



## *Wising Up Press*

### **THE POWER OF THE PAUSE** *The Wonder of Our Here and Now*

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## **Two-Minute Warning**

**By Sidney Stevens**

Here's what I know is true.

Stephen lies beside me in the semi-darkness of another chill spring morning, me awake and him breathing lightly in sleep as he often does this time of day. He's warm beside me and restless, almost awake. I can't imagine lying next to anyone else now. He groans softly and rolls over, keeping perfectly to his side of the bed in the dip he's created over time. I know the full feel of him there, neatly furrowed in the folds of our mattress and my brain after nearly twenty years together.

The alarm will ring soon. We'll both rise, him first into the shower and me right after. Neither of us eats breakfast, possibly a holdover from our graduate school days when we were always running off to the next thing. And possibly because we don't have kids and never fell into a family routine. I didn't want them and still don't feel the call. Stephen did for years. He used to bring it up often, or stop to linger at the ballpark where Little League teams play in the evenings. I hate keeping him from fatherhood, but I can't make myself want what I don't. He could've left me any time for someone more maternal. But he hasn't. He rarely brings it up now. He's given up asking me to marry him, too.

Stephen will walk down the stone path out back to the 1930s garage he's converted into a small studio with skylights and lots of plants. I like his studio as much as he does, but I rarely wander out there. Better to not disturb all those blueprints and sketches piled around him. It's the one realm he inhabits without me.

Stephen is an architect, specializing in energy-efficient buildings with solar panels, bamboo floors, and cellulose insulation made from recycled denim. A majority of his clients here in southeast Pennsylvania don't seek eco-friendly design, so Stephen churns out mostly uninspired cookie-cutter mega-homes in treeless cornfield developments with stone veneer siding and vaulted ceilings. I know he'd give his right arm, and left one too, to design wild, giant, undulating museums, skyscrapers and eternal monuments. But that's not happened for him.

I taught urban planning at Gunther College in town for three years as an adjunct professor. I'd hoped for a fulltime faculty job, but it never materialized, even after I promised to finish my Ph.D. I now substitute-teach in the public schools and handle publicity for a small downtown art gallery housed in a converted silk mill with exposed brick walls and floor-to-ceiling windows. I also try to work on my book every day, an

offshoot of my doctoral thesis on innovative ways cities and towns are preparing for climate change. I adore the topic, but the writing is slow.

Stephen will trudge back to the house about six, unless he's meeting a client. He's usually rumpled looking and tired. So am I. Most nights we cook together, side by side in our crowded kitchen, typically vegetarian stews and stir-fries interspersed with an occasional steak or salmon. Sometimes we go out to eat, sticking with one of the trendy restaurants that line the charming streets of our town's revitalized historic district. Or we dine with friends. On Saturday we'll bike along the Delaware Canal if it doesn't rain. Last weekend we ventured into New York for a tour of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, including an outside exploration of the building itself (for Stephen), which was designed to look like a massive pile of irregularly stacked boxes. Last summer we traveled to France and Germany. This summer a big trip looks doubtful because I had fewer teaching jobs and Stephen's client base shrank. There's always next year. I currently feel a pull toward Argentina or Thailand. Stephen isn't so keen on either, but will go if I plead enough.

It's a good life. For the most part, Stephen and I feel fulfilled and motivated, partaking in personal and professional activities we enjoy and hopefully contributing something to the world.

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Here's what's also true.

What I've just described is the story I tell myself and others. It's what anyone would see upon the closest scrutiny of our lives. I fully embrace this narrative—on the

surface it's absolutely true. Until some buried urge pushes up, despite my best efforts to keep it hidden, reminding me that this account doesn't fully flesh out the tale.

No one can see what I hide as I write multiplication problems on the blackboard or empty my grocery cart at the checkout line, how my nerve endings are often numb, synapses in my brain on half speed. How many days I go through the motions, laughing on cue with the other teachers on break, reaching for another plate to wash in the kitchen sink, nuzzling against Stephen as I chop onions and he sautés mushrooms, pecking out words on my laptop that don't seem to capture everything I want to say. I live these moments physically, but not in some deeper way where they might actually count or archive into memory. I only do them because I must for day-to-day life to function.

It occurs to me increasingly that maybe I haven't felt the fullness of anything for more years than I care to count.

I'm not depressed. I've been down that road before, where everything worth having, like joy and love and the burst of rich red flavor from fresh-picked strawberries seems permanently and hopelessly locked behind tinted, murky glass. Things right now don't look muddied or muffled so much as just an inch removed from reach, running closely parallel but not quite close enough to access the full experience.

I hammer myself for offering such a cliché. My life is plentiful with what anyone would want. Who doesn't occasionally feel numb? I love Stephen. I do. Many days I feel truly fortunate. Yet more and more during odd, quiet moments—while paying bills, scrubbing toilets, or even as Stephen and I wander our neighborhood on lovely summer evenings, down tree-lined streets, past well-maintained mature homes, hand in hand, kids whizzing by on bikes, shouting across yards and lots—I'm increasingly certain I should have kept exploring other paths instead of rejecting them outright.

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Here's what could have been true.

For the record let me say this: I'm a better person than I was before Stephen. That I know for a fact. Maybe it's his steady, kind influence. Living with anyone rubs off the pointy edges, but Stephen's thoughtful, sweet disposition has rubbed off way more edges than I thought possible (he never fails to massage my feet after long teaching days and lets me vent as much as needed when I get stressed, always with a patient smile). I'm kinder and more aware of others because of him, more willing to create space for them and their wishes, more inclined to yield my space in line to a senior or giggle with toddlers. It's sincere, too. I'm also more confident, more settled, more certain about what makes me happy and what doesn't.

With Anthony I was the mirror opposite—like dwelling on the black side of a yin-yang symbol. I was more fearful, more haunted by a sense of darkness that has tinted my thoughts from earliest memory. Which should make me happy that I now live on the lighter side with Stephen.

And yet that old pre-Stephen darkness has begun showing up again with rising regularity. I'm pulled to re-examine a past I once fled—my mom's stifling MS and my dad's stifling devotion to her care, the suffocation and tedium they both endured, and still do, never generating quite enough concern for me or my brother. I thought I'd put those memories away for good.

I replay my life with Anthony again and again, too, the life I ultimately didn't pursue, his desire to travel every inch of the planet, sample every human being in his

path—young and old, good and bad, every shape and size—each one fodder for his fascination. I met him after college as I roamed the country in search of me. I found him instead, sleeping in a ragged tent outside Sebastopol, California instead of his parents' Connecticut estate, train-hopping and hitchhiking from town to town, bathing in rivers and bus stations, foraging in gardens at night and in stinky dumpsters. I joined him without hesitation to explore America, then Asia and Europe—forever ignoring his disregard for my deepest being, his inability to love anyone.

I wasn't as nice with Anthony. I was more like him, lashing out with ugly words and put-downs when I felt most vulnerable, self-absorbed and near narcissism in my pursuit of things and experiences to make me happy. I finally released it all into a different kind of life.

I left Anthony on a cloudy morning in Barcelona, and my parents before that, and a thousand other possible lives because they dredged up dysfunction and pain I decided to escape. I enrolled in grad school, met Stephen while filling out forms at orientation (I asked to borrow his pen), and have labored these years to bury my unpleasant past in work, relationships and good deeds, behind smiles and pleasing gestures—cookies for neighbors, phone calls to sick friends, charitable contributions to causes that move me.

I believed my escape was successful. And yet suddenly I can't seem to paper over the darkness, which is darker now and more alive than back then. I find myself screaming along with rage songs as I drive alone down tame suburban streets, howling

anguished lyrics with a satisfying fury I've never let myself fully feel. I crave piercings and bomb explosions and the emptiness of lonely roads.

I can hardly bear to contemplate what's suddenly all too clear: my life is ordinary. A loaded word, I know. Ordinary is subjective. But let's just say I'm not exactly who I meant to be, close perhaps, but a lackluster version. I ache to torch what's "respectable," smash its nice doodads and pleasantries to bits, speed away and never return.

Apparently, I didn't morph into a sunnier, happier me with Stephen after all. I simply disowned my darkness to the point of numbness, becoming less than fully resplendent. Because to segregate darkness from the entire emotional mix and bury it alone is impossible. Pain simply can't be untangled from the whole and anesthetized without deadening all other feelings with it, including the good.

When I was with Anthony, I wished like hell not to stand out. I thought darkness tinged my flesh, like black jaundice. Now that I'm away from that step outside the line, I wish like hell to kick ass again.

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Here's what I've decided to make true.

The plan, the urge, is an old one, always shoved aside before it reaches real awareness. Suddenly it's recognizable enough for execution. I've decided to leave Stephen.

I decided this morning as he yawned in the bathroom, louder than necessary and ending in a grating grunt.

I decided as he shuffled to the shower, leaving behind an aroma mix of yesterday's faded cologne and something akin to raw eggs. I decided when he kissed the top of my head before strolling to his office and murmured, "So long, Midge," (his nickname for me

since the beginning, a play on my given name, Margaret), as though it's still as clever and fresh as it seemed then.

I decided last week when I noticed I can't see as well as last year. I need new glasses. I decided while recharging my phone halfway through yesterday after having already recharged it once before breakfast. I need a new phone. I decided when I couldn't retrieve a synonym for "livelihood" or "expansion" as I squirmed at my laptop last week to work on my book after school in the dingy teacher's lounge. I decided while observing the flabbiness of my upper arms through a dull ache behind my right eye as the janitor wheeled his clattery cart down the empty hall.

What would life even look like without Stephen? Nothing ever comes to mind. Unimaginable. My life with him is an integral part of my world. He is half my days and nights. I can't imagine losing the security of his familiar face, lopsided jaw and green eyes behind rimless glasses. But last summer when he glanced at me on a hot, Philadelphia street munching a mouthful of pierogis and I saw only his slackening jowl, a certain stiffening of his preferences (he only chooses cheese pierogis now instead of the variety he once preferred), his quiet nature turned even quieter over time with longer and longer stretches of wordlessness, I knew I couldn't pretend waning love isn't a possibility.

The overwhelming urge to leave today feels like the only right thing to do. Stephen and I—so comfortable together for so long—may in fact be losing the gravitational force that's held us steady all these years. I doubt he's noticed, but it's beyond clear to me. Did I slide into orbit around Stephen based on who I was when we met instead of who I hoped to become, someone I'm now becoming?

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Here's what's true that I didn't know until today.

In between tucking athletic socks into my suitcase this morning and selecting knickknacks and mementos to take with me, I made a discovery quite by accident—call it an ineradicable second look.

Analogies don't do it justice, but it was akin to staring at an old photo of yourself from a time when you despised some feature of your appearance. You can remember the general scorn you felt for the shape of your legs or the breadth of your nose or whatever trait you detested—a flaw so monstrous as to overshadow everything else. And yet as you view the photo now there's hardly a hint of that fatal flaw. You were lovely and fresh and deliciously young. The perceived defect is barely noticeable. So much irretrievable time lost not loving yourself, wishing you were beautiful, and come to find out you were all along.

The most striking thing: Nothing about your flaw has actually changed in physical reality. It's merely a shift in perception, nudged along by time. And that's where the analogy diverges, for my ability to perceive things anew this morning required almost no passage of years. I simply glanced out our bedroom window at a snapshot of my life and it magically rearranged itself in a matter of moments.

There was Stephen in his rattiest jeans, the ones I hate most, heading to his office in the morning sunshine. I noticed a shuffle in his walk, a slight lean to the left that I don't remember when he was younger, and a rigidity about his shoulders, a thinning of his salt-and-pepper waves, which used to be fuller and wavier when his hair was darker. There was a noticeable crack in the foundation of his office building that I also don't remember, and a seedling growing from the gutters we never clean. Our bedroom felt cramped. Dust had collected on the sunny windowsill around last year's withered amaryllis. The coffee I

drank earlier churned uncomfortably in my stomach, a new brand with a pleasing leaf-covered label that tasted weak.

An ancient ache erupted inside me, wave after awful wave, like being gutted alive. Life was supposed to be so much more than this. I wanted a stunning man, wildly successful, world renowned, brilliant. All those things. I wanted passionate love with him to last a lifetime. I never wanted a mansion, but I did want land, acres and acres all my own, and a giant old house that we'd restore with outbuildings and stately trees. I wanted to be world-renowned too—a paradigm-shifting visionary of sustainable living—with luxury to pursue a totally private life on my own terms. I wanted enough money to explore 10,000 places, climb mountains, hike rain forests, sleep in luxury hotels under satin sheets and on white beaches. I wanted things to look more perfect, feel more perfect, smell and taste and sound more perfect. I wanted to feel alive and thrilled and productive every moment of every day. I wanted an exceptional life.

Then abruptly what I just described as intolerably insufficient—this snapshot of my life—transformed in a flash from stunning imperfection to its opposite extreme, sweeping through every sense organ from some deeper inner organ of knowing lodged well below the chaos of life's habitual dissatisfactions and hungers. The sorry details of my life spontaneously mutated into a swirl of darling treasures, reconfiguring without fanfare but with vigorous, decisive efficiency, like an impartial electronic data dump. Somehow I could unravel gigabytes of insight instantaneously and grasp it all perfectly.

I found myself fully enfolded and loved in the center of life as never before, absorbing the warm goo and vibrant colors, breathing in the scent of soil and pollen, listening to birds and wind, feeling the pain I've known—darkness and disappointment and loss—as well as all the happiness and wonders, too. I felt it all, full to the brim, for the first

time in my life, and my heart cracked wide open for Stephen and me, his sagging jeans, his lack of big commissions, my lack of publishing credits, the gray-green paint on our bedroom walls that I've never liked and the red oak stain on our living room floor that's too dark, and our nest egg which isn't yet sufficient to retire on.

I saw a million things not to love, but I loved them all in that moment. A miracle of the universal game clock—a do-or-die moment of reflection with only two minutes left to play.

So profound was this love the only thing I could do was quietly empty my suitcase, set knickknacks and mementos back on tables and shelves, grab my purse and brief case and back down the driveway for work. Just like any other day. Except that old thoughts about what form life must take to make me happy had dimmed beneath a new overlay of alternative thoughts. I realized I can think them instead. My dreams don't have to come true. They are made up after all from another life. I can make up new ones for this life, rotate my mind a notch to harness deeper joys. Joy is here already—more than enough. I can work with what I have and who I am.

Now, as I drive past our bank and Stephen's favorite sushi restaurant, Toshi, I marvel at the bright April sun illuminating everything in crisp shadows and supernaturally vivid colors—tree blossoms, road signs, neckties and cars alike. I continue up Belmont Street to Baker Elementary School, slip into the building through a rear door and move down the cool, unlit hallway toward Room 304 where this week I'm teaching fifth grade. I plop at my desk, students not yet here, and surrender again to stillness. Beautiful stillness. I've fallen in love with what is just in time not to lose it.

Faraway footsteps and voices echo down the hall as students enter the building, pulling me back toward the surface. Agitation ripples there, nervous energy. A student

shuffles into the room past my desk to her seat. A sliver of sunlight slanting through the window shimmers a little less than earlier. Another student arrives and another. The shimmer fades more. A text from Stephen reminds me to pick up asparagus for dinner. I delete it with an impatient jab—he's already reminded me twice. Was it all just a blip of imagination? A passing epiphany?

I plummet back to class with a thud. Bored faces watch me watching them. Epiphanies come and go, yet the essence of what's true lingers: I've seen a deeper place where I can burrow as needed for quiet counsel and healing, to explore myself and life with Stephen, make needed tweaks without human blinders and fear, with the whole of my being, using the eyes of my heart. That's where happiness lies, waiting to be carried out to my world, not the other way around. If only I remember the way, still raw-cut through my mind, barely perceptible beneath surface turbulence and the mesmerizing pull of other pastures. If only I remember—moment by moment, day by day, through all of life.

**END**