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The Going Away Party

Tomorrow, my nephew goes away to college for the first time. He is young, bright, and ready for the next chapter of his life to begin. His parents are middle-aged and experienced at sending a child off to college; they already have an older child on her own. They are ready to raise their second family consisting of a sweet toddler, born later in life at a time when no one expected. And all are feeling the swift passage of time and changes underfoot.

My brother and sister-in-law decided to have a going away party for their son before he left for school. The family gathers, but this is not like all the other summer parties we've had to celebrate birthdays and holidays and family visiting from out of town. The dinner conversation revolves around getting children ready to go into the world. (And sometimes having them come back to live with you.) The mood is subdued and reflective—each of the parents at the table trying to figure out how best to cope with life's natural changes. I am also feeling how fleeting the moments are that lead to yesterday's memories. I realize that this same dinner and conversation will be repeated in my house in the coming years. My sons are 8 and 10 years old. I can already see that they are creating a life of their own with play dates and sleepovers and Pokemon cards to capture their attention. Has it really been a decade since I first learned to put a cloth diaper on my shoulder to catch the spit ups?

I can remember musing as a teenager what my life would be like when I turned thirty years old. Where I would live (Colorado), whether I would be married (yes), and what I would be doing for a living (software engineering). And now that it is twelve years past that imagination point, it feels like time has cheated me of its full presence. No more, I say to myself.

Is it possible to slow time down? To take in life in a way that leaves you satisfied instead of regretful or wishing for more? My sons will be out of the house before I know it. And my husband and I will be thinking about how to pay the tuition bills instead of curbing time on the Game Boy. There is a graciousness that I need to learn before then, that allows me to accept each stage of life for myself and those around me. And to be thankful for change and natural growth.

My husband and I celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary last week. The day after our anniversary, he said to me, "This is the first day of the next twenty years." It struck me as a way of marking time that was simple and beautiful.

So here's what I know about living with time, instead of living past time.

1. **Follow your whims and intuition.** Spend time on what feels right, not on just what your conscience tells you. There's no better guidance for leaving you fulfilled at the end of the day.
2. **Be willing to grieve** for the loss that comes with change, **to stand in the chaos** of not knowing what comes next, and **to be curious** as new beginnings emerge.
3. **Be playful.** Play along with your children's imagination, tease your partner, and find the precious moments that want to come out with every turn of life.

4. **Relax into time.** Let it cuddle you with a two-hour nap or a long bike ride with your kids or a quiet dinner with your spouse.
5. **Find joy in life itself, not in life situations.** My sons will never be 5 years old again. But they will continue to uncover the world around them and let me share in their discovery of what it is to be human.

We can't control time, can we? But we can ride it out, like a beautiful wave, so that the ups and downs are just as wonderful as the spray in your face. Maya Angelou said it best: **"Let choice whisper in your ear and love murmur in your heart. Be ready. Here comes life."**

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