

# “Not My Table”

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**Reading**            “Sorry, Hon, not my table” by Meg Barnhouse

I love for a waitress to call me “Hon.” It’s comforting.  
She doesn’t know me, and I don’t know her,  
but we fit into well-worn, ancient categories:  
I am the “Hungry One” and she is  
the “One Who Brings Nourishment From the Unseen Source.”

When I was younger, I worked as a waitress....  
I learned useful things while serving food to strangers.

I know how to rush around with my hands full,  
thinking about six things at the same time,  
which has stood me in good stead as the working mother of two small sons.

I know that people are not at their best when they’re hungry.  
That knowledge helps me to understand world events.  
If the citizens of the world were well fed,  
we’d have fewer wars and less mayhem.

The most helpful thing I grasped while waitressing  
was that some tables are my responsibility, and some are not.

A waitress gets overwhelmed if she has too many tables,  
and no one gets good service.

In my life, I have certain things to take care of:  
my children, my relationships, my work, myself, and one or two causes.  
That’s it. Other things are not my table.

I would go nuts if I tried to take care of everyone,  
if I tried to make everybody do the right thing.

If I went through my life without ever learning to say,  
“Sorry, that’s not my table, Hon,”

I would burn out and be no good to anybody.

I need to have a surly waitress inside myself  
that I can call on when it seems everyone in the world  
is waving an empty coffee cup in my direction.

My Inner Waitress looks over at them,  
keeping her six plates balanced and her feet moving,  
and says, “Sorry, Hon, not my table.”

### **Sermon: “Not My Table”**

Only time will tell  
whether this is the most damaging sermon I ever preach from this pulpit,  
or if it might, perhaps, be one of the most transformative.

Not too long ago, a colleague of mine  
used the “Not My Table” reading by Meg Barnhouse  
that I shared with you earlier.

Unfortunately, he used that reading on the same Sunday  
as his congregation’s annual Volunteer Fair.

That afternoon at Coffee Hour, as it turns out,  
no one signed up to help out with anything.

Looking around a room full of volunteer opportunities—  
of places where they could invest their time and energy  
to sustain the well-being of their congregation—  
it seems most everyone decided that none of the tables,  
with their various causes and commitments, was actually theirs.

The danger in this sermon is that we could collectively decide the same—  
that it isn’t a priority for any of us  
to take on the essential and the optional tasks  
that make this place work, that make our congregation what it is.

And, yet, I am willing to take that risk,  
because I believe the stakes are high.

A few months ago, Tim Kreider, writing in *The New York Times*, named the frenetic pace at which we live our lives “The Busy Trap.”<sup>1</sup>

He points out that this trap is largely self-imposed.

He was careful to acknowledge that it’s not “people pulling back-to-back shifts in the ICU or commuting by bus to three minimum-wage jobs” who are complaining about how busy they are.

Those people, he says, are not “busy,” they’re “tired.”

The busy-ness he warns against is that which is “purely self-imposed”—the variety of things that pull us in different directions, but are entirely of our own choosing.

It is a privilege to have such choices, he points out, despite our complaints to the contrary—our endless complaints of how busy we are.

The problem, the challenge, is to wonder at what might be getting lost in our frenzied patterns.

In describing his own adolescence, Kreider points to the possible cost of an overly-busy life:

“I was a member of the latchkey generation and had three hours of totally unstructured, largely unsupervised time every afternoon, time I used to do everything from surfing the World Book Encyclopedia to making animated films to getting together with friends in the woods to chuck dirt clods directly into one another’s eyes, all of which,” he says, “provided me with important skills and insights that remain valuable to this day.

Those free hours became the model for how I wanted to live the rest of my life.”

I worry about the model that we’re using.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Krieder, “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” Opinionator (Blog), *The New York Times*, June 30, 2012.

I worry about the Busy-Trap,  
because, simply put, we are the busiest people that I know.

The hardest thing to pull off around here is the amazing feat  
of scheduling a meeting with more than two people.

We are a people of endless causes and commitments.  
We have meetings to attend, classes to teach,  
vacations to take and performances to take in.

We go to rallies and marches, medical appointments and yoga.  
We schlep to work or trek across the city to visit family and friends.  
We give of our time to worthy causes, including this place.

And, to hear many of you tell it, then end up exhausted,  
if not on the edge of burnout.

The problem is that everything I just listed is good—is great!—  
is a wonderful and worthwhile investment of our life's energy—  
and, yet, it's often just too much to manage, when taken all together.

Yesterday I spoke at the monthly forum at OISE  
of the Toronto Humanist Association.

A number of people were running late because of the International Women's  
Day march snaking its way down Bloor Street, just outside the building.

The decision was made at the appointed hour to delay the start just a bit.

I was sitting next to Art Brewer from our congregation  
who observed that these Humanists were just like Unitarians,  
always cutting it close, and living on the razor's edge,  
when it came to arriving on time for events.

I joked that this was a reasonable expectation of people who don't place  
a great deal of trust in the promise of an afterlife.

With only this one life to live,  
I ventured that we are prone to packing as much as humanly possible  
into the days that are on loan to us from Life itself.

And, yet, I find myself asking, of late,  
whether an overly-full life is the same as a fulfilled life.

I have my doubts.

The poet Carrie Newcomer seems to share that concern in her poem,  
“Because There is Not Enough Time.”

That because life is short  
I should do more  
be more  
squeeze more  
into each and every day.  
I'd walk around with a stick ruler  
with increasing numbers  
as the measure of fullness.

But lately  
I've sensed  
a different response  
to a lack of time.  
Felt in my bones  
The singular worth  
of each passing moment.

Perhaps the goal  
is not to spend this day  
Power skiing atop an ocean of multi-tasking.  
Maybe the idea is to swim slower  
surer  
dive deeper  
and really look around.

There is a difference between  
A life of width  
and a life of depth.

I can already hear some of you asking,  
“but, how are we to decide?”

“Do we really have to choose between width and depth?”

“And how are we supposed to know which tables are ours, and which belong to other people?”

I think the answer is found in discernment.

In listening to life’s song, and keeping an ear out for the part that only we can sing, the part that is uniquely ours.

Thomas Merton, the author and monk and mystic, once said:

“If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, [and] ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.”

That is the most profound question we can put to one another, or put to ourselves.

What are you living for, in detail, and what is keeping you from living fully for the thing you want to live for?

Too often, I fear the answer to what keeps us from our life’s purpose is that we are overwhelmed with too much to do and too little time in which to do it.

We are so busy with doing, that we miss out on the gift of being.

The truth is that there will never be enough time to accomplish all we might hope to do in this lifetime.

There might just be enough time, though, if we focus, to accomplish what we most hope to do— what I would say we must then strive do—before our days are done.

The writer Anne Lamott has shared the story of two of her best friends,

who have a child with cerebral palsy.<sup>2</sup>

A story, I think, that speaks to us all on some level,  
of that striving, that sacred yearning within each of us  
to discover what we're living for, that thing of which we refuse to let go.

Though the story took place a few years ago, as Lamott tells it:

[The boy] is a very intelligent and cool teenager now...

He had always had major problems with coordination and stamina; one  
leg tended to drag, and he had the appearance  
of disjointed gangliness.

But when he was 10 years old, he asked his parents for a bicycle.

“Great,” they said, [as they] set about planning  
for a specially equipped bike [that] a 10-year-old kid with cerebral palsy  
might be able to ride without hurting himself.

“No,” he said, “I want a bike like all the other 10-year-olds in the  
neighbourhood. I want a regular two-wheeler.”

They did their best to talk him out of it,  
explaining how the kids on regular bikes had started out on [tricycles],  
and then moved on to bikes with training wheels  
and, after a great deal of practice, moved on to a big kid bike  
with hand brakes, and then gears.

He said he knew that, but he was too big for a trike or even training  
wheels, and he just wanted a chance to ride a regular two-wheeler.

So after stalling for as long as possible,  
trying to talk him out of it or distract him,  
they got him a bike—with training wheels.  
“No!” he said. “You don’t understand.  
I want a bike like the other 10-year-olds.  
And that means NO TRAINING WHEELS.”

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, “Is that all there is?” *Salon*, 18 March 1999.

So they took the training wheels off,  
and the boy got on, and then he fell over.

He tried to get on his bike and ride it,  
as he must have seen himself doing in his mind for a long time,  
and it did not go well at all.

It was very painful for his parents and continued to be  
as day after day he got on his bike and fell over.

But he kept trying.

After a very long time, after months and months and months,  
he could wobble down the block, but he still often fell over  
... [and] ended up in hospital several times.

He broke his arm and several other bones and had two concussions,  
and it was killing his parents with disappointment  
on his behalf and fear on theirs,  
that he would hurt or kill himself,  
land too hard on his head or wobble out into traffic.

But they let him keep trying. . . .

“After three years, he was able to ride  
pretty steadily around the block.

Three years it took him to master what took  
the other kids two or three weeks.

And then,” [his mom] said, “it took him six more months  
to learn to let go of one handlebar,  
so he could wave to you as he peddled past.”

There are many ways to describe, in detail, what we are living for,  
what dreams propel us into the future.

And there are many excuses we might supply for what keeps us from it.

May busyness for its own sake not be among them.



We live in a world of deep need.  
There is more than enough work to do.

There are, for certain, life chores to be done,  
in our congregation and beyond.  
And there are urgent causes  
that need our attention and immediate action.

May we, then, come to discern with clarity,  
what is ours to do that we might do it well.

May we give ourselves over with intention,  
to focus on the tables that are truly ours,  
that we might serve life with unflagging passion and resolve.

And may we set ourselves upon the path of our life's highest purpose,  
that we might strive to accomplish what only we can do  
in the knowledge that that is what our lives are for.

So be it.

Amen.

**Closing Words**                      by Edward Everett Hale

I am only one  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.