

PART III: Living (Identity Resurrection)

*Many persons have a wrong idea about what constitutes true happiness.
It is not attained through self-gratification
but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.*

HELEN KELLER

Week 36: Why Wanting is the Way to Truly Living

It's a Saturday morning in early December, which means I'm sitting at the kitchen table with the kids, a cup of coffee, numerous toy catalogs, and a discussion about all the Christmas gifts they want. I'm annoyed by all the asking—it seems a little materialistic—so I decide to rain on their parade. I ask, “Which month do you like better—December or January?”

And of course they all scream, “December!”

So I ask, “Most of December, you don't have any new gifts, but in January, you have all your new toys. If the gifts are so great, why do you like December more?”

They roll their eyes and ignore me and the stream of requests begins to flow again. As I listen, though, the stream of requests *is* my answer. What makes December so joyful for kids? They are given the freedom to want and to ask.

You see, from an early age, we get taught to not ask.

I do it to my children. Usually, when the asking piles up—Can you reach this for me? Can I have more ice cream? Will you read me one more book? When can we play video games? Can we go to the toy aisle?—I subtly discourage the asking. With quiet sighs. Or my own eye rolls. Or by getting up slowly and dramatically to grant the request.

As children, we learn our wanting is a burden.

School is organized around doing what you're told and suppressing what you want—it's all about raised hands and hall passes and a red stoplight in the lunchroom. The whole structure is designed to keep a kid from talking, wanting, and asking. (Thank you, Teachers, who quietly subvert this.) As children, we learn our asking is forbidden.

So, as adults, the joy of asking is replaced by a feeling of guilt.

We feel guilty asking for raises, asking our spouse to help around the house, asking a waiter to take back the wrong order, or asking the person with an overflowing cart of groceries if we can move ahead of them with our single carton of milk. We even feel guilty asking for help: most clients arrive in therapy saying, “I shouldn't need help like this.” As adults, our wants get buried beneath a mountain of guilt and shame and frustration.

We need to unearth them again.

And when we do, we're going to discover our silenced requests are actually buried *treasures*. How can I be so sure? Because when we quit forbidding and start encouraging our children to *fully* want, the things they want are utterly beautiful.

In September, Aidan asked if he could continue his annual birthday tradition. Every year, in lieu of presents, he asks his friends to bring bags of food for the local

food pantry. Every year, we take a picture of the kids standing amongst a pile of food for hungry people. Every year, in the photo, the kids' faces are plastered with joy.

Aidan wants beautiful things.

In October, Caitlin asked if she could cut out, color, and deliver invitations for her friends to donate to the local food bank, so that disadvantaged families would have something to eat for Thanksgiving dinner. When we finally dropped the invitations into her friends' backpacks at school, her smile finally stretched from ear-to-ear.

Caitlin wants beautiful things.

In November, during the week before Thanksgiving, my kids went to a friend's house and packed lunches for the children in their school who wouldn't have access to their free school lunches over the weeklong break. Quinn said he saw a kid carrying one of the lunches. He said it was the best part of his day.

Quinn wants beautiful things.

In the first weeks of December, my kids went shopping for Christmas gifts for the less fortunate children in their school. They bought basic items like shirts and coats and hats and gloves. While shopping, they used their own money to buy materials to create Christmas gifts for each other.

Kids want beautiful things.

So do adults, when we give ourselves permission to want again. So do adults, when we become like children again. At Christmastime, kids are joyful because we are giving them permission to be their truest selves, and they teach us something about ourselves and about joy: our wants aren't ultimately bad or selfish. Our wants, in the end, reveal the depths of love within us. We must plumb those depths. And then, when we discover all the good and beautiful things we want, just waiting for a voice to make them real, we must start asking.

You have things you've always wanted to do with your life. Ways you've wanted to spend your days. Passions you've wanted to practice. Hobbies you've wanted to make a habit of. Love you've wanted to spread in the form of a vocation. Care you've wanted to give in the form of a calling. The things we want most are not, ultimately, material things, but *purposeful* things—patterns of living that feel meaningful. They are the deepest wishes of your truest self. You've recognized who you truly are. You've revealed who you truly are.

Now, finally, it is time to resurrect your truest self in your daily life.