

## **DON'T WAIT** by Emily Agnew

**I watched a movie a number of years ago that changed the way I view life. It was called "The Sheltering Sky", based on the novel by Paul Bowles.** It followed a couple traveling across northern Africa. They had fallen out of love, and they took mortal, ultimately fatal risks in a desperate effort to find themselves and each other again.

**Over and over, their choices poignantly convey the central theme of the movie: the awareness that events and experiences in our lives occur a finite number of times,** and the stunning sorrow of forgetting this, then remembering it when it is too late.

**I thought about this so much over time that I gave the theme a name: the Sheltering Sky syndrome.** It has affected me deeply because the truth of it is so inescapable.

**There are only so many encounters we'll have in our life with those we love.** We'll see and speak to each of these people a finite number of times. There is a finite number of sunsets we'll see, a finite number of times we'll visit a certain favorite place, a finite number of times we'll experience certain activities to which we have a strong attraction or a pronounced aversion.

**All this is finite, because we are in physical bodies.** In the Zen tradition, practitioners are exhorted to effort with the words, "Death is certain, and the time of death is uncertain...wake up!" No matter what your spiritual persuasion, it is hard to argue the truth of these two statements about death.

**What does this mean, to really bear this in mind, not as some kind of anxiety-producing, stark, or masochistic reminder of our mortality, but as a statement of the truth?** Because it is the truth. Each of us is going to die, and we don't know when.

**This brings me to a question. What matters? What really matters?** You never hear a dying person say, "I wish I'd had fifty thousand more dollars in the bank." At such a moment of truth, it is relationships people speak of. They celebrate or mourn the way they treated themselves and the people they cared about - the way they lived as friends, spouses, parents, colleagues, and citizens of their community and the world. These are the things that really matter.

**This is why evolving as a loving human being is the most important thing.** It is in a different class of importance from any other pursuit...it is not just one more item on the list. My clarity or lack of clarity about this truth determines the attitude with which I go through my day.

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**There's a thinking part of me that thinks it knows why I'm here and what is important.** It thinks it knows, "The reason I'm driving down the street right now is to get to work, obviously!" "The reason I'm going to work today is to earn money - obviously!" We think we know.

**We think we know, but do we, really?** We don't know the way the tiniest interaction with another person affects that person. So often, the assignment of meaning to events is just another way of trying to exert control over them.

**There is not much in our life that we have complete control over.** We can't control how other people respond. We have very limited control over outside events. All we have control over is our own attitude and actions. And the single most important action we can possibly take is to make our growth as a loving human being our highest priority.

**This means deciding to give up trying to control what we can't control, and staying open to learning.** We can choose to stay open to the many possible meanings of the events and encounters we experience each day. This doesn't mean *knowing* the meaning. It just means being open to it, instead of pretending we know.

**This frees us to approach our daily life decisions in a new way, asking questions like, "What would be most kind/loving/ caring here?"** Or "Now that I've taken that action, did it feel kind/loving/caring?"

**I offer you this invitation, or inspiration: grasp the opportunities your life offers you, moment by moment, to become more loving to yourself and others.** Remember the Sheltering Sky. Every moment is an opportunity, and our opportunities are all the more precious because they are finite in number. We do not have unlimited time on this planet, in these bodies.

**Don't forget!**

**Don't wait!**