
Open to Life's Sorrows and Joys

Slowing Time: Seeing the Sacred Outside Your Kitchen Door

Barbara Mahany.

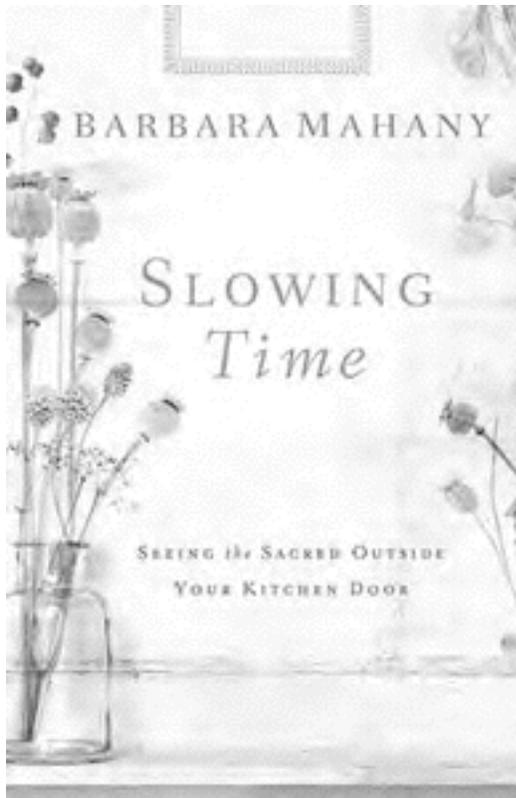
Paperback: Abingdon Press, 2014

Review by Beth Booram

For all the talk these days about living “present to the moment,” how many of us know the first thing about cultivating, let alone sustaining, a life of presence? After reading *Slowing Time: Seeing the Sacred Outside Your Kitchen Door*, I’m convinced that author Barbara Mahany, knows a great deal about living present to the moment.

Mahany, a former *Chicago Tribune* columnist and now freelance journalist, describes life as drenched in wonder. She defines it as such because that’s how she experiences her life. In this book—part field guide, part memoir—she explains, “The aim, at every turn, is to hold the holy hour up to the light. Extract the essence, the marrow, the deep-down glory, and the everyday gospel.”

Each section of the book begins with a description of a season—as in the four seasons—touching down in that season, reflecting on its meaning and significance. For instance, Barbara describes winter as the season of deepening and stillness; spring, the season of quickening; summer, the season of plentitude; and autumn, the season of awe. She begins with the winter solstice and returns to it at the end of the book, denoting her view of life as an ever-turning spiral of time.



After the description of the season comes a list of wonders from that season, such as frost ferns on the windowpanes in winter or jolly pumpkins punctuating a farmer's field in the fall. The reader is also invited to reflect on her or his own particular delights and sightings of the season. The Count Your Blessings Calendar that follows encourages the slowing of time through noting holidays and significant dates of the season, as well as thoughts and "whole body enticements" for entering into and savoring that season.

The bulk of each section is comprised of several short essays, each entitled with the focus of the chapter—like, *The Weightlessness of Summer*—on Savoring; or *Questions without Answers—On Witnessing the Soul, Unfiltered*. The sections end with one of my favorite aspects of the book—a recipe for the season. The ingredients for *Beef Stew with Pomegranate Seeds and Aromatic Rice* are now on my shopping list! One definitely unusual feature of the book's organization is a running tab along the bottom of the page, from page to page, that includes "field notes" from the author about her own seasonal sightings. (I can't say that this feature really works for me).

As for the chapters, each one is a short essay drawn from real life and most are very relatable. The stories shared are ordinary events, like a child watching cardinals on a rooftop, a friend's mother who is dying from cancer and the author's own prompting to take oranges and chocolate to people living homeless. By serving up stories that any one of us might experience and turning them golden by noting the sacred in their ordinariness, this book describes a life that most of us would love to live. Barbara awakens a spirit of adventure in the reader; the inner sleuth who loves nothing more than to track down clues to a mystery. She entices us to want to slow, to still the noise of our lives, and notice that we are perpetually on holy ground.

Speaking of holy ground, a reference from the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament telling of Moses's encounter with a burning bush, *Slowing Time* also invites readers to equally sacred soil. Mahany writes from the perspective of her Catholic faith tradition and her husband's Jewish heritage, uncovering and reverencing common ground between the two. Springtime, for instance, marks the Christian season of Lent and Easter, while in the Jewish calendar it marks the Festival of First Fruits. Winter escorts the Christian Advent of Christ, while for Jews, the Festival of Lights. In her own words, she prays that the pages of this book will be "a springboard" for the readers "own meandering into the Holy." Her family's encounter with the Divine comes from the rituals of two faith traditions and provides a rich lens to reveal both the light and shadows that pulsate throughout the seasons of a year.

The two most prominent recurring themes in *Slowing Time* are prayer and attentiveness to wonder. Prayer weaves through the pages of the stories like a stitch holding together the binding. In many ways, it's not a topic of the book but the glue that holds the pages together. Prayer is described as "unfurling" the deeper desires and cares that are buried within our hearts. Prayer is turning to God and allowing the sentiments of one's heart to be released into the wind like a flag or windsock or kite and carried away to God's heart.

The other theme woven throughout and illustrated again and again is the theme of attending to wonder; the wonder that fills all of life—if we have eyes to see it. I enjoyed viewing the way that Barbara Mahany unpeeled an unsuspecting moment and uncovered the glimmering wonder innate in it. Wonder, to this author, is found within and all

around. It's found in the sight and taste of a luscious tomato; or playing peek-a-boo with the moon; or teaching a child to see through binoculars. Holy wonder, according to *Slowing Time*, can be found most places—whether in families, homes, gardens, friends, losses, life and in love—found by any good detective.

The final note I'd like to make in review of this book is related to the writing style. It isn't a style that everyone might be drawn to. Truthfully, I suspect more women would find it a pleasurable read. For me, as an author who loves good stories told well, I was delighted. Barbara's style is whimsical and informal; poetic and real. She writes about how she lives and each page is drenched with the reality, not theory, of what it is to walk "tip-toed through life." Barbara asked me as the reader to be open to life's sorrows and joys, considerate that both are filled with potential; with the Divine.

If you need a teacher to show you the way of "living present to the moment," I would recommend this book. Read it s-l-o-w-l-y; page by page, essay by essay, pondering and savoring its stories and illustrations. But don't stop there. That would be tragic. Take her examples with you as you develop your own field guide, your own almanac of the seasons of your life and the sightings of all that is truly wonder-filled about it.

Beth Booram is the co-founder and director of Sustainable Faith Indy, an urban retreat center in Indianapolis. She has authored several books including her upcoming book, *Starting Something New: Spiritual Direction for Your God-given Dream*, which will be published by InterVarsity Press in May 2015.

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