

“The Art of Doing Nothing Much at All”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Can words describe this sense, so seldom obtained?
So soft, so simple.
Time for people, inner peace enough
to look into eyes with interest-
instead of self-consciousness.
Time to wait - and let things come to you
instead of going after them.
More time, slower time,
The curious, calm capacity to enjoy simply,
to think freely, to feel deeply.
A slow, sweet sensation, a stillness inside.
You feel the ground through the soles of your shoes
and the sky all around you.
A feeling like ripples, gentle and easy across vast depth.
Sometimes it comes after a catharsis,
after four or five days of vacation,
trying to relax, finally slowing down.
Sometimes it just comes, unexpectedly, perfectly,
for no apparent reason except
maybe you slowed down, looked around,
liked what you saw;
or maybe you asked for it, believing that it can come as a gift
from a spirit far deeper than your own.

Linda and Richard Eyre (from the book, “Lifebalance”)

Reading

Our reading comes from Theodore Zeldin's *An Intimate History of Humanity*.

How can people believe themselves to be free
if they have no space in their lives where nothing is expected of them,
and if they are always late or in a hurry?

The Lilliputians observed two centuries ago
that Gulliver's God was his watch,
and that 'he seldom did anything without consulting it
and said it pointed out the time for every action of his life.'

Montesquieu philosophized that the English were impolite
because 'they are busy people, who do not even have the time
to raise their hats when they meet.'

Time was short even in this supposedly relaxed age.
So what chance is there of escaping its pressures today?

. . . Before clocks were invented, frustration had a different shape.
Time then was not made of little pieces,
of hours and minutes, needing to be saved and accounted for,
but was like a huge cloud enveloping the earth,
and humanity was waiting for it to clear.

The past was a part of the present;
individuals lived surrounded, in their imagination,
by their ancestors and their mythical heroes,
who seemed as alive as themselves;
they often did not know how old they were,
being more preoccupied with death than with time,
which was only a music announcing another life that would last for ever.

Every civilization has made a different prediction as to how long it would take
for eternity to arrive.

The Hindus spared themselves immediate anxiety because they thought it
would be 300 million years; the Chinese insisted that time went around in
circles . . . so that nothing ever really changed;
and the Zoroastrians said that God took 3,000 years

just to create the world.

But then the Jews invented a new idea of time,
which has been adopted by all modern societies:
they separated the past clearly from the present.

Having made a contract with God,
they looked forward to its implementation in the future,
not in heaven, but in the world.

They were the first to imagine a time when justice would be established,
when the deserts would become fertile and when there would be
an abundance of food and drink for everyone.

This vision was their answer to persecution,
and the beginning of a new tradition of dreaming about the future, stretching
from the Book of Daniel to medieval heresies,
socialist utopias, industrial revolutions, and science fiction. . . .

So most of the humans who have lived
have not been much bothered by the passing of time.

The modern idea of time is peculiar because it includes a new sense
that once something has happened, it is gone forever,
that time means change, and so insecurity.

Humans welcomed the clock's regular tick,
its unalterable habits, its tyranny,
because it consoled them from this new insecurity.

It was a tyranny which began as a liberation,
as so many other tyrannies have.

Medieval monasteries were the first to assign a fixed duty
to every minute of the day and night,
so as to free people from the pain of not knowing
what to do with themselves, and from the temptations of idleness.

But some thought the price of security was too high:
[the Renaissance humanist Francois] Rabelais protested,
'never will I subject myself to the hours;

the hours are made for the man and not man for the hours.’ . . .

He was announcing a quarrel between the easy-going and the orderly which was to last for several centuries, until the hours won. . . .¹

Sermon

Once upon a time, the executive of a large corporation in Toronto took a vacation, on doctor’s orders, in a small village on the coast of Mexico.

Unable to sleep after an urgent phone call from the office on the first morning away, he walked out to the pier to clear his mind.

A small boat with only one fisherman had just docked, and inside the boat were several large yellowfish tuna.

The executive complimented the fisherman on the quality of his catch.

“How long did it take you to bring in all of those fish?” he asked.

“Only a short while,” the fisherman said.

“Then, why don’t you stay out a little longer and catch even more fish?” the puzzled executive asked.

“Because I have more than enough here to support my family and give a few to my friends.”

“But . . ., but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

As the man in the boat unloaded the fish into a basket, he looked up and smiled.

“Oh, I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children. I take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening, where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos.

¹ Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994, pp. 349-351.

I have a full and busy life, Señor.”

The business executive laughed and stood tall.

“Well, sir, I have an MBA from Harvard,
and I think I can be of help to you.
You should spend more time fishing,
and with the proceeds, you could buy yourself a bigger boat.

“In no time, you could buy several boats, and eventually,
you could own an entire fleet.”

“And, instead of selling your catch to a middleman,
you could sell directly to consumers,
and eventually open up your own cannery.

“You could control the product, the processing, and the distribution.

“Now, of course, you would need to leave this small fishing village behind,
and move to a big city, where you would run your expanding enterprise with a
solid management team.”

The skeptical fisherman then interrupted him,
“But, Señor, how long will all of this take?

“Ah, 15 to 20 years. 25 tops,” the executive promised.

“And what then, Señor?”

With a sparkle in his eyes, the executive said,
“See, now that’s the best part.
When the time is right, you could sell your company to the public and become
very rich. You’d make millions.”

“Millions, Señor? And, then what?”

“Well, then you would retire and move to a small coastal fishing village,
where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids,
take a siesta, and stroll to the village

where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos ...”²

How easily we can forget that paradise is to be found in the here and now—
and that to “wile away the hours”
isn’t necessarily the same thing as wasting time.

These “Dog Days” of summer,
when the clock seems to move at a blessedly slower pace,
offer us an opportune time to give thought to what really matters—
a time to look for, and hopefully celebrate,
the things that bring deep meaning and joy to our lives.

For some, that, of course, involves seeking after fortune,
working hard to achieve important goals.

There’s much to be said for the intense feeling of accomplishment
that comes from striving toward and reaching some great aim.

Satisfaction of this sort can be particularly sweet.

But, there is also much to be said—and maybe even more—
about the simple pleasures that come from savouring one’s life,
of recognizing along life’s way the moments that make up
everything we may ever know of paradise, right here and right now—
by taking time
to cease from all of our doing and to simply be,
so that we might be awake to ourselves
and to what life is really asking of us.

There is an art to living this way.
An art to slowing down the beat of our hearts
and stilling the stirrings of our minds.
An art to regularly setting aside “time out of time”
when we rest from our labours,
and can begin to see again the larger arc of our lives
and our heart’s deepest desire.

The reading I shared with you earlier blamed Judaism

² Adapted from the telling in *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferris.

for introducing our linear, goal-oriented concept of time.

I'm not sure that's completely fair,
especially without recognizing that from Judaism also emerged
a profound commitment to honouring the Sabbath,
of taking time off from all of life's routine demands.

A day when all work, all effort is strictly forbidden.
Keeping the Sabbath, of course, has long defined the children of Israel.

You may remember also that Jesus often got himself
into a heap of trouble by healing people on the Sabbath.

Though he upset his critics by challenging their traditional notions, Christianity
after him didn't hesitate from imposing stiff restrictions on what could and
couldn't be done on Sundays.

Many of us grew up with these restrictions as the law of the land.

As a kid, in Texas, I remember the odd "Blue Laws," as they were called,
which dictated that you could buy nails on Sunday, but not a hammer,
because the hammer would be working. . .

Toronto also had some strange laws.

The Sabbath and Public Order By-laws came into effect here
in the late 19th century when citizens groups
pushed for ways to uphold public morality.

The Toronto Police were responsible for licensing and regulating
dance halls, pool halls, theatres, and later, movie houses.

They were also charged with making sure that, on Sundays,
the streetcars did not run,
that alcohol wasn't sold or consumed,
and that there definitely wasn't any sledding or playing ball in High Park.³

What's interesting is that there was a serious class difference

³ Homel, Gene Howard, "Sliders and Backsliders: Toronto's Sunday Tobogganing Controversy of 1912",
Urban History Review, Vol. X, No. 2, 1981.

in how these laws were enforced.

Someone once observed that what was forbidden came perilously close to any historians' description of what working-class people actually did for fun back then.⁴

While streetcars sat parked in their stations, chaffered carriages could be seen out and about town.

While baseball was forbidden, golf was allowed, as it was clearly not, according to court records from the time, the sort of game spelled out in the by-laws.

And, while it was illegal to buy or consume alcohol on Sundays, it was common to be served a drink in the parlors and clubs of the wealthy.

As a woman convicted of drunkenness at the time stated to the judge, "The only difference between me and Lady Flaherty in Rosedale is that I don't have a powdered flunkey to carry me up to bed when I get drunk."⁵

Now, as funny and antiquated as that all might sound, the practice of Sabbath even in our own day can sometimes go to intriguing extremes.

A few weeks ago when I last visited Olga McKenzie in hospital, I was struck by the fact that Baycrest, the Jewish hospital up on Bathurst, has a "Sabbath Elevator"—an elevator that from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday runs automatically between the floors so that no one inadvertently breaks the Sabbath by calling the elevator.

What I find interesting and frustrating about all of this—the elevator, the misguided by-laws, the attacks on Jesus for breaking the Sabbath—is that it all seems to have profoundly missed the point by focussing on the letter of the law rather than the spirit.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of the Sabbath

⁴ Boritch, Helen, *The Making of Toronto the Good: The Organization of Policing and Production of Arrests, 1859 – 1959*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, p. 101.

⁵ Denison, George T., *Recollections of a Police Magistrate*, Toronto: 1920. pg. 11.

as a “great cathedral” in “the architecture of time.”

He noted the correspondence, in Latin, between the word for temple (“templar”) and for time (“tempus”).

The Sabbath is a temple made of time.

“It is a day,” he said,
“on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time,
to turn from the results of creation
to the mystery of creation;
from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”⁶

Do you ever make that sort of turn?

Do you set aside a day a week, or an hour a day, to simply rest and be?

Do you take time in a committed, consistent way to honour yourself and your connection with the Spirit of Life that is within and beyond you?

I suspect that most of us don’t. At least not intentionally.

As much as I try, and as central a spiritual practice as this is for me,
I’ll confess that it’s something I struggle with almost every single week.

That’s because it’s not easy, and in our ever-connected world,
it’s not exactly getting easier for any of us.

But, the truth is that the busyness of modern life
means that we need, all the more, to pull away to that temple made of time.

I’m reminded of Gandhi who once said:
“I have so much to accomplish today
that I must meditate two hours instead of one.”

It’s hard to remember such wisdom when we’re drowning in the details of our to-do list.

And, to be clear, I’m not speaking only to those of us who are still working.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951, p. 10.

The retired folks in this congregation are easily some of the busiest people I've ever known!

It's not easy to live with the knowledge that we will never have enough time on this earth to do all that we might like.

And, while great meaning can be, and hopefully is, found in those things to which we do devote our days, we would do well to carve out the time for rest and reflection that ensures our spirits are replenished and helps us to gauge whether we are investing our lives in accord with our deepest values and highest vision.

There is a price to be paid in not taking this time.

Thomas Merton named the excessive demands that distract us from our core commitments as “a pervasive form of contemporary violence.”

He said that, “To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.”

[Our frenzied activity] “destroys the fruitfulness of our own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom” which makes our work meaningful and useful to ourselves and to the world.

What I find intriguing is that brain studies are now backing up what Merton said half a century ago.

Without time to daydream and to let our minds wander where they will, we inhibit our own creativity.⁷

When we think we're getting ahead by doing ten things at once, we're actually weakening our performance of everything we're trying to do.⁸

And when we chronically overwork, we pretty quickly reach

⁷ John Tierney, “Discovering the Virtues of a Wandering Mind,” *The New York Times*, 28 June 2010.

⁸ Matt Richtel, “Outdoors and Out of Reach: *The New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

a point of diminishing returns.

While these may sound like secular reasons for keeping Sabbath, I believe they are spiritual reasons, as well.

In his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, Wayne Muller writes: I use the word Sabbath... [to represent] a specific practice, [as] a larger metaphor, a starting point to invoke a conversation about the forgotten necessity of rest. . . .

“Sabbath time is time off the wheel,
time when we take our hands from the plow. . .while we drink,
if only for a few moments, from the fountain of rest and delight.

But he points out that: “Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true.

“It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honouring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us.”

Yet, as compelling as this temple made of time can be, it’s worth asking what keeps us from visiting more often—what holds us back from making it a central aspect of our lives?

I believe a clue can be found in the best-selling book, *Journal of a Solitude*, by the Unitarian poet May Sarton.

The first entry, September 15th, she writes:

I am here alone for the first time in weeks,
to take up my ‘real’ life again at last.

That’s what is strange—that friends, even passionate love,
are not my real life, unless there is time alone
in which to explore and to discover
what is happening or has happened.

Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening,

this life would become arid.

Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here
and 'the house and I resume old conversations. . .

The ambience here is order and beauty.
This is what frightens me when I am first alone again.
I feel inadequate.

I have made an open place, a place for meditation.
What if I cannot find myself inside it?

[In this journal] I hope to break through into the rough,
rocky depths [of life], to the matrix itself.

There is violence there and anger never resolved.
And, my need to be alone is balanced against my fear
of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge, empty, silence.”⁹

I think what Sarton points to so powerfully is that when we slow down,
it's not only rest that we may find.

As anyone who has ever sat meditation knows,
when we still our minds, just about everything that's ever troubled us
is sure to bubble to the surface.

Hard questions and old hurts.
Grief and ambiguity.
Petty resentments and sometimes unspeakable pain.

Worked on and worked through,
this is the bedrock, blessed stuff of spiritual growth.

Each week, every day, we are presented with an invitation
to enter into the vast and sometimes daunting Sabbath silence
from which our lives might more powerfully speak.

Before this summer slips away,
let us keep the Sabbath.

⁹ May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*, pp. 11-12.

Let us keep busyness at bay
by entering into that life-giving temple of time—
where we marvel at the world of creation
and are renewed to take our part in the creation of the world.

Amen.

Closing Words

Until we find peace at the last,
may we rest in the glorious arms of the universe,
knowing that peace lives, even now, within our hearts.