

Choose Your Adjective

In a recent editorial in the Chicago Dental Society Journal, a fellow dentist implored us to take time off from our busy and stressful lives to smell the roses. After a long and satisfying vacation in Maui (he described it as decadent, which is how many of us feel when we're not working) he told us that he was sufficiently refreshed to return to his normal life with a renewed sense of well-being. His batteries were recharged. That sounds right, I thought. The time away from work helps us feel replenished and allows us to reenter our regular and oftentimes stressful world.

But there was something in the account that didn't sit right with me. I found myself wondering what exactly is his normal life like, and why did he need to leave it to make it tolerable when he returned?

The editorial stayed with me. Why was this seemingly simple and commonsense advice bothering me at all? Was I simply jealous because I have such a hard time taking extended vacations and because this one sounded particularly delicious? I decided there was more to it than envy. I decided that the nerve that the editorial touched in me had to do with my failure to relax, to play, and to bring some semblance of balance into my life. My colleague and I — and I'd bet many of you who read these words — work very, very hard. But the kind of pleasures that one might find in Maui just might be available to us as well in Chicago, New York, or some small town somewhere. We just have to look for them.

A fulfilling and joyful life doesn't have to do with vacations; it has to do not with the extraordinary things — no matter how special or exhilarating they might be — but rather with the ordinary things that fill our lives. It has to do with the degree of intimacy and love that we have with other human beings — our family, friends, co-workers, and indeed everyone with whom we share the planet. It has to do with beauty and nature and the wonder of it all.

I'm reminded of a conversation that took place in the movie *Wyatt Earp*, between Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp. Wyatt had just decided that his days as marshal were over and he told Doc that he just wanted to be left alone so that he could live a "good" life. Doc, who is depicted historically as a philosophical sort (despite his drinking and gambling) said something like, "Wyatt, you can't have a 'good' life. You can only have a life. You'll make it good, bad, sad, or whatever. Life doesn't come with an adjective attached." (To be truthful, I'm not sure Holliday really used the word adjective, but I think I'm accurately conveying the sense of the conversation.)

As I continued to ponder this vacation/normal life dichotomy I wondered if I was actually confusing the concept of *managing a life* with that of *living it*. Now this is a juicy topic. How might we start living instead of struggling to manage our lives? Some might say that this is an empty distinction because you can't really live until your life is well managed, but I don't agree. Nor do I think that this is a trick question — there are, after all, the realities of mortgage, tuition payments, and other annoyingly regular expenses — but an equally real and maybe an even more significant question is, "Why are we living anyway?" or alternately, "Why was I born?"

These questions can't be answered by describing the requirements of our culture of achievement, accomplishments, and prestige. Of course those things do give us some satisfaction, but the psychological demons that insist we must do better and better, make more and more, ultimately take over our lives and cause the kind of relentless stress that demands a month in Maui just to detoxify ourselves. It is a psychological prison, no less painful because we are responsible for its construction.

Is the reason we are on this earth because we need to meet our monthly expenses? What about our psychological expenses? They don't come with a cellophane-wrapped return envelope, but their demands need to be met too. We treat ourselves as if we were machines, money machines. But the hearts and souls of human beings cannot be characterized that way.

I close with a story that was delivered by TV's Mr. Rogers in his 2002 commencement address at Dartmouth College.

Have you heard the story that came out of the Seattle Special Olympics?

For the 100-yard-dash there were nine contestants, all of them so-called physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and at the sound of the gun, they took off. But one little boy didn't get very far. He stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry.

The other eight children heard the boy crying. They slowed down, turned around and ran back to him —every one of them ran back to him. One little girl with Down syndrome bent down and kissed the boy and said, "This will make it better." The little boy got up, and he and the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line.

They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in the stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long time. And people who were there are still telling the story with obvious delight. And do you know why?

Because deep down we all know that what matters in life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too, even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then.

So by all means smell the roses, but don't just smell them when you are in Maui. Smell them every day. And while you are smelling them, please appreciate the other joys of life. Remember, you choose the adjective.