

## Week 41: Five Senseless Days That Could Make Sense of the Rest of Your Days

Slowly, I began to lose my hearing.

Every few days, for about thirty seconds, I would lose my hearing completely in my right ear. The doctors couldn't find an explanation. But then a chiropractic adjustment seemed to resolve it. For about six weeks. Then it happened again, in the other ear. And then it happened again and again and again. As I waited one afternoon to see the chiropractor, my anxiety swelled. I thought of the music I love and the sound of wind in autumn trees and the way my wife's contagious laugh can be heard from two houses away. And I started to panic.

We don't think about disease and disability and death until we have to.

And that's a good thing. If we walked around constantly ruminating about disease, life itself would become a dis-ease. There is something healthy in our capacity to compartmentalize some things for a little while. But what do we do when those things walk out of their compartment and sit down in the middle of our lives?

I get scared.

Some people get angry. Others get compulsive. Some people try to solve the problem until they run out of possible solutions. Some people simply shove the thing back in its compartment and refuse to think about it. I wish I was capable of that, but I'm not. I don't get as scared as I used to, but I still wake up in the wee hours of the night thinking about it. And it still intrudes into my waking hours: a thought I didn't even realize I was having that makes my heart skip a beat.

As I waited for my chiropractor, I tried to think of the healthiest way to let my fear out of its compartment. I thought of the question many of us will play with from time to time: if I had one day to live, what would I do? As we explored earlier in these pages, oftentimes, the answer to that question includes radical things like quitting jobs and jumping out of airplanes and soaking up pleasure and tearful goodbyes to loved ones. It's an extreme question about an extreme situation that elicits extreme answers. It wasn't helpful. So instead, I began asking a different question:

If I only had one day to *hear*, what would I listen to?

That evening, I arrived home, weary from a long week. As usual, I was craving silence. I have three kids—I said goodbye to silence a long time ago. So, as usual, I opened the door and, as usual, I prepared myself for the onslaught of school updates and questions and fights about toys and protests about the dinner selection and resistance to bedtime. But on this particular evening, something *unusual* happened. The three little voices came at me and—on the day I was imagining to my last day to hear—I was overwhelmed with *gratitude*.

I soaked it all in.

Every lilting word and every whiny cry and every petty jab. I wanted to hear my wife laugh with them, and I wanted to hear her get frustrated *at* them. I wanted to hear the clink of glasses and the clank of silverware. I wanted to hear the kids chewing with their mouths open. I wanted to hear the doorbell ring and the dog barking like an idiot.

Like an old Aerosmith song, I didn't want to miss a thing.

With one day to hear, the cacophony felt more sacred than silence ever could. With one day to hear, the noise *in* my ears became music *to* my ears. With one day to hear, the sonorous world rang with treasures. Usually, by that time in the work week, I just want the day to be over. But on this unusual evening, I didn't want it to ever end.

The MRI was negative and the chiropractic adjustment worked again and this time we figured out what I was doing to displace a bone onto the auditory nerve. The relief was immense. Yet, a part of me wanted more of the awareness and the experience the crisis had given rise to. So, this is what I decided to do: I lived the next day as if it was my last day with sight. The messy house became a gift. I lived the day after that as if it was the last day I would smell. The dead rot of autumn made me dizzy. I lived the next day as if it was the last day I could taste. My toothpaste was like dessert. And I lived the following day as if it was my last day to touch.

I realized how warm a hug is.

In the words of Frederick Buechner, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*. Harper & Row, 1983.