

# living in small moments

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MOST MORNINGS I SIT FOR A FEW MINUTES looking out my kitchen window, waiting for my downy woodpeckers to appear at the suet feeders. Sometimes it's only the male, a bright red patch on his nape. Other mornings his mate arrives too, and they flit from the suet to the seed feeders, taking their fill. They have become part of my morning ritual, a moment to look forward to as I begin another hectic day.

They are my constant companions all summer, then for a while after the leaves fall, they disappear until the first snow. Even during

an icy storm last winter, they came to my feeders, clinging to the metal bar as they pecked at the frozen suet block. Whenever I inadvertently startle one, I watch him or her dart for cover in the towering walnut trees behind my home. I am sure they nest in those same trees, nourishing their newborn young throughout the summer.

Buddhist monk and author of *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, Thich Nhat Hahn, says we should savor our time, take slow motions, chew delicately, relish each mouthful of food and each supper dish washed by



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hand. “The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it,” he says. Therefore, when I wash my dishes by hand, I let my palms glide into the warm, soapy water, feel the sponge slip over each plate, stare out the window at my other visitors who come for their daily social calls. When the weather is mild and the windows are open, their merry tunes buzz in my ears: *chick-a-dee-dee-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee.*

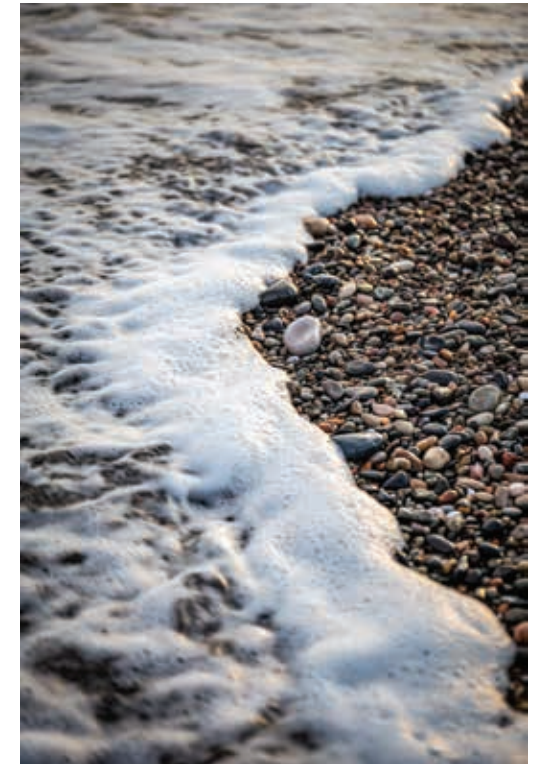
I tend to accumulate so many things in my house, minutiae of all sorts: envelopes, bills, magazines, fliers from the library, receipts. Soon one drawer is full and exasperated, and I have to sort and toss. Clutter is my detriment. I think of ways to enjoy what I collect, what items I value. The ones that don't matter are easily disposed of, and I surround myself with those that bring me joy. Ceramic bowls and wicker baskets are filled with pebbles from my journeys to the Upper Peninsula, the Sleeping Bear Dunes, and Porcupine Mountains.

One late May morning, I waded into freezing Lake Superior with a strainer to search for agates, along with one of the park rangers. After an hour of searching, I picked up a single striped stone that seemed a bit non-descript; however, when dipped into the water, its streaks of gold became apparent.

“You found an agate,” my ranger friend exclaimed. “That one's a keeper.”

It now rests in the small leather medicine bag I loop over the edge of my laptop to bring me positive energy when I write. I can still smell that clear morning, feel a cool breeze touch my face, the icy water revitalizing, sun warming my shoulders. Simplicity did not require money or energy, just being in the right space and time. Often, when I am stressed, I close my eyes and think back to moments like those. “Make thyself all simplicity,” Western philosopher Marcus Aurelius once said.

In other places in my house, a variety of feathers are used as bookmarks in my favorite poetry books or placeholders in my journals. The summer of 2016, after my sister died, on my many hikes through Lincoln Brick Park, a nearby nature preserve, no matter where I trod, I discovered a white feather. White feathers, I read, often appear



when you need strength, courage, or guidance. I like to think my sister was watching over me. “Finding gray feathers may mean you need to slow down and take things easy,” Richard Alois says. My woodpeckers have left small black and white spotted feathers, for me a rare occurrence, and this summer a blue jay lost a single striped feather one afternoon. It sat in the grass like a gift, a splendid offering on an afternoon when I most needed it. My collection includes many small brown wren and sparrow feathers and a raven's black plume with a stripe of deep purple. Suzy Kassem writes, “A heart without dreams is like a bird without feathers.” Wherever I walk, I slow down and cherish the moments as my eyes scan the path before me, waiting to find the next treasure.

During the pandemic, I kept a gratitude journal for one hundred days. I noticed how quiet the world was in my isolation—no boats on the river, very few cars driving down streets, the early morning silence unbroken by the loud whoosh of the school buses' air brakes. I savored the silence



and solitude. I didn't have to rush to be anywhere. I never had to leave my backporch steps if I didn't want to. Each day after working from home, I planned my next walk to a different park or along the river where I often hiked for four or five miles. That summer I wore out the soles of my hiking boots. In one of my posts forty-six days into my journal, I wrote:

*Gratitude Day #46: A different walk tonight at Hunter's Orchard and Hawk Meadow Parks. I have been walking later each afternoon, so it is nearly 9:00 pm when I get home. The river is high from all the rain we've had, and the apple and cherry trees are blossoming now. I love the colors of the flowering trees, the bumble bees finding sustenance, and how green everything is. I don't want the world to move forward too fast. My two favorite seasons: fall and spring! Even as a child, these were the best of*

*times, the promise and the melancholy of a season ending. Spring, though, is all about opening up, being ready for newness, for possibility. Dare I say, a tiny seed of hope gently sprouts in my heart? I shouldn't feel this way, yet who knows, it may be gone tomorrow, but right now I will take it. I will take hope and be grateful for it.*

Living with appreciation for each season makes one's world smaller and more compact, giving us something to look forward to as each day is different. The pandemic taught me how to live "small," how to be appreciative and to recognize each passing moment, like I did last week when I opened my door to feel the rain on my face and taste it on my tongue, being grateful for its blessings.

In my house, I have dried flowers sitting in a tin pitcher. I can still smell a bit of summer in their preserved petals if I get close and breathe in. I have saved a few small bird's nests, unusual pieces of driftwood from McCarty's Cove in my beloved Upper Peninsula, and even the perfect wing of a Monarch butterfly. As my father used to tell me, "You never know what might be found, so don't forget to look up or to look down wherever you go."



Another season, and I am sitting by the window in my kitchen, watching wispy flakes of snow fall and thinking about my father. The birds are busy gathering seeds to stay warm. They have emptied the feeder again. My downy woodpecker has visited, along with a cadre of sparrows, chickadees, and nuthatches. Yesterday, a cardinal graced the snow, pecking at scattered sunflower treats. We are now past the solstice, once more moving slowly toward the light. The spruces' branches are tipped with white, and snow continues to fall, each shape a magical, intricate design created by God, or the universe, or perhaps when a water droplet freezes onto a speck of pollen or particle of dust to form an ice crystal—a magic arrangement of molecules that become the six-sided snowflakes that mesmerize me in their flight. I go out onto my porch, look up, and catch one in my palm. 🍂

