

## **Schedule, Interrupted**

Discovering God's time-management.

Mark Buchanan

[ posted 2/1/2006 12:00AM ]

"Teach us to number our days aright," Moses asked God, "that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

There is a right way to tally up days. There's an arithmetic of timekeeping, and God must tutor us in it. Wisdom is not the condition for learning this arithmetic. It's the fruit of it. Wisdom comes from learning to number our days aright. You don't need to be wise to sign up for God's school. But if you're diligent, attentive, and inquisitive in his classes, you'll emerge that way.

It's easy to get this wrong. God's school is not like most. It's not regimented, age-adjusted, fixed in its curricula. The classroom is life itself; the curriculum, all of life's demands and interruptions and tedium, its surprises and disappointments. In the midst of this, through these things themselves, God hands us an abacus and tells us to tally it all up.

Meaning?

Meaning, work out where time and eternity meet. Pay attention to how God is afoot in the mystery of each moment, in its mad rush or maddening plod. He is present in both. But too often, we are so time-obsessed that we take no time to really notice. I have a pastor friend in Toronto who one day after a Sunday service received a note: "Pastor Peter, I would appreciate it if you prayed shorter prayers. Your pastoral prayer this past Sunday was 12 minutes, 43 seconds in length. Please strive for greater brevity."

The note was unsigned. The only thing we know about this man, woman, or child is that the writer is so bound by time—counting the minutes—that he has never learned to number his days. This person can tell time, but not discern seasons.

Miss that, and you miss wisdom. For only those who number their days aright gain a wise heart. Only they become God's sages: those calm, unhurried people who live in each moment fully, savoring simple things, celebrating small epiphanies, unafraid of life's inevitable surprises and reverses, adaptive to change yet not chasing after it.

The Ironic Secret

I write this at a time when the church talks much about being purpose-driven. This is a good thing, but we ought to practice a bit of holy cynicism about it. We should be a little uneasy about the pairing of purposefulness and drivenness. Something's out of kilter there. Drivenness may awaken purpose or be a catalyst for purpose, but it rarely fulfills it: More often it jettisons it.

A common characteristic of driven people is that, at some point, they forget their purpose. They lose the point. The very reason they began something—embarked on a journey, undertook a project, waged a war, entered a profession, married a woman—erodes under the weight of their striving. Their original inspiration may have been noble. But driven too hard, it gets supplanted by greed for more, or dread of setback, or force of habit.

Drivenness erodes purposefulness.

The difference between living on purpose and being driven surfaces most clearly in what we do with time. The driven are fanatical time managers—time-mongers, time-herders, time-hoarders. Living on purpose requires skillful time management, true, but not the kind that turns brittle, that attempts to quarantine most of what makes life what it is: the mess, the surprises, the breakdowns, and the breakthroughs. Too much rigidity stifles purpose. I find that the more I try to manage time, the more anxious I get about it.

And the more prone I am to lose my purpose.

Truly purposeful people have an ironic secret: They manage time less and pay attention more. The most purposeful people I know rarely overmanage time, and when they do, it's usually because they're lapsing into drivenness, into a loss of purpose for which they overcompensate with mere busyness. No, the distinguishing mark of purposeful people is not time management.

It's that they notice. They're fully awake.

Zigzags and Detours

Jesus, for example. He lived life with the clearest and highest purpose. Yet he veered and strayed from one interruption to the next, with no apparent plan in hand other than his single, overarching one: Get to Jerusalem and die. Otherwise, his days, as far as we can figure, were a series of zigzags and detours, apparent whims and second thoughts, interruptions and delays, off-the-cuff plans, spur-of-the-moment decisions, leisurely meals, serendipitous rounds of storytelling.

Who touched me?

You give them something to eat.

Let's go to the other side.

Jesus was available—or not—according to some oblique logic all his own. He had an inner ear for the Father's whispers, a third eye for the Spirit's motions. One minute he's not going to the temple, the next he is. One minute he refuses to help a wedding host solve his wine drought, the next he's all over it. He's ready to drop everything and rush over to a complete stranger's house to heal his servant, but dawdles four days while Lazarus—"the one he loves"—writhes in his death throes (John 11:3), or fails to come at all when John the Baptist—"the greatest in the kingdom of heaven"—languishes on death row (Matt. 11:1-11). The closest we get to what dictated Jesus' schedule is his statement in John's Gospel: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

The apostle Peter, after declaring that Jesus is "Lord of all," describes the supreme Sovereign's modus operandi: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and ... he went around doing good" (Acts 10:36, 38, emphasis mine). So that's it, the sum of Christ's earthly vocation: He wandered, and he blessed. He was a vagabond physician, the original doctor without borders. His purpose was crystallized, but his method almost scattershot. "My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted," Henri Nouwen said near the end of his life, "until I discovered the interruptions were my work."

Paying Attention

No, Jesus didn't seem to keep time. But he noticed. So many people along the way—blind men, lame men, wild men, fishermen, tax men, weeping whores, pleading

fathers, grieving mothers, dying children, singing children, anyone—captured his attention. He stopped to tell a lot of stories, many of which arose out of interruptions: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13); "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25); "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Matt. 15:22). What's more, he invited others to go and do likewise. Those driven to get and spend, to judge and exclude, he called to attention.

Look at the birds!

Look at those flowers!

Do you see this woman?

Where are the other nine?

Why do you call me good?

Who do you say I am?

Life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, Jesus warned. And then he told a story about a rich fool who noticed all the trivial things but was oblivious to all the important ones. What matters, Jesus concluded, isn't being rich in stuff: It's being rich toward God. He explained the essence of such richness elsewhere: It's having eyes to see, ears to hear. It's to notice, to pay attention to the time of God's visitation. "The dream of my life," Mary Oliver writes,

Is to lie down by a slow river

And stare at the light in the trees—

To learn something of being nothing

A little while but the rich

Lens of attention.

Jesus was that "rich lens of attention."

To live on purpose means to go and do likewise. Purposefulness requires that we pay attention, and paying attention means, almost by definition, that we make room for surprise. We become hospitable to interruption. To sustain it, we need theological touchstones for it—a conviction in our bones that God is Lord of our days and years, and that his purposes and his presence often come disguised as detours, messes, defeats.

I came to you naked, Jesus says. I came to you thirsty.

"When, Lord?" we ask, startled.

When he wore the disguise of an interruption.

Think a moment of all the events and encounters that have shaped you most deeply and lastingly. How many did you see coming? How many did you engineer, manufacture, chase down?

And how many were interruptions?

Children? You might have planned as meticulously as a NASA rocket launch, but did you have any idea, really, what it would be like, who this child in your arms really was, who you would become because of him or her? The span between life as we intend it and life as we receive it is vast. Our true purpose is worked out in that gap. It is fashioned in the crucible of interruptions.

The Crucible of Interruptions

The movie Mr. Holland's Opus tells the story of a man with a magnificent ambition. He wants to be a great composer. But he still has to pay the bills, so he and his young

wife move to a small town where he teaches high school music, strictly for the money. All the while, he works on his masterpiece, his opus, laying the ground for his real calling. The plan is to teach for a few years, then step into his destiny.

But life keeps intruding. One year folds into two, into five, into fifteen. And then one day, Mr. Holland is old, and the school board shuffles him out for early retirement. He packs his desk. His wife and grown son come to fetch him. Walking down the school's wide, empty hallways, he hears a sound in the auditorium. He goes to see what it is.

It's a surprise.

Hundreds of his students from his years of teaching—many now old themselves—dozens of his colleagues, both current and former, hundreds of friends, fans, and well-wishers: The room is packed. All have gathered to say thank you. An orchestra is there, made up of Mr. Holland's students through the years. They've been preparing to perform Mr. Holland's Opus—the composition that, over four decades, he hammered out and tinkered with, polished, discarded, recovered, reworked, but never finished.

They play it now.

But of course he knows, everyone knows: His opus isn't the composition. His real opus, his true life's masterpiece, stands before him, here, now. It's not the music. It is all these people whom his passions and convictions have helped and shaped. It's all that was being formed in the crucible of interruptions. This is his work. This is his purpose.

Finally, after all these years, he's learned to number his days.

In 1973, the comedian Johnny Carson nearly caused a national crisis with a single wisecrack. That was the year North America's long flight of postwar prosperity fell to earth like a shot goose in one ungainly plummet. There was runaway inflation. There were oil and food shortages. All the abundance that Americans had come to see as their due, their birthright, suddenly seemed in jeopardy.

And so, on December 19, 1973, at 11:35 p.m., when Johnny Carson walked on the live studio set of *The Tonight Show* and quipped, "There's an acute shortage of toilet paper in the United States," it wasn't funny. The joke had a toehold in reality: Earlier in the day, Congressman Harold Froehlich from Wisconsin had warned that if the federal bureaucracy didn't catch up on its supply bids, government agencies would run out of toilet tissue within a month or two. Carson took this shard of trivia and played it for a laugh. Then, as was his trademark, he swung at an invisible golf ball, took a commercial break, and got on with the show.

Not so the nation. Twenty million viewers flew into panic. The next morning, hundreds of thousands of frantic shoppers lined up outside the supermarkets of America, poised to dash to the paper aisles and stockpile rolls, fighting over bundles of two-ply and four-ply. There were brawls in the aisles and scums at the checkout. Some store managers tried to limit sales to four rolls per customer, but they had no way of monitoring how many times a customer came back, and most came back repeatedly. By noon on December 20—mere hours after Johnny's flippant remark—America was sold out.

Johnny Carson's offhand gag line had sparked a national run (no pun intended) on toilet tissue.

We're generally gullible about news of scarcity. We have, it seems, an inbuilt skittishness about shortfall. This has been with us a long while, since the garden, by my reckoning.

Most of us live afraid that we're almost out of time. But you and I, we're heirs of eternity. We're not short of days.

We just need to number them aright.

Mark Buchanan's latest book, from which this article is excerpted, is *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring the Sabbath* (Word, 2005).

Copyright © 2006 Christianity Today. [Click for reprint information.](#)