“Excuse me.” The woman sitting next to me on the plane leaned towards me. “But don’t you think you need to have children in order to understand what life is all about?” En route to Washington, DC for the imminent birth of our first grandchild, I wasn’t able to wrap my mind around a question of this magnitude. But now, in my second week of grandparenthood, I am ready to answer.

“No, Tina. I don’t believe we need to give birth to or raise children in order to understand the meaning of life, but I do think life has deeper meaning when we spend time with children.” My beautiful grandson Zachary is only 10 days old, but he has given me many blessings in our precious days together.

Zachary has helped me learn to chill. When I am holding him, we live on Planet Zachary. It’s kind of a bubble experience that sets us apart from everything going on around us. My skills as a multitasker are irrelevant. I cannot drink lattes or work on the computer, or organize my desk. Zach requires and, might I add, deserves, my complete attention. When he looks at me, how could I possibly be looking somewhere else? Every day during my time with him, I study his movements and sounds. Every day I see changes, and it makes me feel so very lucky that I am here to notice and cherish them.

I have been so very busy with my life, involved in many projects that are deeply important to me. My lists are long and complicated and often overwhelming. I try to keep up by doing many things at once, beyond my capacity to do all of them well. I need to break from the challenges and stresses. I need to focus and live the moment. Zach is forcing me to do exactly that.

He has taught me about relaxing and about prioritizing and focusing, and he has also helped me experience the joy of little things. We baked cookies together; well, okay, I baked and he slept nearby. But I do believe I enjoyed baking those cookies more than I’ve enjoyed any kitchen activity in a while. I’ve taken photographs (do I have to confess how many?) of the moments of Zachary’s life; it’s such a rush when I capture what I feel and see. Sounds. Expressions. Touches. Little things that are enormous.

What happens if you pause and focus? You see different things. You watch ears unfurl from curled ribbons into recognizable body parts. You see things more fully. Development is usually charted into months and weeks, but what if we have the opportunity to individualize development and observe it daily, even hourly? To be there when his eyes first lock onto faces, to watch him transition from wake to sleep. To see him find his thumb and the satisfaction that brings. To watch his umbilical cord dry up, his fingers find form and movement. I’m becoming a very keen observer of one small child.

Those of us who work in early childhood programs spend a lot of time with children. When we have the time to be really with them, when we live on the planets they create, we have very special opportunities to understand the meanings of life. It is children who can hold our hands and our attention and help us slow down, focus, relax, and enjoy the moments of life.