

The One Thing

By Santiago Lange

Years ago a movie was released entitled "City Slickers". The movie was about three men, old friends from way back, and now approaching middle age, who spent some vacation time each year doing something daring that would pose a profound contrast with the routine yuppie lifestyle they lived most of the time. The plot of the film revolves around their decision to spend a vacation together going on a cattle drive helping a bunch of seasoned cowboys move a herd of cattle across the big plains of the American West with the hope that, in the process, they might get in touch with their more primitive selves, and find out something useful about the meaning of life.



The boss of this cattle drive is a rough old cowboy named Curly, who lives up to all of our stereotypes about cowboys. He's mean and he's tough, and he can do anything with a rope or a whip or a knife. But in his tough and rugged way he's also very wise. In one of the more serious scenes of this comedy, Curly is riding alongside one of the city slickers, a character played by actor Billy Crystal, and their conversation turns philosophical. Against the backdrop of an open sky, impressive mountains, clear streams and beautiful scenery, the man on vacation turns to Curly and says with longing, "Your life makes sense to you." To which Curly replies: "You city folk. You worry a lot. How old are you? 38?" "39," the man says. "You all come up here about the same age. You spend fifty weeks getting knots in your rope and you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it." He pauses a minute and then he goes on, "You know what the secret to life is?" "No, what?" says the man. And then Curly says, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don't mean nothing." "That's great," says his companion, "but what's the one thing?" Curly looks at him for a minute, and says, "That's what you've got to figure out."

What then is that one thing?

In Luke 10:38-42 we read:

*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but **one thing is necessary**. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

So Jesus gave Martha the advice: "You are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only ONE thing." I would guess that the one thing we tend to suppose Jesus had in mind is time. Time for reflection upon life and what it all means; time for stopping to smell the roses; time for leaving the chores, like Mary did, to sit at the feet of Jesus. If that's the

opportunity that presents itself, time for taking time. And on the face of it, that's not a bad interpretation. Admittedly, we could all stand to do more of that. Certainly, with the schedules we keep, there is a danger of getting so caught up in the business of life that, like Martha, we miss the essence of life.

A man goes on vacation with his family. It's been a long year, and he is looking forward to this suspension in the normal routine of things. He is ready to put away the calendar and to get beyond a telephone and to do different things for a little while. But, without his noticing it, the to-do list for his vacation is as long as the todo list back at the office. Read these novels go to this museum, take this hike, eat at this restaurant, get these chores done on the mountain house, buy and absorb these journals and newspapers. Until one night, early on in the two weeks away and soon enough for him to catch himself, his little four-year-old says, "Daddy, will you read me my stories tonight?" He stretches out on the bed next to her, and they read. And, because she's tired, he knows that as soon as this last story is finished, he can get back to his novel and begin planning the events of the day tomorrow.

But here is what happens instead. When the last story is over, she says, "Daddy, will you just sit here until I fall asleep." And so he does. And with the light out while she sings herself to sleep, he listens to her voice fade quietly away, and then to her breathing, and then to the curtain rustling quietly as a soft breeze ushers cool night air into the room. He is aware of the fullness of time and the keeping of time is not as important and he is thankful. People need more of that kind of time. So, maybe we appreciate this interpretation of the words of Jesus to Martha:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." Time to smell the roses. Time to just be as well as to do. But as compelling as this approach to the text is, there's a danger to it as well. At times we have a tendency to beat up on Martha too much. Too often, in approaching this story, we diminish the importance of Martha's busyness, while at the same time romanticizing Mary's reflectiveness. We might conclude that Jesus came to justify nothing more profound than letting the dishes pile high in the sink. And if we're not careful, we arrive at an ethic of inactivity.

If we judge Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether. And if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do. And, there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. The one thing that Martha needed more acutely than more time, was the ability to properly discern the time.

This is a theme that appears over and over again in Luke's gospel, the theme that the Kingdom of God, in the presence of Jesus or of his disciples, is continually drawing near. And when it draws near, we have the timely opportunity to receive it if we only discern what it is. A little earlier in Luke, Jesus tells his followers that when they enter a place, like laborers entering a harvest, the Kingdom of God has drawn near. When it is welcomed and discerned for what it is, that's great, and "blessed are those who receive you." But whether it is received or not, the fact remains that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. And discerning it is the crucial issue. Being able to discern the time of your visitation by the Kingdom of God, and knowing in that moment what matters the most.

Sometimes, what matters the most is an active response, like that of the Good Samaritan who, in the presence of one in need, recognizes the moment in which the Kingdom of God is breaking into his life, and responds by "going and doing." Sometimes, what matters the most is the contemplative response, to do what Mary did in the story we find in Luke 10, which immediately follows that of the Good Samaritan.

One response is not better than the other, what matters most is the ability to discern what to do on each moment. Just here is where Martha's busyness was illtimed. It's not the busyness by itself that was the problem, but the timing of it. Figuring out what is ultimately important and putting that first, that's the challenge of the Gospel. And nothing is more important than receiving the Kingdom of God, wherever we are, when it comes near.

Sometimes when we discern that it is near, the faithful thing to do is to drop everything and sit still and listen, like Mary. Other times when we discern its presence, the faithful thing to do is to get busy and to commit to some important task, all of the organizational and personal drive and ability and passion we can muster, like Martha. The truth is that both of these attributes have their time and place; and the burden lies in discerning when to do the one and when to do the other.

So we need to be watchful for the ways in which the Kingdom, even now, is breaking around us. Let's stay alert to how it might be drawing near to us, in the form, perhaps, of some person in need this week whom we might meet in a chance encounter. Or of some spiritual awakening which has put us in touch with a beating heart that we had forgotten we had. Or of some thing of beauty that reminds us that the world is more, for sure, than just collective ugliness.

Who knows what form it will take, this Kingdom of God that is ever drawing near and coming among us? Just be watchful for it. Look for it in the midst of the routines and tenure of our life; and pray for the ability to discern it when it draws near. Then, having discerned its presence, the rest is easy. We'll know what to do next.

Let's continue to pray that more people may begin to understand the Good News of Jesus and live accordingly. □