

# Slow Down, Mama

## LESSONS IN BEING HERE

by Jeannie Zandi



When you are true  
Is when you are  
When you are is  
When you are  
Be true.

— Sophia Zandi, sung at age 2

When my daughter was about 3 years old, I put on a CD of Turkish Sufi music I had recently purchased called *The Music of the Whirling Dervishes*. Sophia immediately went to the center of the kitchen floor and started whirling, something I'd never seen her do. Totally surprised and delighted by the synchronicity, I told her the title of the CD and referred to her dancing, and asked her, "Did you used to be a whirling dervish?" In her most patient tone (which I believe she reserves just for me), she said, "No, Mama, I am one *now*."

I've noticed that often the first thing we do when we become excited about spirituality is to try to get somewhere else, rather than to explore who we are *right here*. One of the biggest pieces of conditioning we receive is that there's not enough time for us to show up and be here. And our minds have been conditioned to believe that nirvana exists somewhere else, somewhere in the future — once we are good enough, once we have done enough — but not here, now. This is the core delusion that keeps us from actually deepening into the moment: that somewhere in some distant future we will get somewhere, somewhere good. This is what fuels most of what we do and strive for, whether it's related to spirituality or to creating the life we think we want. What if we stopped?

Circumstances in my life painted me into a corner that I could not get out of with my mind. As my mind went backward to see what I had done wrong to get me into the predicament, and forward to attempt to think my way out of it, intense emotional and spiritual suffering ensued, which included intense full-bodied anxiety. At some point I noticed that just lying on a riverbank sinking my attention into the fluttering of leaves and rippling of water was the only way the suffering ceased. The deep silence of the unknown beckoned to me, not just as a

momentary escape, but as something to give myself to completely. I was at a fork in the road: the path of the chattering mind — the known, of seeming salvation, of figuring it out — had been weakened, and the holy unknown offered itself. The mind said, "You will become sick, crazy, dead if you let go into this and leave me." I no longer cared, and the "me" that was beyond the mind threw my eggs into the basket of the unknown and said, "Yes." It wasn't a yes of excitement, but of being so worn down by the mental struggle that giving up was worth risking death.

I discovered that the moment is not separate from who I am and that the experience of it is ever deepening, dropping further and further into things as they are here, now. This resting in being felt like cluelessness; I was no longer listening to my mind for how to live. Instead, my entire being opened in surrender to the present, and I started knowing what to do and say without thinking or trying to figure it out.

So this is an invitation to welcome yourself just as you are to this moment, to explore you *as you are* rather than trying to get anywhere else. Give yourself a big break if you have been working hard to try to be something in particular, and let everything that came before now fade. Let anything you can imagine beyond now fall away. Let the immediacy of this moment touch you. Stop whatever you are doing, and rest. Like a newborn baby, so new to this moment, see what's here. Let yourself feel the weight of your body in the chair. Listen to the sounds that surround you. Become aware of your breath moving in and out of your body. Notice your thoughts racing and let them fade into the background as you sink into simply being. Close your eyes and experience the aliveness and sensation in your body.

Children are just here, without a lot of mind-chatter, until they are conditioned to ignore the present and start figuring out the future. Sophia is totally surrendered to now. When she was 3, we passed another mom and daughter in the airport. The two children stopped about a foot from each other, taking each other in. No talking, no doing, no distraction — just full world of being encountering full world of being. And for the longest time! As the girl's mom and I squirmed, the girls' gazing went on and on and on . . . And just this morning, a friend of Sophia's arrived. Now they are 8, but the being quality isn't much different. They both stand in beingness for about a half hour before either of them thinks to ask the other to play. Hanging out. Just being. No hurry to "get to" anything.

To surrender to now is to let the mind chatter on in the background without giving it any more meaning than background music in an elevator. You can look inside for the person you think you are and find only space. In beholding this mystery of being, we can turn every certainty into a wondering. Certainties about who we are, what we are, where we're going, what we are like, what others are like, and what we can expect are bricks in the walls of the separate self. So the invitation is to let the actuality of what is present inform us instead of outdated assumptions of a busy mind trying to ensure our survival.

Imagine your cells are little windows and you are throwing all the windows open, just letting everything breathe in not knowing. What if you let all that moves in momentum into the future die in this now? As though you could build a big bonfire in front of you and throw everything in that you cannot find in the sensation of the moment. Give up on this life as a continuum, in which things will get better and places will be gotten to, in exchange for fully, fully being here. Totally on vacation.

In this state, we give ourselves to the wisdom of the Holy, which has been living us below our assumption that we steer the carnival cars in which we are riding. We have never been steering — this is the illusion of the separate self. When we turned the wheel to the right and the car went to the right, we felt like good separate selves and called it success. When we turned the wheel to the right and the car went to the left, we felt like bad separate selves and called it failure. What if something else has been carrying us, powering and directing our cars?

With the invitation to let go, fear of loss of control and of death generally arises. What if I didn't steer? What if I didn't flog this being into shape and drive it with a cattle prod toward the "right" things that keep me prosperous, respectable and safe? This is the core question of the path. Is there something besides this separate self, and can we trust it? We can't find the answer to this question by forcing trust upon ourselves. We can only take risks in following the alive call that invites us into realizing that we are only passengers on this road.

An example of this is recently leaving my job (read: great salary, benefits) of eight years. The aliveness that had been in this work for me was gone. What was alive was the work I was doing with groups of people exploring presence and love. The mind, whose grip has certainly been weakened, said there is no other way to make a living in Taos, Sophia won't be able to go to her beloved school, you will lose your house, your car, your life. Yet, these days there is in me a trust in something deeper, in this aliveness and how it moves, where it is, and where it isn't. And so without a plan or a specific guarantee that this would work out, I gave notice at the job. This way of living is like holding the hand of the Holy in the dark and following only the next prompting, without assurance of any particular outcome. Only because it is alive.

For me, the experience of being called profoundly and completely into the now happened pretty simultaneously to becoming a mother. When Sophia happened on the scene, I was already questioning my habitual reality and dropping a lot of conditioning as a result of the wearing down of the dark night I had experienced and the new love that is inherent in living in the present. Sophia was then such a barometer of when I was moving from the depth of now and when I was running a program in which she and I could only be objects to be managed within it. This slowing down in these habitual places and surrendering my programs was excruciating at times. When I would treat Sophia in this object-oriented way, she would protest: she would cry at being hurried, or at my tone, or at my lack of present attention. I let this be what guided me back to being here fully, though sometimes I felt almost homicidal at the invitation to slow down.

When we dare to be here, we're walking invitations to everyone else: "Why don't you be here too?" We invite all others to drop their locomotive drive to someplace better in the future and just be. The trick is that often the first thing we meet when we jump off the train and land in now is the pain, angst and confusion from which we were trying to distract and escape: *It's boring here! I'm anxious here. I feel grief here. I feel angry here. I feel irritated here. I'll die if I don't get up and keep on keeping on.* This all must be met and moved through as we sink deeper and deeper into being here, which eventually turns to sweet bliss as we stop fighting with what is and melt into it.

Sophia taught me how to let go and allow things, how to roll with things, how to let go of ideas of "completing" anything and just be here. One of her favorite games as soon as she could stand was the laundry game. Right after I was done folding the laundry or stacking it neatly in drawers or on shelves, she thought it was really a blast to pull the pieces out one by one, shake them and toss them into the center of the room. After noting my internal protestations, I simply surrendered to this game. I started folding laundry to fold laundry, not to get anything done. Then I'd fold it again. What difference did it make that the folding is a folding that "makes sense" (i.e., this *needs* to be done today) or doesn't (I'm folding this laundry for the fifth time and it only needs folding once, if it weren't for that rascal Sophia). I had folded laundry over and over and over in my life as if it had some meaning beyond that I was folding laundry. As if getting something "done" was going to get me somewhere better than where I already am, right here! Whether the laundry is yet to be folded, folded, on the floor or refolded, all is well in the here and now.

As Sophia got older and I worked more, my frantic pace in the morning was not to her liking, and oftentimes she experienced it as abusive. Sometimes she would burst into tears at my hurrying her. Once when she was 5, she proclaimed, "Mama, if you hurry me now, I'm going to hurry you when you're an old woman." Another time, she stood up from her breakfast and ran her hands down the front of my body in the gentlest soothing way, singing, "Slow down, Mama, slow down." Up would come a serious, rational and reasonable defense of my speed, which would sound hollow and ridiculous when I looked into her present, soft eyes. What I had to feel in that moment to slow down felt insurmountable, and yet I knew she was right and I was crazy.

To slow down for me felt like dying. And it is dying. Dying *into* this moment, dying to the illusion that it's all up to us, that we are separate beings who are running everything alone, dying into the surrender of being clueless now and letting something else carry us besides our obsolete convictions that it's all up to us.

From the depth of here and now everything that we meet, everyone whom we meet, becomes a reunion. Even picking up your water glass and drinking your water: your tender hand, the glass serving you with its water, your soft, alive lips, the way the water feels going down your throat.

It is our birthright to live this way. Descending deeper and deeper into this moment. Putting all our eggs in this basket until we forget how to go anywhere else.

The journey home that is so revered in most spiritual traditions is simply the journey to now, the journey to here, coming home to the moment. At Sophia's school every morning the teacher sings to each child, "Are you with us?" and each child sings back, "Yes, teacher, I am here." In every moment, every aspect of creation is singing this same song to us. What do you sing back?

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