

# **PAY ATTENTION**

**HOW TO FILL YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE  
WITH WONDER**

*by Brent Manke*

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*Instructions for living a life.  
Pay attention.  
Be astonished.  
Tell about it.*

*Mary Oliver*

# 0

## INTRODUCTION

Recently I took my daughter through an automatic carwash. Just before we drove in, I asked her, “Do you want to sit in the front seat?” Her blue eyes grew bigger than the steering wheel as she slid up into the seat beside me.

We pulled in and stopped the car. As the carwash started its cycle, our car shook with each pass of the machinery, roaring like a fighter jet. My daughter was in complete awe. This was probably the most amazing thing she had ever experienced in her 3 short years. And somehow, looking at this moment through my daughter’s eyes, *I had never experienced anything quite this amazing either.*

But it’s “just a carwash” right? Grownups really shouldn’t get so worked up about something so ordinary. Washing the car, for most of us, is an ordinary part of any given day.

Most days, our lives aren’t all that exciting. We get lulled to sleep by each passing moment, like watching a hundred train cars roll by. We dream of days filled with wonder, but the routine just isn’t all that exciting.

Our eyes grow dull.

Eventually a carwash becomes “just a carwash”. Every day becomes the same as every other.

Work, eat, sleep, repeat.

How can we, as grownups, re-capture the wonder with which children approach the world? Where can we go to find that spark of curiosity?

Wonder, as my daughter showed me that day in the carwash, isn't dependant on your location, or the scenery, or the excitement of your daily life. Any place can be beautiful, and any moment of the day can inspire wonder and awe. In fact, if you let it, wonder might surprise you in the most ordinary and everyday of places.

The trick is to have the eyes to see. To notice moments of beauty. To hear the music that sustains each waking breath.

To pay attention.

Here are some of the things I've learned about how to see, notice, and pay attention.

*He who can no longer pause to  
wonder and stand rapt in awe, is  
as good as dead; his eyes are  
closed.*

*Albert Einstein*

# 1

## DROP THE SHADES

Everyone's got an embarrassing photo from their childhood.

Here's mine:



That's me on the left, at the lake with my family during summer vacation. Bright neon yellow hat, neon green shorts (because, the 90s), and these amazing, bright, bold, neon sunglasses. And note the practical (yet stylish) yellow cord that kept them from falling off my boyish face.

Oh, the attitude! The swagger! Smile for this picture? Heck no, I've got my sunglasses on, nobody's gonna tell me what to do!

This is the attitude I carried well into my teenage years, as peers and rockstars taught me that growing up meant being cool. Somehow being distant, unphased and unimpressed was part of becoming a grownup.

Maybe you learned this attitude at some point as well. Maybe you learned that curiosity and awe were part of childhood, and growing up meant not getting overly impressed about anything. And with good reason too. You tried opening yourself to amazement, only to be let down, laughed at, or made to feel silly.

**This is why wonder takes guts. It takes courage to be amazed.**

## **Wonder is Courageous**

Have you ever watched A Christmas Story? In it, Ralphie eagerly collects points for an Orphan Annie Decoder Ring advertised in his favourite radio program. When the decoder ring finally comes in the mail, he decodes his first message, full of child-like anticipation, only to find a “crumby commercial”.

We've all been there. We've all felt that kind of disappointment before.

Rather than fall into that trap again we cross our arms, put on those neon shades, and leave childish decoder rings to the more gullible folks.

Because taking off the shades, daring to be amazed again is vulnerable.



Brené Brown points out that joy is the most vulnerable emotion we experience. The experience of joy is quickly followed by the fear that the other foot is about to drop, a fear that Brown calls “forboding joy”.

This is why, as proper grownups, we avoid being curious or amazed at anything. We don't care to be let down again. Yet the walls we put up to protect ourselves also trap us in a cynicism that chokes out the life inside. We're safe, but we also give up on the chance to truly live.

If we want to truly live, we need to take off the shades. We need to open ourselves up to being amazed, and the risk of looking silly or being hurt once again.

**Because wonder is an act of courage.**

*Our instinct as humans, after all,  
is to assume that most things are  
not interesting.*

*Malcolm Gladwell*

## 2

# BE INTERESTED

Ketchup isn't very interesting. It's on the table of every greasy-spoon diner, in every household's fridge. And what makes ketchup "ketchup" is that it tastes like ketchup should. It's ubiquitous, and that's how we like it.

Boring.

Author Malcolm Gladwell, though, decided to look at this everyday staple of American food differently. By asking questions, he dug beneath its mundane surface.

When he did he found a world of curiosities that led to the writing of an entire story. About ketchup.

Gladwell sees the world differently. He has chosen to make being interested into a sort of discipline. This is why he's able to continue to write interesting stories about seemingly ordinary topics.

In his book *What the Dog Saw*, he tells the secret of being a good writer:

*"The trick to finding ideas [for stories] is to convince yourself*

*that everyone and everything has a story to tell. I say trick but what I really mean is challenge, because it's a very hard thing to do. Our instinct as humans, after all, is to assume that most things are not interesting."*

It's true, isn't it? Most things aren't all that interesting, but not because things are inherently boring. No, the problem is *us*. Our brains are wired to see most things as boring.

## **The Filter**

If we were to live in constant amazement at everything worthy of it, our brain would probably get overwhelmed and shut right down. Everything is amazing when we give it attention, isn't it? If you were to point out every flower in bloom, every rich blue sky, each muscle that works together to produce a smile, you wouldn't be able to carry on a conversation.

Like getting struck by a crashing wave, your lungs, nostrils and eyeballs would get overwhelmed with stimulation.

Your brain knows this, so it filters most things out in a part of the brain called "Broca's area". The job of Broca's area is to judge which information is essential and filter out the stuff that's not. For instance, most of the information your eyes take in on your daily commute is unremarkable, which is why you don't remember most of it.

Most people can't even recall the order in which traffic lights are organized. Is red on top, or on the bottom?

To your brain, it's not important.

We don't think about most of this information because our brain is saving bandwidth for dealing with that kid on a bike who might swerve in front of you at any moment, or rehearsing that first appointment of the day. For information to get through Broca's filter it needs to be something out of the ordinary. It needs to be surprising in some way.

This is why ordinary life can feel so ordinary. If nothing interesting or unusual happens, our brains won't even bother to pay attention. But if we're going to be curious about ordinary things and find wonder in everyday life, we need to learn how to see the extraordinary amidst the ordinary, in spite of our brain's tendencies.

I think, through practice and habit we can learn how to see differently. And one way to do so is to find fresh eyes.

*The simple things are also the  
most extraordinary things, and  
only the wise can see them.*

*Paul Coelho*

# 3

## FIND FRESH EYES

One way to exercise the *seeing* muscle is to look at the ordinary through the perspective of someone else.

Iris is passionate about typography. As a book designer, she doesn't leave typefaces to the computer's defaults. No, a typeface reflects a writer's voice and must be carefully selected.

Rob believes that not only can a website or an app be beautiful, but the actual code behind it (all those numbers and symbols that look like the Matrix) can be elegant, poetic, even beautiful.

After you've visited Hans' farm, you won't eat "potatoes" ever again. You'll be eating "Russet", "Alaskan", or "Russian Blue" potatoes, each with their distinct colour and taste.

Most of us aren't experts of typography or code or potatoes. In fact, we might consider these topics unremarkable. We gloss over the typeface that we're reading right now, and as long as the app is working we don't even think about the code underneath it. It's unremarkable. Maybe even boring.

Until you talk to an expert.

When you talk to someone who's passionate about kids clothing, or lawn mowers, or the complexities of tree frog saliva, they open up a new and fascinating world for you to explore. Chances are that the landscape of your ordinary routine is full of curious facts, stories and wonder.

But if you can't find an expert's eyes of experience, find some fresh ones.

## Wide-Eyed Gazes

One morning, I went to work as I do every day. I sat down at my usual desk, sipping my same cup of coffee, wearing my same old shirt and tie, and went about my work. It was an ordinary day, until a big group of little kids started pouring in through the door. This little swarm of kids was on a school tour of my office.

When they buzzed over to my desk, you know what I wanted to tell them: *"This is just a job, kids. We're all just working same as we do every day. This is just what grownups do. Now leave me alone so I can do my work."*

But as much as I wanted to, I couldn't tell them that.

When I looked at them, with their wide-eyed wonder at my daily work, I started to see my ordinary everyday routine through their perspective.

I began to see the opportunity of the new day. The things I *get* to do, as ordinary as it all might have seemed to me.



All because of these kids' fresh eyes.

Is your life ordinary? Your hometown, your office, your daily grind, is it same-old same-old? Get someone else's perspective on your world, and you might start seeing it with fresh eyes.

*Sit down. Be quiet.*

*Wendell Berry*

# 4

## MAKE SPACE

Wonder often doesn't happen unless we make space for it.

Making space, though, isn't very natural for me. You see, I am a *speedwalker*. No matter where I'm going, I instinctively try to get there as quickly as possible. While I'm walking, my entire body leans forward, eyes on the destination. Walking isn't a recreational sport for me, it's a way to get from point A to point B.

I don't think I'm alone. The very fact that we have speed limits on every road is a good indicator that a lot of us are trying not to waste any time getting where we're going.

I'm a speedwalker because I'm *busy*. I have a full schedule, long to-do list, and young kids who always want my full attention. And when I do get a moment to myself, I have my phone and my feeds to keep my occupied.

Sound familiar?

But in all of our hurry and busyness, what are we missing along the way?

# Staring Out the Window

History is full of stories of people who made their greatest discoveries - moments of seeing something in a fresh way - while they were taking it easy, rather than when they were busy.

Like Archimedes, for example, who discovered his “Archimedes Principle” while he was taking a bath!

Bathing, as we know, requires a change of pace. You start the water, strip down, test the water, step in. It’s a ritual that forces you to slow down.

It was only as Archimedes slowed down, letting the warm bath water slowly rise around him, that he connected the dots that became his theory of displacement. (Then he made a name for himself when he jumped *out* of that bathtub and ran around town yelling *Eureka!* But that’s a different story...)

Creative insights happen, not while we’re hurriedly rushing through the day, but in the pauses and the margins.

It’s moments where we slow down, or pick our heads up to look around, where wonder and curiosity have the opportunity to surprise us.

*I wonder how many people I've  
looked at all my life and never  
seen.*

*John Steinbeck*

# 5

## ZOOM IN

As grownups we tend to assume that we have to travel somewhere else to see interesting things. Our hometown is familiar territory. When you see your friend's travel photos, your own neighbourhood feels quite mundane. All the excitement, wonder, and new discoveries happen *out there*, don't they?

Of course there's value to zooming out, visiting a new place, or finding a change of scenery. But the endless pursuit of the new and exciting out there is a futile endeavour. What happens once you finally land *out there*? Suddenly you find yourself, not *out there*, but *here*.

**Sooner or later, every *out there* becomes the new *here*.**

Eventually the new-car scent of a new city or country will wear off, the scenery that once was fresh and exciting will at some point become familiar.

Better, before you start stamping your passport, to learn to be amazed at what's *right here*.

## In the Backyard

Chances are, there's more going on in even your own backyard than you ever imagined.

One of my favourite childhood activities was turning over rocks in the garden. Do you remember doing that? Rocks look quiet and ordinary, but underneath is a world of creepy-crawly life that can provide hours of wide-eyed exploration for kids (and grown-ups too, if we're honest). In fact, every corner of any neighbourhood block holds a world of discovery for those who stop to zoom in.

What creepy-crawly life might you discover in your backyard if you turned over a few boring rocks?

What interesting life might you discover in your backyard if you turned over a few boring rocks, or simply looked out the window?

## **Familiar People**

I hate introductions. Rather than go through the awkwardness of meeting someone, I often to avoid breaking the ice altogether. I passed a particular neighbour in our street every morning for *five years* before we ever spoke and got to know each other.

It's easy to make "keeping to yourself" a habit. It sounds polite and respectful. It's much safer to assume that strangers aren't very interesting, or not very interested in meeting you. Because, as you recall, *curiosity is an act of courage*.

How many people have become familiar, without ever actually introducing yourself or getting to know them?

Before you go *out there* looking for a change of scenery, start by becoming curious about the things that have become dull and familiar *right here*.

Start bird-watching in your own backyard.



*Nowadays most men lead lives of  
noisy desperation.*

*Henry David Thoreau*

# 6

## BE QUIET

I once went to a symphony orchestra with some friends. Our seats were surprisingly close to the orchestra. As we sat down, we felt as though we were within arm's reach of the musicians.

But as the orchestra started playing, I was shocked.

I could not hear them. I was only a few meters from the string section, but I could scarcely hear what they were playing.

Have you ever had the feeling that, even though the air is silent, you were engulfed in noise? Sometimes the noise *inside* can drown out the sound *outside*.

That's exactly how I was feeling as I strained to hear the first notes of the performance. I had no idea about the noise level of my own internal world. My mind and entire being were filled with various stresses and preoccupations that prevented me from hearing the things around me.

As I continued to listen, I felt the internal noise starting to drain out of my body. And as my *self* quieted, I began to hear the orchestra's delicate notes.

*“We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.” - Mother Theresa*

We like to blame our environment for the noise and busyness of our daily lives. We point the finger at always-on technology, our crazy schedules, or our boisterous kids. But these are red herrings, distracting us from the real source of the noise.

To be attentive, we must first quiet the noise *inside*. We must, in Wendell Berry’s words, “sit down, be quiet.” To sit quietly in the *right now* rather than running off to next week’s plans or what else we should be doing.

**Only when we’re present *in* the present can our eyes open to the beauty and wonder of the world around us.**

The orchestra is already playing, but you won’t be able to hear them unless you yourself are quiet.

*Absolutely unmixed attention  
is prayer.*

*Simone Weil*

# 7

## REMOVE THE FRAME

The zoo is a great place to see animals up close. But seeing an animal in a cage doesn't let you truly *experience* those animals. I've stood within meters of a mountain lion prowling around its zoo cage, which was pretty interesting. But I also felt pretty safe.

In contrast, I've been hiking in the mountains when I *thought* I saw a mountain lion across the ridge, and the thought alone sent shivers down my spine.

Whenever you put a frame (such as a zoo cage) around something, you put distance between yourself and that thing. You become a spectator in the scene.

Which can be a good idea, if we're talking about things like mountain lions, but most things are better experienced without frames.

Glass windows, TVs, phones, all take you out of the scene by putting a border around it. But if you want to truly experience something, you need to remove that border and get into the scene yourself.

Even the *thought* of a mountain lion's strength is enough to make you shiver, once the frame is gone.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* Robert M. Pirsig compared driving a car across the countryside and riding through it on a motorcycle. In a car you're a spectator, he argued, observing the changing landscape through the frame provided by the car windows.

Riding a motorcycle, on the other hand, dropped you right into the scene.

*“On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming.”*

**To fill your senses with wonder, remove the frame. Get into the scene.**

Smart phones, with their promise of hyper-connection, actually serve to disconnect us from our surroundings by putting a frame around the images display.

Often our first instinct when we see something that moves us, whether it's a sunset or a baby's cute facial expressions, is to pick up our phone to snap a photo. But the desire to capture can actually take us out of the scene and make us spectators, rather than participants in the moment.

And, as Pirsig's travel companion commented while trying to fit the yawning prairie sky into his camera's frame, *“as soon as you put a border on it, it's gone.”*

What would happen if you disconnected the *capturing* of a moment from the moment itself? What if you left your phone in your pocket to

remain a participant *in* the moment?

If you want to appreciate the wonder of a mountain lion, skip the zoo and its cages, and head for the mountains.

*Pay attention to what you  
pay attention to.*

*Amy Krouse Rosenthal*



# 8

## SAVOUR

Our brains aren't wired for noticing the good stuff. Your brain has what's called a *negative bias*. It wants to see the bad stuff and overlook the good. Author Richard Rohr and psychologist Dan O'Grady explain this bias by comparing Velcro and Teflon. Negative and critical thoughts stick to your memory like Velcro, but positive and joyful thoughts slide off like eggs on a Teflon pan.

We often walk through an entire day completely pre-occupied with the stresses, frustrations, and fears of the day. This is the negative bias at work, and it's what gets us into trouble. As Tony Robbins points out, "the two emotions that mess us up the most are anger and fear."

The antidote he prescribes is *gratitude*, because gratitude can't co-exist with anger and fear.

If you want something good to stick, to notice and feel gratitude for a loving or positive experience, you have to savour it. This doesn't come naturally, so savouring must be intentional.

Neuroscience suggests that it takes *15 seconds* before a positive thing will stick in your memory.

Fifteen seconds is longer than we spend enjoying anything, most of the time. Imagine standing in the parking lot watching the sun go down for 15 seconds. Or looking at your loved one, without talking or trying to fill the empty space, for an entire quarter-minute.

With practice, fifteen seconds at a time, we can strengthen our “noticing muscle”, make gratitude a habit, and start re-wiring the natural bias of our brains.

*We write this to make  
our joy complete.*

*The Apostle John*

# 9

## SHARE

What's the first thing do when you see something beautiful?

If you're like me, your first instinct is to tell someone else so they can enjoy it too.

A few nights ago I was in the backyard and noticed aurora borealis (northern lights) dancing in the sky overhead. Excitedly I rushed into the house and pulled my wife outside to watch the display.

This was too good to enjoy alone.

**Good things aren't meant to be enjoyed alone. Good things want to be shared.**

It seems we're wired to share the things that we see. Social media is built on this human instinct to share the things we enjoy. One of the reasons we're so quick to whip out our phones to capture our children, dogs, and dinner is because good things want to be shared.

You might even say that you can't fully enjoy *anything* unless you can somehow share it. Being able to say, "Hey, look at that!" to someone else is part of the enjoyment.

Mary Oliver's instructions for living a life are to, "pay attention, be astonished, tell others." I've sometimes wondered about that last bit. Why "tell others"? Isn't enjoyment of the things you notice enough?

Apparently not. Because attention and astonishment are best when enjoyed with others.

*And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye,  
clear. What we need is here.*

*Wendell Berry*

# 10

## EMBRACE YOUR STORY

They would have you believe that the good life is *over there*. Where the grass is greener and everyone else is happy and fulfilled. And getting *over there* is as simple as that next purchase or vacation or milestone.

In times of discontent with ourselves and our present situation, we dream of hopping the fence to enjoy the greener grass.

This discontent stirred in me recently while reading Donald Miller's *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. Miller explains that living a good life is like writing a good story. His quest to "live a good story" led him to hike the trail to Machu Picchu, start dating a girl, bicycle across the continent, and start a national mentorship program, among other things.

As I was reading, I found myself thinking, *"I'd like to live a good story too! I should really do the hike to Machu Picchu as well. Or start biking long distances. You know, do something crazy."*

Have you ever had similar thoughts? As you're dragging your feet through your day, you look at all those cool people on Instagram (or wherever you get your envy-fix) and think that if you could just climb some great mountain or land some dream job, you'd finally be living a

cool story.

**Our dream life always seems to live somewhere outside of our current, mundane existence.**

At some point in my reading, I started to realize that while doing “something crazy” might be helpful on some level, it wouldn’t actually help me with my real story. In fact, some kind of one-off adventure would be an *escape* from the story I was currently living.

My story includes things like getting breakfast ready for my daughters or pushing them on the swing after work. While this might not sound adventurous, no change in context would give me a more real story to live.

Where are you at? Do you need to do something drastic to reboot your story? Or do you, like me, already have the raw materials for a great story right where you are?

Maybe you’re simply not seeing your story because you’re right in the middle of it.

## **Cast, Reel, Repeat, Repeat**

Have you ever gone fishing? Fishing can be fun, but it’s not always exciting. Between the exciting parts of actually catching fish is a lot of casting, reeling, getting snags, getting bored.

Now imagine you had to film a dynamic fishing show. Imagine how many long hours of boring footage it takes to produce one action-packed hour of a fishing show. The casting, the getting snags, the



getting blown around by the wind and going home empty-handed.

Life can be like fishing. Real fishing is a lot different than a show about fishing. When you're living your story, you're not watching the highlight reel. You're living through the whole thing.

Every cast.

Every snag.

Every boring moment.

This is the long middle, and everyone is living through it.

Miller compares this “long middle” to kayaking across a body of water. When you first leave the shore, you feel the beach fading quickly behind you. You're making great progress! Then, once you reach the opposite shore, you similarly feel the finish line approaching quickly. But there's a point in the middle of the trip where you don't feel *any* progress. You start to think that your paddle strokes aren't getting you anywhere, that you'll be stuck in the middle forever.

You might be at the beginning or end of some exciting mini-stories, but on your long arc you're probably somewhere in the middle. The key is to keep paddling and keep your eyes open.

This is your story, and you get to live through it.

## Checking Out

It's tempting, if you're stuck in the long middle, to try to escape your

story. You don't have to physically leave to escape your story. You can check out by reaching for your phone when you take the kids to the park, or by thinking about work projects during dinner. You might be physically present, but it's easy to avoid engaging with the people and events around you.

**Engaging your story, day in and day out, takes work and courage.**

Sometimes all it takes to make an average story great is making that phone call you've been putting off, or raising your hand when an opportunity arises, or turning over a rock that's always looked dead and boring.

But you'll only take advantage of those opportunities if you're leaning into your story. Not the story you dream of, but the one you're living in now, right at this very moment.

## **Enter Your Story**

Several times a week I go for a morning run to start the day. It's quiet. Me and the road, and maybe a podcast in my ears. After running, I'll come back home, sit on the deck and watch the sunrise. It's a refreshing space.

At that point I have a choice to make.

I can start the day thinking about all the stories I'd rather be living, bored by my routine, irritated by the demands on my time and energy. Or, I can enter the context of my real, long-middle story. The real story can be mundane, many times interrupted, but it also can be filled with wonder, if my eyes are open.

You're living a real story, right now. Will you enter that story? Will you choose to be interested, curious, and grateful?

**Will you pay attention?**

I hope you will. Because maybe with the next rock you overturn you'll discover that your ordinary life is, in fact, teeming with life, curiosity and wonder.

# THANKS FOR READING

For more about this book, and to buy a printed version of this book and other goodies, visit [payattnbook.com](http://payattnbook.com).

Do you have a story about learning to pay attention, or a time when you discovered wonder in an ordinary moment? I'd love to hear it! Email me at [brent@brentmanke.com](mailto:brent@brentmanke.com).