

The Blessings of a Boring Life

How to find joy and gratitude in the ordinary!

by Vanesa Pizzuto

What image comes to mind when you hear the word success? A blue-suited CEO? Internet billionaire Mark Zuckerberg? Perhaps Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela? If you're like me, you probably didn't think of a person living an unglamorous, ordinary life when you picture success.

I'm in my mid-30s, and I have a decent job, great friends, and enough money to pay my bills and take the occasional overseas trip. But I keep feeling that, in some way, I'm a disappointment. For a long time, the sense that I wasn't living up to my potential shadowed me. And when I talked about this with some friends, I discovered I'm not alone.

In our glossy, glamorous, fame-obsessed culture, "ordinary" has become a synonym for "mediocre." We feel pressure to live up to an impossible social media presence, and if we haven't done something impressive, we feel like we're underachieving. Average is no longer normal - it's failure.

But the intense and unrelenting pressure to excel and be extraordinary comes with a big price tag: we're not happy. In fact, we're more depressed than ever. We sacrifice sleep and relationships, only to discover that we can never meet our own expectations. No matter how hard we play the game, the goalposts keep moving.

I do want my life to count and to be meaningful, but I have the suspicion that fulfillment comes from being, not doing. So I propose we rediscover the power and meaning of an ordinary life lived with dignity.

BORED and **BRILLIANT**

Let's face it: Most of us hate the idea of living an ordinary life because it sounds boring. Our society is terrified of boredom. Consider what happens when there's a pause in a conversation, no matter how fleeting: smartphones are pulled out, and screens light up. In fact, the average person spends about four hours a day on their mobile phone.

Boredom has become our greatest enemy because we've bought into the lie that our lives need constant stimulation, information, and entertainment to be meaningful. Ironically, by systematically eliminating boredom, we may be robbing ourselves of creativity and meaning. A recent study showed that a "bored" brain can, in fact, be a "creative" brain. Boredom ignites a network in our brains called default mode. Our brains are very active during these times of mind wandering, creating new connections that boost our creativity.

But there's more: "Boredom fulfills an important function," says Wijnand van Tilburg, Ph.D., a psychologist from the University of Southampton. "Boredom makes people keen to engage in activities that they find more meaningful than those at hand." Embracing the uncomfortable feeling of boredom can help us reevaluate our priorities and find a clearer sense of purpose. Yes, ordinary life has dull moments, but these may be the key to a more creative and meaningful existence.

DOING *the* DISHES

Shane Claiborne, an author and activist who worked with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, discovered a saying in his travels that summed up the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary: "Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes." Indeed, it can be tempting to think that menial tasks don't make a difference, that they're a waste of time.

"People tend to believe that the pathway to significance is paved with the big, the showy, and the grand," writes Michael Kelley, author of *Boring: Finding an Extraordinary God in an Ordinary Life*. "But what if we're wrong? What if "bigness" is not an accurate measure of significance? ... And what if a life of great importance isn't found by escaping the details but embracing them?"

Think about it. It would be absurd for a professional athlete to refuse to train daily but still expect to keep fit. Every push-up and every drop of sweat counts. Little things add up. If you've ever been on a diet, you know what two seemingly innocuous slices of pizza can do, especially if you eat them every day.

Small things have a quiet, often underestimated, power. In fact, it's the faithful attention we give to the little things in life that prepares us to tackle the bigger ones. So don't live life in a permanent standstill, waiting for the chance to change the world, while avoiding the small opportunities you have every day to help others.

Want a revolution? Begin by washing the dishes tonight.

ORDINARY, NOT MEDIOCRE

Can we embrace our ordinariness and still strive for excellence? Absolutely. But true excellence is often the result of love, not ambition. In the words of theologian and author Michael Horton, you excel when you "find yourself desiring something or someone whose inherent truth, beauty, and goodness draw you in. You love a particular object enough to endure whatever setbacks and challenges stand in your way."

Mediocrity is about disengaging, about not caring. Excellence, on the other hand, demands enough care to invest time, effort, and skill. Excellence requires a commitment beyond simply seeing immediate results and, sometimes, beyond seeing results at all. Consider scientists whose work was rejected while they lived, like Nicolaus Copernicus, or artists unappreciated during their lifetime, such as Vincent van Gogh. It was their passion that kept them going and fueled their excellence, not a quest for superiority.

Because excellence is about passion, not popularity, it can permeate our everyday lives. Even the simplest tasks can be performed with excellence. I believe it might have been this that the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). I can't think of something more ordinary than eating, yet it can be done as an act of worship or devotion.

The FREEDOM to be ORDINARY

At a deeper level, what prevents us from allowing ourselves to be ordinary is the fear that we are not enough. We are ashamed of our ordinariness because we think it makes us unlovable.

Researcher and author Brene Brown explains how an extreme aversion to being "ordinary" can be a trait of narcissism, a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a lack of empathy for others, and a deep need for excessive admiration: "When I look at narcissism through the vulnerability lens, I see the shame-based fear of being ordinary. I see the fear of never feeling extraordinary enough to be noticed, to be lovable, to belong, or to cultivate a sense of purpose."

Learning to accept ourselves just as we are sets us free from seeking external approval. Instead of striving to prove that we're better than others, we can find contentment in whatever ordinariness we might want to hide or avoid. It takes courage and vulnerability to do that.

The Bible teaches that God's measure of success is faithfulness - consistently choosing His path as we make hundreds of small, daily decisions. It's His job to be extraordinary, not ours. "God showers His extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image bearers, and sends us into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings," writes Horton.

There's a strength and dignity in fulfilling the everyday duties that quietly, slowly transform us. While the faithfulness and constancy needed to make a marriage last a lifetime may not make the news, it's that kind of sustained and collective success that keeps society together. Somehow, between changing diapers, paying bills, and shopping for groceries, our character grows. We become less self-absorbed and more generous. We learn to depend on God for our sense of self-worth and develop endurance for the times we go unnoticed.

Jesus was ordinary in many ways. He was born to a poor couple, lived in a quiet village, and worked as a tradesman. Even though He was God in the flesh, Jesus never shied away from ordinary work or menial tasks. He even washed the gnarled, grubby feet of fishermen.

"In some cases the way a person does a task makes that work sanctified and holy forever," writes author Oswald Chambers. "It may be a very common everyday task, but after we have seen it done, it becomes different. When the Lord does something through us, He always transforms it."

This is the extraordinary ordinariness of how God works: We can embrace the ordinary and still make a difference in the world.

5 Simple ways to Celebrate the Ordinary

1. Watch the sky!

There is wonder all around you. Choose to see it. Pay attention to the little things, such as the colors of the autumn leaves, the way your parents hold hands, or the aroma of dinner cooking.

2. Prepare a simple meal and eat it slowly.

Take your time, allowing your taste buds to enjoy the meal before you swallow it.

3. Smile at strangers.

At work or in the grocery store, smile at strangers, and see what happens.

4. Call people by name.

Learn the names of people you see only occasionally - or even once - such as janitors, waiters, or cashiers. Make eye contact and use their name when you talk to them. Under the ordinary surface of everyone you see, there is a sacred person made in God's image.

5. Unplug.

Set a time each day when you turn off your devices and set aside your phone. Pause, breathe deeply, pray. Take a moment to "be" rather than to "do."

Vanessa Pizzuto is a freelance writer and Journalist working for Adventist Radio London. She loves ordinary things, such as books, fresh ginger tea, and breaking into song.

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