

“Nuthin’ Doing: Changing the World By Sitting Still”

The title of this sermon is Nuthin’ Doing: Changing the World By Sitting Still.

Now, I am no master when it comes to doing nothing. In fact, although I’m not a complete failure, intentional stillness still somehow evades me most of the time. So, just for the record, this sermon isn’t for you, its for me. Hopefully, and this is generally how I write most of my sermons, it will also be useful for others. To add to that, I should also set the record straight about my ordination status. The UU website kindly gave me credit that I don’t have of being a Presbyterian Minister. I do have my masters in divinity, but I’m not ordained. I’ve been in the Presbyterian ordination process for ten years now, but I haven’t jumped through the final hoops required for that distinction. I’m just me, an unordained but longtime professional youth pastor who grew up and worked mostly in the Presbyterian Church.

Perhaps it is the youth pastor in me that gives me the strong sense of the importance of play – sacred play, I like to call it; or perhaps it is that strong sense that keeps me relatively effective in youth ministry. (I say relatively effective because that’s about the best one can hope for in youth ministry – it’s all relative.)

My dad, who is actually an ordained Presbyterian minister, will often comment on how you are always preaching to two congregations. This sermon is for all those out there, just like me, who’s natural tendency is NOT to sit still and find all the moments in life that recharge us.

However, there is also the congregation who are sitting back and thinking “Hey, this is a snap! My whole life is about enjoying the little things!” The truth is that these two congregations have something to teach one another. So, in a short aside for the other congregation in the congregation today, I simply want to say, fully charged batteries are great but if you never plug them in, then what is the point of charging them. Yes, the (I think) obvious counterpoint to this is that we also need to plug in and get working – but TODAY we are going to talk about the need for down time. (because I’ll put money on it that most of us here fall in to the first camp. UUs aren’t known for just sitting around.)

Again, I am not a master at doing nothing, but motherhood taught me the true value of self care. And this is where we will begin to explore how sitting still is essential in anyone’s effort to change the world. I use motherhood as my example, not because it is a universal experience, but because it is my own. There’s nothing quite like motherhood, as far as I know, that can teach a person what it means to give 100%.

As committed moms, we give up our sleep, our food, our bodies, our schedules, our brains, our peace of mind, and any ambition that we had been harboring, at the very least, for our first few years of raising our child. (Fifteen years later they tell us they hate us and we’re supposed to be grateful that we managed to keep them alive that long.)

Early motherhood is like Mamma boot camp; the good news is that if you survive it, you will be stronger.

Indeed, most of us go through some form or another of postpartum depression. I sure did, and in my experience, this is a classic case of burnout. It is a set up for it. Constantly attending to someone else's needs, you can never give them enough, they are always asking for more, and you don't really learn how to set up good and useful boundaries until it is way to late. There are no required classes on self care for moms, but there should be.

My realization, finally, was this: if I don't take care of myself, I'm not going to be any good for anybody! But dogonit, if I didn't still feel guilty when I tried to step away! Listen, self care, like anything else, takes practice and intentionality. Be intentional. If you've been on an airplane you know that you are told to fix the oxygen mask to your own face and then help your child. In life guarding, your own safety must come first. In Judeo-Christian scripture it's "love your neighbor as you love yourself" – understand that the assumption is that you must love yourself first.

A cup that never sits still doesn't get refilled let alone runneth over. And if your cup isn't filled what are you going to pour out for others?

So I have learned to take the task of self care very seriously and I have, I think, become a better mom for it. (don't worry, someday my children will still need therapy like everyone else's children in order to work out all of my parenting flaws.) Nonetheless, there's progress and that's about all you can ask from anybody. My family now knows that if I go for a run, I am, quite simply, more sane (*more* sane; there's nothing perfect about this equation); if I play my guitar and sing, I'm more relaxed and energized; and if I take the time to sit still and meditate, I'm more peaceful and centered. I'm refueled. These are some of the ways that I engage in sacred play, some of the things I do in order to "sit still."

Now, one might argue that running is the farthest thing from sitting still, but I will counter with this: my mind is more still when I run than when I am sitting still in front of a TV show; my heart is more still when I sing than when I sit still in front of Facebook. And then there ARE the moments that I take, usually at sunset as the golden rays play across our back deck, when I do, quite literally, sit still and soak in the wonderful nourishment that the smells of the earth and the warmth of the light offer to me and realize the gift of it all.

This is all a part of sacred play for my soul. Running, singing, long hikes, good books, easy laughter, smelling flowers, playing board games, reading novels: it is these moments in life that refuel us for our tasks.

“To act as if the world cannot get along without our work for one day in seven,” writes Dorothy Bass in her essay Keeping Sabbath, “is a startling display of pride that denies the sufficiency of our generous maker.”

Wendell Berry the farmer poet, writes:

“Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap.
Great work is done while we’re asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.”

The idea of Sabbath is near to my heart, yet it is not a practice that I have ever kept in any traditional way. The ancient Jewish practice of Sabbath requires the observant practitioner to rest from their work from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday. It was one of the many ways that the Hebraic peoples separated themselves from other nearby cultures. Over the ages, this practice has been modified and morphed somewhat but its basic essence has remained the same. “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God” says the book of Exodus.

Well before the time of Jesus the Nazarene, this Sabbath keeping practice had become very legalized. We read about Jesus when he was rebuked by the religious authorities regarding Sabbath law and he retorted: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” This is a truth that all religious authorities have needed to hear. Nonetheless, over the course of time the Christian church would follow the same pattern and legalize the do’s and don’ts of Sabbath keeping. Perhaps the common problem was similar to what we face today as we pass laws meant to protect ourselves from ourselves. If it isn’t a requirement, we’re not, as a people, going to do it. And yet we so often fail to recognize the true value once it becomes law.

Dorothy Bass writes, “ In Deuteronomy, the commandment to “observe” the Sabbath day is tied to the experience of a people newly released from bondage. **Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can.**” She goes on later to say, “All week long, human beings wrestle with the natural world, tilling and hammering and carrying and burning. On the Sabbath, however, [we] let it be. [We] celebrate it as it is and live in it in peace and gratitude.”

If we learn to keep ANY Sabbath practice – by observing a full day of rest or inserting restful moments into our week – we are affirming that we are not slaves to our work

AND that the ecosystem in which we live is not a slave to us. Both are allowed to rest, both are given the chance to rejuvenate and reconnect to one another.

Are we sometimes slaves to the to do list? Can we master ourselves enough to intentionally rest and recharge without the laws? I sure hope so, because otherwise we seem to get rather mixed up about it all.

But sacred rest isn't singular to the Judeo Christian experience. The Buddha also taught his followers to take a day of rest. For him, it was a day to cleanse the mind and it would lead to opportunities for deeper meditation. Islam has less Sabbath law and more daily practices that help the followers to take time away from the hubbub of the day.

The common thread between most religions is the practice of meditation and emphasis on taking time to rest and even to play. How we do it, I think, is less important than THAT we do it. As a youth pastor I have almost never observed a Christian Sabbath. My principle day of work has always been Sundays. My Sunday shifts have been known to last 12 hours. In my life, sacred rest and sacred play have been more in line with daily practices. An hour here, an afternoon there... and what I have found is that my inner clock and balance keeper will surely let me know when I need time to rest and rejuvenate. So I listen, best I can, because I know that no matter how you cut it – I can get 7 days of work done in 6 days, but I can't do it in 7.

There are, of course, other reasons why sitting still is so important to our quest for making the world a better place and it is inherent in the Sabbath practices of our religious heritages. The time and space that we take away from our everyday tasks allows us the opportunity to take off the blinders of constant busyness and see what needs attending to. Listening to our world, our community, our neighbors, even our family members only happens when we are quiet. And only when we listen can we discover what needs doing. When we practice being quiet, listening comes more naturally.

It also affords us the perspective that we can only focus our energy in so many directions at once. We do both of these things while we engage in stillness. We need to listen but we also need to limit the number of needs that we attend to at any one time; or, as I mentioned before – too many needs with too few boundaries is the perfect set up for burnout and then we are no good to anybody. A quiet mind can assess this. And it takes practice to quiet a mind. I know, I'm still practicing, I don't claim to be good at it. But like a good game of sandlot baseball, it takes a little bit of practice and a whole lot of love for the game.

Says Bass: "When Sabbath comes, commerce halts, feasts are served, and all of God's children play."

What was that thought before that helped you to smile? What is it that you can look forward to doing so much that your inner child emerges and comes out to play? Can

you make the time to do that, or something like it, every week so that you can be recharged?

It is because there are tasks, because there is work to be done, because there are causes to champion, that we need to hear this message. It is in order to be at our best, in order to do good work in the world, in order to answer our callings and take care of those around us that we **MUST ALSO** love this gift of life, appreciate the beauty, and recharge our batteries. It isn't a choice and it can't be the first thing to fall off of your to do list. In case of emergency please secure the oxygen mask to your own face before helping the person next to you.

How can you change the world by sitting still? By investing new energy into the most valuable resource that you can give to the world. Yourself.

Take some down time, make self care a priority, engage in sacred play, whatever that is for you. Why? Because the rest of us need you to!

One of my family's favorite Berenstain Bears books is called The Berenstain Bears and Too Much Pressure. Once the busy lives of the bear family resolve after reaching the overwhelming crisis of busyness the book ends with a lovely line: "They worked and played, went to school, visited friends, enjoyed nature, and once and a while, they sat around doing absolutely nothing."

Here's my challenge for you this week: Start small. Spend one hour intentionally doing absolutely nothing, and smell the roses, bask in the sun, connect to the earth, regain your energy before going out into the world to do the work required to make the world a place where every creature can do just that, relax in sacred play and be in love with life.

Can I get an Amen?