

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

Andrew C. Kennedy Sermon Subscription Series

VOLUME IV, NUMBER 9

JUNE, 2002

**“HOW ABOUT NEVER?
DOES NEVER
WORK FOR YOU?”**

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

1342 North Astor Street • Milwaukee WI 53202

Telephone: 414 273-5257 • Fax: 414 273-5254

E-mail (for information about series): fusm@execpc.com

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy:

Drew_Kennedy@execpc.com

©Andrew C. Kennedy

Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.execpc.com/uumilw

SILENCE FOR REFLECTION

This morning I want to invite you to join me in reflecting together on the busyness that characterizes many, if not most, of our lives. Further, I invite you to reflect on how this busyness may affect us spiritually, and, finally, what we might do about it.

So, at this time, let me invite you to go to a quiet place within in order to briefly assess how you are doing in managing the busyness of your life. . . .

READINGS

I have two Readings for your consideration this morning. But, first, let me explain my title for today. It comes from a cartoon. A man is standing with his calendar in his hand talking on the telephone. "No," he says, "Thursday is out. No, Friday won't work either. Nope, Sunday won't work. How about never? Does never work for you?"

Okay, our first Reading was written by Thomas Merton, a celebrated Trappist monk who died in 1968. Amazingly, Merton wrote this sometime in the 1950s.

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence...[and that is] activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.¹

Our second Reading is a poem called "Camas Lilies" by Lynn Ungar, a published poet and Unitarian Universalist minister.

Both of these Readings, incidentally, are found in a lovely little book, which I recommend, called *Sabbath*, by Wayne Muller, which is out in paperback and is subtitled "Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives."

CAMAS LILIES²

*Consider the lilies of the field,
the blue banks of camas opening
into acres of sky along the road.*

¹ Merton, Thomas, as cited by Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), p. 3.

² Muller, op. cit., p. 192.

Would the longing to lie down
and be washed by that beauty
abate if you knew their usefulness,
how the natives ground their bulbs
for flour, how the settlers' hogs
uprooted them, grunting in gleeful
oblivion as the flowers fell?

And you - what of your rushed and
useful life? Imagine setting it all down -
papers, plans, appointments, everything -
leaving only a note: "Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through with blooming."

Even now, unneeded and uneaten,
the camas lilies gaze out above the grass
from their tender blue eyes.
Even in sleep your life will shine.
Make no mistake. Of course
your work will always matter.
*Yet Solomon in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.*

HOW'S NEVER? IS NEVER A GOOD TIME FOR YOU?

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine overslept one morning in November of 1994. For this high-profile achiever in the midst of a million-dollar-a-day fund-raising campaign, it was cause for alarm. As Wayne Muller explains in his book *Sabbath*:

After years of intensive, nonstop toil and struggle in an atmosphere that rewarded frantic busyness and overwork, and having been assaulted by a hail of never-finished tasks, President Rudenstine collapsed. "My sense was that I was exhausted," Rudenstine told reporters [when it eventually hit the newspapers].

Rudenstine's doctor agreed, so he took a break in order to regain his equilibrium. And then went back at it.

Indeed, from University presidents with tasteful, well-appointed homes on the hill to the so-called "working poor," who are juggling two jobs with no car and inadequate day care, *everyone*, it seems, is busy.

Just as Thomas Merton identified busyness as a problem in the 1950s, the Jungian analyst and author James Hillman, even before the explosion of the Internet, cell phones, and email, painted the following frenetic picture of modern life. In an interview he said, "Look,"

a great deal of our lives are manic. I can watch 34 channels of TV; I can get on the fax and communicate with people anywhere; I can be everywhere at once; I can fly across the country; I've got call waiting so that I can make two calls at once. I live everywhere and no where. But I don't know who lives next door to me. Who's in the next flat? Who's in 14-B? I don't know who they are, but boy, I'm on the phone, car phone, toilet phone, plane phone; my mistress is in Chicago; the other woman I'm with is in D.C.; my ex-wife is in Phoenix; my mother in Hawaii; and I have four children living all over the country. I have faxes coming in day and night, I can plug into all the world's stock prices, commodity exchanges; I am everywhere, man - but I don't know who is in 14-B.³

What is sometimes called the "hurry sickness" has even infected our young. For example, I read in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* this week -- probably many of you saw it as well -- that the Girl Scouts now have a "stress less" badge they can earn, and that children as young as six-years-old are now getting their own "daily planner" calendars.

A cartoon of two little girls in conversation while waiting for the school bus is closer to truth than fiction. They stand there with their "daily planners" in hand. One says to the other: "OK, I'll move ballet back an hour, reschedule gymnastics, and cancel piano...you shift your violin lesson to Thursday and skip soccer practice...that will give us from 3:15 to 3:45 on Wednesday the sixteenth to play."⁴

Meanwhile, the Information Age spews forth its information in quantities that threaten to overwhelm us. We try to keep up, but as one observer puts it, "We're awash in a sea of information, and the tide is ris

³ Hillman, James, as cited by Sewell, Marilyn, "Beyond Therapy: Healing the Soul," in *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays 1998* (Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, 1998), p. 15.

⁴ Gilbert, Richard S., "Is Faster Better? A Theology of Pace," First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY., Sermon Subscription Series, Vol XI, No 2, p. 3, citing *Democrat and Chronicle*, 9/24/99, p. 10A.

ing.” Information is everywhere, but there is little time to think, to sift, to evaluate, let alone to muse over the data. Indeed, the total amount of unique information generated worldwide each year, measured in bytes of computer space, is said to be about 1.5 exabytes. How big is an exabyte? Well, one exabyte of information is a one followed by 18 zeros of information. How much information is that? Well, stored on floppy disks, this amount of information would be a stack of floppies 2 million miles high! Or, looked at another way, divided among all the people on earth, this amount of information – the amount of unique information generated worldwide each year -- would be the equivalent of a library of 250 books (or roughly 250 megabytes of data) per person.⁵ Worldwide. Every year.

Another measure of the current information explosion is an estimate given that today’s scientific knowledge is doubling every six years.

I am reminded, however, of what T. S Eliot said many years ago when he asked: “Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?”⁶

II

“Speed kills,” as the saying goes. And many of us, myself included – and, believe me, I am preaching to myself this morning! -- many of us are too often going 80 miles-per-hour in 55 mile-an-hour zones. We may have been lucky so far, but deep down we know that if we keep it up, sooner or later, we will get pulled over. Only in this case, as one of my colleagues notes, the fines levied are spiritual, not monetary.⁷ Or worse, instead of being fined, we’ll crash – like Harvard president Neil Rudenstine. Or worse yet, we’ll have a heart attack or some such calamity.

Indeed, as spiritual author David Steindl-Rast tells us, the Chinese pictograph for the word “busy” is composed of two characters: “heart” and “killing.”⁸

So, I am just reminding us of what we already know here: that we are busy – both adults and children, at work and at home, and that there are costs associated with our chronic busyness. All kinds of costs.

III

Being chronically busy and rushing around may be reaching some sort of apogee in our culture right now, but it is actually an old problem. The importance of regularly stopping work to rest, to relax, to light candles and sing songs, to tell stories and take naps, to lie fallow and have a chance to listen for the “still, small voice” within and, thus, to restore our souls, is an ancient concern. It is, and long has been, so important, in fact, that it made it into the Ten Commandments thousands of years ago along with not killing or stealing. Commandment Number Four: “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.”

Speaking of the ancients, let me tell you a relevant Bible story. It is truly one of the masterpieces of dramatic narrative in the Old Testament. It is in I Kings. It is about Elijah.⁹

⁵ Gilbert, Richard S., “The Age of Overwhelming,” First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY., Sermon Subscription Series, Vol XII, No 12, p. 4, citing Weise, Elizabeth, *Democrat and Chronicle*, 10/25/00, p. 1C.

⁶ Gilbert, “The Age of Overwhelming,” op. cit., p. 5, with apologies to Eliot for reversing the order of his two sentences quoted.

⁷ Gilbert, “Is Faster Better?” op. cit., p. 2.

⁸ Muller, op. cit., p. 3.

⁹ I am indebted to my colleague Gary Smith for inspiring me to look up the stories of Elijah and to apply them to our chronically busy lifestyles. See Smith, Gary, “The Still, Small Voice of Calm,” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Convocation, Birmingham, Alabama, March 2002, unpublished paper.

Elijah lived over 800 years before Jesus was born. Now, we have to understand that the stories of Elijah were not told with an eye towards well-documented factual information such as historians might seek to do today. Rather, the stories of Elijah are colorful, faith-filled, and somewhat imaginative stories that were remembered, told and retold for generations before being written down.

Elijah was a powerful Hebrew prophet, a fierce and uncompromising champion of Yahweh, the monotheistic God of Israel.

It was a time of crisis for the Israelites. For political reasons, King Ahab had married a woman named Jezebel, who was a fanatical evangelist for Baal, the storm god of the Canaanite nature religion. The Hebrew prophets, who were equally fanatical, were being killed. The altars of Yahweh were being torn down. The Israelites increasingly were deserting Yahweh and worshipping Baal.

Then, out of nowhere, Elijah comes catapulting onto this scene from across the Jordan River, where he had lived a rough, semi-nomadic life on the edge of the desert. He is a strange sight in the cultured land of Israel. He is clothed in a garment of hair, wearing a leather girdle, and displaying his rugged strength.¹⁰

Right away, Elijah had a way of surprising people. He would disappear and then suddenly show up again. Obadiah, the king's servant, insisted that the spirit of Yahweh must be whisking the wily prophet around to and from who-knows-where.¹¹

Elijah's first act is to boldly declare a drought in the name of Yahweh to punish the Israelites for their wanton idolatry. Remembering that Baal is the god of storms, as well as the weather and other related phenomena, Elijah, in declaring a drought, is also clearly challenging Baal. As the drought continues and the tension mounts, Elijah is forced to go underground to hide from his persecutors.

Finally, after three years of drought, Elijah is desperate. He is losing the fight and is now apparently the only prophet left. The people of Israel have abandoned Yahweh in droves.

In his desperation, Elijah proposes a contest. He declares that it is Yahweh, not Baal, who controls the sky and the weather, so let us definitively find out, once and for all, who is the greatest. He, thus, challenges the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah (Baal's consort) to a contest. The contest shall be on the high and holy promontory of Mount Carmel, which juts out from Israel into the Mediterranean Sea (by the modern day city of Haifa). Elijah declares, "If Yahweh is God, then follow him; but if Baal, then follow Baal."

The contest Elijah proposes is this. The prophets of Baal shall prepare a fatted calf, kill it, dress it, and lay it on the sacrificial altar, but not light it. Elijah, all by himself, will do the same with a second calf. Then the prophets of Baal and the prophet of Yahweh shall each pray and perform their respective rites, and the God who answers with fire will clearly be the true God, the God who can end the drought. With royal backing from King Ahab, both parties agree to the contest.

So, the prophets of Baal go first and they pull out all of the stops. They pray and dance around the altar all morning long, shouting and crying and even lashing themselves with knives into an ecstatic frenzy.

¹⁰ This description is taken mostly from Anderson, Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc), p. 251. In addition to I & II Kings in the Bible, I will be drawing from many sources for the stories and information about Elijah. Other helpful secondary sources include: Alter, Robert and Kermode, Frank (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University); Trawick, Buckner B., *The Bible as Literature* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books); Metzger, Bruce M., and Coogan, Michael D. (eds), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mays, James L., (ed.), *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row); Achtemeier, Paul J. (ed.), *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row); and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press).

¹¹ I Kings 18:12.

Elijah, serenely confident, gives them all the time they need. As time goes on, he laughs at the prophets and pokes fun at them, suggesting that perhaps the reason Baal does not answer their prayers is because he is asleep, or perhaps because he is away on a business trip, or perhaps because he is off relieving himself.¹²

(Incidentally, in case you are wondering, I swear, I am not making this up! It's all in I Kings.)

After many hours, it is finally Elijah's turn. All eyes are now on him. He is all alone. It is up to him – and Yahweh. Curiously, he pours water over the wood, soaking it, says his prayers, and then, sure enough, Elijah's wood explodes into flames!" Yahweh wins the contest, the people are impressed, a few verses later the drought ends, and the prophets of Baal are all slaughtered -- which is what did in those days.

Now, you might think that Elijah would be a hero, but all of Jezebel's prophets have been killed, so she now wants Elijah's head on a platter. Once again, Elijah runs for his life.

At this point, Elijah is a wreck. Even in victory, he is defeated. He is stressed out. He's alone. He's being hunted. He's got to wonder just where all of this is headed. He definitely needs a day off.¹³

So, he goes off a day's journey, beyond Beer-sheba into the desert wilderness. He collapses under a lonely juniper tree and asks to die. He's had it. He is sick at heart and despairing. After all, what good had winning the contest done? And then he falls asleep.

After a while, an angel wakes him up and invites him to eat some cake and drink some water from a jar which he finds by his head. He does so and goes back to sleep. The angel comes and wakes him up again, and again he eats more cake and has more water. On the strength of this, Elijah then travels for forty days and forty nights until he reaches Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai, which, of course, is where Moses saw the burning bush and received the ten commandments). At Mt. Horeb he comes to a cave and spends the night there.

Then Elijah has another dream. This time God himself comes to Elijah and asks, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Elijah pours his heart out -- tells God the whole story. Then God tells Elijah to go to the mouth of the cave that God might pass by. Elijah does so.

Now, at this point, there is a great wind, a wind so strong that it splits mountains and breaks rocks into pieces, but Elijah does not see God in the wind. And after the wind, there is a jarring earthquake, but Elijah does not see God in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, there was a tremendous fire, but Elijah does not see god in the fire.

Now we are at the climax of the story. Remember, now, God had clearly defeated Baal, the great storm god, at the contest at Mount Carmel. And yet, here we are at Mt. Sinai -- the Mount of God, as it was known -- and Elijah does not see God -- as we might expect or at least as people in those times would have expected -- in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire! So where is God?

The next verse very simply tells us the answer. After the fire: "there was a still, small voice." That's all it says. *This* is the voice of God, of Yahweh. Some scholars translate it as "a sound of sheer silence,"¹⁴ others as "a voice of a gentle stillness,"¹⁵ still others as a "slight whispering sound."¹⁶

¹² Anderson, op. cit., p. 252, explains that "gone aside" is a euphemism for relieving oneself.

¹³ I am indebted here to Smith, op. cit.

¹⁴ *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), I Kings 19:12, p. 551.

¹⁵ Anderson, op.cit., p. 254.

¹⁶ Mays, James L., op. cit., p. 320.

Whatever the translation, we have a huge theological shift taking place here -- one of the biggest in Western theological history. Yahweh (or the Biblical narrator) seems to be saying, "Hey, let's not do any more of these fire tricks or contests. Let's not look at Yahweh as a nature god anymore. Let's look for God -- and the wisdom she brings -- in the silence, in the still, small voice within."

IV

Elijah's story is our story in a lot of ways despite the vast differences of time and culture. We rush around. We get stressed out. We get overworked, burned out, under-appreciated. We get tired, isolated, at the end of our rope sometimes.

That is when, like Elijah, we need to head for some form of wilderness. We need to rest, to dream, to eat and drink, to wander, to dream some more, and to take the time to listen for "the still, small voice" within.

Just like Elijah.