

Celebrating Ordinary Time
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Faster than a speeding bullet, they're coming. You know they are. The holidays. Though it's not yet Halloween, commercial America would have us believe they're on top of us already. You've seen the displays and decorations in the stores, the advertisements on TV. I'm here this morning to say, resist them.

I'm no Grinch or Ebenezer Scrooge. I'm looking forward to Thanksgiving and I love Christmas. One year I made the mistake of skipping several of my favorite holiday traditions and when New Year's came I felt I'd had a year without a Christmas. So let's be clear; I'm not suggesting cutting out or even cutting back dramatically celebrations of Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year's. I'm just saying enjoy what's left of these last few weeks of ordinary time before jumping into the fray.

There is a quality to holidays and holy times, to moments of high drama, a magic if you will, whether of theological origins as Auden would have it or whether its origins lie in its very intensity as Tagliabue suggests, there is a magic to holidays and other moments out of time that moves us to a different realm of living for a few hours or days or weeks.

At the holidays we draw near to distant friends and family. At the holidays we become aware of and celebrate and give thanks for the abundance in our lives. At the holidays we ponder dreams of peace on earth, good will toward all. At the holidays we prepare and eat our favorite foods. At the holidays we strive for a jolly, festive mood, and succeed to varying degrees. In other words, at the holidays, we try to be constantly ringing Sunday church bells, to live with the intensity of van Gogh.

Tagliabue's right. None of us can sustain any of that for very long. And we all learned as very young children that it can't be our birthday or Christmas Day every day of the year. The days of the year, a good 340-345 of them are ordinary days. That's too great a number to be ignored.

We've just heard two very different perspectives on ordinary time. Auden's not very pleasant description of the Time Being between the birth and death and resurrection of Christ, and Tagliabue's praise of moderation. Reality, as usual, mostly rests some place in between the two. Some ordinary days are sheer drudgery, when the kitchen table exists because you scrub it. Some ordinary days are lazy pleasures from sun up to sun down. Most ordinary days are just that—ordinary. Stretches neither endured nor particularly delighted in, simply lived.

Yet I would say, the days of our lives, the ordinary ones, are holy. They contain our real lives. The math tests, the arguments, the commute, time in the garden, laundry, grocery shopping, work, football games, babies crying in the night, telephone calls and e-mail, church, spring cleaning, breakfast cereal, forgotten dates, haircuts, leaf raking, the boss, student, neighbors, teacher, the people close at hand, not distant, the flu, garbage day, the bills, snow shoveling, taxes, late night whispers, that new novel, that stack of old magazines, and on and on. These, more than the festivities of the holidays, shape our lives and our beings. These hold a magic of their own.

When I say there is magic to ordinary days, I don't mean to make them into minor holidays. I mean only that in their very ordinariness they are remarkable. Its even tenor is what makes life livable on a daily basis. And we need not see much more than the headlines of the newspaper to know that ordinary by our standards is really quite extraordinary in comparison to much of the world, and even parts of our nation. We do well to appreciate their very ordinariness

There is relief and responsibility to life between holidays, to life in ordinary times. Relief from the intensity of the holidays, a moderation of all that is good and bad in them. And responsibility for recognizing and living out their unique potential.

It is good to draw near to distant family and friends in holiday times. Yet we are blessed, most of us, with happy, healthy, workable relationships with those we interact with every day in between—friends, neighbors, co-workers, children, partners, students and professors. Those relationships too need tending and care and appreciation.

It is good to become aware of and celebrate and give thanks for our abundance at Thanksgiving or amidst the litter of wrapping paper just after the last gift has been opened. But we live in abundance every day of our lives, making every day occasion for quiet celebration and simple thanksgiving. Grace before meals perhaps or a recalling at the end of the day of all you have to be thankful for.

It is good ponder dreams of peace on earth, good will toward all in the cold and dark of Christmas Eve. The need of those dreams lies in the every day. And indeed many of us work toward those goals throughout the ordinary times, not simply the holiday.

It is good at the holidays to prepare and eat our favorite foods, good that some foods are special occasion only food. But our lives are lived between holidays and our bodies and our spirits have need of well-cooked, cherished food, eaten in the company of loved ones all the year round.

At the holidays we strive for a jolly, festive mood. In these ordinary days we know better. We're festive when we're festive and grumpy when we're grumpy. We don't try to force the issue.

We have just a month left to take some of John Tagliabue's advice. To stop for a while, to lounge and linger, scrounge and be stupid, get enough sleep. It's not possible, I know, you will say, given the details of your ordinary life. Do what you can. For thirty minutes a day, perhaps, bask in moderation, in ordinariness, in the glory of the everyday. It will get you in shape for the holidays. And who knows? Perhaps going into the holidays in good shape (and stopping to be stupid once or twice during the holidays) is the trick to avoiding the depth of the post New Year's let down described by Auden.

If you simply can't stop trying to pull yourself together, will you try this instead? As you prepare for Halloween and then Thanksgiving amidst the rush of your daily life, pay attention to the elements of your daily life—the meals, the errands, the people, your job, the phone calls and e-mail, the volunteer work, all of it. Pay attention and do it with the deliberation it deserves, for these are the hours of the days that shape your life. Not the holiday that will be gone before we remember which dish we forgot to prepare.

The Holidays, with a capital H, that blur of festivities from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, will come soon enough. We need not rush into it. Instead let us linger in the quiet joy of these ordinary days, embracing life as we are privileged to live it every day of our lives. And so may we find all the days shimmering, each with its own magic. Amen.