

**Summer, Time and Being**  
July 8, 2012  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
Fiona Heath, Summer Minister

Summer afternoon - summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in  
the English language. *Henry James*

**Reading**

Excerpt from Walden by Henry David Thoreau

But while we are confined to books...  
we are in danger of forgetting the language  
which all things and events speak without metaphor,  
which alone is copious and standard. ...  
No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert.  
What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry,  
no matter how well selected, or the best society,  
or the most admirable routine of life,  
compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?  
Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans.  
Nay, I often did better than this.  
There were times when I could not afford to  
**sacrifice the bloom of the present moment** to any work,  
whether of the head or hands.  
I love a broad margin to my life.

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath,  
I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery,  
amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs,  
in undisturbed solitude and stillness, until...

[by] the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway,  
I was reminded of the lapse of time.  
**I grew in those seasons like corn in the night,**  
and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.  
They were not time subtracted from my life,  
but so much over and above my usual allowance....

For the most part, I minded not how the hours went.

The day advanced as if to light some work of mine;  
it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished....  
I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune.

## **Reflection Summer Time and Being**

It is summer time and the living is easy.  
Fish are jumping and – well we don't have cotton,  
but the corn is just starting to get high.  
It is time to drink beer on the patio, go visiting, swim in the pool, walk in the park, hang  
out at the cottage, enjoying the simple pleasures of sunshine and companionship.

But while some of us are in the fortunate position to have summers like this, not all of  
us do. Many of us are too busy to take any extended time off work.  
The average Canadian works more hours now than in the 1950s. North Americans  
work an average of nine weeks longer than Western Europeans in a year. We are in an  
era of time poverty. There is never enough time to get everything done.

And in many ways, we kind of like it. You're busy? I'm busy! We're all busy together!  
It's like we're members of the **Busy Club** and that's our special greeting.  
The secret handshake seems to involve tapping a phone screen.

You busy? I'm so busy! Well, alllll rightttt. You belong, you are part of the busy,  
buzzing hive of corporate consumer culture.  
You are a worker bee. Good job!

We live in a culture that prides itself on busy. Media stories are consistently devoted  
to helping us deal with our oh-so-busy days. There is an assumption that to do a job  
well you must have too much to do and must do it all now.

For many years I was underemployed. I was on contract at temporary jobs, home with  
my son, and free lancing in writing and education. I could never say that I was "busy".  
I had time for everything. It was lovely. And lonely. It was awfully isolating not to be a  
member of the busy club. When people derive so much worth and identity from a busy  
work life those of us on the margins, with limited or no work, struggle to find our place.  
First question at parties: What do you do? Wrong answer: Not much.

It is only in the last few years, as I worked four days a week, went to school part time,  
then school full time, plus 3 years of commuting to Toronto, with this last year being  
full time, that I can say I am busy and mean it. Being part of that intensity, feeling  
indispensable, in the thick of things, feels good. There is an adrenalin high to be had by

rushing around each day, with every task accomplished in crisis mode. It is exciting. You feel part of the whole, the whole strange busy worker bee world in which we live. **Being Busy becomes a badge of belonging.**

But I worry that dashing about being a busy worker bee isn't actually a good thing. The Busy Club isn't perhaps the best club to belong to. Membership comes at a cost. Not just the cost of our time, but possibly at the cost of our spirits. "The whole mechanism of modern life is geared for a flight from the [spiritual]". (paraphrase *Thomas Merton*).

Even the metaphor of busy worker bees is false: **bees aren't actually busy.** They look terribly busy, as they buzz, buzz, buzz about but they spend lots – almost two thirds – of their time doing nothing at all, except hanging out. One researcher noted that a worker bee crawled into a beehive cell and just lay there for five hours. Bees really spend most of their time just being alive.

How do we provide for our emotional, mental, and spiritual health in a culture of busy? We are either caught up in the busyness ourselves and have "no time to spare" or we are excluded from it, unappreciated and often without support. We may be connected, connected to our jobs, to our communities, to our electronic devices, to our friends and families as much as we can be. But where do we find the time to simply be?

It is summer time and the living is easy.  
Your daddy is rich and your momma's good looking.  
What more could you need?  
**Time**, many of us would say. More time to enjoy it all.

"The hectic activity imposed upon us by [consumer culture] ... keeps us from that inward stillness where meaning is to be found. how can we grasp the nature of things, how can we lead gathered lives, if we are forever dashing about like water striders on the moving surface of a creek? (*Scott Russell Saunders*)

So how do we move, even for a little while, from hurry and busy and rush and run to a slower sense of time and being? Summer, when the natural world is so vibrant, abundant, and vital, seems like a good time – and place – to try.

If you believe, as I do, that the universe is alive, then this is most easily experienced in the summer. To paraphrase writer Majorie Kinnan Rawlings, "the universe is breathing, and the world and ourselves are **breathing the same breath**. It is important only to keep close enough to its pulse to feel its rhythm and to know that life is vital, and we part of it."

The Busy Club keeps us from experiencing this sense of being. We can't sit still long enough to notice the larger whole, to feel it breathing with us. This is not just about feeling connected to nature. I had a friend who once told me of her late night spiritual epiphany at a Toronto bus stop. Sitting there – sober – she suddenly had a strong sense that it was all alive, the grimy bus stop, the concrete sidewalk, the asphalt road, all alive and flowing and benevolent and loving. We can experience life as vital even at bus stops.

**The sacred is present if you look for it, but absent if you don't.**

Our cultural images celebrate the worker bee, industriously buzzing away without respite. But our ancestors looked for the sacred, and associated bees with the divine. In Mesopotamia bees were associated with the mother goddess. For ancient Egyptians, the bee was a symbol of the soul, for early Christians the bee was symbol of hope or of Jesus himself. Often the bee was associated with royalty. Perhaps it is time for us change the meaning of our metaphors. To **welcome more reverence** into our lives. To cherish the image of the bee as a symbol of the divine, just hanging out and enjoying the flowers.

As a society, we need to remember that busy-ness is only one way of being in the world. And while it can be exhilarating, there are other ways of being that have value as well. We need time to simply be, to fully relax into our own being. Unstructured, unscheduled time which allows our souls to “grow like corn in the night” as Thoreau said.

We could develop our ability to sit and do nothing. John Lubbock, an associate of Charles Darwin said “Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass on a summer day listening to the murmur of water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is hardly a waste of time.”

We need to have time to just breathe and relax. Time to be leisurely: to go slow, take time, to notice, to appreciate. This is easy to say, but not really that easy to do.

I recently read an essay that suggested we should learn to sit and do nothing for half an hour while sitting in a park or a garden. Really do nothing, don't focus on your breath, don't think, don't plan, just sit and be. I tried, I didn't make five minutes before getting up to water the tomato plants. The next time I just started telling myself a story about the rest of my day. It's hard not to want to get on to the next activity, to make plans, to get things done. The Busy Club is deeply internalized as the right way to live.

To simply *be* takes some practice.

Being in this way is **the state of being yourself at ease within the whole.**

It is not about forgetting yourself, or transforming yourself, but simply being comfortable with all that you are. Not just the thinking you, or the physical you, or the emotional you, but the whole integrated deal. And in just being you, at ease, you become open to the world, to all the other beings with you. Being part of the aliveness of summer with all the plants and skateboards and ice cream.

Being open to the world, being present, opens up the self. This experience of **deep absorption in the now** is what allows us to **feel deeply**.

Beingness opens the self not just to joy and beauty and gratitude, but also to pain and grief and terror. The world can be a terrible, terrible place. It hurts an awful lot of the time.

There a lot of people and creatures suffering mentally, emotionally, physically. Injustice abounds. This can be overwhelming. We can't be open all the time. But we can't avoid it all the time either. That leads not to growth but to stasis. Protecting ourselves keeps us from being fully alive. We need to experience this sense of wholeness in being to **be whole ourselves**.

It's summer time and the living is easy. How do we move from a poverty of time to a way of being that gives us "a broad margin to our lives"? That gives us the gift of a morning spent in reverie which feels far more productive than the work of our hands? How do we become, not just readers, not just doers, but, as Thoreau said, seers?

I think coming here may help. We gather in religious community to find the balance between being and busy, to help each other when we reach the extremes at either end. To reach the quiet centre where meaning is found.

As Unitarians we have yet to develop a unique spiritual practice, one that grounds us and connects us the greater whole, although as individuals many of us have found fruitful practices such as prayer and meditation.

I think a Unitarian spiritual practice might simply involve being still, breathing, and paying attention. **Reverential Contemplation**. Smelling the wet asphalt after a rain, looking a homeless person in the eye, seeing the bees in the clover. Taking moments to be still and be ourselves. Just as we are. Sitting for half an hour outside without doing anything at all.

As chalice lighters, we are called to ground ourselves in the here and now. Not in prayer to a divine being above it all, not in detachment from the suffering of the world, but in taking our time to see and accept, with all its joys and burdens,

our particular place in this living, breathing, terrible, beautiful planet.  
To be **more present** in the world, not less.

From this type of spiritual practice we might be refreshed, reinvigorated, ready to live  
out our principles of hope and social justice.  
Ready to be truly ourselves.

It's summertime and the living is easy.  
May it be so.