



I used to think I had to “get away” in order to be contemplative. Contemplation, prayer and meditation required seclusion – or at least peace and quiet. They happened in church, during retreat, on a hike or at home as a bookend to the day, requiring time and space set aside from life to rest and return, rejuvenated, to life.

Then, I had children. Contemplative rituals often took a back seat to family dinners, bedtime rituals and, of course, sleep. “No time for contemplation today,” I would yawn.

Of course, I still believe that setting aside time for contemplative practice is important for maintaining balance and a healthy spiritual life. But it’s during the most stressful parenting moments that I discovered, mostly out of necessity, that there is an everyday contemplation that we can – and must - cultivate in the midst of chaos in ourselves and in our world. Mindfulness.

Young children are the best teachers of mindfulness because they live it. Adults often mistake it for dawdling or wasting time. Picking up rocks when it’s time for school. Chatting about the shadow the street lamp casts on their wall when they should be asleep. Stopping to pet an animal or talk to an elder in the store. At the same time, children serve as a mirror through which we can see ourselves when we lack mindfulness. In fact, these not-so-flattering reflections sometimes surface in response to their behavior. Grabbing a child by the arm and urging her to hurry up. Yelling at a child to stop talking and go to sleep. Rushing a child away from an old woman in the store because, you should “never talk to strangers.”

There are lessons about mindfulness that we can learn from children and how we respond to them. In any given moment, we can choose to slow down. Breathe. Notice. Look someone in the eye. Feel compassion. Make a connection. Instead of reacting to a situation by lashing out, we can be patient and stay present. Instead of rushing from one thing to the next, we can enjoy the moment. When we engage in mindfulness – and it is a daily exercise – we soon find that we don’t need to “get away” to experience the divine. We begin to transform ourselves and the world just by being present – one moment at a time.

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