

## **"Numbering Our Days"** **by Gail Lipsitz - June 2020**

The other day, I realized that I have not put on my wristwatch for nearly 3 months. What a telling sign of how my sense of time has changed since we began "sheltering at home" as the coronavirus pandemic invaded our lives.

This altered sense of time has affected us in ways we couldn't foresee, especially because everything happened so quickly. Living with others 24/7 presented new challenges, but so did living alone. At first, it was scary and disorienting. No need to set the alarm clock or be somewhere at a certain hour, no need to rush or meet a deadline, no place to go. Our regular routines disappeared overnight. The usual pattern of our days -- structured according to some kind of schedule and punctuated by predictable activities -- was disrupted. This was especially traumatic for those who suddenly lost their jobs, but also true, to a lesser extent, for people like me who had already retired. I looked longingly at my wall calendar for the spring months (yes, I still use one). Each week was chock-full of classes, exercise, get-togethers with friends, concerts, theatre, vacation plans, visits with family, and more. It was so depressing to realize I could no longer do any of these things, and for who knows how long. So I took down the calendar and stuck it in a closet. Then the days started to flow together. Is today Monday or Tuesday? Does it matter, when every day feels like Sunday?

For the first couple of weeks I fumbled around, trying to absorb this new reality and figure out how to "spend" all this "free" time. (Have you ever noticed how many expressions about time in English use commercial language?) I still tuned in to the morning and evening news, which one could count on happening when they were supposed to. But all the other hours in the day were so fluid.

Gradually, I started to see this as an opportunity. Who expected to have all this time to sit and read or watch movies as much as you wanted, to take solo or socially distanced long walks outdoors, to savor the blooming of spring, to call old friends and catch up, and to tackle the long postponed tasks of cleaning out your closets and files?

Then along came Zoom, live-streaming, and all the other vehicles that opened doors and invited us in for "virtual" learning, activities, and social contacts. "Zoom" seems an apt metaphor for time speeding up, for getting somewhere you want to go, and fast. No, life is not the

same as it was. But it became possible once again to take classes and lectures, attend religious services, exercise with others, visit an art museum, listen to a concert, and talk to and see friends and family, even if all this had to happen remotely. There were so many tempting things to do that I had to create a new weekly schedule. Now my days are again filled with stimulating activities. If someone calls, I may have to say: "I'll get back to you later because right now I'm on a tour of Tel Aviv," or I'm with Haydn in Vienna in 1785, or in my aerobics class at the senior center.

And yet, this freedom to indulge in whatever interests me feels like a luxury during what is an overwhelming crisis. No matter how many checks I send to food banks and other organizations trying to help, it feels like a drop in the bucket in the face of the huge devastation. Millions of people around the world have fallen ill with the virus; reported deaths exceeded 413,000 by early June. Many more have lost their jobs, savings and health insurance (if they had it) and can't pay their bills or feed their families. We know some of these people personally, and some of us have been directly affected by these kinds of losses.

Covid-19 has brought the fragility of life into sharp, painful relief. Any human being can literally be here today and gone tomorrow.

This sobering reality affects our sense of time in another way that is very different from what I described earlier as a luxurious kind of time. The feeling that we have "all the time in the world," "quality time," and "time to spend" on doing anything we choose may now be overshadowed by a sense of urgency, a feeling that "time is flying" or even "running out." Then there is also the nagging uncertainty about "how much longer?" and "when will this end?" Will life ever get back to "normal," and what will that look like?

Psalm 90 (verse 12) offers these ancient words that speak to us today: "Teach us to number our days [or count our days], that we may attain a heart of wisdom." What does it mean to "count our days"? The calendar is a visual tracker of time, with every day assigned a number. But below that obvious surface is the reminder that our lives are finite. We don't know how many days we will be given. So we need to make each day count, living it and appreciating it fully. Or, as Stephen Mitchell renders these lines of the Psalm: "Show us how precious each day is; teach us to be fully here."\*

Will our sense of time be permanently altered by how the coronavirus is affecting us? As we gradually emerge from the isolation and restrictions, what will we take with us into the future? Perhaps this experience will help each of us "attain a heart of wisdom" by becoming more aware of the passage and value of time.

*\*Stephen Mitchell, "A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew," HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.*