

Busy No More
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
February 23, 2020

Readings

from the *Tao Te Ching*:

Brim-fill the bowl,
it'll spill over.

from Ursula LeGuin ch. 9

...as you want less and less, you come closer to not-doing –
this is the way to get things done.

from Man-Ho Kwok/Martin Palmer/Jan Ramsay ch. 48

The Tao goes on forever doing nothing
And yet everything gets done.
How? It does it by being,
And by being everything it does.

from Man-Ho Kwok/Martin Palmer/Jan Ramsay ch. 37

It is stupid to rush around.
When you fight against yourself, it shows in your face.
But if you draw your sap from your heart
then you will be truly strong.

from Man-Ho Kwok/Martin Palmer/Jan Ramsay ch.55

...be busy with business
and to the end of life
nothing can help you.

from Ursula LeGuin ch. 52

from the journal of Henry David Thoreau:

The really efficient laborer will be found not to crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure. There will be a wide margin for relaxation to his day. He is only in earnest to secure the kernels of time, and does not exaggerate the value of the husk. Why should the hen set all day? She can lay but one egg, and besides she will not have picked up materials for a new one. Those who work much do not work hard.

Sermon

“Busy” is a funny word. The dictionary says it simply means being occupied with doing something. Descriptive, neutral word it would seem. But how we often use the word these days suggests something other than a neutral meaning, in fact something maybe even dangerous. A couple of years ago a piece appeared on-line (by a young man named Chris Hazell) ominously titled “Is Busyness Jeopardizing our Souls?” The article began this way:

Today it seems everyone’s favorite response to the common, probing introductory question, “How are you?” is this: I’m busy. Very busy. *Extremely* busy. I’m guilty of this response more than I care to admit. Of course, many of us are—actually—extremely busy. Many of us are stretching ourselves razor thin, fulfilling the necessary obligations of life...

Which he went on to list.

As for me, I surely have many days with long lists of things to do, people to call, emails to write, visits to make... all in addition to one or two or three personal matters to attend to – in other words just like you and so many of us. But for years if I’ve been asked if I’m busy, I have preferred to say that my day is full, but not busy.

Which is not to say that I am immune to the disease of trying to pack too much into a day or of allowing myself to lose focus in the midst of all the doing, altogether sometimes failing to heed the warnings in the *Tao Te Ching* that we heard earlier:

Brim-fill the bowl,
it’ll spill over.

It is stupid to rush around.

...be busy with business
and to the end of life
nothing can help you.

I think we all do know the danger of doing too much at too frenetic a pace, and then sometimes discovering we have done nothing as well as it deserves – *and* that we’ve somehow lost track of ourselves in the process, not to mention lost track of the continuing unfolding wonder of this mystery we call life.

I may have told you before a story that the poet David Whyte has shared. He was at the time working for a non-profit organization of some sort, with a predictably long to-do list on the day in question, too many things to do with too few hours in which to do them. He arrived at the door of the room where a staff meeting was scheduled to take place, looked around, and asked, “Where’s David?”

Well, he was the only David working there at the time. He had quite literally lost track of himself.

So he called it a day and went home to reclaim himself, reclaim his soul we might well say.

So... is it that we should find ways to do *less* in order to maintain our centeredness, our balance, our full presence for ourselves and for others?

Well, sometimes yes indeed. But we can't always do that. So it is also the case that we might wish to seek to change the *way* we tend to our tasks, not necessarily how *much* we take on.

This is why I appreciate those sentences we heard from Thoreau's journal. He isn't telling us to take a day off or even to do less. In fact, he tells us he is talking about "the really efficient laborer" – someone who gets everything done that needs to be done. Yet in what spirit? I love this line: He or she will saunter to the task surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure.

Really? But how do you get stuff done with that sort of lackadaisical approach? Well, Thoreau affirms that "those who work much do not work hard." How can this be?

Let me get to a response with a story. Some of you may have seen the article in the Boston Globe this week about the lunch scene in downtown Boston these days. It was headlined: "Downtown Lunch Rush Is a No-Waiting Game." The sub-head: "With so much at stake for customers and restaurants, the lines must keep moving."

In fact, at the Pita Thyme counter they serve up to four customers a minute! Which is, the article noted, the only way for the restaurant to make payroll, pay the rent, and buy the food.

At another similarly fast-paced lunch spot, a Greek takeout place called Zo, the article described a cashier of particular note, Maritza Lemus:

Her signature move involves grabbing a paper bag, passing it from her right hand to her left while (seemingly simultaneously) inserting a napkin, utensils, and the customer's food, even if it's soup and a bulky salad, while at the same time ringing in the order and swiping a credit card... She's so fast that some customers don't know they've already paid.

How does she do it? Looks like she's very busy indeed! Well, maybe.

When asked, she said, "I don't know how I do it. It's just my hands."

"To be honest," she went on, "when I first started working at Zo I was so overwhelmed seeing the line. How am I going to do this? The most important thing is I started liking it." And, she added, staying in the moment helps.

Two things: Maritza came to like what she was doing, and she learned to stay in the moment. (You can, by the way, find a video of her amazing work embedded in the Globe article on-line.) Maybe this is another way of describing "sauntering" to, actually sauntering in the midst of, her work even as her hands were moving at blinding speed.

Yet... there is also a certain sadness to the scene at these lunch spots – the downtown office workers with no apparent "halo of leisure" around their work. As the article also noted, "No one has time... spend too long waiting for your sushi and – poof – the only half-hour you have to yourself all day is gone."

Still, I'll bet that some of them, maybe many, have found ways to be present, to be grounded, even in the midst of the rush. I hope so. Maybe a few of them, eyes locked into their phones, are reading not the latest stock quotes or political news, but a few lines of ancient spiritual news from the *Tao Te Ching* or Thoreau. It could be so.

After all, this sauntering, literal or metaphorical, must not be only for the retired or the financially privileged. This must be spiritual grist for all of our mills.

There is a story in the Gospels that speaks to our need to be done with busyness. You may recall it, the story of Jesus's visit to the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

Martha welcomes Jesus and his disciples in – a beautifully hospitable thing to do – and then she proceeds to rush around with all the "preparations that had to be made." Meanwhile, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus "listening to what he said." Martha – understandably! – gets

quite fed up with this scene, and says to Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” But Jesus replies, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better.”

Poor Martha! After all, she was only doing everything that needed to be done to be hospitable to these unexpected guests! Then found herself getting rebuked for it, while her sister just lies around apparently doing nothing.

What *is* the message here?

Well, I can only make good sense of this story if I think of Mary and Martha as two parts of one person, one soul. Here’s what I mean. It seems to me that we each have both a Martha self and a Mary self. Our Martha self, rushing about doing things that actually do need getting done, sometimes has little sympathy for our Mary self, doing nothing – yet who knows the value of an inward focus on the things that matter most in life: peace, love, a sense of wonder.

So it seems to me that our human challenge is to live Mary-Martha lives – yes, doing what needs doing while at the same time maintaining inward focus and calm, presence – Thoreau’s “wide halo of leisure.”

Maybe that cashier, Maritza, has discovered this secret. Maybe we can too. Discover that “busy no more” does not necessarily mean slowing down or doing less (though sometimes it might mean that); but in any case *does* mean a different way of moving through our days of work or errands, whatever our “to do” list happens to be.

This sometimes might be as simple as taking a few breaths in between tasks during a day full of tasks. It might be as simple as looking up now and then from our screens and looking out the window at the design of crisscrossing bare branches against the blue sky, or taking the time to actually taste and enjoy that next sip of tea or coffee. Or it might be as simple as exchanging a few friendly words with a co-worker or cashier at the market check-out or receptionist at the doctor’s office.

And here’s the thing: None of these inner “Mary” moments take significant time away from the often important, even essential, work of our outer “Martha”.

Further, if we wanted to be truly radical about all this, we could stuff a favorite book of poetry or a wisdom text into our backpack, briefcase, or pocket book – and take a glance at a few lines in the midst of a full day.

These days of course, whatever our personal to-do list, our minds might also be very busy with political concerns and worries, or heartbreak about one or another piece of suffering in this world of ours.

But, just as it is with our daily work or errands, to be effective in whatever we want to do politically or to address some social issue, we need to settle into an inward, grounded sense of presence to what matters most to us, what we are best suited to do, and then carve the time to do it, sauntering to those chosen tasks as well –whatever they might be... sauntering to the voting booth for that matter.

All this said... however full our days, however many our concerns, whatever measure of joy and sorrow is threading its way through our lives these days, may we find ways to be more present to this moment and to this person who is right in front of us... and present as well to ourselves... as we saunter to the next task at hand.

With that thought in mind, I draw to a conclusion with these additional thoughts from Thomas Merton, whose words are printed at the top of your order of worship this morning, and then a coda from the *Tao*. First Merton:

The fact that our being necessarily demands to be expressed in action should not lead us to believe that as soon as we stop acting we cease to exist. We do not live merely in order to “do something” – no matter what.

Merton goes on to write of the need for an “economy of action” and also sometimes for rest, sometimes “to sit back for a while and do nothing.”

After all, as some of you know, the *Tao Te Ching* affirms that the master does nothing and everything gets done. “Does nothing?” I think the meaning is “is not busy” – somehow doing without doing.

Well, that might be another sermon altogether, so for now we’ll leave it at that.

May today and all of our days be full – but not busy – full of love and kindness as we get the essential things done and let go of worry about those things that it turns out might not be so important after all or that we can do nothing about.

So may it be.