"The Poverty and Abundance of Time"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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This smartphone is one of my favorite and my most hated things that I own. While I value being accessible and better organized, I also struggle with the feeling of being tethered to my emails, to my calendar, and to the vast ocean of distraction that is the internet. Anyone else feel the same?

Last summer I began to collect articles about time, being too busy, and the value of rest. I saved them in a folder and penciled in a sermon about time at the start of the holiday season.

As calendars fill with events and gatherings, shopping and celebrating, now seemed like a good moment to remind ourselves of the need to take a break. Indeed, as studies show, naps, daydreaming, and other mental breaks often make us *more* productive by allowing for a kind of mental rest.

We live in an age and a culture that demands a lot from us and our brains. In an op-ed entitled, "Hit the Reset Button in Your Brain," Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, writes: "According to a 2011 study, on a typical day, we take in the equivalent of about 174 newspapers' worth of information, five times as much as we did in 1986. As the world's 21,274 television stations produce some 85,000 hours of original programming every day (by 2003 figures), we watch an average of five hours of television per day. For every hour of

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YouTube video you watch, there are 5,999 hours of new video just posted!"[1]

We simply cannot process all of this information. We must make choices about which information we will listen to, watch, read, or simply give our attention. In essence, we have all become curators of information charged with sorting through the piles of possibilities to assemble our own collections of ideas and information. Faced with such vast amounts of information, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and a bit exhausted. In response, we may want to either tune in to only a few sources of information (such as only NPR or only Fox News) or we may choose to simply tune out all together.

How do we live within such an information saturated society? How do we live when we always feel that we might be missing something—whether its some breaking news story, or the cool new show everyone is talking about, or a new study that finally has figured out what we should—or should not be—eating? How do we raise our children in such an information saturated society? What do they *need* to know to be able to live within such a world? What tools must they be able to use and what skills and abilities should we seek to cultivate within them? If you are a kid or teen growing up in such a world, how do you know what information really matters? How do you know what to trust when there is so many different points of view that so often conflict with each other?

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/opinion/sunday/hit-the-reset-button-in-your-brain.html?_r=1

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Now you're all looking at me waiting for the answers, right?!? What I can tell you is that I believe answering these questions requires more than time management techniques or other technical fixes. Rather, the capacity to orient oneself or your children through these floods of information and possibility requires a sense of direction, of purpose, of commitment.

When I worked at Wellesley College last spring, the Catholic chaplain, Sister Nancy Corcoran, included a short quote beneath her name in every email she wrote. It said: "to be over-extended is to be under-committed."

As someone who has frequently found herself feeling over-extended, this phrase really struck me. It challenged me to consider that I *cannot* do it all. It reminded me to make choices—to make *commitments*—to what matters most in my life. Or, to put it another way, knowing what I was committed to would enable me to be a better curator and editor of my choices.

Using another metaphor to express the same idea, Buddhist monk, *Than-i-ssa-ro Bhikkhu,* writes:

> "Look at your life in the same way you'd look through an attic, deciding what you're going to keep, what you're going to throw out. You're moving from a house with a large attic but you've got only a small trailer to make the move. Some things have got to get thrown out so that you have space in the trailer for the things that really mean a lot to you. In other words, there are things you've got to give up in order to have the time for the

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things that really make a difference, that really do give substantial results."

Such editorial work of choosing what stays and what goes is *not* easy to do, but it can help bring clarity about what really matters. And when there is so much to do and to know we have to learn how to make choices. We have to learn how to resist the narrative within our culture that being over-extended, being so very busy, is *normal.* Instead of being normal, the author of the reading today, Omid Safir, calls for us to see the disease of busyness. He writes:

> "This disease of being "busy" (and let's call it what it is, the dis-ease of being busy, when we are never at ease) is spiritually destructive to our health and wellbeing. It saps our ability to be fully present with those we love the most in our families, and keeps us from forming the kind of community that we all so desperately crave."

This dis-ease of being busy, of being overextended, is a problem—it's a *spiritual* problem.

But . . . there *is* so much to do!! Yes, there is *too* much to do. There are too many books to read, events to attend, items to be bought, cleaned, or repaired. There *is* too much to learn, to know, to be aware of in our world. There is too much and we will not ever know or experience it all. And that's okay. Trying to do, know, and manage it all *will* leave you exhausted and overwhelmed. I know...I've tried. There has to be another way. And I believe that there is.

It starts with a commitment to yourself and to those closest to you to remember you are a human *being* not a human doing. *Being*

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human calls us to ground our sense of worth in simply *being*—that each of us are persons of *inherent* worth and dignity—important simply by being. *Doing* more will not make us more important. The busiest person with the longest to-do list or most unanswered emails is not the most *valuable* person. This distinction between human *being* and human *doing* sounds clever and rather obvious, but its not so easy. We live in a culture that tells us that we *do* is what makes us valuable—that busier people *are* more "important." Given this context, it can be very hard to say no, to step back, or to limit the number of activities your kids do.

So why? Why *do* less? I believe the spiritual problem in doing too much is that we risk forgetting the breadth and depths of what being human means. Daydreaming, reflection, musing . . . these often happen in moments of "down-time." I think such moments of being are crucial for reminding us of how we are more than machines cranking out tasks on our to-do lists. We need to remember that we are capable of great love, of compassion, of righteous anger, and of creative inspiration. Such moments of being are what call us to long for and imagine a different world, a better world. When we're caught in the endless cycles of emails, to-do's, projects, and errands, we can too easily forget to dream. And when we forget to dream, we begin to accept the world the way it is, we lose hope in the possibility of change.

This past week was a tough week for many in our nation. The decision to not indict Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown has left many angry and tired of the persistent patterns of racial

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injustice in our country But, doesn't this event as well as the death last week of 12-year old Tamir Rice call us to do more not less?

Yes, I think it does. I think that as a predominantly white, generally affluent community we have a lot to do in learning how racial injustice continues to disempower so many and to ask how we might be a part of changing it.

But, will we do any of this? It's hard to imagine we will—or how we will—if we're so busy. In my own life, I had meetings on Tuesday evening that conflicted with the rally in Boston that I had hoped to attend.

So, what *will* I do? What *can* I do to respond in a meaningful way to Ferguson and the ongoing legacies of racial injustice? How can I also respond in a meaningful way to other pressing issues such as economic inequality or climate change?

I want to *do* something. And I don't want to be too busy to get involved. Sister Nancy's words echo in my head: to be over-extended is to be under-committed. I don't want to be so over-extended that I don't have the time to make the world a better place.

Today, it could have been so easy to simply preach a few platitudes about slowing down, not answering emails on weekends, and taking naps. All good things. But in light of Ferguson, I long for a deeper response to the dis-ease of being busy. Omid Safi suggests we start by asking each other, "How is the state of your heart today?"

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My heart hurts. It hurts for the mothers and fathers who have to teach their black sons to expect being stopped by police. It hurts for the police who must do their job on streets flooded with weapons of all kinds. It hurts for the legal system that seeks justice but is shaped by human failings and limits. It hurts for our society where the status quo includes repeated acts of gun violence, persistent racial imbalance in incarceration rates, and rising economic inequality.

And my heart is full of joy because I love *being* human, being alive. I love taking a deep breath in and out to simply connect anew with this gift of life. I love living in a place where driving to work means passing through farmland and beside the shimmering waters of Walden Pond. I love being a part of multiple families—here in Boston and farther away in Michigan. I love being a part of multiple communities—of scholars, of ministers, of Unitarian Universalists, and of the First Parish in Wayland. For such gifts I am enormously thankful.

By taking time to remember these gifts, this joy, I remember that life is important not because of *doing* but simply because of being. And so my heart hurts when I think of those whose desires to simply *be* alive are thwarted by the anxieties of poverty, by the fear of violence, or by the uncertainty of global weather.

Love for life, respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person....these are *commitments* that can help to orient one's life. They are commitments that can help us edit and curate the flow of unending information as we seek to live in this information saturated world.

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To what are you committed? What matters? What *really* matters in your life? As a kid, I remember a minister holding up his checkbook and asking the congregation to audit how they spent their money as a sign of their values.

How about *this* smartphone? If you were to audit your emails, your web searches, your use of social media, and your calendar, what would it say about your values, about what really matters to you?

What are we all busy doing? Does all that busyness reflect what really matters? Does it bring us closer to *being* human, closer to the human community that we so desperately crave?

When we find ourselves face to face with the dis-ease of busyness, in ourselves or in another, let us try to remember Omid Safi's words and to say in response: "Yes, I know love. We all are. But I want to know how your heart is doing."

May we all find ways to resist this dis-ease of busyness as we seek to listen to our own heart and the hearts of others—making the time to simply be as we dream about paths to a better world.

May it be so.

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