

Peaceful Easy Feeling©

Rev. Julie Forest

A while back, I was reading an article the *New York Times* regarding three books about Bob Dylan. One of the reviews upset me. I wasn't quite sure why at first. It actually took me until the next day – swimming laps in the pool – to figure it out. The quote was, “Looking at Dylan nearly 50 years after having first encountered him, the writer sees ‘the winding down of a well-designed but relentlessly used machine that has not always been properly maintained.’”

It wasn't a negative review of his work as a songwriter, musician, singer, or public personality. If it had been, that wouldn't have bothered me, because Dylan has been a lightning rod for differing critical opinions. What bothered me was an artist, one of the greatest of the 20th century, being compared to a used machine, a well designed but relentlessly used machine.

I am not; you are not; Dylan is not; we are not machines. Our souls and our humanity are in danger, at risk, when we think of ourselves as machines, think of others as machines, act like machines – expect others to act like machines, and do not challenge this machine mentality.

We are not machines. We are not efficient. We are not logical. We are often confusing, complicated, and entangled.

Yet, we don't often hear stories of people celebrating these aspects of their humanity. Even if not celebrated, these are not bad qualities or human conditions to be avoided. They just are. They should be a treasured part of our humanity as they link us to other qualities that most of us value highly, because we can also be conscious, creative, compassionate and interconnected.

But not only are they linked we can't have one without the other. And when we find ourselves evaluating ourselves and our lives and how we spend our time and what is important to us, we err when we try to remove or eliminate inefficiencies from our lives. Especially now, too many of the stories in our culture have to do with work and productivity and busyness. It is soul killing, not to mention damaging, to the fabric of our families and relationships.

What is the purpose of your life? Let go of the pat answers. How do you really know what your purpose in life is? Is your purpose static or does it change over time and circumstance? How close are you to living in harmony with your purpose? How close are you to having all the horses in your life, all your horsepower, pulling your chariot in the right direction? How closely are your heart and your daily actions in alignment? What is the purpose of your life and how do you know? What systems do you have in place to reflect on this question and evaluate your own performance?

This is the million dollar question. This is one of the reasons why many of us come to church on Sundays. We come because here is a place for us to ask and reflect on life's big questions and to listen for and then align ourselves with the answers that we hear.

This is in part why cultivating silence and making space for silence is important in so many spiritual practice and traditions throughout the world. That is why silence is a part of each one of *our* worship services.

There is so much noise and busyness in our lives and culture that we can easily become deaf to the ways that make us, or call us into more wholeness; and instead find ourselves living absurdly. Living lives that are absurdly out of whack, absurdly out of alignment with what - underneath it all - we think is sacred and of ultimate worth.

I was reminded recently of the origins of the word absurd. It means foolish, or inappropriate. The word comes from the Latin *surdus*, which means deaf. When we live our lives without taking the time to listen, without setting up a conducive atmosphere to listen, our lives veer towards the absurd, because of our deafness, because we do not listen.

The world seduces us with an artificial urgency that requires us to respond without listening to what is most deeply true. So we need silence to hear, but we also need time and space. This is where the spiritual practice of Sabbath comes in.

The concept of the Sabbath, a time of rest and enjoyment, comes from the Hebrew tradition. I am not aware of any other major religious tradition that opens up the concept of Sabbath to this degree, to rest and enjoy. I am grateful to Judaism for this. For me, its spiritual and ecological benefits continue to unfold.

Sabbath is the spiritual practice of allowing one's self to rest from one's work. The concept of rest was so important to the Hebrew understanding of spiritual health that the land, the animals and even the Hebrew God rested. And while these scriptures are old, this wisdom of the Sabbath that they hold remains relevant to our lives today.

In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. All plants, all animals have a rhythm and ebb and flow. We humans, like the other life forms of this earth, have circadian rhythms that are challenged and compromised with a 24 hour work and news schedule that values instant everything.

I happen to see another newspaper article a few weeks ago. There was a picture of a family sitting together after dinner on the couch. How nice I thought, until I looked more carefully. The article was about how much time they spent together even though they were each doing their own thing. The young boy was holding a Nintendo controller and staring at the TV. Sitting next to him, the dad was checking work e-mail. His wife was next on the couch, she was surfing the web on her tablet. Next to her at the end of the couch was the teenage daughter of the family, head bent over her cell phone both thumbs busily texting. The sociologist that wrote this article tried to put forward the idea that this was new family time, and this counted as togetherness.

This article was troubling to me for several reasons. First I honestly don't think that each person doing their own thing with either a TV screen or a computer screen or phone screen is being together. Second the father and husband of the family was actually working, which is what reading work e-mail is. More and more people work their eight hours a day, come home and work some more. They seem unable to put boundaries on their work life. I believe that not putting boundaries on work life makes it very challenging to engage life's most meaningful questions.

Some people work a lot because our culture has equated busyness and productivity with a sense of godliness, goodness, value and importance. Some people work a lot because they have addictive personalities. This particular addiction is rewarded in our society and yet it serves similar purposes to other addictions. It helps keep feelings of pain at bay, and it gives one the false sense of having one's life under control and chaos in quarantine. But relentless work also creates a false sense of urgency, and it prevents us from savoring life.

Earlier I asked the question, "What is the purpose of our lives?" One of my answers to the purpose of life is to savor life, to appreciate it. For me, the purpose of life is to savor life, to appreciate life, to grow my sense of connection to the web of life, to grow my relationship with the holy in myself and others and to grow my relationship with the sacred. None of this happens when I am on the hamster wheel of busyness.

Sabbath dissolves the artificial urgency of our days because it liberates us from the need to be finished. One does not practice Sabbath when one has finished all of one's tasks. And that is a very good thing because we are never finished; there will always be something else that needs to be done. So the wisdom of the Sabbath is just picking a time, setting aside the time each day or each week, to cultivate a peaceful, easy feeling. You will be amazed at what will happen. Here is a story about a group of nuns that illustrates what I'm getting at

There was a group of nuns that had been given a small working ranch as a gift. They knew a lot about growing vegetable gardens and planted enough vegetables and herbs to provide a lot of food and flavor for their table. They didn't know a lot about ranching so they studied up on it. Then they brought in someone who had studied something called permaculture; the most efficient and sustainable way to use the land. They were advised to change the grazing habits of their animals. Previously the animals had been allowed to roam and graze wherever they wanted, completely free range. The ranching nuns were told to separate the land into 6 parcels and pen the animals into one parcel. When it was completely grazed and fertilized to then move the animals to the next plot until they had rotated through the entire property.

They tried this practice and at the end of two years they noticed a substantial change. The land that had been left dormant after grazing, sprouted many new herbs and grasses that they had never seen before. The grasses that grew up after the dormant time turned out to be so nutritious that the nuns no longer needed to supplement the grass the cattle ate with

corn. When the land was freed from constant use and allowed to rest, seeds that had lain dormant had the time and energy to come to fruition.

The same is true for us.

If you were to go home after our time together today and think about where you could set up some of your own fences or boundaries what new energies might emerge? So for folks actively parenting, it might mean making sure that you have some time off every week. For folks in the work place it might mean honestly examining your behaviors around work activates and make the changes to set aside non work time, get counter cultural and refuse the false senses of urgency and stick to not working during the times you have consciously set aside. For those of you who are retired ... ha ha. I am laughing because some of the folks I am meeting that are retired have seemed to carry over work habits that closely mimic workaholic behaviors. Yes, being able to retire is a gift. Yes, many folks are pursuing their passions, and while all this is true even you folks will find spiritual gifts in not doing. In setting aside time when your souls have time to graze in silence.

If setting boundaries up for ourselves to insure rest is so good for us and feels so good when we actually do it, why is it so hard to practice Sabbath time regularly?

I find myself coming back to the theological concept of original sin versus original blessing. In original sin there is the understanding that we are not one with creation not one with God but separated through some original ontological deed, and that we are cursed. Even if as Unitarian Universalists we don't believe this on a conscious level, I observe it creeping into my life and the lives of others in numerous ways.

I remember one day a few years ago I had had a particularly good yoga session. We came to the end of the yoga class and we lay on our mats in what is known as the corpse pose. I experienced such a wonderful sense of well-being in my body. It was noticeable because I don't always feel that way. I now know that it is healthy and good to feel that way as often as possible.

Sometimes I hear people say that they don't feel that they deserve to be peaceful to feel good in their bodies or their minds. Feeling good in our bodies, feeling good on this earth, is a birthright; we all deserve it. There is nothing wrong with feeling good, slowing down, having down time, savoring the precious gift of life. When we go to fast, we break things. We break our spirits, we break our relationships, we fracture our connection to the rhythmic ebb and flow of life.

Today is about tuning in to that rhythm.

Today is about pausing and savoring and tending.

Pausing in our busyness to listen

Savoring the gift of being alive

And tending to our relationships to each other and to creation.

At Blackwater Pond the tossed waters have
settled
after a night a rain.
I dip my cupped hands. I drink
a long time. It tastes
like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold
into my body, waking the bones. I hear them
deep inside me, whispering
oh what is that beautiful thing
that just happened?

By Mary Oliver

May each sip be a reminder of our interconnectedness and may we be able to
taste and savor the sweetness of life.

Blessed Be.

Amen.

Mary Oliver. (2006). At Blackwater Pond. On *At Blackwater Pond: Mary Oliver
reads Mary Oliver* [CD]. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.