Meaning, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing · About 4 minutes

A Good Hour With Unanswered Questions

Giving pleasure a place in a life that is still unfinished

In May's kitchen the dough is rising. The argument about the garden is still unresolved. For a while she has her hands in something she enjoys.

May's fictional afternoon raises a question that can be surprisingly difficult: must a life be settled before we are allowed to enjoy it?

Some unfinished matters do require attention now. A child is waiting. A deadline is real. Someone is relying on a promise. Those responsibilities deserve a place in the account. But unresolved concern can also become a prohibition with no clear end. Until the dispute, the future, or the grief is sorted out, pleasure feels premature.

What did the afternoon leave undone?

This question helps distinguish a practical responsibility from a general sense that enjoyment was wrong. If May missed a promised call while baking, she can address that call. If she had no duty that afternoon, feeling absorbed in the kitchen does not identify one she abandoned.

The garden still matters. She may remain disappointed about the meeting and worried about the next decision. Her friendship and the bread belong to the same life, even though they did nothing to settle the dispute.

Research on well-being distinguishes approaches concerned with pleasure and happiness from those concerned with meaning and fuller functioning.[1] A commitment can be meaningful while being difficult. An ordinary hour can be enjoyable without providing a larger purpose. Asking every welcome moment to prove its usefulness can make pleasure into another form of work.

No conclusion is required

Perhaps the afternoon leaves May refreshed. Perhaps sadness returns as soon as her friend goes. She might feel no larger change at all. She doesn't need to choose an interpretation such as "I am finally healing" or "I was only distracting myself." There is room to say what happened: she enjoyed making bread and being with her friend.

Others may read more into it. If you laugh, they may assume you need less support. If you go out, they may decide you can take on more. You can correct that kindly and plainly: "I had a good afternoon. The difficult part is still difficult."

It may help to name the unresolved matter and the actual responsibility attached to it. In May's case, those could be the garden's uncertain future and whatever task she has agreed to do before the next meeting. Naming the task can make space for the rest of the day without requiring indifference to the issue.

There are also periods when pleasure is hard to reach. Nothing here asks you to produce it. Appropriate care, help with daily demands, or fewer expectations may be needed first.

May's hour in the kitchen stays welcome even while the garden dispute waits.

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The bread will be ready later. The garden still needs a conversation. For this hour she has been here with her friend.

Companion reading · What Is This Life Asking of Me?

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Meaning, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Annual Review of Psychology, 52, 141–166. Source.

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