

Ideas in Passing

✚ *from Joan Chittister*



What Do You Have Time For?

One of the obsessive concerns of contemporary society is speed. Everything we produce we produce to go faster than the ones before it. Planes go faster than the speed of sound, though no one cares. Computer upgrades costing hundreds of dollars are downloaded every day to take milliseconds off the operating speeds of the versions before them. To be valuable now, everything must go faster, start up more quickly, work at speeds measured in numbers no mind can calculate. We want instant oatmeal, electronic ticketing, accelerated educational programs, weekend college courses, and world news in thirty seconds or less. We are “a people on the move.” We want results. We are not a people who believe in process anymore, much as we love to talk about it.

But the spiritual life does not operate in high gear at high speed. The spiritual life is a slow, slow uncovering of the mechanics of the soul and the even slower process of putting it all back together again, of coming to see what we never saw before—God everywhere and, most of all, in us. Ironically enough, in our haste, our generation has lost a sense of the value of time. Speed has not saved us time. It has simply enabled us to fill it with twice as much work as we used to do. The faster we go, the more we leave ourselves behind. We do not stop for sunsets anymore. We take pictures of them, instead, and then never take time to look at the pictures again.

But there are some things that cannot be hurried. We cannot hurry the process of grief, for instance. We cannot rush the project of growth. We cannot speed the effects of hurt. We cannot hasten the coming of love. We must not attempt to flit through the search for God and then, failing in the enterprise of a lifetime, call it fruitless. Each of those things comes in stages. Each of them takes soul-work.

Time, the contemplative knows, is given not for the sake of perfection but for the sake of discovery. There is a great deal to be discovered in life before we are finally able to break ourselves open to the God within and around us out of whom all life flows. What we learn in the course of a lifetime, is life-changing:

We must learn that no institution is God. Nothing that symbolizes God is God and cannot be absolutized.

We must learn that we are not God. The world was not made for our amusement; it was made for our growth. And grow we must, painful as the growing may be.

We must learn that the God who is not contained in any institution and who is the very breath we breathe, is in us waiting for us to come to that realization. We must stop looking for God in things. God is here.

Finally, we must learn that time is the gift of realization, not the death of all our dreams. Whatever is happening, whatever stage in which we find ourselves, is the stuff of God. And the more we have of it, the more we have of God in the now. To be a contemplative we must begin to see time, not as a commodity, but as a sacrament revealing God to us in the here and now. Always.

—from [*Illuminated Life*](#) by Joan Chittister (Orbis)