

# “Still 1: Find a Stillness”

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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.

## Reading

“Bronze Buddha for Sale”  
- Wayne Muller<sup>1</sup>

I almost bought a Buddha.

Green cast bronze  
suggestive, abstract  
lumping shape of earth  
sat so long so  
still  
all elements over how many years time  
fused as one.

I thought it would look good in my house,  
effuse some deeply missing spiritual  
fragrance I missed or  
suddenly knew I so desperately  
needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Muller, *A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough* (New York: Harmony, 2010), 57-58.

I wondered how much it would cost.  
I looked at the price list,  
no red dot,  
can afford it,  
I thought,  
but, but.

Then, there. I stopped.

Knowing at once  
It was the quiet I wanted.

The stillness inside,  
the not moving for so long  
what had been inside this Buddha  
had become one with  
everything good and soft  
everything sharp and aching,

some impossible alchemy of time  
and needing no thing

Peace had rendered all life still.

No movement was required;  
nothing need move anywhere  
ever, again.

How much, I wondered,  
would that cost?

## **Sermon: Find a Stillness**

Finding a stillness.

That's what Wayne Muller thought he was doing,  
when he discovered the bronze Buddha and considered  
taking it home.

Something had been missing in his life...  
and now it was found! Or was it?

To his credit, he wakes up  
in time to pass up the purchase.

To see that it's stillness he wants.  
The real article! Not the symbol of stillness.

We too might realize this.

Perhaps in a store, this time of year...  
Or browsing a bookstore shelf.

We might stop in our tracks...take a breath.

And choose stillness instead...  
guided by timeless wisdom  
we may already know by heart.

§

Like this poet, I've been inspired by the search for stillness for much of my life.

You can read it in my song titles:

“Slow Me Down”... “I've Been Busy”...  
“My Messy House”... “Complicated Things.”

Perhaps like some of you, I've had difficulty finding stillness and slowing down at times.

So, I've written songs about it.

Yet even they, at times, have gotten in the way of stillness itself.

As the Zen Buddhist saying goes,  
“The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.”

So, let's try now to get a little closer to real stillness, using familiar words from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

## §

“Be still and know that I am God,” is one of the best-known passages of the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 46, verse 10.

This call to “be still” came during a time of war...and can also be translated as “stop striving,” “stop fighting,” or simply “stop!”

It was meant to be a “wake up call,”  
to turn people away from specific conflicts,  
toward the reverence of God.

Even if we no longer imagine a personified figure in that  
awe-inspiring role, we can meditate on this simple teaching  
in ways that align with modern insight.

An interesting way to do that,  
taught by contemplative teacher Richard Rohr,  
is to subtract things, rather than add...  
to find our way to stillness.

*“Be still, and know that I am.”*

In the Hebrew texts, God was the “I AM”...  
that is, a state of being, more verb than noun.

*“Be still and know that I.”*

Know the inner “I”...that is, become present to the True  
Self.

*“Be still and know that.”*

That which is.

*“Be still and know.”*

*“Be still and...”*

*“Be still.”*

“Be.”

*(Silence.)*

## §

We create stillness by subtracting and letting go...  
not by adding new activities.

Yet we love our lives of motion...  
and travel writer Pico Iyer is no exception.

In a book called “The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere,”<sup>2</sup> Iyer describes his journey toward nowhere and nothingness...after a busy life of traveling from place to place.

An “unchurched” person, who subscribes to no doctrine or creed, Iyer writes:

“The idea of going nowhere is as universal as the law of gravity; that’s why wise souls from every tradition have spoken of it.”

He quotes Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher who said, “All the unhappiness of [human beings] arises from one simple fact: that they cannot sit quietly in their chamber.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pico Iyer, *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere* (New York: TED Books/Simon & Shuster, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Iyer, 41.

“The need for an empty space, a pause,” Iyer says,  
“is something we have all felt in our bones; it’s the rest in a  
piece of music that gives it resonance and shape.”

And he notes that,

“The one word for which the adjective ‘holy’ is used  
in the Ten Commandments  
is ‘Sabbath.’”

The holy time to “be still.”<sup>4</sup>

## §

It’s important, I think, that ancient wisdom from so many  
sources, as well as contemporary self-help writing...

Is calling for stillness at a time when the earth itself  
is also doing so.

You don’t have to be religious today to hear the urgent call  
toward “less is more.”

We’re hearing the call to slow down and simplify not only  
from deep within ourselves, but from the planet...

Which shouldn’t be surprising if we understand that we are,  
after all, the same thing.

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<sup>4</sup> Iyer, 53.

Unfortunately for the earth and for us, though, our species has developed a culture which has taught us quite a different message:

That human worth is based on acquisition, speed and accomplishment.

Spiritual wisdom, on the other hand, points toward the inherent worth of every person:

The built-in, inner value that requires nothing more than being itself: not having, owning, or doing.

The Gaelic blessing found in our hymnbook,

“Deep peace of the running wave to you,  
Deep peace of the flowing air to you...”<sup>5</sup>

Contrasts sharply with the human aim of progress  
“onward and upward forever,” which regrettably has  
Unitarian origins.<sup>6</sup>

## §

In our times, we are caught between the value system of  
“more, better, faster...” and the timeless call toward stillness.

The poem “Bronze Buddha for Sale” captures it perfectly,  
but I’m sure we can all find examples from our own lives...

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<sup>5</sup> Reading #681 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

<sup>6</sup> James Freeman Clarke, in a sermon in Boston, 1886.



...when the call to slow down or even come to a complete stop is in tension with our ambitions, and even with our desire to help others.

## §

Sometimes, we may fear that by stopping, in formal meditation or in other ways, we might take time away from more valuable pursuits.

Pico Iyer recalls a famous story about Gandhi.

On a particularly busy day, he told his community that he would not be able to meditate for an hour.

He would have to meditate for two!<sup>7</sup>

We might wonder how that's practical or even possible.

But if we want to live ethical lives of justice and action, we may not be able to afford not to.

As stillness teachers explain, it's through contemplative experience that we outgrow our sense of separateness...

We transcend our patterns of dividing and conquering...

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<sup>7</sup> Iyer, 54.

And we come to know ourselves, deeply,  
as part of the interdependent Wholeness that is life.

“Be still, and know...”

## §

Wisdom teacher Cynthia Bourgeault writes:

"The only thing blocking the emergence of this whole and wondrous other way of knowing is your over-reliance on your ordinary thinking.

If you can just turn that off for a while, then the other will begin to take shape in you, become a reality you can actually experience."<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes people fear that by sitting in stillness, we will isolate ourselves from others.

As Pico Iyer writes, “It can sound selfish to take a break or go off to a quiet place.

But as soon as you do sit still, you find that it actually brings you closer to others, in both understanding and sympathy.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Cowley Publications: 2001), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Iyer, 62.

We might also resist stillness, when we don't want to experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, grief or fear.

We might want to avoid these, in fact, and use constant motion and activity as a defense.

Teachers of stillness recommend instead, sitting with the uncomfortable feelings, gradually developing our ability to stay with them and accept them.

From that place of peaceful equanimity, cultivated in stillness, we can better choose how to move in the world.

As mindfulness teacher Jack Kornfield writes, “[In meditation], we can go through periods of strong emotions.

Initially they overpower us, until we find a mindful middle where we neither suppress them nor are completely lost in them.

As we mindfully allow them [...] we experience the intense, pure feelings of joy and sorrow in their own right.

We can let ourselves be carried by the river of feelings, because we know how to swim.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* (New York: Bantam, 2008), 131.

## §

So, how might we find stillness...  
in these lives, full of motion and e-motion?

Here are a few easy ways. I think you know them,  
and you'll add more, I'm sure.

Take ten deep breaths. Enough time to feel the stillness  
within your body, that is always present.

Hold a still thing, preferably an old still thing...  
like a stone.

Let the weight of its ancient stillness fill you,  
not with a deadness...but with a different kind of aliveness  
that connects you to all things.

Focus your eyes on a still point, even as you are moving...  
as whirling dancers do.

If you're a painter, contemplate white space.  
If a musician, the space between the notes.

Make space in your day for even a few minutes of quiet...  
as we did at the beginning of our service today.

Practice any form of contemplation, using mindfulness  
techniques, Buddhist teachings, Christian or Jewish prayer or  
others as your guide...

Or simply take any word or short phrase that's meaningful to you, and repeat it to yourself, until the words dissolve into another form of experience...

Of stillness, and of knowing.

§

There is a stillness to be found,  
in every moment of our crowded lives.

In the coming Sundays of December,  
we'll explore how stillness can lead us to a less-violent world;  
a simpler and less consuming life;  
and finally, peaceful ways to respond to life's most difficult  
challenges.

May we find a stillness,  
hold a stillness,  
and let the stillness carry us...

Today and all days to come.

Amen.

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