

The Peace of Non-Doing

Today is my birthday. Though it's mid-week, I've managed to clear my schedule so I have a completely open day. On the one hand, "Hallelujah!" On the other hand, "Gulp."

The gulp has to do with Aristotle's observation that nature abhors a vacuum. (And, I would add, so does the busy mind in the midst of our busy lives.) Make a space, like the one I've created today, and it's astonishing—almost to the point of amusement—how many to-do's start making noise to be checked off the list.

But I'm not listening to them today. It's my birthday. It seems we often need a special occasion to give ourselves permission to let go and step off the treadmill of Doing. And still, even on those set-aside, special days or hours or minutes, it can be hard to ignore the strange seduction of get-it-done, whatever it is.

Today, saying no to that siren call is a little easier for me because less than a month ago, I returned from a 2-week silent meditation retreat. On retreat, the main thing to get done is....well, nothing.

I try to go on retreat for at least a week around my birthday each year, and it always takes me a good 2 or 3 days of restlessness to downshift and begin to allow the slower rhythms of retreat-time to settle my body and mind. This retreat was a bit longer than I'd done before, and somewhere in the middle of it, I began to experience moments and then some stretches of time, when my mind was clear and quiet, and the urge to 'do the next thing' was absent.

One evening, I ate dinner in silence, as we do on retreat, and found myself continuing to sit at the table after I had eaten, with an empty plate, looking at the trees out the window, and, most importantly, *having no desire to be doing anything else*. This may not sound particularly important, but it was so strikingly different from so many after-dinner moments and other moments in my daily life, that I named it in my journal later: "*the peace of non-doing*." And then, this comment: "It's so unfamiliar that I don't quite know if it's real."

In this culture, in 2012, the peace of non-doing is a rare occurrence. So rare that if by chance the conditions are right to bring us to an experience of this peace, we might not quite know if it's real. When the phrase came to mind, I thought of a cartoon by Robert Weber that I often give to participants in groups I lead on the art of slowing down.. It shows a man in a suit sitting on a couch with his wife nearby. He has a puzzled, somewhat shocked look on his face. The caption reads, "*What the hell was that? Something just swept over me—like contentment or something.*"

I understand his disbelief, despite the fact that I *teach* about how to find contentment in a more-is-better, achievement-driven culture. I teach about it, of course, because we teach what we need to learn. My inner achiever started developing in kindergarten, if not before, and had teamed up with my budding inner perfectionist by the time I was in grade school. What a pair!

But, while I owe some of my achievement-oriented mindset to this internal dynamic duo, I also understand that the tendency to value 'doing' over 'being' is not simply my personal challenge. It is *our* challenge, all of us. Why? Because we live in a culture that values and encourages us to keep moving, keep doing, keep achieving, even if what we "achieve" in a given day amounts to nothing more than drawing lines through a to-do list.

While crossing things off the list can be satisfying, there is at least one fundamental problem with the non-stop Doing generated by an achievement-based frame of mind: *we can't 'achieve' our way into the peace of non-doing.*

We have to stop.

We have to let go.

We have to learn to let things be just as they are.

And given the culture we live in, we have to create conditions in our daily lives that encourage us to stop, that help us to let go, that invite the peace of non-doing to show up. The conditions in my case that gave rise to my after-dinner experience of contentment were: taking a 5-month 'pause' from giving talks and leading workshops; within that pause, attending a 2-week silent retreat; and then within that retreat, experiencing some moments of deep peace.

That may sound extreme, but there are plenty of small, simple ways we can create conditions for more contentment in daily life without going to extreme measures. For example:

- Plan a daily time to take 'time-in,' that is, a time when you can cut down on distraction, be by yourself, and take an intentional pause to practice non-doing. You could be "doing" something, like taking a walk or having a cup of tea or driving to work, but the focus is more on *being* with yourself than on *doing* the activity.
- When there's a natural, perhaps unexpected pause in between one activity and the next, try not pushing forward into the next thing. Let the pause be. If you notice the *discomfort* of non-doing, which is often the first response we have when the treadmill slows down or stops, see if you can breathe with and allow the discomfort for a few moments before you go into motion again. You might be pleasantly surprised to find that: a.) the discomfort won't kill you and b.) there is peace to be had in the gaps between things.
- Try doing one thing at a time. For example, just eat a meal, or part of a meal, without reading or talking or making a list or listening to music. Maybe even sit still for a few moments when you're done, before you move on to the next thing.

These are just a few possibilities. When we start to look for them, there are countless ways to invite moments of non-doing into daily life. I like to take the long view about this kind of practice, that is, that we have the rest of our lives to work

with allowing things to be as they are, to appreciate the pauses in between things, to find our way to the peace of non-doing.

My husband and I started a birthday tradition when our children were little: we light a candle on the birthday morning, sing “Happy Birthday,” and then the person whose birthday it is states their wishes for themselves in the coming year, followed by each family member adding theirs.

Our kids are on their own now, but we continue the tradition. On my birthday, my wishes for myself usually include good health, time with the people I love most, depth and satisfaction in my work, and so on. This year--and maybe for many years to come--one of my wishes for myself is to experience the peace of non-doing. Often. Many times throughout the coming year.

Whether it’s your birthday or not, I wish the same for you.