

9884 DAYS

By Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood

Recently, I went for lunch with a close friend. We played college basketball together many years ago, and although our lives have travelled in different directions, she remains someone who matters deeply to me.

During lunch, I noticed a tattoo on her wrist: 9884. I asked her what it meant, and she told me it was the number of days she had with her mom before her mom passed away.

I found myself thinking about that number long after our lunch ended. It represented a life with someone, expressed in days. Some of those days would have contained important milestones, celebrations, and memories she knew she would hold onto forever. Most were probably ordinary. They would have included quick conversations, meals, errands, laughter, frustration, routines, and moments that did not announce their importance while they were happening.

That is the difficult thing about time. We do not know how much of it we will get.

THE BRUSHSTROKES ADD UP

I once watched a documentary in which Warren Buffett was asked how he made decisions. At the time, there were scandals throughout the financial sector. The person asking the question was curious about how Buffett had remained grounded, including his decision to continue living in a smaller city rather than moving closer to the centre of the financial world.

As I remember it, Buffett was sitting at a desk. He looked behind him at a piece of art hanging on the wall and compared the choices we make each day to brushstrokes on a canvas. Why, he wondered, would you spend your life creating a masterpiece you would not want to look at when you reached the end?

That idea has stayed with me. Our lives are rarely shaped by one enormous decision. They are created gradually through the choices we make every day:

where we direct our attention, how we spend our time, who receives our energy, what we say yes to, and what we are willing to say no to. They are shaped by whether we are physically present but mentally somewhere else, or whether we allow ourselves to arrive fully in the moment we are living.

Each choice can seem insignificant on its own. But the brushstrokes add up. So do the days.

THE COMPOUND INTEREST OF SMALL CHOICES

We are presented with hundreds of choices each day, and most do not feel particularly important. We answer one more email, spend one more evening working, or reach for our phone instead of looking at the person beside us. We put off a conversation, take a walk, accept an invitation, or protect a boundary.

Because the immediate impact of these choices is small, we can easily dismiss their significance. Missing one dinner will probably not change a relationship. Working late one night will probably not damage our health. Skipping one opportunity to connect will probably not alter the course of a life.

But choices accumulate. Like compound interest, their influence grows over time. A single choice may feel inconsequential, but repeated choices eventually become patterns. Those patterns begin to shape our relationships, our well-being, and the life we are creating.

The same is true of the things we are afraid to begin. One brave choice may not transform a life immediately, but it changes the canvas. It creates a new possibility and makes the next brushstroke available.

BE CAREFUL WHAT GETS YOUR BEST

I have been fortunate to receive many reminders to protect what matters. For years, I attended an annual conference. One year, a man I consider a friend told me that when his children were young, he flew home from work for a single day so he could be there for Halloween.

I asked him why he had gone to so much effort for one day. His answer was simple: You do not get time back.

In another conversation, he cautioned me to be thoughtful about what I gave my best to. Work can easily take our sharpest thinking, our greatest patience, and the most energized parts of us. Then we return home and offer the people we love whatever is left. He reminded me to save some of my best for the people who matter.

Two years later, when I saw him again, he told me he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His advice landed differently then. It was no longer simply about work-life blend or learning to manage a busy schedule. It was about recognizing that our time, energy, and health are not unlimited resources.

We do not need to live in fear of losing them, but we should be intentional about how we use them.

THE MOMENT THAT GAVE ME CLARITY

I remember watching my son run across a field to begin kindergarten. He was excited, moving toward his next adventure without looking back.

I had spent years trying to create a meaningful professional life while also fighting for a blend that allowed me to be present with my family. At times, prioritizing that blend meant turning down opportunities or making professional choices that others might not have understood.

There was often tension in those decisions. Was I doing enough professionally? Was I missing an opportunity I would not get again? Would stepping back in one area limit what might become possible later?

Fear has a way of presenting its predictions as facts. It tells us that one choice will close every other door or that choosing what matters now will inevitably cost us something we will regret later. But as I watched my youngest child run toward school, I felt an incredible sense of clarity. Fighting for that blend had been worth it.

A new chapter was beginning. Teachers, coaches, friends, and other people would now influence him in new ways. He would continue to grow into a life that extended beyond our home, and I was grateful

I had been there during the years when my presence mattered in a different way.

That did not mean I had made every decision perfectly. None of us do. It meant that when I looked at that part of the canvas, I recognized the life I had been trying to create.

MOMENTS MATTER

The point is not that we should make every moment profound. That would be impossible and exhausting. Sometimes a Tuesday is simply a Tuesday. We will be distracted, work too late, miss opportunities to connect, and make choices that do not reflect what matters most to us.

The goal is not perfection. It is awareness. It is pausing often enough to remember that small choices are not meaningless simply because their impact is not immediately visible.

Putting down your phone, making the call, going home for Halloween, saying no to one more commitment, protecting your health, or resting before you have absolutely nothing left may not feel momentous. Neither might attending the game, sharing the meal, taking the walk, or staying in the conversation a little longer.

Trying something new matters too. So does beginning before you feel completely ready, changing direction when something is not working, and allowing yourself to imagine that the future could become something other than the outcome you fear.

These choices may never appear on a résumé or be recognized as significant achievements, but they become part of the life we are creating.

Paying attention to the brushstrokes we have already made is important. But we are not limited to looking backward. If there is still space on the canvas, we also get to participate in what comes next.

LIFE AS A BLANK CANVAS

Lately, I have been reflecting on what it means to approach life as an artist.

When we face uncertainty, we often imagine that the outcome has already been decided. We see a

new opportunity, a difficult conversation, or a meaningful change and immediately picture how it could go wrong. We treat the failure we fear as though it has already happened.

What if I am not good enough? What if I make the wrong decision? What if I try and fail? What if this does not become what I hope it will be?

We can become so focused on avoiding an unwanted outcome that we forget the future has not been created yet.

An artist looks at a blank canvas differently. The emptiness does not necessarily represent failure. It represents possibility. There is something exciting about discovering what could be created.

The artist does not need to know exactly what the finished picture will look like before beginning. They make a brushstroke, step back, and look. They experiment, adjust, add another layer, and sometimes paint over something that did not work. The process is not evidence that they are failing. It is how the work is created.

What if we approached our lives with more of that spirit?

Instead of viewing uncertainty as proof that something will go wrong, we could see it as an invitation to participate in what happens next. Rather than asking only, "What if I fail?" we might also ask, "What could I create here?"

We do not need to see the entire picture. We need the courage to make the next intentional brushstroke.

WHAT ARE YOU CREATING?

Most of us can identify what matters to us. It may be family, friendship, health, meaningful work, learning, adventure, love, service, or contribution. But naming our values is only the beginning. Our lives are shaped by what we repeatedly invest in.

If something matters, where does it appear in your calendar? Where does it receive your attention? Where does it receive some of your best energy rather than whatever remains at the end of the day?

This also means investing in yourself. Pay attention to what restores you. Know what fills your bucket. Protect the parts of your life that help you feel grounded, energized, and fully yourself.

That investment is not selfish. When we continually neglect ourselves, we eventually lose some of our capacity to show up for the people and moments that matter most. Taking care of yourself helps you arrive with more to give.

We can also ask ourselves whether we are treating the future we fear as though it has already happened. What possibility might we see if we approached it as a blank canvas? What do we want to create in this part of our lives? What is one small brushstroke we can make today?

LIFE YOU WANT TO LOOK AT

We cannot control the number of days we will have with the people we love. We cannot say yes to every opportunity or be fully present in every moment. Even when we know what matters, competing responsibilities can make the right choice difficult to see.

But the picture is not already finished.

We can pause and pay attention. We can notice what we are giving our best to and whether the way we spend our time reflects what we say matters. We can recognize what we continually postpone because we assume there will be more time. We can consider who may be receiving only what is left of us and what small choice could move us closer to the life we want to create.

We can stop treating our feared future as a done deal. We can approach our lives as artists: curious about what is possible, willing to begin without certainty, and prepared to keep adjusting as the picture takes shape.

THE CANVAS IS NOT FINISHED

A life is not created all at once. It is built through ordinary days and small decisions whose importance we may not recognize until much later.



The moments accumulate. The choices compound. The brushstrokes become a picture. We do not know the number that will eventually represent the time we had with someone. But we know that today will become part of it.

Today is another day, another choice, and another brushstroke. The canvas is not finished, and the outcome is not already decided.

It does not need to be perfect. Let it be part of a life you are excited to create and, one day, grateful to have lived.

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