

“Still: Carry Me”

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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.

When Elisabeth Tova Bailey was 34 years old,
she was traveling in Europe when she came down with a
sudden and severe illness.

Her life was suddenly transformed
from one of adventurous motion
all over the world...

To one of almost complete stillness:
confined to bed in a small room.

One day, to her complete bewilderment,
a good friend came to visit her
bearing an unusual gift:

She brought to Elisabeth's bedside
a tiny woodland snail,
nestled in a makeshift garden
made of wild violets
brought in from the surrounding yard.

“I found a snail in the woods,” she said.
“I brought it back and it's right here beneath the violets.”

“You did? Why did you bring it in?”

“I don’t know. I thought you might enjoy it.”

“Is it alive?”

She picked up the brown acorn-sized shell and looked at it.

“I think it is.”

“Why, I wondered, would I enjoy a snail?”
wrote Elisabeth.

“What on earth would I do with it?”

I couldn’t get out of bed to return it to the woods.

It was not of much interest, and if it was alive,
the responsibility—especially for a snail,
something so uncalled for—
was overwhelming.

My friend hugged me,
said goodbye,
and drove off.”¹

From the humble beginnings
of that awkward gift-exchange
came a profound relationship
that changed Elisabeth’s
life—and, indeed, the snail’s as well—

¹ Elisabeth Tova Bailey, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill: New York, 2016).

Until eventually Elisabeth was able to return it to its natural home.

The book “The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating” is both a memoir of personal resilience and a loving study of a snail.

In 2016, the book won the John Burroughs Medal for distinction in natural history.

I believe it has a profoundly spiritual dimension as well, as we consider the intertwined nature of all existence...

And the wisdom and sustaining force of stillness...

Wherever, and however, it is found.

From time to time, I've shared with you
different ways of envisioning
the spiritual source of strength
some people call "God."

When I was beginning
in the path toward ministry,
one of the most helpful descriptions I heard
was "the Non-Anxious Presence."

I heard it first from a Unitarian Universalist
minister, and it carried me through many a
difficult passage in my seminary years.

When I was offering spiritual care
to people at Bridgepoint Hospital,
drawing on the "Non-Anxious Presence"
was extremely helpful...

It reduced the jitters I frequently felt,
in my new role as spiritual care-provider.

I thought of this when I read Elisabeth Tova Bailey's book.

Because, clearly, the snail became
a non-anxious presence for her.

It taught her a slower way of life;
it changed the energy in the room,
and it allowed her to care for another—
which of course,
contributed to her own healing.

Over many months,
the study of the snail,
in its tiny movements
became Elisabeth's sole focus.

This still, small creature
became her source of meaning and hope,
as it carried her through a time of almost
inconceivable challenge.

Now, it's important to point out that although
the snail often appeared completely still,

...that was when it was sleeping, inside its shell,
during the day.

Its lifestyle paralleled Elisabeth's,
as she struggled with the fact that her days
were no longer filled with activity and accomplishment.

At night, though the snail moved at "a leisurely pace,"
it did move a great deal.

It came to life in the dark times,
the ones so often avoided, feared or slept through.

With her illness robbing her of restful sleep,
Elisabeth writes that the snail came to her rescue.

"As the world fell into sleep without me,
the snail awoke, as if this darkest of times
were indeed the *best* of times in which to live."²

² Bailey, 22.

It was in these times of deep darkness,
when the room was completely still,
that Elisabeth could actually hear
the sound of the wild snail eating...

As it chewed a tiny hole
in a Portobello mushroom
or even a “get well soon” card.

Perhaps like many of you,
I’ve found a great deal of meaning in activity and motion
throughout my life.

Even though I deeply value times of stillness and
contemplation, and I’ve learned that I genuinely need them
for my own mental and spiritual health...

Even now, I can find it hard to find stillness.

Even when my body is sitting still,
in meditation, prayer or yoga,
my mind can take a long time to quiet down.

And in the course of any ordinary day,
I can become busily preoccupied, not only with
the particular anxieties contained within my
tiny field of existence—

But with the dramatic and often frightening
movements taking place around the world.

Movement that is often violent...
In many ways catastrophic...

So often caused by selfish, reckless
and unconscious human activity.

Powerful movement,
breaking so much.

When I think about all this tumultuous motion,
so much larger than I can control,
I find it hard to “find a stillness”...

Yet still I seek some Non-Anxious Presence...
because, indeed, I need it to survive.

Recently I gained new perspective
on stillness through two new items
that came as unexpected gifts.

The first was YouTube interview about
the origin of the Big Bang—
that is, the point before the point
when everything began—
The stillness beyond time and space
that somehow gave rise
to the magnificent motion
of billions upon billions of stars.³

Tim Maudlin, a professor of philosophy at
New York University,
seemed calm, even bemused,
as he reflected on how “nothing”
may have come before all things...

³ “How many stars are in the universe?” Space.com <https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>

Or perhaps that the “nothing”
before everything
was actually something else entirely.

(I know. Crazy.)

In my online travels,
as I tried to find that video again
after seeing it the first time,
I ran across several other interviews
with Stephen Hawking and his
colleague Thomas Hertog.

They outlined Hawking’s final theories,
including the idea that we live not in a
universe, but a multiverse.

By the way, if you’re looking for something
to do over the holidays, wrapping your head
around these things will keep you very busy!

In any case, the possibility that
some cosmic stillness
came before all the motion
helped me feel more at peace.

The second story was easier to find,
because it was passed along by our friend
and fellow congregant Gerta Moray.

From The Guardian, the story reported that
scientists had found an ecosystem
twice the size of the world’s oceans
below the earth’s surface.

“Despite extreme heat, no light,
minuscule nutrition and intense pressure,”
the article said, “scientists estimate this subterranean
biosphere is teeming with between 15 billion
and 23 billion tonnes of micro-organisms...

That is, hundreds of times the combined weight of every
human on the planet.”

The article concludes:

“The Earth is far more alive than previously thought.”⁴

“Is it alive?” Elisabeth Tova Bailey asked,
when she saw the snail for the first time.

“I think so,” said her friend.

And so began a study of that still, small thing:
so much more alive than previously thought.

Whether it’s the still point at the origin of deep space...
Or the still solid ground beneath our feet...

The still mind, releasing the busyness of thought...
Or the stillness of sleep that gives birth to dreams.

So much stillness is more alive than previously thought.

⁴ The Guardian, “<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/dec/10/tread-softly-because-you-tread-on-23bn-tonnes-of-micro-organisms>”

The songwriter Leonard Cohen developed his contemplative life through Judaism and also Zen Buddhist practice.

When he spoke to author Pico Iyer about the surprising aliveness of being still, he called it:

“The real deep entertainment...[the] voluptuous and delicious entertainment...the most sumptuous response to the emptiness of my own existence.”

He said that “Being in stillness...was simply the most practical way of working through the confusion and terror that had long been his bedfellows.”⁵

Throughout this month, we’ve been singing the hymn “Find a Stillness” each Sunday.

Shawn and I have titled our sermons using lyrics from the first verse, and today of course is “carry me”.

The lyrics were written by Unitarian Universalist minister Carl Seaburg.⁶ He based it on a Transylvanian Unitarian text.

I gained new admiration for Seaburg, and perhaps the early author too, when I appreciated its key message, that “stillness” can “carry” us.

Well, how can that be?

⁵ Pico Iyer, *The Art of Stillness*, 4.

⁶ Biography of Carl Seaburg: <http://uudb.org/articles/carlseaburg.html>

Surely stillness can only “hold”...
perhaps “encompass” or “embrace.”

But no...

The song says it can “carry”...
which of course implies movement...

And not just any movement,
but intentional movement,
often toward something that is desired.

Movement we couldn’t do on our own.

For me, this makes sense,
when I think of “still” things
that contain more life than we thought...

Still things that contain more
“carrying power” than we expected.

Perhaps at this “still point” of the year...
this time of solstice which means “sun standing still”...
we’re more able to open ourselves
to being carried by something
we once thought was nothing at all.

The Unitarian-raised poet T.S. Eliot
loved to explore the intertwined,
“non either-or” nature of life.

A passage from his poem,
“Four Quartets,” Part II, East Coker,
is quoted at the top of your Order of Service.

It speaks to the familiar feelings of deep anxiety
that can come to us
when we see stillness, absence,
loss, darkness, and indeed death,
in a certain way.

Yet it also expresses the deep understanding
that absence and presence are utterly intertwined...

That growth takes place in the dark,
and that stillness can bring us alive.

Eliot writes:

“I said to my soul, be still
and wait without hope,
for hope would be hope for the wrong thing;

Wait without love,
for love would be love of the wrong thing;

There is yet faith,
but the faith and the love are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought,
for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light,
and the stillness the dancing.”⁷

*“Voice, still and small,
deep inside all,
I hear you call, singing....*

*Through sun and rain,
Sorrow and pain,
still you remain, singing...*

*Calming my fears,
quenching my tears,
Through all the years,
Singing.”*

Another beautiful UU hymn
by contemporary composer John Corrado.

There are so many ways to “find a stillness,”
and so many reasons to do so.

For Elisabeth Tova Bailey,
the unexpected presence of a still, small creature
allowed her unique creative voice
to sing out in an beautiful way
that turned our attention to the natural world
and our ability to care for others...
even when we feel least able.

⁷ <http://philoctetes.org/documents/Eliot%20Poems.pdf>

May we, too, each in our own ways,
find even in our most difficult times
new ways to heal and to serve.

May we seek out the sources
of Non-Anxious Presence
that calm and sustain us
when our own activity cannot.

Enlivened by the Stillness that we find,
may we move toward others
in loving care and connection...

that we may create a world
in which all are carried...

in peace, in justice, and in love.

Amen.