

The Mad Rush for a Silent Night
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Blurb: Anticipating and preparing for big moments is both joyful and stressful. One thing that both the holiday specials and Buddhism agree on: Watch out for getting too attached to outcomes.

INTRODUCTION: Being Being, Not Labeling

In my younger days I kept two sayings tacked up on my office wall: The composer Igor Stravinsky's "A masterpiece is all that counts" and the Roman writer Pliny the Elder's saying, *Nulla Dies Sine Linea*, "Never a day without a line."

I've always been fond of quotes, the sort of thing that nowadays appears as memes all over social media.

Pliny would have been big on Twitter. He wrote some *serious* lines less than 280 characters. In addition to "never a day without a line," he wrote:

Cum grano salis, "with a grain of salt."

In vino veritas, "in wine there is truth."

Fortes Fortuna iuvat, "fortune favors the brave."

And the slightly longer phrase, *Malum quidem nullum esse sine aliquo bono*. "There is no bad that will not bring some good."

It's debated whether he was the first to write *ubi domus, ibi cor*—"Home is where the heart is."

I still practice *Nulla Dies Sine Linea*. I've managed to write something every day for over forty years, including some days I've been flat on my back in a hospital.

But I won't be retweeting Stravinsky about a masterpiece being all that counts. As a matter of fact, I positively and totally *disagree* with that idea. I don't think a masterpiece matters much at all in terms of a life well-lived.

Nowadays I retweet something the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote: "Being an artist means ceasing to take seriously that very serious person we are when we are not an artist." Or Louise Erdrich's incisive comment, "You're the book you're writing."

Because to be honest, following Stravinsky's very serious insistence upon high art as the very essence of life made me a bit of a jerk. (OK: a *lot* of a jerk.) Eventually, I didn't like that guy I became. Lots of things matter more than creating a masterpiece.

A lot of that being a jerk part had to do with my adamant drive to be something I wasn't. To acquire a new label. I was born with the labels "trailer trash," "white trash," and, rather than questioning the labels—the more healthy alternative—I went looking for other labels.

Consequently, for years I was focused on how to *be* a *poet* rather than focusing on the attempt to *write* a poem. And that's just foolish. Because what poets *are* are people who write poems. It's foolish to attempt to live up to some sort of label.

In time, I've learned to cease to be that very serious person who wants to achieve "poet" or "artist" or any other label.

That said, I don't mean to fall off on the other side of the rail either. This is not about that "being not doing" thing. Again, for me it's not about *product*, masterpiece or otherwise. It's about *living and enjoying being* alive in its fullness, not in the tiny stuffy rooms of single-minded achievement.

Here's another thought that might make a good tour of the Twitter-sphere: The Russian writer Anton Chekhov said, "If you want to work on your art, work on your life."

Which about sums it up.

ONE: Stressing Over the Stress

OK. Working on ourselves . . . Writing that book that is the self that Louise Erdrich talks about.

A lot of people are having a tough time writing that book just now. The American Psychological Association examines American stress levels every year with the appropriately-titled (and copyrighted) "Stress in America."

Here's a bit from the report:

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of American life, from health and work to education and exercise. Over the long term, warns the American Psychological Association, the negative mental health effects of the coronavirus will be serious and long-lasting.

One section of the report is titled:

Government Response to COVID-19 Is a Significant Source of Stress for Nearly 7 in 10 Adults

The two groups most adversely affected are parents of young children and people of color:

More than 7 in 10 say managing distance/online learning for their children is a significant source of stress (71%).

Parents are more likely than those who are not parents to say basic needs—such as access to food and housing—are a significant source of stress (70% compared with 44%). Other significant stressors for parents include access to health care services (66% vs. 44%) and missing major milestones, such as weddings and graduation ceremonies (63% vs. 43%).

Added to all that stress is the added stress of the sudden spike in cases. I suppose it goes without saying that American stress levels—always higher than much of the world—are now astronomical.

And then . . . we've got the holidays coming soon . . . that hectic, mad rush in the hopes of getting to that perfect silent night.

That's what I want to think about today: Where do we find some stillness?

That's our theme for the month of December: Stillness. How to get there. How to stay there as much as possible in the maelstrom of 2020.

TWO: Irritable Reaching

The British Romantic poet John Keats spent much of his very short life—he died in his mid-twenties—consciously working at writing great poems.

Because he had considerable success toward that goal in his few years on earth, many would-be poets ever after have read his letters to discover what Keats realized about writing a poem. What made his poetry so sublime when he was so young?

The most famous of his poetic speculations is what Keats called “negative capability,” which he defined in a letter as “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

“Capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Sounds like that old Buddhist teaching of letting go of expectation, doesn’t it?

The great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke was thinking in the same direction when he wrote in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. (Letter 4)

In another letter Rilke said:

It must be immense, this silence, in which sounds and movements have room, and if one thinks that along with all this the presence of the distant sea also resounds, perhaps as the innermost note in this prehistoric harmony, then one can only wish that you are trustingly and patiently letting the magnificent solitude work upon you, this solitude which can no longer be erased from your life . . . (Letter 10)

In these passages, I propose, is a formula for not only writing but for wise and felicitous living in general—“capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” And “love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue.”

We've all witnessed a great deal of sound and fury lately. Very loud words full of very adamant conviction.

Yet these poets tell us that a world in which every question has an answer is a world without creativity and possibility.

Creativity. Possibility. And I think hope as well—all these are about living in the gray areas Living with the ambiguity. Living not for the conclusion but for the *process*.

That's clearly good for poets, yes. It's also good advice for everyone. It's a way to work on our lives . . .

For me, that work is often in writing poems. But it doesn't have to be about writing a poem. It can be meditation. Or mindfulness. Or yoga. Or photography. Or a gratitude journal. Or identifying plants. Or rocks. Whatever.

Whatever method you need in order to stop . . . to pause . . . to find the stillness . . . and to realize the beauty.

I love the book that Allison shared with us this morning, *Mindful Bea and the Worry Tree*. It's a clever and succinct instruction manual in the art of beating anxiety through mindfulness.

What practice will enable you to savor life's gifts during this season that is likely to be more stressful than still? How can you avoid that "irritable reaching" that Keats talks about?

All of us would do well to figure that out. And then go and do that.

THREE: The Shoulda-Wouldas

I've talked before about my situational depression around the holidays. I know I'm not alone in that. Childhood trauma. Loved ones lost. The shoulda, coulda, woulda, and oughtas that we force on ourselves in self-talk.

My resolution for this holiday season is to stay out of my head and keep in my body. Those shouldas, couldas, wouldas, and oughtas are merely thoughts. That's the central insight of Buddhist practice. Thoughts are not us; thoughts are only thoughts. None of us are our thoughts. Not if we don't allow our un-thoughtful thoughts to run our lives, anyway.

For me, being in my body isn't entirely comfortable. As I've discussed before, we Midwestern farmers learn early to ignore pain and emotions. In addition, I was malnourished as a child, so my bones didn't develop properly. And we hillbillies are in-bred. When I get out of bed in the morning, I pop and crack like a lumber wagon.

The carry the scars of poverty—physical and mental. I so dreaded going back to school after Christmas and having the kids ask what I got for Christmas.

The holidays bring back the anger, the sadness. And if I'm not careful, I can forget to stay in my kinda decrepit body. But none of us can feel whole, be whole, if we're not in both our minds and our bodies.

So, this season, I intend to get up on my bent old legs and be here, in *this* holiday season, not living in "Christmases long, long ago" as the song puts it. That's the only way to be whole now. Today.

Sure, I'll be looking for stillness by writing some lines of a poem. And going for walks. And talking with friends and family.

It's not easy. But it can be done.

When I feel anxiety rising, I intend to remember *Mindful Bea and the Worry Tree*. To remember to breathe.

Awareness of the breath is the center of all meditative traditions. Breathing is something we have some control over. We can slow it down. We can deepen it. We can calm ourselves by using some simple techniques available all over the internet. Or, email me. I've been studying and practicing meditation for decades.

And if that anxiety just won't go away, the ministers and members of First Unitarian Society are here for you. Contact us. That's what community is for. Reach out to people you know. Ask us ministers who you might like to get to know. We are a community. And that means being here for each other.

And, we have programming for you. Coffee and Wisdom every weekday morning. Humanist bible study on Wednesday nights. Rev. Jim will be doing a special program for people in grief. The Seasonal Celebrations Team is working on a great Solstice Celebration. Rev. Jim will be doing a special Assembly on Christmas Eve. And, every Sunday morning in December, we will have an Assembly and consider the theme of stillness.

CONCLUSION: Your Breathing Makes More Space Around You

This season, may you be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching." May you, "live everything. Live the questions now." That's one of the central insights of Buddhism: holding onto expectations hurts; letting go of expectations frees us.

In this often-hectic season, may you write that poem. Or play that song. Or take that walk. Or read that book. Whatever it takes, to find the stillness that is there in you, always, despite the noise of the times.

I'll end today with poem from Rilke. One of his *Sonnets to Orpheus* that reminds us to breathe:

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

SOURCES

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