

“Visualize Free Time”

Quotations are from the book Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America, John de Graaf, Editor

As I began to write this morning's sermon, I sat at the computer thinking about how to begin and I happened to look down at my hands. These hands are no longer the hands of a young woman. The skin is becoming wrinkled; the joints of my fingers are more prominent than they used to be - and my fingers are just a little crooked now - they are beginning to resemble my grandmother's hands. I can see her hands in my mind's eye now; as she rested in the evening at the end of the work day, she would often crochet so fast that her gnarled fingers blurred with the motion of the crochet hook winding the thread in and out. Whereas she did handwork at top speed, I can type faster than the speed of thought; we all create what we can with our respective talents. There are scars on my hands, and a few age spots. I used to be vain about my hands. That's one part of the body that looks good even if you are overweight in other areas.... But no one looking at my hands now would mistake them for those of a woman of 25. Time transforms beauty.

It seems strange to me that the years I have to live are more than half gone. Perhaps some of you have the same feeling of strangeness when you look at your hands or see yourself in the mirror. In many respects, I still feel young ; and in others, like when I get up in the morning and I have to move slowly until I limber up because my bones ache, I feel about 80. This is what it means to be in the middle age.

I imagine some of you remember that old soap opera called “The Days of Our Lives.” It opened with this music [theme] and a serious announcer saying “Like sands through the hour glass, so are the days of our lives.” Trite, but true.

Each of us has been given the gift of certain amount of sand. This morning's service is an opportunity for us to consider how those grains of sand are spent, and how our culture is set up to spend them for us in ways we would do well to change. There is a reading by Henry David Thoreau in our hymnal, in which he says “I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.” Thoreau lived 45 years - that's approximately 16,425 days. I think he got the most out of his grains of sand.

The fact is, most Americans today are spending most of their precious, limited time on this Earth doing things that can hardly be described as “living.” Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman summed up the normal modern American lifestyle this way: “Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it.” If that drive to and from work is 30 minutes one way, you'll spend 6 weeks commuting over the course of a year. Over the course of a lifetime, each of us will spend about 6 months waiting at stop lights. All that meaningless time adds up.

The Hopi Indians have a word - Koyaanisqatsi - which means "world out of balance...a state of life that calls for another way. "

We are acutely aware that our world is out of balance. The question is how to bring it back into balance? As a whole, Americans comprise 5% of the world's population and

consume 30% of earth's resources. Americans spend an average of 40 minutes per week playing with our children, and 6 hours per week shopping. Designer dogs that cost their owners more than the average yearly wage earned by over 3 billion people of the world spend their exclusive canine days alone at home being amused by mechanized tennis ball throwers and thwarted from getting up on the couch by electronic dog zappers attached to the furniture. Middle class American children are scheduled to the max with planned and purposeful activities, while parents (also known as chauffers) act, as one writer put it, "like recreation directors on a turbo-charged family cruise ship." The ice caps are melting, the ozone is dissolving, and women with silicone breast implants drive Hummers to the shopping plaza.

Koyaanisqatsi, surely. How do we begin to restore the balance? Where to start?

Strangely enough, we could well begin by taking a tip from former president George W. Bush: By September of 2001, Bush had already set the all-time record for taking the most vacation days of any president in U.S. history. By the end of his presidency, George had taken the equivalent of over 2 and 1/2 years off, or 33% of his time in office, for rest and relaxation at his ranch in Crawford, the family home in Kennebunkport, and the Presidential retreat at Camp David. In this, Americans might do well to follow his example.

Regardless of where our political sympathies lie, the vast majority of Americans reputedly agree on this point: People would like to work fewer hours in order to have more time to spend with their families, helping others in the community, pursuing their passions, creating art or fixing up old houses, nurturing their spirits, fishing, staring into the middle distance, feeding the chickens - learning whatever it is that life has to teach. Almost everyone would like to have more free time. And this simple, common desire for free time is a path we can follow towards the restoration of sanity in our culture. The "Take Back Your Time" movement, begun in 2003, has advocated for such a restoration. Since the onset of the Industrial Age, the "Take Back Your Time" folks observe, we have "taken our increased productivity in the form of increased material goods rather than in leisure." They argue "if we begin to change the *pattern* [of our lives] in favor of more **time** rather than more **stuff**, a host of other beneficial changes in the quality of our lives will follow."

Those benefits include (get ready for more statistics - I'm loading enough in this one sermon to last for the whole year...)

- Better Health: Men who take an annual vacation reduce their risk of heart attack by 30%. Women's risk of death from heart disease is cut in half by frequent vacations.

Remember, these statistics aren't just about other people, they are about us. This could be your heart's health we are talking about, or mine.

The number one cause of premature heart disease in the U.S. is something doctors call "time urgency" - a continual sense of time pressure. Presently, people are tied to jobs that are bad for their health in order to receive health insurance... Koyaanasqatsi

- Fewer hours spent at work actually result in greater productivity

- Better family time; the average length of time a two-career couple spends talking to each other each day is 12 minutes. A national poll of teenagers found that over 20% said "not having enough time with their parents" was their top concern. I didn't even know that many teenagers **wanted** to be with their parents! ...Our children want to be with us, but often we adults just don't have the time now.

- Time for volunteer work in the community and in our religious societies. One out of 4 Americans spent 1 to 14 hours in volunteer work over the course of one year, as reported by a Labor Department survey. The other 3 folks did no volunteer work at all. Folks here in this Society are helping to bring up that average, I'm sure!
- More free time would mean less time spent in front of the tube by folks too exhausted and brain dead at the end of the day to do anything else.
- Time to recycle, fix old stuff instead of buying new would decrease our negative impact upon the environment. "You have a choice" writes one advocate "at every moment, with every purchase, to ask 'Does this item add to my experience of fulfillment or is it just clutter?' 'Is it worth the work time I've invested in earning the money to buy it?' " Less work time, scaling down, means we have to think twice before clicking "Add to your shopping cart." Presently that shopping cart adds up to about 52 tons of garbage for every person during the course of our lifetimes, give or take a ton. Clearly we have to seek ways to break the compulsive American cycle of overwork and overconsumption that is wrecking our planet and our way of life.

It may seem that none of this has to do with the religious life, and this topic really would be better suited to a community meeting than to the pulpit. But our time in this Society serves, if anything, as an opportunity to seek deeper meaning and enrichment in our lives. It is a place to explore the relevant issues of living and find positive responses.

I believe every one of us here makes a great effort to spend time with our loved ones; we set aside time to make music, and to be outside in nature - to have fun, to volunteer, to help others. All of us know it is difficult to find time away from the things we **must** do in order to do what we love. The only country in the world with folks who spend more time working than the U.S. is South Korea. Everywhere else in the world, people have figured out how to do what they need to do and still have ample time for living. The Europeans provide a model for us of reasonable consumption, generous free time, and adequate social services. Folks in countries that are not as developed as our own may be much poorer, but they are also often much happier in ways that matter deeply. They don't have **material** affluence, they have **time** affluence. Finding the time to pursue our heart's promptings, to make connections with and to serve others, is a religious obligation. It's what we're here for in the first place, isn't it? Sometimes we have to fight to claim that time. Every transformation involves struggle - and as a country, we are up against the dire necessity to change our ways. Claiming the days of our lives is a good place to begin.

David Korten, a businessman and teacher, writes "We, in America, know pretty much everything there is to know about making money, including hyping stock bubbles and cooking the corporate books, but we have turned economic purpose on its head - forgetting that the purpose of an economy is to help us live fully and well. We devote so much of our personal time - and life energy - to making money, we have forgotten how to live. To take back our time is to take back our lives. To take back our lives we must replace what I call the global suicide economy (devoted to the service of money) with local living economies (devoted to the service of life)."

Korten observes that the corporate global economy is driven by wealthy financial speculators whose interests are solely confined to the profits reflected in a company's next quarterly statement. Concerns for the long term health of a company, the

environment or workers' rights are irrelevant. These financial wizards, he says, buy political power through campaign contributions and lobbyists; the result is an economy where a very few are the rich and powerful winners, while the majority struggle.

"Hopeful of being a winner" he says, "we give our time - our life energy, really - to a system that is destroying the foundations of its own existence, as well as our families, our communities, the life support system of the planet, and the future of our children."

He suggests an alternative with the following: "Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. The institutions of the suicide economy are human creations - the product of human choices. What humans have created, humans can change. It starts with taking back our time and redirecting it to economic choices that create real value for ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation, our world, and the whole of life."

Free time, then, is a path to freedom for all of us, to live for ourselves, our families, and our dreams. It starts with taking back our time.

I'd like to close with a little anecdote from the Jewish tradition concerning time. This is the story of the Seer of Lublin's Clock:

The Seer of Lublin was a great Hasidic rebbe. Of course, few of the rebbes were rich and so, when the Seer died he left his few possessions to his students. One of the students sought shelter at an inn and, having no money, he gave the Innkeeper the Seer of Lublin's clock. The Innkeeper placed the clock in one of the Inn's finer rooms.

One night another rebbe came to the Inn and was placed in the same room as the clock but he did not know who the clock had belonged to. As he said his prayers

that evening, he found himself overcome with joy and he spent the remainder of the night singing and dancing. When he came downstairs the next morning, the Innkeeper asked him how he had spent the night. The rebbe said that he felt so wonderful and so joyful that he did not need to sleep and, with every tick of the clock his joy increased.

The Innkeeper told him that the clock in his room had once belonged to the great Seer of Lublin. "The Seer of Lublin's clock?," he said, amazed. "Why then it was no wonder that I felt as I did. Ordinary clocks measure the time that you have lost...the hours you have wasted and each tick brings you closer to death...BUT each tick of the Seer of Lublin's clock brings you closer to the coming of the Messiah and to paradise. It tells you that you still have time to praise God and rejoice in His commandments.'

May it be so for us. May the grains of sand remaining for each one of us signify the time we have to love and live well, as we turn our hands to the work of making a better world.

AMEN