

“Doing Nothing”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

29 December 2019

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.

So, yesterday I was sitting around, enjoying the slow pace of the week after Christmas, doing nothing in particular.

I was appreciating the fact that Rev. Christopher Wulff was going to be here today, preaching on “The Unbearable Art of Doing Nothing.”

Ironically, it was only when I decided to “do something” and logged onto my email that I learned that Christopher was sick with a stomach bug and unable to do much at all!

Suddenly, my rare weekend of doing nothing turned into something quite different, as I had the unexpected opportunity not only to preach,

...but also to witness how I responded to this change in circumstance.

To my surprise, instead of feeling annoyed that I wouldn't be able to spend more time doing nothing, I felt happy to have a new project—eager, in fact, to have a new task with which to occupy myself.

This was very strange,
considering that over the many busy weeks
leading up to Christmas,
I've been extremely unhappy about the fact
that my time was so filled up.

As my husband, Dave, and the rest of my family will tell you,
“never having enough free time” has been one of my favourite
subjects for quite some time.

So, why was I not more upset, when my holiday free time was
suddenly interrupted by an unexpected sermon?

What was going on here?

Could this be a “teaching moment”—when I was being offered the
opportunity to see myself more clearly,
to question some of my dearly held assumptions?

Was it possible that, on some unconscious level,
I didn't want to do nothing after all?

Despite what I said, and how often I said it,
did I find “doing nothing” in some way unbearable?

Well, suddenly I had a sermon's worth of time
to reflect on that question, and to share the results with you.

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Some years ago, I recorded a song called “I've Been Busy,” which
caught the attention of a church music director in the United States.

The song was written from what I thought at the time was a purely
secular perspective. Part of it went like this:

*Fill it up, the regular please,
Fill the spaces in between these
Small defeats, these victories,
These many things I need to keep me busy.*

And the chorus went:

*I've been busy
and I've been sorry
and I've been missing you.¹*

The church music director assumed that I was speaking about missing God, or perhaps Jesus.

I hadn't intended that at all;
I meant only that my chronic busy-ness was preventing me from being in deeper relationship with others.

But as my religious understanding deepened,
I realized that there was less difference between those two outlooks than I'd previously thought.

The constant activity that was getting in the way of my connection with other people...

...was also preventing me from connecting deeply with God, Soul, or Spirit.

Clearly, it's a lesson I've been trying to learn for some time, and I'm still working on it.

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¹ Lynn Harrison, "I've Been Busy" on *Learning Curve* (2003)
<http://www.lynoleum.com/mp3/IveBeenBusy.mp3>

It's not accidental that every religious tradition includes some form of contemplative practice, in which “nothing” happens in particular.

“Nothing” except sitting quietly and attending to the breath...or repeating a simple word or phrase.

As beginning meditators will tell you, sitting and doing nothing for even ten minutes can feel almost unbearable.

We are so accustomed to constant activity and the need to be “productive.”

The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once said: “God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction.”

The point of “doing nothing” in contemplation is not simply to create breathing space in a busy life—although that is valuable in itself.

Rather, it's a way of teaching ourselves to witness our thoughts and feelings with a “third eye,”

With “the eye of the Soul” or the “non-anxious Presence.”

Through this non-judgmental practice, we gradually learn to respond more kindly and peacefully to all of life's experiences, whether they're pleasant, unpleasant or anything in between.

When life is very challenging, or, when we feel we have less control over it, “doing nothing” can be a wise—if counter-intuitive—approach.

As the story goes, on a day when he was particularly busy, Gandhi told his students that he wouldn't be able to meditate for an hour that day...

He would have to meditate for two.

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It's well-known that people in the "helping professions" or working for social justice are at high risk for burnout.

There is so much to do, such urgent need, that well-meaning people often try to do more and more... until they run up against their own human limits.

The song we sang earlier by Aly Halpert invites us to let go, saying:

*You don't have to carry
the weight of the world...*

*Loosen loosen baby
your muscles and bones
Let go, Let go, Let go*

*Holy breath, and holy name
Will you ease, will you ease this pain?²*

The easing that we seek cannot come by gripping and tightening and controlling... as might be our impulse as human beings.

² Aly Halpert, *Loosen, Loosen* on SoundCloud <https://soundcloud.com/aly-halpert/loosen-loosen>

Instead, the easing of pain may
come only through what she calls “Holy breath”--

The “doing nothing”
that connects us to the Holy Everything.

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When we do nothing, we come face to face with powerlessness...

Which is something the Ego really hates.

After all, we get lots of credit for doing things.

Our sense of identity and self-hood is made up,
in large part, of roles we play in life,
the projects we undertake,
the ways we help and fix.

Once again I’m reminded of how pleased I was, yesterday,
to be able to fill a need.

How wonderfully heroic of me!

Now, this is what the ego or “small self” feeds on.

In many ways, there’s nothing wrong with that.

Activity and accomplishment is necessary for us,
to establish our place in the world and find a sense of meaning and
purpose.

It’s also an essential part of community.

You might not have appreciated it if I'd opted yesterday to keep doing nothing instead of stepping in.

But the timeless lessons of spiritual wisdom teach us that there is also something more than this ego-based identity.

It is the Something that requires no accomplishment,
no special talent,
no social role.

The Self with a capital "S," the Divine Indwelling,
the "Peace that passeth all understanding"...
the Inherent Worth.

And it is always present, embracing us,
and inviting us to the deep rest of Unconditional Love.

The trouble is, in the continual rush headlong into the next activity,
as worthwhile as it may be...

We might lose contact with that peace.

And, worse, we can start to identify our worth with the success of
our projects...or our effectiveness in whatever role we're
playing...which can come and go and is often beyond our control.

It is only in the pause of non-doing that we can cultivate the ability to
witness ourselves and our situations
with some degree of equanimity...and even humour...

...as we notice how easily we can get hooked on doing
something...anything!...

Instead of getting to know ourselves...
and whatever we might call "The Holy"...
in stillness and in silence.

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As many of you know, I'm a big fan of synchronicity:
the Universe seeming to show me a connection
I couldn't see on my own.

Given the way this Sunday turned out,
it was a happy accident that, truly, the only thing I'd been doing over
the past two days had been reading.

And the book I had been reading was
“Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying”
by Baba Ram Dass, the beloved spiritual teacher,
who died on December 22nd at age 88.

It had been sitting on my bookshelf for a couple of years,
and reading it seemed a fitting way to mark his passing.

The book was completed after he had a severe stroke in 1997 that left
him partially paralyzed and unable to speak.

Suddenly he was unable to do many of the things
he'd taken for granted, and as he puts it,
he was now “qualified” to write about the losses that take place
during the aging process—

Everything from being more physically limited
to losing mental capacity and memory.

A longtime practitioner of mindfulness meditation,
he recommended it highly, to help people of all ages develop the
capacity to see from the Soul's perspective, rather than the Ego's—

And to enter more deeply into Awareness itself, which he

saw as one of many synonyms for God.

He wrote that “Awareness is beyond time and concept,”
and as such, transcends anything we might be doing,
no matter how important it may seem at the time.

All of us are inherently worthy within this Awareness...
no matter how much we are doing,
or how little.

It’s a basic spiritual idea which is echoed in our
Unitarian First Principle, affirming “the inherent worth
and dignity of every person.”

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In addition to reading the book,
and also in unconscious preparation for this unexpected sermon,

Dave and I watched “Going Home”
a half-hour documentary on Netflix that showed Ram Dass
going through a normal day, and reflecting in very few words on the
radical simplicity of his life in his later years.

He reflects that he once wrote a book called
“How can I help you?” but that now his life could be called “How
can you help me?” and that his new journey has been toward
receiving rather than giving,
and stillness rather than activity.

The most powerful aspect of the film, for me,
was the radiant love and peace
that shone from his eyes—
despite the reality of discomfort and physical difficulty.

In the times that I witness that—
whether in a noted spiritual teacher or in any person—
I find myself drawn to what they have found.

And that motivates me to re-commit to spiritual growth,
to the gradual loosening of my grip on control,
which can be revealed in my habitual tendency
toward over-activity.

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It's worth pointing out that quiet, stillness
and non-doing is radically counter-cultural.

Choosing such a path, whether for an extended time or temporarily,
can be seen as lazy, unmotivated, or selfish...

But I think we need to challenge that.

In cultivating an ability to be still,
to know the “I AM” of God or Awareness,
to listen to the clamour of voices within us that we can gently
question and loosen...

We can reduce our habit of consuming more and more...

We can cultivate an attitude of acceptance toward others and
ourselves...

We can strengthen our ability to “be with” life as it is...
which is something we are likely to need in the future,
as our world continues to change and new challenges arise,
and as we continue to grow older with all of the challenges aging can
bring.

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Finally, I'd like to point out the wisdom that Christopher Wulff showed by letting me know he was sick when he did.

Reverend Chris and I went to seminary together, and it's wonderful to have such a colleague that I can learn from as we move into ministry somewhat in parallel.

Christopher contacted us early yesterday afternoon, saying he wouldn't be able to make it in this morning.

He didn't soldier on heroically.

He chose to do nothing but heal... knowing perhaps on some level that the Greater Good would provide and a solution for this morning would be found.

As it happened, the topic was one I was needing to explore more deeply for myself, and in fact, I welcome more exploration on this with you in the year to come, as we, as a congregation discern where we best place our energies, in a time of transition and some uncertainty.

But even if I hadn't been able to step in, the "doing nothing" would have been alright.

It's worth wondering, actually, how people would have felt if no-one stepped in with a new sermon...

And if we all decided to simply do nothing together for a period of time.

Clearly, this was too advanced an assignment for me to take up.

I wasn't ready for it this time...
but perhaps there will be a time when we can do nothing together.

In the meantime, I wish for you,
and for me in the coming days,
more opportunities to practice this "unbearable art."

And may you be well, happy and at peace.

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