

Frank Bruni, NY Times, 9/5/2015, The Myth of Quality Time

EVERY summer for many years now, my family has kept to our ritual. All 20 of us — my siblings, my dad, our better halves, my nieces and nephews — find a beach house big enough to fit the whole unruly clan. We journey to it from our different states and time zones. We tensely divvy up the bedrooms, trying to remember who fared poorly or well on the previous trip. And we fling ourselves at one another for seven days and seven nights.

That's right: a solid week. It's that part of the ritual that mystifies many of my friends, who endorse family closeness but think that there can be entirely too much of it. Wouldn't a long weekend suffice? And wouldn't it ward off a few spat and simplify the planning?

The answer to the second question is yes, but to the first, an emphatic no.

I used to think that shorter would be better, and in the past, I arrived for these beach vacations a day late or fled two days early, telling myself that I had to when in truth I also wanted to — because I crave my space and my quiet, and because I weary of marinating in sunscreen and discovering sand in strange places. But in recent years, I've showed up at the start and stayed for the duration, and I've noticed a difference.

With a more expansive stretch, there's a better chance that I'll be around at the precise, random moment when one of my nephews drops his guard and solicits my advice about something private. Or when one of my nieces will need someone other than her parents to tell her that she's smart and beautiful. Or when one of my siblings will flash back on an incident from our childhood that makes us laugh uncontrollably, and suddenly the cozy, happy chain of our love is cinched that much tighter.

There's simply no real substitute for physical presence.

We delude ourselves when we say otherwise, when we invoke and venerate "quality time," a shopworn phrase with a debatable promise: that we can plan instances of extraordinary candor, plot episodes of exquisite tenderness, engineer intimacy in an appointed hour.

We can try. We can cordon off one meal each day or two afternoons each weekend weed them of distractions. We can choose a setting that encourages relaxation and uplift. We can fill it with totems and frippery — a balloon for a child, sparkling wine for a spouse — that signal celebration and create a sense of the sacred. And there's no doubt that the degree of attentiveness that we bring to an occasion ennobles or demeans it. Better to spend 15 focused, responsive minutes than 30 utterly distracted ones.

But people tend not to operate on cue. At least our moods and emotions don't. We reach out for help at odd points; we bloom at unpredictable ones. The surest way to see the brightest colors, or the darkest ones, is to be watching and waiting and ready for them.

That's reflected in a development that Claire Cain Miller and David Streitfeld wrote about in *The Times* last week. They noted that "a workplace culture that urges new mothers and fathers to hurry back to their cubicles is beginning to shift," and they cited "more family friendly policies" at Microsoft and Netflix, which have extended the leave that parents can take.

How many parents will step off the fast track and avail themselves of this remains to be seen. But those who do will be deciding that the quantity of time with their brood matters as much as the intensity of it.

They'll be lucky: Many people aren't privileged enough to exercise such discretion. My family is lucky, too. We have the means to get away.

But we're also dedicated to it, and we've determined that Thanksgiving Day isn't ample, that Christmas Eve passes too quickly, and that if each of us really means to be central in the others' lives, we must make an investment, the biggest components of which are minutes, hours, days. As soon as our beach week this summer was done, we huddled over our calendars and traded scores of emails to figure out which week next summer we could all set aside. It wasn't easy. But it was essential.

Couples move in together not just because it's economically prudent. They understand, consciously or instinctively, that sustained proximity is the best route to the soul of someone; that unscripted gestures at unexpected junctures yield sweeter rewards than scripted ones on date night; that the "I love you" that counts most isn't whispered with great ceremony on a hilltop in Tuscany. No, it slips out casually, spontaneously, in the produce section or over the dishes, amid the drudgery and detritus of their

routines. That's also when the truest confessions are made, when hurt is at its rawest and tenderness at its purest.

I know how my 80-year-old father feels about dying, religion and God not because I scheduled a discrete encounter to discuss all of that with him. I know because I happened to be in the passenger seat of his car when such thoughts were on his mind and when, for whatever unforeseeable reason, he felt comfortable articulating them.

And I know what he appreciates and regrets most about his past because I was not only punctual for this summer's vacation, but also traveled there with him, to fatten our visit, and he was uncharacteristically ruminative on that flight.

It was over lunch at the beach house one day that my oldest nephew spoke with unusual candor, and at unusual length, about his expectations for college, his experiences in high school — stuff that I'd grilled him about previously, never harvesting the generous answers that he volunteered during that particular meal.

It was on a run the next morning that my oldest niece described, as she'd never done for me before, the joys, frustrations and contours of her relationships with her parents, her two sisters and her brother. Why this information tumbled out of her then, with pelicans overhead and sweat slicking our foreheads, I can't tell you. But I can tell you that I'm even more tightly bonded with her now, and that's not because of some orchestrated, contrived effort to plumb her emotions. It's because I was present. It's because I was there.