

Idleness as Spiritual Practice

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We've turned the calendar page and now find ourselves in the month of June – on the edge of summer. Though summer officially starts on the 21st, around here, we're already experiencing the precursors, the reminders that “full-on” summer is right around the corner. We've had days when the temperature soared into the high 20s, alerting us to get the fans out or have the a/c tuned up. We can see the greening of the trees and the blooming of the flowers, taking on their summer hues. Each week there are more farmer's markets, art festivals, concerts, and outdoor activities happening in our community. No matter our stage of life, young or old, retired or working, the season of summer invites a change of pace, a shift in our consciousness – a chance to experience our relationship with life abundant, and ourselves, a little differently.

Listen to these words from the Rev. Robert T. Weston, from his “Summer Meditation.” You can follow along, if you like – its number #547 in the gray hymnal. [READ #547]

Perhaps it's seeing children at play that inspires us to reconnect with that place of joy and wonder and play inside each of us, waiting to be invited to emerge. Maybe it's just a reaction to being cooped up for so long on cold and wet days. Maybe longer days present an opportunity for reflection or the languid feeling that comes from dealing with the heat and humidity opens the door to slow down and take it easier. During summer, we give ourselves more opportunities to be outdoors, in connection with nature, and perhaps this reminds us of how we are connected and interconnected with so much beauty. Whatever it is, Rev. Weston reminds us of the opportunity present in this season – the chance to experience idleness and reconnect with “who we have been and as we are, still yet have to become.”

And yet, it's so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day practicalities of life, to find ourselves so focused on our “to do” list, that we feel sort of like we are operating on autopilot. To get through the list of endless responsibilities and limitless things that need our attention, our focus narrows and we start to only see what needs to be done next. After all, with summer's fun comes lawn mowing and fix-it projects and maintenance. I can relate to that - I know when I find myself operating in this kind of focused mode, if I find myself having any thoughts of the future, they are shaped by the burden of the responsibilities and commitments I see looming on the horizon.

And it feels somewhat suffocating, joyless, hopeless...soul killing. Recognize that place? Ever found yourself so caught up that you're running primarily on stress and adrenalin? Obviously, as a religious professional, I do not endorse or recommend lifestyles that are suffocating, joyless, hopeless or soul killing (despite how you may feel about my sermons!) I believe we are here to experience happiness, fulfillment, joy, and love. And, while I know not every moment of our lives will be perfect, I do believe we are happier and healthier when we offer ourselves the chance to slow down and restore our physical, mental, and emotional reserves. I'm a big fan of the incorporation of idleness into spiritual practice, and summer is often a great time to add it into our lives.

We live in a culture that takes a pretty dim view of idleness. For just a moment, let the word play in your mind. Idleness. What images come to mind for you? What associations do you have with that word? Positive? I'm guessing that it brought up some

negative impressions. For example: lazy – ineffective – worthless – useless. Not a very inspiring image or something most of us would aspire to.

It's not those negative stereotypes that I'm hoping to reinforce by talking about the concept of being idle. I'm not encouraging a practice of idleness that is a total slump of mental fretting, physical inertia, and/or emotional isolation. Yes, I know that occasionally it can feel good to "zone out" for a period of time – perhaps in front of the TV or computer. But it's not the same when it becomes a "binge" of engaging in hour after hour of mindless channel surfing or hunkering down for a long siege of videogames or surfing the Web, often accompanied by quantities of junk food (and/or drink) and becoming mind-numbingly unengaged. Been there – done that – didn't become happier, more enlightened, or feel very good afterward, however.

Rather, what I'm encouraging you to consider is a spiritual practice of creative idleness – a practice where you offer yourself the time and space, internally and externally, to engage your imagination, connect with your creativity, and restore yourself to an optimistic view of your life. I'm encouraging a practice of mindfulness that grounds us in being fully present in our lives, in the moment, engaged fully in whatever we have chosen to do in that moment. This is a kind of idleness that is fully focused and aware, fully present, that allows the imagination to expand, allows new insight and thinking to emerge, allows us to feel rejuvenated and alive and hopeful once again.

This kind of idleness is about quieting the "white noise" of our minds, not by drowning it out with more noise (like TV or the internet), but by being still, unhurried, fully present, and open to being in the moment. It may involve doing absolutely nothing, but it could also involve being involved in reading, taking a long walk, painting, or any activity that nurtures your creative, hopeful soul.

Rebecca Leigh is an Australian woman who talks about her practice of creative idleness on her blog. She says, "to me, idleness is about intention, about being quietly in the moment without filling your mind with the next productive thing you could or should do, about having the cup of tea without thinking, 'I could pop a load of laundry in while I'm sitting here.' (It's about giving yourself permission to) daydream and dabble and wander and snooze and become very languid and soft. Practice this often, for no particular reason and with no particular end in mind, simply because it feels right."

I'd encourage you to consider the usefulness and need for Sabbath – taking a time of rest and renewal. Sunday is often a convenient day to incorporate a sense of rest and renewal into our lives – permission to avoid work and spend time with ourselves and those or what we love. We find reminders to adopt a spiritual practice of renewing the soul in all of the world's religious traditions.

Some might call it a form of prayer or meditation, some ask us to engage in mindfulness, all are encouraging an expansion of consciousness and awareness by suggesting that it is important to engage in a practice – a purposeful, repeated engagement – that helps us focus our attention inward, pay attention to the creativity and possibility that each of us possess, and hear the wisdom of our own experience.

That's hard to do if we're always busy, always going, always noisy, always distracted, always "on task" in our lives. Creative idleness is a practice because we must consciously create the conditions in our life that will allow us to experience it. We have to make time. We have to think about what we will do that will allow us the space, quiet, time, and attention to and for ourselves.

Let's go back to our own UU source for words of wisdom – the hymnal. Look at #94, "What Is This Life," the hymn by William Henry Davies we sang earlier in today's service. Mr. Davies words are quaint, and even a bit funny – I love this hymn because of its sheep, squirrels, and cows. But the message is clear and reinforces what I'm talking about with you today.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has spent many years speaking and teaching about the practice of mindfulness, of being fully awake, aware, and present in the moments of our lives. He says that we really only have the present moment, and yet our human inclination is to spend time rehashing the past or anticipating the future, instead of being in the only time we really have, right now. He says that we get too caught up in our amazing ability to think, and forget to be present. He points to our love of Descartes "I think, therefore I am." Thich Nhat Hanh says, "I think, therefore I'm not available in the present moment of my life."

In his mindfulness practice, he encourages people to be conscious of being in the very moments of their lives, aware in the act of doing whatever we are doing. If you're washing the dishes, he says, have your focus be on washing the dishes, not having the dishes washed. Through mindfulness practice, our goal, he says, is "to become conscious of each breath, each movement, every thought and feeling, everything which has any relation to ourselves."

The kind of creative idleness practice I'm encouraging us to pursue combines this kind of mindfulness with slowing down, focusing, choosing, and engaging in activities that renew us, encourage us, energize us, engage us in being fully human and alive. Yes, life is about responsibilities and duties, but it's also about joy, hope, gladness, and love. Give yourself permission to not be "effective" today.

There are so many ways to practice this kind of creative idleness. But, if you need a place to start, here are three simple suggestions to consider that might enhance your practice of idleness this summer:

GO BAREFOOT – Chief Luther Standing Bear reminds us that "it is good for the skin to touch Earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred Earth...the soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing." Old or not, taking off your shoes changes your connection to the world. It helps us relax and let our guard down. There's nothing like sand between your toes, or mud. There's the tickle of newly-mown grass on the soles of your feet. There's the warmth of the soil heated by the sun, then the coolness of the dirt beneath as you dig your toes down below the surface. This summer, take your shoes off.

OFFER BLESSINGS - Celtic Christians walked a "blessing path" and were aware of the "long hand of God" in their lives. As they went through their day, they offered blessings over the signs of this sacred presence in life. Make yourself mindful of the blessings in your life this summer – the sun, rain, flowers, breezes, fruits and foods, birdsong, and so much more - that make this time of year special. Be aware of what is around you. Look for things that you have not noticed before. Breathe. Spend a few minutes experiencing them – seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting. Offer your thanks and blessings to the world for these marvelous aspects of our life.

CREATE A "WONDER TABLE" – in a corner of your home or on your porch or deck, create a space to display "summer wonders." Then, as you go about in your life - in nature, in the garden, around town – collect things that appeal to your senses to put on

your table. Perhaps a smooth stone or a bird's feather you find on a walk. Something from the garden that smells good, or a treasure of good taste from the farmer's market. Maybe you include a piece of cloth in a summer color, or flowers, or leaves. You can invite your family, friends, or summer guests to participate in creating and sharing your wonder table, as well. Then, on a regular basis, gather together to share your wonders, as well as the story of where or when you found the items you've collected, or use this table and its treasures as a place to meditate, reflect, or write in a journal.

Summer's here, and the time is right – not only for dancing in the streets – but for allowing ourselves the pursuit of idleness, the practice of renewing ourselves by intently listening for the voice within. And, from that place of renewal and deep knowing, let us then bring richer meaning to the world again.

Blessed be.