

Still Life
The Art of Doing Nothing
By
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Several years ago, a couple at my church in Louisville were in a severe car accident. Their injuries were serious enough that I went to the hospital everyday for a couple of weeks to check-in on them. It wasn't much, but I was at a smaller congregation then, had the time, and figured it was the least I could do. After a couple of days, Mel, who was in the hospital the longest, kept complaining he couldn't see well enough to read or even watch TV because his glasses had been knocked off during the accident. I knew it was a long shot, but after the visit I drove to the scene and found them undamaged on the curbside.

I was elated and couldn't wait to get them back to Mel. It felt like I was doing something practical to help alleviate his suffering. The most I'm usually able to do in response to another's pain is show up, visit for a bit, then express my sincere concern and sympathies before leaving. As much as I care and wish to be of genuine service, I'm usually helpless to do or say anything meaningful. But this time I was able to do something real, something important, something that made me feel like more than just a lump on a log. Against the odds, after a couple days on a busy road, I manage to recover Mel's glasses, and with them, his eyesight. He thanked me and eagerly began reading the paper for the first time since his accident.

I was a bit disappointed, however, that he never mentioned the glasses again, or seemed to remember that I'd retrieved them for him, even though I thought it had been a big deal. But when Mel and Patrick finally got home and were able to get back to church, they repeatedly thanked me for being there. "We just can't believe you came everyday to see us," they said. That's when I understood the importance of what I'd been taught during my ministerial training, that the most important part of pastoral care is being present. In other words, as the White Rabbit tells *Alice in Wonderland*, "Don't just do something, stand there." Of course, the Rabbit, who was always in a hurry, frantically repeating, "I'm late! I'm late," probably fumbled the phrase in its haste, but it's still sage advice.

Just being there for Mel and Patrick wasn't the least I could do, it was the most important thing, the thing they remembered and were most thankful for, even though it felt to me like I wasn't doing anything at all. As I've also learned over the years, satisfying the urge to do something or say something, especially in the wake of another's grief or pain, often results in doing or saying the worst thing. "God works in mysterious ways." "They're in a better place now." "Someday you'll look back at all this and laugh." Trying to put lipstick on tragedy, or divert attention away to happier thoughts, usually only adds to the pain or grief. It's better to simply say, "I'm sorry," and be present, like a lump on a log. Being still, being present, doing nothing is, paradoxically, often the best medicine any of us can offer.

This principle of keeping still, of doing nothing, which may sound easy, but is often the hardest thing to accomplish, is important for life in general too. “Resisting the headlong tumble into the next moment,” as Rev. Kathleen McTigue so eloquently puts it, may be to resist the fundamental temptation of each moment. The White Rabbit has trouble experiencing this moment because it’s always looking at its watch, worrying about the next moment.

It reminds me of Benjamin Hoff’s treatment of another fictional rabbit in his beloved book, *The Tao of Pooh*. Hoff reminds us of Rabbit’s discovery of a note on Christopher Robin’s door, GON OUT, BACKSON, BISOY BACKSON.

“Rabbit didn’t know what a Backson was,” Hoff writes, “in spite of the fact that he is one...¹ The BISOY BACKSON is almost desperately active. If you ask [them] what [their] Life Interests are, [they] will give you a list of Physical Activities, such as: ‘Skydiving, tennis, jogging, racquet-ball, skiing, swimming, and water skiing.’”² Hoff further illustrates the point with an old Taoist story about a man who dislikes seeing his footprints and shadow. So he begins running to escape them, but the more he runs, the more footprints he creates, and his shadow easily keeps up. So he runs faster still, until he dies of exhaustion. “If he had stood still,” Hoff explains, “there would have been no footprints. If he had rested in the shade, his shadow would have disappeared.”³

A big part of the problem is the idea of being still runs counter to the Western notion of what it means to be alive, and the notion of doing nothing is counter to our Protestant work ethic. The founders of Western society, the ancient Greeks, may not have known about the pulmonary vascular system that circulates blood to the lungs, where red blood cells pick up oxygen and release carbon dioxide, but they understood that if something breathes, it’s alive, and, if not, it’s dead. They didn’t consider there to be a difference between life and soul, or spirit and breath. In the *Iliad*, as psychologist, Julian Jaynes once noted, “The word *psyche*, which later means soul or conscious mind, is in most instances life-substances, such as blood or breath: a dying warrior bleeds out his psyche onto the ground or breathes it out in his last gasp.”⁴ Jaynes also tells us another Greek word for soul, *thumos*, originally just meant, “motion or agitation.”⁵ For our ancestors, to be alive, to have soul, to be inspirited, meant movement, which is why the Latin word for soul, *anima*, is also the root of the word, “animation.” In the Hebrew creation myth, the word for “breath” and “spirit,” as in many languages, means the same thing. “...the Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”⁶

¹ Hoff, Benjamin, *The Tao of Pooh*, E.P. Dutton, New York, NY, 1982, p. 92.

² *Ibid.* p. 93.

³ *Ibid.* p. 92f.

⁴ Jaynes, Julian, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, Mass., 1976, 1990, p. 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Genesis 2:7

Conversely, they understandably concluded one who doesn't move must be dead, that death comes when the last breath, the spirit, leaves the body. This is why *inspiration* and *respiration* share the same root, because, for our ancestors, they meant almost the same thing. Today we still tend to associate movement with life and stillness with death, animation with living things, and stillness with inanimate objects. Henry Ford, inventor of the horseless carriage that now moves us miles in just minutes, believed the soul literally leaves the body with the final breath of life. He took this so seriously that he convinced the son of Thomas Edison, whom he greatly admired, to hold a test tube to his dying father's mouth in order to capture his last breath. The corked tube was discovered in 1950 by Ford's relatives and is now on display at the Henry Ford Museum, also known as the Edison Institute, in Detroit, Michigan.

Perhaps Ford felt that by enabling us to move about in automobiles he was contributing to life itself, to its movement. Maybe it's why so many others enjoy the rush of moving fast, fast cars, downhill skiing, motorcycles, roller coasters, skydiving, bungee jumping, and so on. And maybe it explains why we keep developing new technologies that make everything go by even faster. Instead of snail mail, we use email, and text, and twitter. We can now share our thoughts and photos with all our friends almost instantly, thanks to our smartphones. For some reason my phone tells me every night how active I've been. I didn't ask it to. It just does it. "Congratulations. You took 137 more steps today than you did yesterday." Do you know how condescending that sounds? The other day it told me, "You know what your most active month of the year was? June." I'm like, "It's been six months, can you just let it go."

It may have been our ancestors who first associated life with movement, but today our lives are busier than ever. Sometimes we don't feel alive unless, like the White Rabbit, we're late for the next moment, the next thing we must do, the next bit of activity, distraction, or play. Once, while driving, I approached what I thought was a dead dog on the side of road, but just as I passed I saw a puff of breath and realized it was still alive. I was able to pull over and save the poor fellow from dying alone on a snow-covered curb. I knew what I thought to be dead was actually alive the moment I saw its breath in the form of exhaust. Today this makes me wonder how many of us don't feel alive until we're exhausted, until we're too tired to do anything else, go to sleep, then get up and begin all over again.

In the U.S., especially, where the philosophy of pragmatism was born, the idea that something is only useful if it works, has become part of how we view each other too, that we're useless if we don't work. The whole point of education has become preparing our kids to get a job and spend a lifetime working. According to Juliet Schor's book, *The Overworked American*, a third of our population feels rushed and stressed everyday of their lives,⁷ a majority of us get one to one-and-a-half hour less sleep than we need each night,⁸ and half of us report having too little time for our families,⁹ all of which is leading to increased instances of child neglect, marital distress, sleep deprivation, and stress related illnesses.

⁷ Schut, Michael, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p. 35.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

In our association of life with activity, furthermore, we have forgotten that activity requires energy, and ignore the wisdom of energy conservation. Exertion may express life, but it also exhausts and drains it. Today our species is using so much energy that we're exhausting our entire planet. Some are acting as if they won't stop until, like Henry Ford, they're able to capture its very last breath, its last "gasp," the root of which, ironically, is gas, a word that etymologically means, "empty." Some of us refuse to stop moving until the gas tank is empty, until the final drop is burned up, until the last drop of oil is sucked from the ground, or the last chunk of coal torn from a decapitated mountain, until the Earth itself dies of exhaustion, of having its resources, its energy, exhausted like that dying dog left on the side of the road.

Fortunately, the world's great religions almost all urge us to practice stillness in our lives. It's even one of the Ten Commandments, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God... in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your foreign traveler who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you."¹⁰ In other words, everyone, especially those most exploited—women, children, slaves, immigrants, even animals—according to the first labor law in human history, must get a break. As, *Ecclesiastes* says, "Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind."¹¹

This principle of "doing nothing" is more subtly expressed in the Christian doctrine of Grace, that there is nothing we need to do, or can do, to save ourselves. As the mystic author of, *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote, "The active life is troubled and busy about many things but the contemplative life *sits in peace with the one thing necessary*."¹² The more contemporary Christian mystic, Thomas Merton once said, "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence... activism and overwork."¹³ And Jesus himself is reported to have said, "Look at the birds in the sky. They don't plant or harvest or gather food into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are more valuable than they are, aren't you? Can any of you add a single hour to the length of your life by worrying? And why do you worry about clothes? Consider the lilies in the field and how they grow. They don't work or spin yarn, but I tell you that not even Solomon in all of his splendor was clothed like one of them."¹⁴ Why worry, Jesus asks, when there is so much abundance all around us, at least there would be if we'd stop exhausting the Earth's resources, if we'd give our Great Mother a Sabbath, the time she needs to rest and re-create. "If busyness can become a kind of violence," Theologian Wayne Muller says, "we do not have to stretch our perception very far to see that Sabbath time—effortless, nourishing rest—can invite a healing from this violence."¹⁵

Buddhism most directly recognizes the value of sitting still and doing nothing, of just being

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 5:13-14

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 4:6

¹² Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 50.

¹³ Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1999, p. 3

¹⁴ Matthew 6:26-30

¹⁵ Muller, *ibid.*, p. 5.

and breathing, through its practice of meditation. Of course, many make a chore out of meditating too. It becomes one more thing we must find time to *do*, or go somewhere to *do*, or feel like we're not "doing it right" if we can't empty our minds of all thoughts, or ignore the disruptive noises around us. But I remember Alan Watts explaining that mediation isn't something we do, it's something we don't do, or, rather, we sit still because we realize there's nothing else we need to do. "When you realize that you have come to your wit's end," he said, "you can begin meditation. ...meditation happens, and that happening is simply the watching of what is... that's it... This is really what meditation is."¹⁶ Sometimes, when people ask me if I meditate, I say yes, for several hours a day, and I'm able to empty my mind of all thoughts for much of the time. The secret, I find, is mediating horizontally at night.

Taoism also stresses the importance of doing nothing. It's notion of *wu wei*, literally means "to accomplish by doing nothing." Sounding much like Jesus, an old Chinese proverb says, "sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself."¹⁷ Karen Armstrong says the ancient Chinese took this notion so seriously that their most revered spiritual and political leader, their Prince, "...had to be entirely passive. He did not direct the administration; he gave no orders."¹⁸ Or, as Confucius put it, "he ruled by inactivity,"¹⁹ by, *wu wei*. In fact, the Chinese pictograph for "busy," is symbolized by two characters meaning "heart" and "killing."²⁰ Being too busy, they thought, is heart-killing. Maybe this explains why 20 percent more heart attacks happen before 9:00 AM on Monday mornings,²¹ just before the start of the workweek.

"Practice not-doing," the *Tao te Ching* tells us, "and everything will fall into place."²²

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,

¹⁶ <https://theeffortlessway.wordpress.com/tag/alan-watts/>

¹⁷ Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen*, Pantheon Books, Inc., U.S.A, 1957, p. 141.

¹⁸ Armstrong, *ibid.* p. 147.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 148.

²⁰ Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1999, p. 3.

²¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/BUSINESS/02/03/monday.pressure/index.html> and <http://www.wisegeek.com/do-more-people-have-heart-attacks-on-mondays.htm>

²² #3

but non-being is what we use.²³

“Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill. Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt...²⁴
Tao never acts, yet nothing is left undone.”²⁵

Today most heart attacks happen before work on Monday mornings, and most of us are busier than ever, despite, or because of, all the technology that’s supposed to make life easier and less stressful. We’ve got more forms of communication bombarding us than we can humanly respond to, more forms of digital distraction than we can keep up with, and more activities than we can take advantage of. Worst of all, we are destroying our planet in the process, exhausting her natural resources in our insatiable demand for constant growth and summertime fun. As a species we don’t value the importance of winter, the Earth’s Sabbath, the period she’s supposed to rest. We no longer let winter stop us from having fresh vegetables at our table, or from harnessing the Earth’s energy, or from stopping us from being on the move. In our association of movement with life, we have rejected winter and have nearly brought about perpetual summer in the process through Global Warming.

And because of all this, today, more than ever, we must begin to listen to the sages of old, to obey the Sabbath law, to look to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, to sit still and watch what is, to fall asleep, and to accomplish what we now need most of all by doing nothing. We must embrace Winter again by conserving our energy. Isn’t that the advice we give to those who are ill or injured? Just rest. Conserve your energy. Today we are doing violence to ourselves by over doing it, and violence to others by making them overwork just to make ends meet, and violence to the earth by exhausting her resources, her energy, her life, her last breath. Instead of taking her breath away, why don’t we all take a breather, give it a rest, learn to lie beside still waters and be comforted.

²³ #11

²⁴ #9.

²⁵ #37