

“Keeping Our Balance”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Libby Smith

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

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Readings:

From the Tao te Ching, translated by Stephen Mitchell:

In the pursuit of knowledge,
every day something is added.
In the practice of the Tao,
every day something is dropped.
Less and less do you need to force things,
until finally you arrive at non-action.
When nothing is done,
nothing is left undone.

True mastery can be gained
by letting things go their own way.
It can't be gained by interfering.

From In Praise of Slowness by Carl Honore':

The problem is that our love of speed, our obsession with doing more and more in less and less time, has gone too far; it has turned into an addiction, a kind of idolatry. Even when speed starts to backfire, we invoke the go-faster gospel. Falling behind at work? Get a quicker Internet connection. No time for that novel you got at Christmas? Learn to speed-read. Diet not working? Try liposuction. Too busy to cook? Buy a microwave. And yet some things cannot, should not, be sped up. They take time, they need slowness. When you accelerate things that should not be accelerated, when you forget how to slow down, there is a price to pay.

Sermon:

I read a story somewhere, told by a man named Bruce Chatwin. It's a story about a white explorer in Africa, who had hired native porters for his journey. The explorer was anxious to hurry ahead, and he paid the porters extra money for a series of forced marches, trying to cover ground as quickly as possible. But when they were almost within reach of their destination, the porters set down their bundles and refused to budge. No amount of extra payment could convince them to go on. They said simply that they had to wait for their souls to catch up.

I think more and more of us are feeling that way these days – as if we are running so fast that we are leaving our souls behind. Gandhi had it right when he said that there is more to life than increasing its speed. But we live in a culture that is obsessed with speed, with doing everything in the quickest way possible. Originally, of course, that was supposed to lead to more leisure time. Remember that theory? Modern technology was going to make us so efficient that we would all go to a four-day work week and have more time for our hobbies, our families, our selves.

But instead, somehow, we simply raised all the expectations as we raised the efficiency, and now people work longer hours than ever. In Japan they actually have a word, *karoshi*, which means “death by overwork.” In 2001, the government of Japan actually reported 143 deaths from *karoshi*. Critics of Japanese culture say that number is really in the thousands.

It's not only Japan. We live in a culture that is addicted to overdoing. So many people, already feeling pushed to the limit, now feel pressured to do even more. Multitasking has become the ultimate virtue. We conduct our business calls while we're navigating heavy traffic and drinking our coffee. We take our laptops and blackberries to the beach. One of my closest friends was given a blackberry by her boss, for the sole purpose of keeping up with her work email on her days off. Excuse me?

Of course I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. And for many of us, diagnosing the problem is easy – finding the cure is much harder. So I want to share some thoughts this morning, some my own, and some gratefully borrowed from a book I discovered about a month ago called In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed, by a journalist named Carl Honore', a self declared “rehabilitated speedaholic.”

Honore' first noticed his need to slow down when he was standing in line at the airport, during one of his many work-related trips. A dedicated multitasker, he felt frustrated by just waiting and being unable to be productive, so he began skimming a newspaper and he spotted an article about The One-Minute Bedtime Story. As he describes it, “To help parents deal with time-consuming tots,

various authors have condensed classic fairy tales into sixty-second sound bits. Think Hans Christian Andersen meets the executive summary.”

At first Honore’ was thrilled at the thought. Apparently he was always in a battle with his young son at bedtime, feeling rushed, wanting to hurry through the bedtime ritual and get on to other things, like his email and the work he had brought home. His son, though, wanted story after story. So this struck him as the perfect solution. Five whole stories in five minutes, then back to the computer!

But then, as he describes it in the book, “as I begin to wonder how quickly Amazon can ship me the full set, redemption comes in the share of a counter-question: Have I gone completely insane? As the departure line-up snakes toward the final ticket check, I put away the newspaper and begin to think. My whole life has turned into an exercise in hurry, in packing more and more into every hour. I am Scrooge with a stop-watch, obsessed with saving every last scrap of time. And I am not alone. Everyone around me – colleagues, friends, family – is caught in the same vortex.” (p. 3)

And so began his journey to slow down and live more intentionally, and to explore a vague but growing philosophy loosely labeled the Slow Movement. (Of course, I have to point out that as a journalist, he was also mining good material for a book at the same time! And now he rushes all over the world, teaching people how to slow down. He calls himself a victim of his own success.)

Honore’ argues that our love of speed has become an addiction. We have come to expect immediate results in just about everything. He cites a time management book that had a chapter titled “Do Everything Faster!” He, and other proponents of the Slow Movement, argue against this cultural trend. They argue that life is less satisfying and that we are less happy, and even less healthy, as a result of this addiction to speed.

On the other hand, trying to live Slow (with a capital S, in case you can’t hear it) doesn’t mean giving up speed in all contexts. The philosophy of Slow has more to do with the choices we make, and whether they enhance our lives or detract from them. Sometimes speed is a great gift – taking a jet to California instead of a train might allow us to attend a family gathering we’d otherwise have to miss. Most of us would not choose to give up the convenience of email and the ability to communicate so quickly. I certainly am glad I can call my mom to see how she’s doing, instead of having to write and then wait for a reply.

There are plenty of ways that speed and technology enhance our life. But the fact that we can do something faster doesn’t always mean that we should. And when we forget how to slow down, we pay a price.

So living Slow means taking charge of the tempo of our lives, choosing when speed is useful to us, and when we're better off slowing down. Take multi-tasking, for example. Sometimes, the fact that I can read and think on the train ride into Philadelphia means that I can go into the city with John for a concert and also work ahead on the sermon, which allows me to feel less anxious about the work ahead, and more able to enjoy the outing. But other times, trying to squeeze one activity inside another means that I enjoy neither. If I tried to read and take notes during intermission at the concert, for example, it would detract from my ability to stay with the musical experience and enjoy it. And that's not worth the extra preparation time it buys me. It's a matter of balance.

Most of us are painfully familiar with the reality of the old adage "haste makes waste." Often, when we do things too quickly, the time it takes to repair our errors is longer than the time it would have taken to work more deliberately. It's more than just physical errors – any carpenter knows you should measure twice so you only have to cut once. But think about emails sent too quickly, without proper thought, and the time it can take to repair the misunderstandings or hurt that result. Going Slow can ultimately lead to faster, more efficient results.

Slower living can also allow us to feel more connected. Honore' writes: "The great benefit of Slowing down is reclaiming the time and tranquility to make meaningful connections – with people, with culture, with work, with nature, with our own bodies and minds."

I think about when I take the time to walk down to the bank and do my business in person. It takes so little time, but it provides a nice walk, and always a friendly chat with my favorite bank lady. A nice way to start the day.

So often we can go through much of our day with out having to talk to another person. I buy my gas at the pump. I get my money from a machine. I self-check my groceries. I can effectively go through the business of life without ever having to interact with others.

I feel so sad when I see two people having a nice dinner together, but each of them is on his or her cell phone talking to someone else. Can't they turn off the ringer for one meal, I wonder? What are they afraid they'll miss? Obviously, there may be times when we need to be accessible. But most of us aren't so important that we need to be accessible all the time, and it does us harm if we never turn off from technology and communication. In our need to stay connected, we miss the chance to deepen the connection to the person we're actually with.

Slow and Fast can be applied to the ways we think as well. We spend a lot of our lives having to think quickly, work quickly, be productive. When we're thinking Fast, we're using the rational, linear part of our minds. It's quick, productive, results-oriented. Slow Thinking, on the other hand, is less focused,

more intuitive, and often more creative. It's what happens when we let our minds wander. It can lead us to places that Fast Thinking will never take us.

Scans of the brain show that the two different kinds of thought produce different kinds of brain waves. It's not that one is better than the other. They serve different purposes, and if we get so hooked on Fast thinking that we assume it's always the best way, we won't ultimately do our best thinking. I've learned, when writing a sermon, that if I get stuck, it will NOT help to sit at my desk and read more, think harder. It usually does help to go do something completely different, take a break and allow my mind to come at the topic in a new way.

Back when I was a smoker, a cigarette break was the answer. It forced me to go outside, sit quietly, and do nothing for five minutes. Invariably I would come back in with the ideas flowing again. Only now do I understand what was really going on. My craving for a cigarette was my way of taking a break. Since I didn't think it was a good thing to take a break, I had to use an addiction to give me an excuse. (Of course, the stimulant effect of the nicotine may have been a factor too.)

When I quit smoking, sermon writing got much harder. I've had to learn how to give myself permission to take different kinds of Slow breaks. If I can't feel OK about just gazing out the window, I'll do something useful but free of thinking, like unloading the dishwasher, or weeding part of the garden. Anything to Slow my mind and allow it to focus in a new way. We have to relax enough to be able to access that Slow thinking. It simply can't emerge when we're caught up in the whirlwind. The Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstien called one of her books Don't Just Do Something; Sit There! But it's not always easy to give ourselves permission to "just sit there."

My cat, Jack, consistently slows me down. He has a way of jumping on to my lap just when I'm about to get up and get busy. And because I enjoy sitting with a cat on my lap, I put off getting up for ten minutes and just sit there. He purrs, I pat. I don't think about anything in particular. I just sit there and listen to him purr. When I do get up to get to work, I'm calmer, more relaxed, and better able to focus myself.

Jack slows me down in another way, too. Jack will not jump up onto my lap when I ask him to. I can invite him. I can look at him and make all the "here kitty" noises in the world. He registers the invitation, but he takes his own sweet time about leaping up, and nothing I do will hurry him. Even though it's obvious that he's eventually going to jump, if I pick him up and put him on my lap, he hops down and walks away, only to come back when he's ready.

It sounds pretty silly. But it's a very important reminder that some things cannot be rushed, but must be waited for. And there can be pleasure in the anticipation.

In our world of instant gratification, it's good to re-learn the satisfaction of looking forward to something.

Slowing down, living Slow, isn't necessarily about doing less, although it often turns out that way. It's about living more intentionally, putting more energy into the things that bring joy and less into the things that bring anxiety. Most of us don't have a lot of control over these things, but claiming even small victories can make a big difference. It could be adding something – take five minutes with the cat purring on your lap, or take a walk around the block. Or it could be letting go of something -- pick one thing in your busy life that you really don't want to do, and just don't do it. Even if you only eliminate one thing, allow that choice to feel freeing. Let it free you to use that time to do something you love. Or to do nothing at all.

The International Institute of Not Doing Much (IINDM) has as their motto “Do less, slowly.” Their wonderful, tongue-in-cheek website can be found at slowdownnow.org. They're the ones who coined the phrase ‘multi-tasking is a moral weakness.’ Think about it, and see if your life needs to slow down.