"Doing Nothing"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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I am a fan of doing nothing—are you? A recent *New York Times* article by Olga Mecking extolled the virtues of doing nothing—or, as the Dutch call it, niksen. For example, the research of psychologist Sandi Mann suggests that simply kicking back to daydream "literally makes us more creative, better at problem-solving, better at coming up with creative ideas." And researcher, Chris Bailey suggests noticing when we're most productive and when our energy starts to drag. Then, during those downturns, intentionally take a break, go for a walk, do nothing.

Doing nothing can be an intentional resistance to a culture of busyness. Mecking suggests finding opportunities to be idle, like when waiting in line at the store or for our kids. Emphasizing the conscious intention of doing nothing, she writes:

> If you're doing nothing, own it. When someone asks you what you're doing during a nothing break, simply respond, "Nothing." Be unapologetic about taking breaks or holidays, and if you start to feel guilty about being seen as lazy, think of niksen not as a sign of laziness but as an important life skill. Choose the initial discomfort of niksen over the familiarity of busyness.

Doing nothing, niksen, may take practice . . . to many of us, it is an unfamiliar state.

And yet, the call to a simpler, less cluttered state of being is not a new idea. I was reminded of this on Friday when I led a tour of Walden Pond for the youth group of Rev. Sam Teitel, our former Outreach and Youth Coordinator. Thoreau famously called for us to "simplify, simplify, simplify." Wasn't this why he went to live in the woods of Walden? As you heard read earlier, Thoreau explained:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

For me, facing only "the essential facts of life," is what draws me to camping. In the back of my car, I toss only what is essential to life: a shelter, a bed of sorts, a chair, some clothes, a means to cook, and some food and water. Well, ok, I also include bug spray, a flashlight, some toiletries, books, a journal, and my phone. Compared to the many comforts of my

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house, it is life pared down to the basics. The to-do list of housework, maintenance, or various projects that surround me at home are absent. Camping is simpler.

And yet, there is that smartphone tempting me to set aside the books, to ignore the campfire, and to just slide into the digital world. "Do I have any emails? Texts?" "Is anything important happening in the news?" "Did someone post on Facebook? Instagram?" "Oh, maybe I should buy that book someone recommended to me?!" And an hour is gone. And another.

I know I am not alone in my struggle with this device or any other number of screens that pull us quickly into the digital world. It is our era. But, must it be? Are our smartphones and digital devices part of the *essential* facts of life?

In rereading the passage from *Walden Pond* with the familiar quote about "living deliberately," I was struck by the preceding paragraph read earlier. Thoreau counsels: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep." Notably, the first clock with an adjustable alarm time was patented in France in 1847—the year Thoreau left Walden. Rather, the mechanical aid he would have known is the clock that chimed the hour or the factory bell marking time. Of course, he is really talking about a lot more than how we wake up in the morning.

Thoreau lived as the Industrial Age transformed his world. During his lifetime, the sleepy town of Concord, where he was born and where he died, transformed from an agricultural village to a larger town and trading center. As he lived at Walden, he watched the train to Concord be built . . . the same path that carries the Commuter Rail today. In challenging his reader to wake to the dawn instead of a mechanical aid, he was calling us to live by the rhythms of nature rather than the signals of technology.

Thoreau does not want us to be passive cogs in the machine of industrial society, but to be persons capable of living awake and intentionally responsive to the world. Thoreau want us to not only move in response to the mechanical markers of time, but to be spiritually awake to who we are as natural beings and moral creatures able to live with purpose and intention. To be persons capable or shaping our world rather than simply responding to the mechanical cues telling us what to do. If we substitute "digital" for "mechanical," I think this has a lot to say to us today

In the book, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World,* computer scientist Cal Newport draws on the wisdom of *Walden* to help chart a course in a digital

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age. Newport points to Thoreau's careful attention to measuring his costs of living at Walden Pond against the amount of time Thoreau needs to work to pay those costs. Newport emphasizes that Thoreau's concern is not with the volume of money he must expend, but rather the amount of *time* he must give to meet those expenses. Newport writes,

> " [Thoreau] asks us to treat the minutes of our life as a concrete and valuable substance—arguably the most valuable substance we possess—and to always reckon with how much of this life we trade for the various activities we allow to claim our time. When we confront our habits through this perspective, we will reach the same conclusion now that Thoreau did in his era: more often than not, the cumulative cost of the noncrucial things we clutter our lives with can far outweigh the small benefits each individual piece of clutter promises." (p.43)

What is the cost of our digital usage on our life? Have we calculated the balance of benefit and cost? Newport wants us to be deliberate in our digital use. Rather than suggesting we abandon digital devices, he advocates a philosophy of *digital minimalism* which he defines as:

> "A philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else." (p.28)

Newport does not want us to fall backwards into our technology use. He wants us to consider what do *we* want from technology? How might we craft *intentional* and *deliberate* relationships to our devices and our screens? How might we resist living only by the rhythm of mechanical aids and digital beeps?

This is where I think "doing nothing" can help. When we do nothing, we are stepping out of the frameworks of mechanical and digital life. We confront our basic humanity of simply being a person, a human animal, breathing in and out. We are not only "unplugged"; we are reconnecting with a sense of who we are as someone who just *is.* And, lest we forget to be aware, the gift of being, of breathing, of living is rather wondrous.

In this way, deliberately doing nothing is in fact doing something rather important. Like the restorative impacts of sleep on our minds and bodies, doing nothing can be a practice of renewing our sense of self and connection to the world. Doing nothing reminds us that we exist as a person that can be deliberate about how to interact with the world. Our time and our attention are valuable—are we being intentional about how we use them? Or, is there clutter in the field of our awareness, distracting us from what we value most?

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To give you a concrete example from my life, I have been intentionally unsubscribing from all manner of email lists. Checking my email had become an exercise in deleting unwanted emails from stores, political candidates, and non-profit groups. Unsubscribing from these emails does not mean I will not shop, vote, or support social causes. But it does mean that I control when and how I shop, get political information, or engage in social issues. This is digital minimalism. I am not eschewing email, but I am choosing to use it as a vital way to connect with people like you rather than corporations or organizations seeking my dollars. In this way, I have controlled a bit of what crosses the field of my awareness and retrieved some precious minutes. Minutes that I may choose to use doing nothing.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge that some folks have enormous demands on their time. For some, three jobs are what it takes to pay the basic bills of food and shelter. And for others, caretaking or crises absorb so much of one's time. But I wonder if there are not even then moments when one can practice "doing nothing"—moments where one can be reminded that they exist as a person . . . not just as a worker or a caregiver. Moments to simply take a breath, notice something of beauty, and, perhaps, even daydream a bit.

And, I also want to acknowledge that some folks do have lots of times in their lives "doing nothing." Admittedly, this is farther from my own experience. But I wonder, what happens when one frames "doing nothing" as an intentional activity of simply being human? Does it change the quality of one's time if it is released from the need of having a "productive" activity? Or, does anything change if one thinks of oneself as following in the footsteps of Thoreau sitting beside Walden Pond noticing a bug, a bit of light, the changes of the season? If you have thoughts, I would love to learn from you.

However busy our days may or may not be, each of our days are indeed a precious gift. There are so many potential demands on our time and on our attention. As we consider how and where to focus our attention, my hope is that we will also spend some time unfocused and "doing nothing." Perhaps in these moments, we might just remember the simple gift *that* we are.

So may it be.
Amen.

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