

Il Bel Far Niente

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The Unitarian Church in Summit

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Reading:

"Not So Fast!" by Donella Meadows

Slowing down.

Slowing down could be the single most effective solution to the particular save-the-world struggle I immerse myself in -- the struggle for sustainability, for living harmoniously and well within the limits and laws of the earth.

Suppose we weren't in such a hurry. We could take time to walk instead of drive, to sail instead of fly. To clean up our messes. To discuss our plans throughout the whole community before we send in bulldozers to make irreversible changes. To figure out how many fish the ocean can produce before boats race out to beat other boats to whatever fish are left.

Suppose we went at a slow enough pace not only to smell the flowers, but to feel our bodies, play with children, look openly, without agenda or timetable into the faces of loved ones. Suppose we stopped gulping fast food and started savoring slow food, grown, cooked, served, and eaten with care. Suppose we took time each day to sit in silence. I think, if we did those things, the world wouldn't need much saving.

Sermon:

Since so many new folks join us over the summer, I feel the need to recap a little of our very recent history in this community.

Last year here in this community, we spent some of our energies exploring the idea that the mission of the congregation is, in part, to equip people for bold living. The staff and lay leaders started asking what that might mean, what programming we might offer, how that mission might shape issues that came in front of committees and the board. It was a wild ride with exciting and sometimes surprising results.

We adopted a school and a city, and the newspapers wrote about this novel relationship. Members started echoing back the bold living charge and sharing how it had given them the motivation to do courageous or gutsy things in their own lives -- from facing down troubled relationships to volunteering for three months in a foreign country to moving in together. Up blossomed the "Moving Toward Peace" initiative; the anti-racism task force; Green Vespers took root, and attention to environmental concerns continued to influence our sense of ourselves in myriad ways. This year we will double the number of plate offerings we give away, and this fall we'll take concrete action, along with all of Summit's religious organizations and many of its major civic organizations, to draw

attention to the atrocities in Sudan and offer help. This is an initiative we helped start. The workshop rotation model may revolutionize the way we educate our kids ... and more.

The year before all this began, I had been feeling that if the religious venture were worth our time and commitment, then it had to be worth doing big. Not exactly “Take no prisoners,” but more along the lines of the Helen Keller quote outside our doors. And this daring adventure was bearing, is bearing, incredible fruit.

And then, in this headlong tumble, I hit a little internal snag. I went on vacation. I mentioned a little about what happened in my July column, but allow me to elaborate.

Leila, my daughter, and Rohit, my husband, and I traveled to Rome for a family wedding. The extended family booked two different houses in the Umbrian countryside around the wedding so we could all stay together. There was a little bit of sightseeing the first week, but in the second, almost none. We were out in the country, no TV to speak of, no Internet, no phone except in emergencies.

We all were challenged to entertain ourselves with what was there. As a result, I played “Go Fish” so much that I probably am ready for international competition. I’ve endured more Bingo than the most avid church basement regular, and my coloring skills I’m sure will rival any sixth-grader’s. A soccer ball kept us all busy most late afternoons, as did the shared challenge of so many cooks who loved food so much trying to put a single dinner together. Best of all, however, was the every-night dance.

It got so that dinner was hardly finished some nights, the dishes not even off the table, when Leila would whisper to me, wondering if her uncle would play music again, and every night her uncle would put on the music, and chairs would get pushed back and the generations would take to the floor. Older aunts would persuade normally reticent college-age men to be their partners, there would be spontaneous lessons on the sidelines, great-uncles would scoop their little nieces and nephews up into their arms and spin them around the floor, and the night would evaporate in a medley of rumbas, waltzes and cha-cha-chas. It doesn’t take much to have fun.

I quoted to you in my July column author Elizabeth Gilbert’s observation that Americans are good at pre-packaged good times and entertainment, but bad at what the Italians call *il bel far niente* -- the beauty of doing nothing. We are also bad, according to her, at what the Italians call *l’arte d’arrangiarsi*, the art of making something out of nothing. What she learned while living for three months in Rome, and I learned this summer, was the sweetness of nothing.

If the dancing was the best part of every night, the best part of every day might have been the naps we took. Sad, isn’t it? But these were fantastic naps. Leila fell into a late-to-bed, early-to-rise, three-hour-midday-nap schedule. It was lovely to be pulled into her patterns of waking just after dawn, and staying up late reading books until they ran out. And the three-hour naps, in a place with no interruptions, were magical.

I'm sure you have all had those experiences, even in a busy city, maybe on a quiet weekend or in the midst of a heavy snowstorm -- those occasions when the whole world seems to fall still at midday. You know, those times when the bedroom becomes a refuge for self-care and personal wandering. When you have time to nap, and wake up slowly. When you have time to consider the day in progress, the one just past, the one to come. When you have time enough to let ideas and images and feelings surface and then fall silent again beneath consciousness. When there is time to read without interruption and chew on a passage, staring at the ceiling, until the passage is soft enough to swallow. What a luxury and what a *necessity* such time is.

For me, those naptime stretches were like sessions of being knit back together, hour by quiet hour. I got keenly in that time why wholeness and holiness share a common root. They are connected. There is something deeply sacred, even religious, about the practice of bringing the self back together.

All of this became a problem late this summer. Something about those weeks in July felt not special, but fundamental. Not something that should be surrendered only to scattered weeks of vacation, but built into a life -- all of our lives -- as part of what serves the purpose of giving life heft and integrity.

Why, as Thoreau rightly asked, are we in such a hurry and waste of life?

I preached about a year-and-a-half ago about how similar Thoreau's times were to our own. How the 1840s, in the middle of which he retired to Walden, were a time of tremendous change, the cusp of an industrial revolution. People like George Ripley and Margaret Fuller were busy creating intentional communities to escape its pull and the price it seemed to exact, from environmental degradation to the expansion of the average workweek.

According to the Harvard economist Juliet Schorr, for centuries the average farmer in Europe (and, we imagine, America) worked about two-thirds of the year at about 9.5 hours a day, but by 1850, the average American working in a factory was working 70 hours a week with no reason to take one-third of the year off.

Our own situation is, of course, eerily similar. Today the average amount of time an American worker spends in the workplace is the highest of any industrialized nation. Since 1973, the equivalent of five 40-hour workweeks has quietly been added to our total hours in the workplace. In addition, in 2002, one-quarter of Americans had no vacation¹ and many others feel pressure to leave precious vacation on the table. A University of Michigan study notes a 28 percent decrease in families taking vacation together since the 1970s.² And an article in the New York Times this summer reported that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "the number of full-time employees who took less than an entire week off has more than doubled since 1990."³

In other words, we work more, take less vacation, take less of it together, and when we do take it, we are taking it in smaller and smaller pieces. Enough vacation not to disrupt

the flow of work, but, I imagine, hardly the kind that fundamentally knits us back together and connects us to the part of us that needs a hearing.

Thoreau took an extreme step to reclaim life from the culture gone mad. He retired to a cabin on Walden Pond for two years and two months, to (as he described it) confront the basic facts of life, and to do so mostly in his own company and nature's. Much good came out of that time, yet few of us really have that option, and many of us wouldn't want it if it were offered.

And, just back from vacation this summer, I wondered whether those really are our two options for life: to alternate working and coming back to ourselves over shorter and shorter vacations until we retire and can reflect on and deeply savor life, or do a version of what Thoreau did, go off the grid and live in a cabin somewhere. Are these really the only two options? I think we have to insist they are not. There is too much at stake if we don't.

To begin with, an overworked life, busy even with the best and most meaningful work, has huge -- as they say in economics -- negative externalities. The industries that feed us convenience often feed us pre-packaged foods that are less healthy, that travel farther than is good for the environment before they make it to our tables, with waste packaging that has nowhere to go but on land that is better left for trees and wildlife. We rush to get places, raise our heart rate, increase our stress, weaken our immune system, do all kinds of potential damage, and are unhappy in the race. We squeeze friends in over lunch, which is too little time to get to what's important or to listen for what is unstated and needs to be aired.

In addition, if part of our call, as people committed to values that we hold dear, is the hope to imbed these values in our world before we go -- the kind of bold living we've been talking about -- then surely we agree that this kind of living is best done in a life that has time for significant reflection. To "do" without reflection is to risk going far off track before you notice it.

It can be no accident that the diaries of men like Martin Luther King record, in the midst of things like the Montgomery bus boycotts, those daily efforts at things like morning study, prayer or reflection. It is time *away from the work*, as much as anything else, that feeds, directs and sustains such work. Is it an accident that Thoreau managed to write and live the commitment to civil disobedience, an idea now fundamental to our sense of the rights and responsibilities of citizens? That was work that was in part possible because it was nourished and explored in protected time. Greatness is fed in such places.

So if time for repose, time with family, time in nature, down time is what is required for us to live boldly and more satisfied, as I am increasingly convinced it is, then we need to make a whole lot more space for such time, which means we need to ask for and demand support for some change. What might that mean?

- * It could mean raising again the public issue of limiting the average workweek. (Can you imagine doing that even as the French are caving on their protected 35-hour week?!)
- * It might mean the somewhat painful personal work of scaling back our expenses and activities to buy back and reclaim our time.
- * It will certainly mean hard conversations with bosses and friends that make clear the expectation of time away, in the first case, and time together in the other.
- * Or what about reclaiming the idea of the Sabbath -- 24 hours of religiously protected time without work, for study, reflection, lovemaking.

Does this sound naïve? As I wrote it and even as I say it now, it all sounds so hopelessly naïve, doesn't it? But then, it strikes me how *religious* it is to sound so naïve. Religion has always been the protector of the hopelessly naïve ideal. So I'll take it as a good sign.

What we are talking about may actually touch on some of the most radically countercultural work we could be called to do. In this country, it might actually be more countercultural than fighting for same-sex marriage!

Nightly in Italy, my brother-in-law would lead an expedition of the smallest children on a nature walk down the same small stretch of road. You could hear the kids chatter as they astonished each other with what they found along the way, pointing out wildflowers and insects and listening for birdcalls. I cannot imagine they will forget those walks soon, the sun setting against the hill, dust in their shoes, being so easily together. And I wondered as I walked with them one night and was so grateful to just be, to be there, to be with these sweet kids, I wondered *why is such time so rare?* So expendable? It feels more fundamentally important than most of what I hurry to get done.

Boldness, I am finding, has new facets. One of them I found in the dust and quiet of a July filled with a whole lot of nothing.

Beauty, boldness and many more sweet, sweet nothings to us all. Amen.

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Footnotes

¹ John de Graaf, ed., *Take Back Your Time*, p. viii.

² *Ibid.*, p.40.

³ *New York Times*, 8/18/07, B1.