

“The Summer Day”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
12 June 2022

Reading

“The Summer Day” – Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean -
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down -
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Sermon: “The Summer Day”

Once upon a time, the CEO of a large corporation
took a vacation, on doctor's orders,
in a small village on the coast of Mexico.

Unable to sleep after an urgent call from the office
on his first morning away, he walked out to the pier to clear his mind.

A small boat with a lone fisherman had just docked,
and inside the boat were several large yellowfish tuna.

The CEO complimented the fisherman on the quality of his catch.

“How long did it take you to bring in all of those fish?” he asked.

“Only a short while,” the fisherman said.

“Then, why don’t you stay out a little longer and catch even more fish?”
the puzzled CEO asked.

“Because I have more than enough here to support my family
and give a few to my friends.”

“But . . ., but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

As the man in the boat unloaded the fish into a basket,
he looked up and smiled.

“Oh, I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children.
I take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening,
where I sip wine and play guitar with my friends.
I have a full and busy life.”

The CEO laughed and stood tall.

“Well, sir, I have an MBA,
and I think I can be of help to you.
You should spend more time fishing,
and with the proceeds, you could buy yourself a bigger boat.

“In no time, you could buy several boats,
and eventually, you could own an entire fleet.”

“And, instead of selling your catch to a middleman,
you could sell directly to consumers,
and eventually open up your own cannery.

“You could control the product, the processing, and the distribution.

“Now, of course, you would need to leave this little village behind,
and move to a big city, where you would run
your expanding enterprise with a bigger management team.”

The skeptical fisherman then interrupted him,
“But how long will all of this take?

“Ah, 15 to 20 years. 25 tops,” the CEO promised.

“And what then?”

With a sparkle in his eyes, the CEO said,
“See, now that’s the best part.
When the time is right, you could sell your company to the public
and become very rich. You’d make millions.”

“Millions?
And, then what?”

“Well, then you would retire and move to a small coastal fishing village,
where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids,
take a siesta with your wife, and stroll to the village in the evening,
where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your friends ...”¹

How easily we can forget that paradise can be found in the here and now—
and that to “wile away the hours”
isn’t necessarily the same thing as wasting time.

As we shift into summer,
when the clock seems to move at a slower pace,
we have a fresh invitation to give thought to what really matters—
a time to look for, and hopefully celebrate,
that which brings deep meaning and joy to our lives.

For some, that, of course, involves seeking after fortune,
and working hard to achieve important goals.

There’s much to be said for the intense feeling of accomplishment
that comes from striving toward and reaching some great aim.

Satisfaction of this sort can be particularly sweet.

But there is also much to be said—and maybe even more—
about the simple pleasures that come from savouring one’s life,
from recognizing along life’s way the moments that make up
everything we may ever know of paradise, right here and right now—
by taking time to cease from all of our doing and to simply be,
so that we might be awake to ourselves
and to the life within that’s longing to be lived.

¹ Adapted from the telling in *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferris.

There is an art to living this way.

An art to slowing down the beat of our hearts
and stilling the stirrings of our minds.

An art to regularly setting aside “time out of time”
when we rest from our labours,
and can begin to see again the larger arc of our lives
and our heart’s deepest desires.

I have long admired Judaism’s deep commitment to honouring the Sabbath,
of taking time off from all of life’s routine demands.

A day when all work, all effort is strictly forbidden.

Keeping the Sabbath, of course, has long defined the Jewish people.

You may remember that Jesus often got himself
into a heap of trouble by healing people on the Sabbath.

Though he upset his critics by challenging their traditional notions,
Christianity after him didn’t hesitate from imposing stiff restrictions
on what could and couldn’t be done on Sundays.

Some of us grew up with these restrictions as the law of the land.

As a kid living in Texas,
I remember the odd “Blue Laws,” as they were called,
which dictated that you could buy nails on Sunday, but not a hammer,
because the hammer would be working. . .

Toronto had some strange laws, too.

The Sabbath and Public Order By-laws came into effect here
in the late 19th century, when citizens groups
pushed for new ways the government might help to uphold public morality.

Toronto Police were responsible for licensing and regulating
dance halls, pool halls, theatres, and, eventually, movie houses.

They were also charged with making sure that, on Sundays,
the streetcars did not run,
that alcohol wasn’t sold or consumed,

and that there definitely wasn't any sledding or playing ball in High Park.²

There was a serious class difference
in how these laws were enforced.

Someone once observed that what was forbidden
came perilously close to any historians' description
of what working-class people actually did for fun back then.³

While streetcars sat parked in their stations,
chauffeured carriages could be seen out and about town.

While baseball was forbidden, golf was allowed,
as it was clearly not, according to court records from the time,
the sort of unseemly games spelled out in the by-laws.

And, while it was illegal to buy or consume alcohol on Sundays,
it was common to be served a drink in the parlours and clubs of the wealthy.

As a woman convicted of drunkenness at the time stated to the judge,
"The only difference between me and Lady Flaherty in Rosedale is that I
don't have a powdered flunkey to carry me up to bed when I get drunk."⁴

Now, as funny and antiquated as some of this might sound,
the practice of keeping Sabbath even in our own day
can sometimes go to intriguing extremes.

When I've visited people in hospital at Mt. Sinai
or been to other major Jewish institutions,
I've been struck by the presence of a "Sabbath Elevator"—
an elevator that from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday
runs automatically between the floors so that no observant Jew
inadvertently breaks the Sabbath by calling the elevator.

Ingenious.

But what I find interesting and a bit frustrating about all of this—
the elevator work-around, the misguided city by-laws,
the attacks on Jesus for breaking the Sabbath—

² Homel, Gene Howard, "Sliders and Backsliders: Toronto's Sunday Tobogganing Controversy of 1912", *Urban History Review*, Vol. X, No. 2, 1981.

³ Boritch, Helen, *The Making of Toronto the Good: The Organization of Policing and Production of Arrests, 1859 – 1959*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, p. 101.

⁴ Denison, George T., *Recollections of a Police Magistrate*, Toronto: 1920. pg. 11.

is that it all seems to have profoundly missed the point by focussing in on the letter of the law rather than the spirit.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of the Sabbath as a “great cathedral” in “the architecture of time.”

He noted the correspondence, in Latin, between the word for temple (“templar”) and for time (“tempus”).

The Sabbath, he said, is a temple made of time.

“It is a day, on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”⁵

Do you ever make that sort of turn?

Do you set aside a day a week, or an hour a day, or a moment in an hour, to simply rest and be?

Do you take time in a committed, consistent way to honour yourself and your connection to the life that is within you?

I suspect that most of us don’t. At least not intentionally.

As much as I try, and as central a spiritual practice as this is for me, I’ll confess that on Mondays, when my own sabbath day rolls around, I still sometimes struggle to honour it as a day for being and not doing.

That’s because it’s not easy, and in our ever-connected world, when so much competes for our attention, it’s not exactly getting easier.

But, the truth is that the busyness of modern life means that we need, all the more, to pull away to that temple made of time.

I’m reminded of Gandhi, who once said: “I have so much to accomplish today that I must meditate two hours instead of one.”

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951, p. 10.

It can be hard to draw on such wisdom
when we're drowning in the details of our to-do list.

And, to be clear, I'm not speaking only to those of us who are still working.

The retired folks in this congregation are easily
some of the busiest people I've ever known!

Now, being busy isn't necessarily a bad thing.
But we do need some balance.
And perspective.

It's not easy to live with the knowledge
that we will never have enough time on this earth
to do all that we might like.

And, while great meaning can be and hopefully is found
in those things to which we do devote our days,
we would do well to carve out the time for rest and reflection
that ensures our spirits are replenished
and that helps us to gauge whether we are investing our lives
in accord with our deepest values.

There is a price to be paid in not taking this time.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk,
named the excessive demands that distract us from our core commitments
as "a pervasive form of contemporary violence."

He said that, "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of
conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands,
to commit oneself to too many projects,
to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence."

[Our frenzied activity] "destroys the fruitfulness of our own work
because it kills the root of inner wisdom"
which makes our work meaningful and useful
to ourselves and to the world.

What I find intriguing is that brain studies
now back up what Merton said over half a century ago.

Without time to daydream and to let our minds wander where they will,

we inhibit our own creativity.⁶

When we think we're getting ahead by doing ten things at once, we're actually weakening our performance of everything we're trying to do.⁷

When we chronically overwork or overextend ourselves, we pretty quickly reach a point of diminishing returns.

While these may sound like secular reasons for keeping Sabbath, I believe they are deeply spiritual reasons, as well.

In his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, Wayne Muller writes:

I use the word Sabbath... [to represent] a specific practice, [as] a larger metaphor, a starting point to invoke a conversation about the forgotten necessity of rest...

“Sabbath time is time off the wheel,
time when we take our hands from the plow. . .
while we drink, if only for a few moments,
from the fountain of rest and delight.

But he points out that: “Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true.

“It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honouring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us.”

Yet, as compelling as this temple made of time can be, it's worth asking what keeps us from visiting more often—what holds us back from making it a more central aspect of our lives?

I believe a clue can be found in the first entry in the best-selling book, *Journal of a Solitude* by the late, Unitarian poet May Sarton.

The first entry, September 15th, she writes:

I am here alone for the first time in weeks,

⁶ John Tierney, “Discovering the Virtues of a Wandering Mind,” *The New York Times*, 28 June 2010.

⁷ Matt Richtel, “Outdoors and Out of Reach: *The New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

to take up my 'real' life again at last.

That's what is strange—that friends, even passionate love,
are not my real life, unless there is time alone
in which to explore and to discover
what is happening or has happened.

Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening,
this life would become arid.

Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here
and 'the house and I resume old conversations. . .

The ambience here is order and beauty.
This is what frightens me when I am first alone again.
I feel inadequate.

I have made an open place, a place for meditation.
What if I cannot find myself inside it?

[In this journal] I hope to break through into the rough,
rocky depths [of life], to the matrix itself.

There is violence there and anger never resolved.
And, my need to be alone is balanced against my fear
of what will happen when suddenly
I enter the huge, empty, silence.”⁸

I think what Sarton points to so powerfully is that when we slow down,
it's not only rest that we may find.

As anyone who has ever sat meditation knows,
when we still our minds, just about everything that's ever troubled us
has a way of bubbling up to the surface.

Hard questions and old hurts.
Grief and ambiguity.
Petty resentments and sometimes unspeakable pain.

Worked on and worked through, though,
this is the blessed, bedrock stuff of spiritual growth.

⁸ May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*, pp. 11-12.

A notion captured so well in Susan Browne's poem, "Buddha's Dogs":

I'm at a day-long meditation retreat, eight hours of watching
my mind with my mind,
and I already fell asleep twice and nearly fell out of my chair,
and it's not even noon yet.

In the morning session, I learned to count my thoughts, ten in
on minute, and the longest
was to leave and go to San Anselmo and shop, then find an outdoor
cafe and order a glass

of Sancerre, smoked trout with roasted potatoes and baby
carrots and a bowl of gazpacho.
But I stayed and learned to name my thoughts, so far they are:
wanting, wanting, wanting,

wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, judgment,
sadness. *Don't identify with your
thoughts*, the teacher says, *you are not your personality, not your
ego-identification*,

then he bangs the gong for lunch. Whoever, whatever I am is
given instruction
in the walking meditation and the eating meditation and walks
outside with the other

meditators, and we wobble across the lake like *The Night of the
Living Dead*.

I meditate slowly, falling over a few times because I kept my
foot in the air too long,

towards a bench, sit slowly down, and slowly eat my sandwich,
noticing the bread,
(sourdough), noticing the taste, (tuna, sourdough), noticing
the smell, (sourdough, tuna),

thanking the sourdough, the tuna, the ocean, the boat, the
fisherman, the field, the grain,
the farmer, the Saran Wrap that kept this food fresh for this
body made of food and desire

and the hope of getting through the rest of this day without
dying of boredom.

Sun then cloud then sun. I notice a maple leaf on my sandwich.
It seems awfully large.

Slowly brushing it away, I feel so sad I can hardly stand it, so I
name my thoughts; they are:
sadness about my mother, judgment about my father, wanting
the child I never had.

I notice I've been chasing the same thoughts like dogs around
the same park most of my life,
notice the leaf tumbling gold to the grass. The gong sounds,
and back in the hall.

I decide to try lying down meditation, and let myself sleep. The
Buddha in my dream is me,
surrounded by dogs wagging their tails, licking my hands.
I wake up

for the forgiveness meditation, the teacher saying, *never put
anyone out of your heart*,
and the heart opens and knows it won't last and will have to
open again and again,

chasing those dogs around and around in the sun then cloud
then sun.

* * *

Friends, each week, every day, we are offered an invitation
to enter into the vast and sometimes daunting Sabbath silence
from which our lives might more powerfully speak.

This summer, let us learn to set aside some space to keep busyness at bay
by entering into that life-giving temple of time—
where we might marvel at the world of creation
and be renewed to play our part in the creation of the world.

Let us learn to simply savour a summer day,
as the wondrous gift it is,
that we might ask and that we might know
what it is, after all,
that we plan to do “with our one wild and precious life.”

Amen.