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I HAD A BAD DAY

Paying Attention to the Beautiful Things

1. What's bugging you? I burned the bacon and set off the smoke alarm.
2. What's bringing you joy? Spotting a hummingbird on a hike.-----

I offered to cook the bacon so that Dan and I could start working. We were both working remotely from a warm and sunny spot in Palm Springs—a privilege we are grateful that our employers allowed. My parents had an unused timeshare week available, so we were housed at a nice resort.

The bacon cooked up nicely, but the smoke set off the kitchen alarm. We were on central time but I knew our neighbors were likely enjoying a Pacific time morning in their beds at five o'clock. So I grabbed the pan and set it outside the front door. We proceeded to open the windows and air the place out.

Then the doorbell rang. The two security officers asked if we were okay.

“Yes,” I said with my pre-coffee eloquence. “Bacon.”

“Bacon?” said the security officer.

“Yes, bacon,” I repeated, and he left.

My pan was no longer smoking, so I leaned down to pick it up. Stuck. I pulled harder. It came off with a patch of welcome mat firmly attached to the bottom.

So my lovely day in Palm Springs started with scrubbing and scraping the welcome mat off the new-looking frying pan at the timeshare, and wondering whether we were going to be charged for the welcome mat’s new indentation.

Some days are like this. Of course, they are not supposed to be the days away in a sunny location. *Where would the day go from here?* I wondered.

In this case, I had only goodness ahead. Sun. Time to walk. An early dinner. Watching the sun set on the balcony. But on a regular day with commuting and coworkers and pressures coming from every direction—well, the kitchen alarm could have easily taken me down.

For those of us in Western culture who live in privilege, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture when we get a traffic ticket or lose a credit card. How can we get back on track when everyday mishaps distract us from our plans and goals for the day?

For me, paying attention to the tiny spots of beauty that are also at hand pulls me out of the “bad day” funk.

NOTICING SMALL THINGS

It’s nice to think about those days that don’t include a smoke alarm going off. The movie night with friends. The easy summer Saturday that

ends with a glass of wine on the porch. On days like that, the first thing I want to write down is what brought me joy. Sometimes when I start writing, I notice more than one spot of joy and find myself writing a series of gratitudes. These are the days when it feels easy to connect with God and others. They are the days that seem to be filled with grace.

Gratitude leads to more gratitude. Writing down a moment of joy is leading me to notice more beauty.

My friend Christy Buckner Foster messaged on Facebook: “Post beautiful things, please.” I eagerly clicked on the thread. There I saw the following:

- a happy cat and dog reunited after four months apart
- a canoe on the water filled with flowers
- a GIF of Dolly Parton and Miss Piggy hugging
- beaches
- a moonscape and a sunset
- happy babies
- horses
- more cats

We long for these moments of beauty after days filled with fake news and bad news but not nearly enough good news. And the Good News is that God is near. Stopping to savor these moments gives us the opportunity to stay connected with God all day long.

How can we bring more awareness of beauty into our lives?

Beauty can be found in the small things, in the details, like the tiny hummingbird Dan noticed on our hike later on the day-of-the-smoke-alarm.

“Beauty is goodness made manifest to the senses.”

DALLAS
WILLARD

Because he drew my attention to the one bird, then we were on the lookout. And we saw another and another. Each moment was one of connection between us and gratitude for this tiny, amazing creature of God's creation.



PRACTICE: MOMENTS OF BEAUTY



You can cultivate awareness of beauty within your own community by sharing moments of beauty with one another, just as my friend did. You can text images of beauty from your own life and talk about them with the people around you. Even when our posts don't go viral, we honor the gifts in our noticing.

I purchased a simple free app that allows me to add a quote to my own image and share that image on Instagram. In contrast to the extremes of either creating a false social media persona or ignoring real-world events, we can put a little joy out into the social media world and see what joy comes back our way.

CONNECTING WITH GOD IN THE GLORIOUS MOMENTS

I also regularly rotate the startup and lock screen pictures on my computer. There's a great one of my dad with our three kids. We went at Christmas and saw him in his men's chorus, so he's wearing his chorus vest. The kids said, "We came to see Grandpa's concert,"

which seemed like a fun reversal of the usual grandparent-grandchild dynamic. Dad is wearing his red chorus vest and everyone is laughing over something.

The tiny hummingbird Dan pointed out on the hill above Palm Springs is a new favorite.

Swiping past these pictures as I open the phone to pull up an app at the grocery store brings me back to these memories and gratitude for the moments of joy.



A hummingbird in Palm Springs

PRACTICE: PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Put a picture of a moment that represents a beautiful gift where you will see it often. When you see your picture again, offer a little word of thanks for that past happiness, and let that reminder open up a space of gratitude for you. Gratitude leads to more gratitude once we've gotten ourselves into a grateful mental space.

GET OUTSIDE

“You need to get outside. It’s a beautiful day.”

I heard this from my mom fairly often in the summer. I was an unathletic bookworm as a child and teenager. Actually, I’m still an unathletic bookworm.

My brother would go down the street to play basketball on a summer day and come home sweating and dripping to look for food. Mom would send him to the patio to drip or to the shower if he wanted to enter the house. He would repeat this process about four times a day.

I was happy reading a Nancy Drew mystery in our cool basement family room.

But somewhere along the way I did discover that Mom was right (as usual). Though you won't find me playing basketball, I have learned that I also love being outside. I love nature. I love walks. I'm learning to identify birds. I love gardening—for about an hour.



PRACTICE: A VISIO DIVINA WALK



I first learned about the idea of photography as a form of lectio divina (divine reading) called visio divina, or divine vision, from Christine Valters Paintner. Visio divina involves meditating on an image and asking God to speak to us in that. We can also “read” nature and nature can read (or speak) to us.

Take yourself on a walk with your phone and identify something that stirs you. Maybe it's lovely or interesting. Or maybe it's ugly. Watch your inner response. Both attraction and repulsion can be cues that there's something more. I like to take three to five of these images and sit with them. Sometimes I combine them in a photo collage. How do they speak to you?

Those gorgeous winter days in Palm Springs I was doing a bit of work and a bit of writing. Whenever I could, I sat outside on the porch or by the pool to work, and it brought me so much joy.

God is always reaching out to us, wooing us, especially through creation. Scripture invites us to picture God as a shepherd looking after each sheep in the flock. Ezekiel records the promises of the Shepherd: “I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:14). These images draw on God’s invitations to us through nature.



A walk with God can also involve noticing what creates dissonance or a sense of ugliness. In these things, too, God can be drawing close and speaking to us. The Shepherd also promises: “I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. . . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34:12, 16).

ESCAPING THE POLAR VORTEX

For me the opportunity use my parents’ timeshare has been a mixed blessing. The booking process is incredibly tricky, and sometimes the original weeks my parents purchased have not been booked in time. Then there’s an opportunity to redeem them back out of another system—which has a broad range of quality levels in terms of the properties included. So sometimes I end up feeling beaten down and frustrated by the system. It’s just not well suited to my vacation needs and personality.

But it’s still a free vacation! I am always grateful for that when I finally get there.

The stay in Palm Springs had its timeshare-related hitches as always, but it went better than usual, and it was a lovely property. And, best of all, the booking I set up a year ahead of time turned out to fall right in the midst of a polar vortex hitting Chicago. That alone was an event to celebrate. But there were the hiking trails, lots of fun, new restaurants, the art shows and galleries we visited, and more. So at the end of my time there I created an altar of gratitude as a way of offering thanks to God.

I took a prayerful walk around the timeshare looking for items that sparked my attention and seemed to call to me in some

PRACTICE: MAKING AN ALTAR

I learned about home-altar making from Anne Grizzle, who wrote a book called *Reminders of God*. An altar can be made indoors or outside. For example, you could pick up items on a walk, arrange them outside, use the altar for prayer and meditation, and then walk away from it as a way to reinforce the moment but not hold on to it. You can, of course, take a picture to preserve the memory and return to those moments of grace. Or you could gather items indoors on a table or shelf and keep them together as a reminder of grace when you pass by.

In my home I have a little prayer table near the chair where I sit to pray in the mornings, that holds objects of importance to me—crosses and a crucifix, part of an angel wing, a piece of cut granite, a Bible, and so on. I sometimes change this seasonally and add a purple cloth in Lent and Advent. This is a visual reminder of God's presence with me.



An altar of gratitude from Palm Springs

way—bark from a palm tree, seed pods, grasses—all reminding me of the beauty of those weeks. I noticed a golf ball in the parking lot. We didn't golf there, but golf courses were all around us in that location, so it seemed fitting. The whole experience was rather a mix of the natural beauty of mountains and hiking trails blended in with shopping malls and highly manicured properties with water features such as golf courses and the timeshare itself. I arranged it on a counter, took a picture, enjoyed looking at it for the next day, and then put the items back outside when I left.

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