

"Be Still and Don't Know"

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Especially during the summer months, I like to spend time painting with watercolour.

I've been doing this off and on throughout my life, and even though I've achieved only a limited degree of skill, I find it a peaceful and fulfilling activity.

One of the skills I'm still working on, when it comes to watercolour, is letting paint dry.

Taking the time to let one layer of watery paint dry on the page before I add another.

If I don't wait, the colours bleed together in ways that are sometimes pleasing, but often not what I intended.

Now, the phrase "watching paint dry" is often used to describe activities that are boring, and best avoided.

"Attending that minister's worship service was like watching paint dry."

You get the idea.

So perhaps it's not surprising that when I'm painting watercolours, I want to race ahead to the most interesting part.

I want to add that important new detail...I want to see how it all comes out!

I want to get the project finished.

I certainly don't want to wait until the paint dries.

But I've learned that I actually do need to do that,
as uncomfortable as it is for me.

I'm sure that many painters here in this online space could teach me
something about that.

And as I've practiced that skill, I've learned as much about myself as I have
about painting technique.

I've found that the stillness required, the waiting when nothing else is
happening, allows me to notice things I wouldn't have otherwise.

First and foremost, I notice my own impatience.

My dissatisfaction with the way things are; my desire to improve
something.

Sitting with my thoughts allows me to cultivate acceptance and for myself
and for others, and for life as it is in this moment.

The stillness also allows me to notice everything that is moving and alive
around me: the sound of the birds, the wind, the grass, the neighbour's
lawnmower.

When I sit, doing nothing but watching paint dry, I open myself to life.

It's good for my painting, and it's good for me.

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Over the time I've been at First Unitarian, you've heard me speak about
both meditation and prayer quite a lot.

For many years, though not completely consistently, I've practiced a very simple form of mindfulness meditation, influenced mostly by Zen Buddhist practice.

More recently, I've practiced what is called "Contemplative Prayer" or "Centering Prayer" from the Christian tradition, which allows for the letting go of thoughts by using a sacred word, such as "peace."

One can find common threads in many religious traditions--and lately in completely secular teachings as well--that help us cultivate stillness.

That allow us to open up a space for wisdom, healing and peace, described in whatever words work for you.

It appears to me, anecdotally, that meditation and spiritual practice have become more widespread since the pandemic, because we needed the mental health benefits more acutely.

But long before that, people were writing about the benefits of meditation.

For example, a decade ago, a writer in the Harvard Business Review spoke about its benefits for productivity, saying:

"Meditating daily will strengthen your willpower muscle.

Your urges won't disappear, but you will be better equipped to manage them.

And you will have experience that proves to you that the urge is only a suggestion.

You are in control."¹

¹ Peter Bregman, "If you're too busy to meditate, read this" <https://hbr.org/2012/10/if-youre-too-busy-to-meditate>

It's interesting to me that meditation was being promoted as a productivity tool!

But if that's what motivates people to find a stillness, that's as good a starting-point as any.

Perhaps more valuable, though, may be finding a place for non productivity...for mystery or unknowing...especially at a time when so much of our world seems out of control.

Last week, Chris Hatch of Canada's National Observer devoted an entire feature article to the benefits of mindfulness practices during the climate crisis.

The article was called "Zen and the Art of Not Freaking Out."²

In it, he lists a number of approaches to contemplation as well as several teachers, including well known figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and lesser-known ones such as the Jewish writer Jay Michaelson.

Chris Hatch writes: “ 'Don't believe everything you think,' has got to be one of the world's greatest bumper stickers, and it's very applicable to minds grappling with climate chaos.

Anxiety is so bound up in thoughts about the future (or rehashing the past).

Discovering that you are not your thoughts can be one of those simple but liberating shifts in perspective.

Turn awareness onto thoughts themselves and they're revealed as gossamer wisps, arising from some mysterious nothingness and dissolving back into it, unless we perpetuate them."

² Chris Hatch, "Zen and the Art of Not Freaking Out" in Canada's National Observer, July 28th, 2023. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2023/07/28/opinion/zen-and-art-not-freaking-out>

Chris Hatch goes on to cite several climate activists who credit meditation with enabling them to sustain the work of climate justice.

He also points out that meditation practice is not a cure-all, nor a substitute for professional supports when needed.

He also tells an amusing story about the time when the Tibetan Buddhist monk Mingyur Rinpoche was speaking at a conference.

He writes:

"A distraught questioner asked for advice. The entire auditorium fell silent, anticipating a jewel of contemplative wisdom.

"Try jogging," suggested the meditation master. "Or some aerobic exercise."

In other words, a healthy life has many dimensions, and cultivating stillness in any form may be only one of them.

But it's one we might overlook in the busy lives we lead.

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Intentional practices of quiet, stillness or letting go of thoughts can offer a channel toward un-knowing and simply being, even at times of considerable change.

Lest we feel that our own agendas are too important to be replaced by sitting, it's worth recalling the story of Mohandas Gandhi, the peace activist and civil rights leader who led India to independence in the 1940's.

During a particularly demanding time, Gandhi told people working with him that he would not be able to meditate for an hour that day.

No...because the demands were so immediate and so intense, he would need to meditate that day for two hours, rather than one.³

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Going back much further, “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 has also been translated as “stop striving,” “stop fighting,” or simply “stop!”

Quite different than a simple call toward peacefulness, it was meant to be a “wake up call,” to turn people away from specific conflicts, toward a larger perspective.

Even if we may not imagine a God-figure in a person-like role, we can meditate on this simple teaching in ways that align with modern insight.

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

I shared this simple meditation several years ago at First, and I'm happy to repeat it now.

It takes that wisdom text and subtracts from it, instead of adding more commentary...until we arrive at a place of simple, non-naming silence.

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

“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.

³ Pico Iyer, *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere* (New York: TED Books/Simon & Shuster, 2014).

“Be still and know that I.”

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

“Be still and know that.”

That which is.

“Be still and know.”

“Be still and...”

“Be still.”

“Be.”

(Silence.)

Once again:

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

“Be still, and know that I am.”

“Be still and know that I.”

“Be still and know that.”

“Be still and know.”

“Be still and...”

“Be still.”

“Be.”

(Silence.)

If you type it up on a page, it forms a beautiful triangle that leads the reader to space of stillness.

So, an intriguing meditation in many ways.

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Some of the wisest teachers from every tradition are the ones that emphasize silence and stillness.

This is true whether the person was writing two thousand years ago, or in our own time.

As we at First Unitarian have been opening ourselves to Indigenous wisdom, as part of the ongoing work of reconciliation and transforming oppressive systems, many of us have been inspired by the writings of the late Ojibway writer, Richard Wagamese.

In his book, "Embers," he writes:

"I am my silence.

I am not the busyness of my thoughts or the daily rhythm of my actions.
I am not the stuff that constitutes my world.

I am not my talk.

I am not my actions.

I am my silence. I am the consciousness that perceives all these things.

When I go to my consciousness, to that great pool of silence that observes the intricacies of my life, I am aware that I am me.

I take a little time each day to sit in silence so that I can move outward in balance into the great clamour of living."⁴

⁴ Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*, (Douglas & MacIntyre, 2016), 15.

Likewise in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer teaches us to find a healing stillness in the plants and living things around us...in the slow and patient rhythms that sustain life.

By cultivating stillness, by maintaining silence, by creating space for rest and healing, we interrupt the consumeristic cycle of supposed productivity that creates a culture of burn-out and is literally fueling the materialism that is burning the world.

By returning to stillness, silence and un-control we refrain from doing harm...while also strengthening ourselves for the actions that are needed to heal the planet.

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We often speak of meditation and spiritual practice from a personal perspective...

We look at the ways it can benefit us as individuals, to help us become less reactive, for example...to enable us to become more aware of our thoughts and storylines...or to find a place of deep rest amidst our daily routines.

But what role can stillness play in the life of an organization?

What value could there be in empty space...especially for non-profit organizations that are working so hard to address systems of injustice in our world today?

That is, organizations like First Unitarian?

I recently read a helpful perspective on this in one of my favourite books: "Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide for Caring for Self While Caring for Others," by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky.

She spoke to Zaid Hassan, who is a facilitator and writer, with experience in long-term projects in sustainable food supply, child malnutrition and indigenous relations.

He wrote about how his perspective has changed, regarding how to approach justice work.

He says:

"You have social situations that have not improved for 50 or 500 years, and you need to figure out how to do something different.

How do you support [an organization] to choose a different pattern from the one they're in?

I used to think this was about teaching new skills--creation, innovation, etc.

I realize now that the work is about creating or opening a space and keeping it empty.

What skills does it take to hold a space open so that the wisdom that is already there can come out?

How can you be silent and sit with yourself and be compassionate and patient?

A lot of what fills space is concern and fear and anxiety, and suspending these habitual reactions takes a lot of work.

Slowing down, knowing your own patterns, and knowing what triggers you are a big part of that.

On both a personal and an institutional level, people are petrified of empty space. It's like, fill the space, fill the space."⁵

Zaid Hassan then goes on to quote C. G. Jung who said that humanity will survive if, and only if, enough of us do our "inner work".

I'll devote my message next week to exploring what is meant by "inner work" and why it's necessary for our outer work in the world.

Zaid Hassan's insights resonate with me, and when he talks about "fill the space, fill the space"...

He describes perfectly my desire to keep painting instead of letting the paint dry!

And I recognize it in other areas of my life, too.

In fact, when our group of colleagues recently got together online to grieve the sudden and tragic loss of Reverend Rod Solano-Quesnel, our group was facilitated by two highly-experienced ministers from the Unitarian Universalist Association.

One of them had a professional background as an emergency first responder.

He said that what often happens after a sudden and traumatic loss is that people move into hyper-vigilance mode...when what they most need might be to rest and take care of themselves.

When I consider the turning-point at which First Unitarian Toronto now finds itself, I wonder whether this might be a time when at least some space could be held empty...for new wisdom to arise.

⁵ Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 166.

This may come out of necessity, as you'll be served by ministers who are working a defined number of hours in very specific ways...

And as some members of the congregation may be finding as you get older, you may have more limited capacity for various kinds of congregational activities.

In the past, in both congregational life and elsewhere in our society, being busy and highly-committed was seen as a badge of honour.

Many of us (and I'm definitely speaking of myself) prided ourselves on being multi-taskers, on working long hours, on being highly productive at all times and at all costs.

Fortunately, people in all professions are making the connection between overwork and burnout and white supremacy culture...

Finally questioning the measuring-sticks that have been so harmful to so many, and so harmful to the earth.

Changing our patterns, as individuals, as institutions and as a culture, may be very difficult...

But I believe it is possible with practice. That is, spiritual practice.

And I notice that sometimes life itself conspires to help the effort along.

That may turn out to be true for First Unitarian, as you respond to the organizational changes that come, during the time of space between one building and another, and one form of ministry and another.

As we continue to enjoy the "pause" between program time that comes in the summer months, may we all find ways to "find a stillness"...that can carry us through times of uncertainty.

May it be so.

