

The Spiritual Practice of Unplugging

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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

from Thomas Merton

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist. . . . most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by the 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. . . . It destroys the fruitfulness of one's own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

Reading - “Adam’s Complaint” by Nicholas Biel

On the third day I was dust, ordinary common dust
like you see on a country road in a dry spell,
nothing expected of me,
me expecting nothing neither.
On the sixth day he comes along and blows.
“In my own image too,” he says,
like he was doing me a favour.
Sometimes I think if he’d waited a million years
by then I’d been tired maybe being dust
but after only two, three days,
what can you expect? I wasn’t used to being dust
and he goes and makes me into Man.
He could see right away from the expression on my face
I didn’t like it so he’s going to butter me up.
He puts me in this garden only I don’t butter.

He brings me all the animals[.] I should give them names—
What do I know of names? “Call it something,” he says,
“anything you want,”
so I make names up—lion, tiger,
elephant, giraffe—crazy but that’s what he wants.

I’m naming animals since 5 AM, in the evening I’m tired
I go to bed early, in the morning I wake up,
[and] there she is sitting by a pool of water admiring herself.
“Hello, Adam,” she says, “I’m your mate, I’m Eve.”
“Pleased to meet you,” I tell her and we shake hands.
Actually I’m not pleased—from time immemorial nothing,
now rush, rush, rush; two days ago I’m dust, yesterday
all day I’m naming animals, today I got a mate already.
Also I didn’t like the way she looked at me
or at herself in the water.

Well, you know what happened, I don’t have to tell you,
there were all those fruit trees—she took a bite,
I took a bite, the snake took a bite and quick like a flash—
out of the garden.

Now I’m not complaining; After all, it’s his garden,
he don’t want nobody eating his apples, that’s his business.
What irritates me is the nerve of the guy.

I didn’t ask him to make me even dust;
he could have left me nothing like I was before—
and such a fuss for one lousy little apple
not even ripe (there wasn’t much time from Creation,
it was still Spring), I didn’t ask for Cain, for Abel,
I didn’t ask for nothing, but anything goes wrong,
who’s to blame?....Sodom, Gomorrah, Babel, Ararat...
me or my kids catch it,...fire, flood, pillar of salt.
“Be patient,” Eve said, “a little understanding. Look,
he made it, [it] was his idea, it breaks down, so he’ll fix it.”
But I told him one day. “You’re in too much of a hurry.
In six days you make everything there is,
you expect it to run smoothly? Something’s always
going to happen. If you’d a thought first,
conceived a plan, consulted a specialist,
you wouldn’t have so much trouble all the time.”
But you can’t tell him nothing. He knows it all.

Like I say, he means well but he's a meddler and he's careless.
He could have made that woman so she wouldn't bite no apple.
All right, all right, so what's done is done,
but all the same, he should have known better,
or at least he could have blown on other dust.

Sermon: "The Spiritual Practice of Unplugging"

There's a good chance you've already heard about the fiasco.

The drama unfolded on a Tuesday night,
not too long ago at Avery Fisher Hall.

The New York Philharmonic, over the preceding hour,
had led the audience through the passionate wrestling with life and death
that is Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony.

As he composed this, his last complete work,
Mahler knew death wasn't all that far off for himself,
making the quiet and tender farewell at the end all the more poignant.

The last prayerful minutes of the symphony are barely audible at times,
the soft sound of the strings finally trailing off into silence and eternity.

It's the kind of piece that, when it ends,
leaves an audience, for the longest time, incapable of applause.

More common is a collective sigh—
a shared release of the emotional tension
that has been carefully built over the past hour.

Now, that's how it usually works,
but on this particular Tuesday night,
just as the orchestra was reaching the end,
someone's phone started ringing.

As it turned out, that someone was sitting in the front row.

And, that someone was oblivious that the ringing phone was his,

that is, until the conductor stopped the orchestra,
turned around, leered, and implored him
to make the light-hearted marimba music stop.

Even then, by all reports, it took what seemed an eternity
for the man to reach into his pocket and actually silence the phone.

In those few fraught moments,
at least a couple of people, in anger and desperation,
yelled out certain directives in his direction.

At last, the festive sounds were silenced.

And after the conductor asked the man from the stage
if it would happen again (as it seems it had
actually been repeatedly sounding off at intervals for several minutes),
he spoke to the audience, offering his sincerest apology,
explaining that the interruption was so egregious
he felt he had no choice but to stop the performance.

After a round of grateful applause,
the conductor turned back to the orchestra,
which played much of the last movement over again,
though something of the spell had surely been shattered.

The man in the front row was appropriately mortified.
He is a regular concert-goer and a longtime subscriber to the Philharmonic.

The following day, he granted an anonymous interview to *The New York Times*,
explaining he didn't actually realise
the noise was emanating from his own pocket.

It seems the day before, his company had exchanged his Blackberry
for a newfangled iPhone.

He knew that the annoying sound wasn't his ringtone,
and he was certain he had turned off the phone's ringer
before the performance.

What he didn't know is that the alarm clock feature on his new iPhone

always comes through loud and clear,
even when the ringer has been turned off.

Apparently, in the car on the way home,
his wife figured out that his alarm had inadvertently,
and quite unfortunately, been set for 9:45pm.

I can only imagine how that conversation went...

But the moment points to the fact
that unplugging is sometimes harder than we imagine.

A second story.
A while back, I was at a large worship service,
sitting up in the balcony of a grand auditorium.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who is widely regarded as one of the world's greatest
preachers—and certainly is in my book, was in the pulpit.

And, as enraptured as I was by her preaching,
I couldn't help but be bothered by the woman sitting in the row ahead of me
who, through the course of the sermon,
was playing a game on her phone,
which occasionally involved little explosive noises
followed by a series of beeps.

I was angered by her disregard for the moment
and for those of us sitting around her.

Even worse, though, was what happened a few minutes later
during the time of silent prayer and meditation.

The man sitting a couple of rows behind me rather than immediately
muting his phone when it began to ring decided to take the call.

Right then and there!

As those of us around him tried to maintain some semblance of worship,
we were regaled with a list of mundane instructions
he was supplying to the people in his office back at home.

Directions, as I recall, about the colour of paper in the photocopier.

Now, what made this whole experience so very appalling
was that this service I was attending
was part of a conference for clergy on the arts of worship and preaching!

These were ministers behaving so badly!
People who should have known better!
(I'm glad to say that the crowd was mostly non-Unitarian types, but still...!)

In our increasingly wired world,
it is becoming ever more difficult to disconnect, to unplug,
to learn how to be present to the present moment,
to be where we actually are—in body, mind, and spirit.

To prove just how hard this is,
there's a new game making the rounds.

It's being played out in restaurants here and there by groups of friends.
You can try it today at lunch, or sometime later this week for yourself!

Here's how it works: everybody at the start of the meal
places their cell phones on the table.

The first person who picks up her or his phone—
to check voice mail, text messages, the weather or their stocks—
ends up picking up the cheque for the entire table.

It can be hard to be fully present to the present moment—
so hard that even a financial incentive isn't always enough
to make us focus on the matter (or the people) at hand,
rather than the people to whom we are tethered by technology,
dear to us, though they may be.

It might be easy to think this is all a generational thing,
and to some degree it, perhaps, is.

But it seems that, more and more,
the drive to distraction is impacting us all.

That's why I'm not really talking about smart phones this morning.

I'm talking about our need for silence and rest and renewal,
for sabbath and sabbatical.

I'm talking about our need to unplug, and to disconnect,
and I'm talking about the things that can get in the way.

So, often, the most obvious things are the modern conveniences
that make our daily lives so much easier than those
of most of the humans who've walked the face of the earth before us.

With the flick of a switch, we are bathed in light, no matter the hour.
Radio and television and computers bring the world to us in an instant.
Planes and trains and automobiles whisk us across the city
or around the globe in a fraction of the time once required
to travel such distances.

(And, as even our mayor finally learned this week,
one can travel by subway across Toronto in the wee hours of the night!
And then post the photos on Twitter to prove it.)

We are now able to pack more into our days and nights than ever before.
And, so we live our lives—at least a good many of us—
somewhere between full to overflowing.

Our calendars are filled around the clock with work and school,
with chores and childcare, with concerts and volunteer jobs
and congregational commitments.

I find I'm part jealous and part worried for our children these days, too,
as I see them shuttling back and forth
between Coming of Age classes and cello lessons
and hockey practice and ballet and choir rehearsals.

While I envy the array of things that fill their days,
I often wonder what we're really teaching them—
about time, about life, about balance.

Years ago, I heard a story that has stuck with me over the years about the elephant that was used in a commercial for Coca-Cola in the early 90's.

Do you remember the ad?

It involved an elephant swimming in the ocean out to a raft where a woman was sunning herself next to a bucket of ice cold Cokes.

The elephant plunks down four peanuts on the dock and then makes off with a bottle of pop, all without ever calling the woman's attention to himself.

As remarkable as it was to see this massive mammal filmed from below as it swam, the behind-the-scenes story is all the more amazing.

It seems the elephant used in the ad, before turning to a life in television, was a working animal in an industry where he was only required to work Mondays through Fridays.

On the other two days, he rested.

Things were different, though, in the world of television.

To contain costs, the director wanted to get things done as quickly as possible, and this required extra days of filming that apparently threatened to cut into the elephant's weekend plans.

When Saturday came, to the dismay of the cast and crew, they suddenly had on their hands a very non-cooperative pachyderm.

Same thing on Sunday.

Only on Monday did filming fully resume.

"Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy," the fourth commandment commands.

Who knew elephants could read *The Bible*?

Who knew that elephants, with their celebrated memories,
could, just as the commandment demands, *remember*?

Who knew that elephants might understand something of what Thomas
Merton said in those words you heard during the meditation?

To allow oneself to be carried away
by a multitude of conflicting concerns,
to surrender to too many demands,
to commit one's self to too many projects,
to want to help everyone and everything
is to succumb to [a form of contemporary violence and] aggression.

Though we Unitarians aren't big on commandments,
there's much to be said for the one on keeping Sabbath—
on setting aside some "time out of time,"
when we can return to the springs from which our lives are nourished.

This will mean different things for different people.

For some, it will be holding to the ancient Jewish tradition
of kindling the Sabbath candles at sunset on Friday,
of sharing food with family and friends,
and setting aside work until dusk on Saturday.

For others, it might involve committing to a "Digital Sabbath,"
by literally unplugging from our gadgets and our gizmos
and the constant flow of information that comes with them.

As important as that information can be,
as helpful as it might be for keeping us connected
with our nearest and dearest,
it does leave me with a question
about the degree to which all of this information,
all of these commitments,
all of the things we juggle in our lives,
might also keep us distracted and disconnected
from ourselves and that tap root of inner wisdom
Thomas Merton mentioned.

In a conversation with a colleague this week,
she shared a snippet from a recent article
that spoke of how the flow of modern life
is increasingly leaving us only capable of “rapid shallow processing.”

Bombarded by information on all sides,
we’re always on to the next thing.

The Euro is collapsing.
City Council overrides His Worship!
It’s going to snow!
Hell’s breaking out in Syria.
Eastern Europe is in the grip of winter.
Beyoncé had a baby.
The Toronto Zoo is getting Panda bears!
The TSX is up! The TSX is down!
The Leafs lost. The Leafs lost again. . .

Around and around we can go, from one thing to the next,
and weeks or months can pass before we remember
that it wasn’t too long ago when we were deeply concerned
about Attawapiskat or the famine in Sudan,
though our minds have moved on.

The constant flow of information and stimulation
can keep us from going deeper,
from doing the kind of reflecting and thinking
that is required to better understand what this life is asking of us.

A couple of Saturdays ago, I was visiting a member of our congregation
who lives in a Jewish Seniors Residence.

It being the Jewish Sabbath, people were using the Sabbath doors and the
Sabbath elevators to honour the letter of the law about not doing any work
by letting technology do it for them.

At one point, I overheard one woman say to another,
“What do we need with the Sabbath? It’s not like we ever do anything?!”

Fair enough.
I thought it was a fair and brilliant question.

I resisted the urge to offer up a sermon there on the spot,
but what I wanted to say is that we need Sabbath
to live more fully into our lives.

Not by filling them with endless commitments and demands,
but by carving out time out of time
when we can be renewed and refreshed and refocused.

Intention is the key.
Sitting at home and watching football doesn't necessarily count—
though an argument could be made!
Neither does sitting in silence or just taking a walk.

Anyone can take a day off.
The trick is in choosing to take that day off and to use that day off
for something that restores our flagging spirits,
that connects us to others, and to the heart of who we are.

Each week, we lead into meditation with a verse of the beautiful hymn,
“Come and Find the Quiet Centre.”

It's one of the most meaningful moments in the service for me,
and, I know, for many of you.

If you listen carefully, you can frequently hear
an audible sigh in the room as the music ends.

Come and find the quiet centre in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter,
find the frame where we are freed;
clear the chaos and the clutter,
clear our eyes that we can see
all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.

That is the gift that the Sabbath brings.

May we learn to honour some block of time—

in our every day and our every week.

Some beautiful block of time set apart from all the others,
that we might simply bask in the glory of being alive,
and make our days upon this earth glad. Amen.