

Finding the season that best suits you

I was gathered together with a few of my girlfriends around a table with candles, and pies, and Mason jars filled with ice cubes melting in the kind of beverage that saturates your soul best — water. The sky was 38 shades of beautiful and china plates held sweetness in the finest forms.

There were slips of brown paper tucked in between the candles and succulents. Slips of paper filled with beautiful words written in whimsical handwriting with question marks, and discussion points to guide our conversation. We were celebrating friendship, fresh fruit pies, and the season of summer.

I came home that evening with my soul and spirit filled to the brim as I thought about those questions — particularly the one about seasons. Seasons where we've been refined, where we've sought after purpose and less of ourselves, and where we've grown in ways we never thought possible but don't always see the growth until the season is long over. The discussion of these periods of time in our lives brought so much emotion with it that I couldn't get it out of my mind several hours later.

Why is it that we often want out of the period of time we're in, just to get the next? Do we think it's going to be better than what we have right now? Are we anticipating something greater instead of seeing what's beautiful and wonderful

about the present? Sadly, I think so.

This past spring was one of those seasons where I found myself thankful for the fact it was here, but questioned why winter seemed to be hanging on with tiny threads of unbelievable strength. The snow had finally melted, but with the moisture that I knew would help things grow seemed to be overwhelmingly brutal as waters rose, and the sunshine just wasn't quite strong enough to win. I chose to wear a yellow sweater for days in hopes to bring the light with me that I knew was lacking, but a yellow sweater can only do so much.

As I answered the question that evening about what season I liked best, I remember wishing I had been given the question in advance to strategically plan out a really great answer, but in all honesty, conversations that work themselves through our lives without a plan often show us what we are really made of. So, rather than complaining about the winter and spring I thought would never end, I shared with my treasured friends around the table that night how I have found contentment in each season.

I have lived, thrived, and sometimes barely survived the seasons in my life by simply paying attention to the beauty in the places my feet take me each day. It's not always easy or even right, but instead of wishing for what isn't and giving up

on that which stares me right in the face, I focus on where to look and how to look to find the goodness that has been there all along.

During what seemed to be never-ending, ridiculously long winter and spring, I watched calves grow and the hay shed empty. I cheered about warm days and soft skies. I savored the green shoots of grass and wheat that lined the road to home. I embraced the quiet and still of our hillside that rolled through like clouds. I splashed in puddles and thanked God for sunshine, while I walked through the barn pens in muck boots. I saw my home from different perspectives and angles, tore out old flower beds and created new beauty along our fence, and played happy music that kept my spirits alive. I sorted cows and calves, I sifted thousands of rocks from a dirt pile, and prayed that my camera could capture the beauty found when the light was just perfect. I looked for the good every single day, and although it didn't make the season perfect, it did keep my eyes focused on that which was longing to be seen.

I don't have any idea what kind of season you're going through right now, but the next time you find yourself on the answering side of a question about the different times of year and which one might possibly be your favorite, I think you should consider answering like this: This one.



LINDSAY MURDOCK
FROM SUN UP TO SUN DOWN

Yes, this season that I'm living right now — it is my favorite.

Lindsay Murdock lives and teaches Echo.

Will Gen-Z save the world?

There is some sort of hard-to-define spiritual crisis across the land, which shows up in rising depression rates, rising mental health problems. A survey that the Pew Research Center released late last year captures the mood. Pew asked people to describe the things that bring meaning to their lives. A shocking number of respondents described lives of quiet despair:

"I no longer find much of anything meaning, fulfilling or satisfying. Whatever used to keep me going has gone. I am currently struggling to find any motivation to keep going."

"It would be nice to live according to my being rather than my blackness. I will never know how a totally worthwhile life will feel because of this."

"Drugs and alcohol are the shining rays of light in my otherwise unbearable existence."

"I don't feel very satisfied with my life. I'm a stay-at-home mom and my life is endless monotony and chaos."

The Pew survey reveals a large group of Americans down the income and economic ladders who are suffering from economic scarcity, social scarcity and spiritual scarcity all at once. Less educated people were less likely to say that friendship was a source of meaning in their lives. They were less likely to say hobbies were a source of meaning, nor was learning, nor good health nor stability.

When people overall described the sources of meaning in their lives, they stuck close to home. Nearly 70% identified family as a source of meaning, followed by career, making money and practicing a spirituality or faith. Only 11% said learning added meaning to their lives. Only 7% said helping others was a meaningful part of their life.

If you ask philosophers how people fill their lives with meaning, they usually point to some version of serving a cause larger than self. William James said that meaning was found in tireless struggle on behalf of some sacred ideal. Susan Wolf says that meaning is found in active engagement in important projects.

But the meaning of meaning seems to have changed. When people in this survey describe meaning, they didn't describe moral causes or serving their community, country or God. They described moments when they felt loved, satisfied or good about themselves. They described positive personal emotions. As one respondent put it, "It's easy to forget what's wrong in the world when you are pretending to be a puppy with your daughter."

It's as if people no longer see life as something that should be organized around a specific vocation, a calling that is their own way of doing good in the world.

Everything feels personalized and miniaturized. The upper registers of moral life — fighting for freedom, struggling to end poverty — have been amputated for many. The awfulness of the larger society is a given. The best you can do is find a small haven in a heartless world. One respondent said he found meaning in the tiniest things: "Small-scale nature — individual bugs and plants — are quite pleasing. I like to be able to focus on things that don't care about me or the larger world."

I've just finished a four-month tour for my book "The Second Mountain," talking with thousands of people, and I certainly encountered the disillusioned America described in the Pew survey. But the big thing I encountered was

the seismic generation gap. People my age rag on the younger generation for being entitled and emotionally fragile, etc. But this generation is also seething with moral passion and rebelling against the privatization of morality so prevalent in the Boomer and Gen-X generations.

They can be totally insufferable about it. In the upscale colleges on the coasts, Wokeness is a religious revival with its own conception of sin (privilege) and its own version of the Salem Witch Trials (online shaming). But the people in this movement have a sense of vocation, moral call and a rage at injustice that is legitimate rejection of what came before.

I recently met a group of high school kids from around the United States and Africa involved in the Bezos Scholars program. In our conversations they didn't define their identity by where they were from, or even by their ethnicity and race. They defined themselves by what project they work on — serving Native Americans, working for clean water. Similarly, high school students generally are more likely to define themselves by their political stances and their vocations, rather than whether they are jocks or drama kids.

I've also found that college students are eager to talk about a moral project entirely absent from the Pew survey: doing inner work, growing in holiness. Many seem to have rediscovered the sense, buried for a few decades, that one calling in life is to become a better person. Your current self is not good enough. You have to be transformed through right action.

It's often uncomfortable and over the top, but we're lucky to have a rebellion against boomer quietism and moral miniaturization. The young zealots may burn us all in the flames of their auto-da-fe, but it's better than living in a society marked by loneliness and quiet despair.

David Brooks is a columnist for The New York Times.

The biggest threat to America is us

Near the close of last Wednesday's Democratic presidential debate, Chuck Todd asked the candidates what he called "a simple question." In "one word," he asked, who or what is the biggest geopolitical threat to America today?

Reflecting on that moment, I asked myself what I would say. It didn't take long to decide. It's not China or Russia or Iran. It's us. We've become the biggest threat to ourselves.

China, Russia, Iran and even North Korea's "Little Rocket Man" aren't going to take us down. Only we can take ourselves down.

Only we can ensure that the American dream — the core promise we've made to ourselves that each generation will do better than its parents — is not fulfilled, because we fail to adapt in this age of rapidly accelerating changes in technology, markets, climates, the workplace and education.

And that is nearly certain to happen if we don't stop treating politics as entertainment, if we don't get rid of a president who daily undermines truth and trust — the twin fuels needed to collaborate and adapt together — if we don't prevent the far left from pulling the Democrats over a cliff with reckless ideas like erasing the criminal distinction between those who enter America legally and those who don't, and if we fail to forge what political analyst David Rothkopf described in a recent Daily Beast essay as "a new American majority."

That's a majority that can not only win the next election but can actually govern the morning after, actually enable us to do big hard things, because we have so many big hard things that need to be addressed — and big hard adaptations can only be done quickly together.

Sounds naive? No, here's what's naive: thinking we're going to be OK if we keep ignoring the big challenges barreling down on us, if we just keep taking turns having one party rule and the other obstruct — with the result that no big, long-term and well-thought-out adaptations get built.

Indeed, this moment reminds me of something that Mark Mykleby, a retired Marine colonel, said in a book I co-authored in 2011 with Michael Mandelbaum, "That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back":

"At no time in our history have our national challenges been as complex and long-term as those we face today." But, he said, the most salient feature of our politics of late has been our inability "to respond coherently and effectively to obvious problems before they become crises. ... If we can't even have an 'adult' conversation, how will we fulfill the promise of and our obligation to the Preamble of our Constitution — to 'secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity'?" How indeed?

Here are just a few of the challenges coming head-on:

First, if we have four more years of Trump, we'll probably lose any chance of keeping the global average temperature from rising only 1.5 degrees Celsius instead of 2 degrees — which scientists believe is the difference between being able to manage the now unavoidable climate-related weather extremes and avoiding the unmanageable ones.

Second, as Ray Dalio, the founder of the Bridgewater hedge fund, recently pointed out, there has been "little or no real income growth for most people for decades. ... Prime-age workers in the bottom 60 percent have had no real (i.e., inflation-adjusted) income growth since 1980." In that same time frame, the "incomes for the top 10 percent have doubled and those of the top 1 percent have tripled. The percentage of children who grow up to earn more than their parents has fallen from 90 percent in 1970 to 50 percent today. That's for the population as a whole. For most of those in the lower 60 percent, the prospects are worse."

The anger over that is surely one of the things that propelled Trump into office and, if not addressed, could propel someone even worse, like Donald Trump Jr., in the future.

Third, the next four years will redefine rela-

tions between the world's two biggest economies — the U.S. and China. Either the U.S. will persuade China to abandon the abusive trade practices it adopted to go from poverty to middle income and from a technology consumer to a technology producer, or we're headed for a world divided by a new digital Berlin Wall. There will be a Chinese-controlled internet and technology sphere and American versions — and every other country will have to decide whose to join. The globalization that provided so much peace and prosperity for the last 70 years will fracture.

Fourth, technology is propelling social networks and cybertools deeper and deeper into our lives, our privacy and our politics — and democratizing the tools for "deep-fakes," so that many more people can erode truth and trust. But the gap between the speed at which these technologies are going deep and the ability of our analog politics to develop the rules, norms and laws to govern them is getting wider, not narrower. That gap has to be closed to preserve our democracy.

Fifth, today's workplace is distinguished by one overriding new reality, argues Heather McGowan, an expert on the future of work: "The pace of change is accelerating at the exact same time that people's work lives are elongating."

When the efficient steam engine was developed in the 1700s, McGowan explains, average life expectancy was 37 years and steam was the driving force in industry and business for around 100 years. When the combustion engine and electricity were harnessed in the mid-1800s, life expectancy was around 40 years and these technologies dominated the workplace for about another century.

So in both eras, notes McGowan, "you had multiple generations to absorb a single big change in the workplace."

In today's digital information age, "you have multiple changes in the nature of work within a generation," McGowan says. This dramatically increases the need for lifelong learning. "The old model was that you learned once in order to work, and now we must work in order to learn continuously," she contends. So we're going from a model of "learn, work, retire" to a model of "learn, work, learn, work, learn, work."

In that kind of world the new social contract has to be that government makes sure that the safety nets and all the tools for lifelong learning are available to every American — but it's on each citizen to use them. This moment "is not about who to blame or what to bring back or what to give away," McGowan concludes. "It is about how to create a new deal that engages the American people to 'take longer strides,'" as President John F. Kennedy said in seeking funding for NASA. But more of that striding will be on you for more of your life.

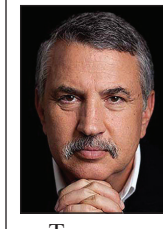
Fortunately, the midterm elections showed us that there is a potential new American majority out there to be assembled to meet these challenges. After all, it was the independent voters, suburban women and moderate Republicans — who shifted their votes to Democrats, because they were appalled by Trump's lying, racist-tinge nationalism and divisiveness — who enabled the Democrats to win back the House of Representatives. That same partnership could topple Trump.

If Democrats can choose a nominee who speaks to our impending challenges, but who doesn't say irresponsible stuff about immigration or promise free stuff we can't afford, who defines new ways to work with business and energizes job-creators, who treats with dignity the frightened white working-class voters who abandoned them for Trump — and who understands that many, many Americans are worried that we're on the verge of a political civil war and want someone to pull us together — I think he or she will find a new American majority waiting to be assembled and empowered.

Thomas Friedman, a New York Times columnist, was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes for international reporting in Beirut and Israel and one for commentary.



DAVID BROOKS
COMMENT



THOMAS FRIEDMAN
COMMENT