

**WHEN WILL WE MAKE THE TIME?**  
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One of my all-time favorite singers is Harry Chapin. It's not that he had such a magnificent voice, or that his melodies were so rich, though they certainly are catchy and get stuck in my head. What makes Harry Chapin stand out above all the rest for me are his lyrics. Chapin had a magical way of using his songs to teach valuable life lessons. Okay, maybe not so much in his song "30,000 Pounds of Bananas," though I love that song. But songs like "Flowers are Red," which speaks to the importance of encouraging creativity and independent thought, manage to touch us deeply by uncovering every day truths that we too often overlook. Perhaps Chapin's most famous song is "Cat's Cradle." It was in the top ten for 15 weeks back in 1974 and it was Chapin's only number one hit, but 40 years later it remains a song almost everyone knows.

The song is about a father that is too busy to spend time with his son. As the son grows he asks his father to spend time with him, but the father always postpones the son's request to the future. The son idolizes his father and wants to become like his father. At the end of the song, the father realizes his son has become like him. It is the son, now who has no time for his father. Throughout, the song is peppered with phrases of nursery rhymes to remind us how quickly this time is going by. Here are a few verses:

My child arrived just the other day.  
He came to the world in the usual way.  
But there were planes to catch and bills to pay.  
He learned to walk while I was away.  
He was talking before I knew it, and as he grew  
He said, "I'm going to be like you, Dad.  
You know I'm going to be like you."

My son turned ten just the other day.  
He said, "Thanks for the ball, now come on let's play.  
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today,  
I've got a lot to do." He said, "That's OK."  
And he walked away and he smiled and he said  
"You know I'm going to be like you, Dad,  
You know I'm going to be like you."

The final verse says:  
I've long since retired and my son's moved away.  
I called him up just the other day.  
I said, "I'd like to see you, if you don't mind."  
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I could find the time.  
You see, my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu,  
But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad.  
It's been real nice talking to you."

And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me,  
He'd grown up just like me.  
My boy was just like me.

That's the song. But there is more to the story. Harry Chapin's wife, Sandy, was the one who actually wrote the words to that song. Her poem was inspired by watching her ex-husband try to reconnect with his absent father. Harry wasn't really interested in the poem until after their son Josh was born. It was then that he put the words to music. But sadly, Harry Chapin himself became the father in the song.

When their son was seven, Harry was performing 200 concerts a year. Sandy asked him "When are you going to spend some time with our son?" Harry promised he would make some time at the end of that summer. But he never made it. That summer, on his way to a business meeting, his car was rear-ended by a truck. The car burst into flames. Harry died in that accident before he could fulfill his promise to Sandy to make time with their son.

Just as in the song, I'm sure if Harry Chapin had it to do all over again, he would have used his time differently. The question we should be asking ourselves today is "How well do we use our time?"

We tend to live as if we had all the time in the world. But the Psalmist reminds us that is not so. In Psalm 90, we our lives are compared to the fragile grass: "In the morning it sprouts afresh, by nightfall it fades and withers." Our time on earth is limited, and what we do with that time matters. We only have a finite amount of time to do the things that really count.

And yet we squander that time and let it slip away from us. We don't mean to. It's just that our lives are so busy. We rush after so many things: trying to get that job or promotion, launching a new business or project. There is shopping to do, and laundry. The house doesn't just take care of itself. So many demands press in on us every day and it seems like there just aren't enough hours to get it all done. At the end of the day we are so exhausted that it is hard to find the energy to do much else. As a result, we put off the very things that most deserve our time. But postponing life's true priorities comes at a cost.

Too often we are like the farm boy, Joe, who accidentally overturned his wagonload of corn in the road. The farmer who lived nearby came to investigate. He offered to help the boy but he said to him, "Hey, Joe, forget your troubles for a spell and come on in and have dinner with us. Then I'll help you get the wagon up."

"That's mighty nice of you," Joe answered, "But I don't think Pa would like me to."

"Aw, come on, son!" the farmer insisted.

"Well, okay," the boy finally agreed. "But Pa won't like it."

After a hearty dinner, Joe thanked his host. "I feel a lot better now, but I just know Pa is going to be real upset."

"Don't be foolish!" exclaimed the neighbor.

"By the way, where is he?"

"Under the wagon."

How many times have we left a family member or friend "under the wagon," knowing they need us but not making the time to be present for them?

According to a 2013 Pew Study, parents – no surprise – say they feel increasingly stressed about juggling work and family life. 56% of working moms and 50% of working dads say they find it very or somewhat difficult to balance these responsibilities. Though time with our children is thankfully on the rise, half of all fathers and one out of every four mothers say they spend too little time with their children.

A 2010 study in the Great Britain revealed that one in ten of us spends more time talking to our other half on the phone or by email than in we do in person. Couples now spend on average less than an hour a day talking while together, with one in five of us spending just fifteen minutes a day chatting in person. Fifteen minutes. More than a quarter of couples said they did not get the chance to have a proper chat until the weekend. That's six days without spending meaningful time together.

We all know in our hearts that there is no replacement for spending time being fully present with others. Just ask the ingenious teenager who, tired of reading bedtime stories to his little sister, decided to record several of her favorite stories on tape. He told her, "Now you can hear your stories anytime you want. Isn't that great?" The little sister looked at the machine for a moment and then replied, "No, not really. It hasn't got a lap."

What those we care about need most from us is not things. What they need most is *us*. They need us to be fully present in their lives. If we are absent from our relationships how can we expect those relationships to flourish? If we fail to be present in the lives of those we love, how can we expect to them to feel our love and be transformed by it?

The same can be said for our relationship with God. A 2007 study found that the average American spends a total of three minutes on religious or spiritual activities on a normal weekday. Three minutes. No wonder then that we struggle to feel a relationship with God in our lives, or even to feel God's presence at all. The Kotzker Rebbe taught "Where is God? Wherever we let him in." The problem is that we don't let him in very often.

It is not that we do not know what is important. We do know. If I asked you to list your priorities in life, most of you would not list shopping, or commuting, your job or your home. The proof that we know what is truly important is that toward the end of our lives we suddenly start scrambling to attend to all those things that we have ignored.

A rabbi waited in line to have his car filled with gas just before a long holiday weekend. It was a full-service station and the attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned to him to move forward to a vacant pump. Rabbi, said the man, I'm sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip. The Rabbi chuckled. Oy. I know what you mean. It's the same in my business!

That's us isn't it? Like the father in Harry Chapin's song, suddenly, we get older, we realize what we are missing and we stand in line seeking to fill up on the love and good that we passed by so many times. We want to heal our broken relationships. We want to make up for lost time. The problem is, we can lose time but we can never restore it. Once it's gone, it's gone forever. The rabbis of our Talmud tell us that when we stand before God in heaven for judgment of our lives, we will be asked five questions:

Did you conduct your business honestly?  
Did you set times to study Torah?  
Did you engage in procreation?  
Did you hope for deliverance?  
Did you seek wisdom and discern one thing from another?

I think there is one more question God will ask us: How do you explain those times when projects and things were more important to you than people? If we want to be prepared to answer that question, we need to ask ourselves now: Who do we need to spend more time with? What do we need to cut out of our schedule to make that possible? What sacrifices do we need to make?

The psalmist pleads with God: "Teach us to number all our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." But God has already provided the teaching. It's up to us to heed it.

Let me close with a poem by Charles Hanson Towne:

Around the corner I have a friend  
In this great city that has no end;  
Yet days go by, and weeks rush on,  
And before I know it, a year is gone.  
I never see my old friend's face,  
For life is a swift and terrible race.  
He knows I like him just as well  
As in the days when I rang his bell  
And he rang mine. We were younger then,

And now we are busy, tired men;  
Tired: with trying to make a name.  
“Tomorrow,” I say, “I will call on Jim.  
Just to show that I’m thinking of him.”  
But tomorrow comes – and tomorrow goes...  
And the distance between grows and grows.  
Around the corner! Yet miles away...  
“Here’s a telegram sir... Jim died today.”  
And that’s what we get, and deserve in the end.  
Around the corner, a vanished friend.”

So be present – truly present – in the lives of those you love now, because you just do not know how long you will have the opportunity. Circumstances change. People die. Children grow up. You have no guarantee of tomorrow. If you want to express love, you had better do it now.