our lives away. It's not just about the future.

There's an old expression: "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." I've probably singlehandedly put a few people up on horseback.

Occasionally there are days when I find myself imagining all the things I will be able to do when I finally retire. But that isn't going to be any time soon! It would be no fun, and

such a waste of time to be merely minding time, hoping to make it through to better times. Are there any of us, though, who don't feel like that's what we're doing – sometimes?

We all try to stay in the present moment, but I can testify to how difficult that can be. I think we should try not to beat ourselves up about it. That's another waste of time. When we find ourselves living in the past or the future, just give yourself a shake and come back to “now.”

I think it's also important to distinguish between the negative aspects of wishing your life away and the positive things that can come from dreaming of a better life or a better world – and then making those things happen. Yes, we can wish our lives away, but if we didn't have dreams we'd never get anywhere! It's a balancing act of a sort.

I wish I was healthier – and that's not necessarily an impossible goal – I could maybe make it happen. Wishing to be taller or shorter is a little less likely.

Wishing our lives away wastes a lot of time. I know the physicists tell us that there is no such thing as a real time-line that stretches from the past and into the future; they say time as we imagine it doesn't exist. But beside the fact that I just cannot grasp that concept, it also seems likely that living without notions of the past and future would be very impractical if not impossible.

Here is a little riddle I found in my research for this sermon:

*All dwelling in one house are strange brothers three,  
as unlike as any three brothers could be,  
yet try as you may to tell brother from brother,  
you'll find that the trio resemble each other.  
The first isn't there, though he'll come beyond doubt.  
The second's departed, so he's not about.  
The third and the smallest is right on the spot,  
And manage without him the others could not.  
Yet the third factor with which to be reckoned  
Because the first brother turns into the second.  
You cannot stand back and observe number three,  
For one of the others is all you will see.  
So tell me, my child, are the three of them one?  
Or are there but two? Or could there be none?  
Just name them, and you will at once realize  
That each rules a kingdom of infinite size.  
They rule it together and are it as well.  
In that, they're alike, so where do they dwell?* by Michael Ende, in Momo

Years after Miss Warner's good advice I still must have been exhibiting the same bad habits, because someone gave me a little book called The Precious Present by Spencer Johnson. The precious present is not a package to be ripped open at the holidays or on your birthday – it's something that's with us all the time just waiting to be recognized for the gift it is: the present moment. Now.

*The present moment is always precious, not because it is absolutely flawless, which it often seems not to be, but because it is absolutely everything it is meant to be... at that moment.*  
(p. 39)

I know that often in sermons the minister seems to be trying to tell her congregation how they should be, or what they should do, to be better people. It is rare, however, that I would ever talk to you about something I am not talking to myself about, too. And sometimes, all I want to do for you, and for me, is merely acknowledge the difficulties of being human. Acknowledgment is the first step toward forward progress.

I know that you want to be the best you can be. I trust that we would all live entirely within that precious present moment I am speaking about today – if we could. But it is nigh impossible to be that good, all the time. I know, being one who struggles often with living in the moment. My past sometimes haunts me. My future often feels uncertain. Wendell Berry's notion of "forethought of grief" feels very real to me. But, still, I do try to make the most of the present, of my life here and now, and that is all that I can possibly suggest to you, as well. Let us try, together, not to wish our lives away.

My son-in-law recently asked me the subject of my next sermon – this one – and when I told him he dredged up from his incredible memory a line from a book called The Swimming Pool Library by Alan Hollinghurst: "wishing away the unrepeatably hours." It is so true.

Do you remember green stamps? I loved to paste them in the books and look at the catalog of things for which you could redeem the stamps when you had enough. Some people describe using time, living, as redeeming time, cashing in on (making use of) what the day has to offer. It is used this way in a biblical verse from Ephesians 5:15-16 *See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*

I'm not sure about that last part: "because the days are evil." Perhaps it was meant to mean that as sinful human beings we can be easily tempted to evil ways, or that our days on Earth are but the evil part of a longer, more heavenly, existence. But one could also look at this phrase as a way of saying that yes, the time can get away from us very easily, and we can get to the end of the day not having done much of worth. The days can thwart our efforts because they are so short.

Redeeming time. Making the most of those books of stamps that will eventually run out – just as the Green Stamp program has been discontinued for some time now. There are so many ways in which the days are short, and life itself is short. The unrepeatable hours...

Life is also incredible and amazing. Emily Dickinson described it: “To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.” How did I get so lucky that I am here with you in Emily Dickinson’s town?

Here are a few other insightful things that have been written about time – and life.

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our time.” I chose this quote by Annie Dillard for our wayside pulpit recently. It fits today’s topic pretty well. What we do in each moment of the present is what will become our past – and also, what with inertia being what it is, our future. An object in motion (or not) tends to stay in motion (or not).

“The future is something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour, whatever he does, whoever he is.” C. S. Lewis

Thich Nhat Hanh always has wise things to say. On the subject of the precious present he wrote:

*Our true home is the present moment.*

*To live in the present moment is a miracle.*

*The miracle is not to walk on water.*

*The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment.*

We can’t undo the past, or the mistakes of the past. We can only affect the here and now, and in doing so, hopefully also affect the future. I’m thinking of so many problems in our world right now for which we hardly know where to begin to change or fix what has come to us from the past. But we had better decide and get to it. “Each day a day goes by,” said Carlo Goldoni.

On the other hand, we can find some hope in the Mark Stand’s words: “Each moment is a place you’ve never been.” Possibility abounds.

My personal experience has been that the past is gone, the future is barely in our control, and the only two things it seems we have anything to say about in the current moment are our attention to what is going on and our own attitude. This is my best advice for living in the present – pay attention to possibility and remember that your attitude determines a lot of how you experience your life. Judy and I both, independently, found a reading for this service, that didn’t actually make it into the service, but did make it into the white pages inside your order of service. It’s really wonderful and a great message for the beginning of a new year.

I've also printed, in your order of service, in their assigned spot, the words I intend to use as our closing words this morning. "Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves." (Mark Belletini)

I no longer wish to be shorter or to have dark curly hair. There are some ways in which I am, these days, more at home in myself. I very much like that phrase "at home in myself." But there are, and will be, other ways in which I am not content. I will try not to wish my life away, but I know it won't always be easy.

Mostly, like Henry David Thoreau, I want to live my life deliberately, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. (paraphrased from *Walden*, 1854)

James Freeman Clarke was a Unitarian minister of the 1800s and he wrote with the words and expressions of those times. His words, however, are exactly of what we have been speaking. From the *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers: In the spirit of faith* [that it matters how we live] *let us begin each day, and we shall be sure to "redeem the time" which it brings to us, by changing it into something definite and eternal. There is a deep meaning in this phrase of the apostle, to redeem time. We redeem time, and do not merely use it. We transform it into eternity by living it aright.* (James Freeman Clarke, reported in Josiah Hotchkiss Gilbert, *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers* (1895), p. 583.)

As the new year begins, let us resolve, as individuals and as a congregation, to live our lives as fully as possibility allows.

May it be so.