

The Summer Day- Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life

Sermon: A Time to Knead, a Place to Breathe

About eight years ago I began to get the oddest craving. I became obsessed with baking bread. Staring out of the window at work I would fantasize about yeasty, wheaty bread, with sunflower seeds browning on the top. Round loaves of stinky sourdough rising in the oven. Forming 3 long strips of rich eggy dough and twisting them gently into a Challah braid. Making bread, from scratch. Flour on my hands, kneading pillow dough into smooth rounds.

Now I am not the bread-making type. I am the active type, I want to hike and run and climb, not sit and wait for bread to rise. But bread making called to me, it called to me so persistently, and so I checked out some library books on baking and I learned to make wheat bread. My initial loaves weighed about a hundred pounds each and were nearly inedible-burnt

on the outside, undercooked mush inside. I broke the first loaf into small pieces- a humble communion offering- and scattered it in the yard for the birds to eat, but even they wouldn't touch it. However at the end of a day of baking, standing in my oven-warmed kitchen with a mug of tea, I felt great. Awake. Reinvigorated. And I started the week so happy and focused. My work was better, I was more creative. I was much more patient.

But why? Is home-baked bread the secret to happiness? No, of course not. But listening to our hearts & slowing down might be. You see, at that time in my life I was working hard all day in an office, and then going to a theater to direct plays right after work. I ate dinner in the car, I spent weekends at my UU church and volunteering with the social action committee- I never stopped. And I was tired all the time. So on my new bread baking days I would come home from church and mix together my ingredients, knead the soft loaves, and then sit. For the first time all week just sit. Because the bread had to rise. And even when my loaves became edible it wasn't about the bread- the wheat with sunflower seeds and the stinky sourdough and the braided challah. I wanted to bake because I needed rest. And in the hours while the loaves rose I rested, I listened to music and read books, I picked out chords on my guitar, I watched squirrels and traffic.

Most importantly I thought about my life, and my pace, and my future. Was this what I wanted? What was most important to me? How could I match those values to a career? I realized my life was racing by with little intentionality- I got through the days with little thought toward meaning or purpose. I missed the passing of the seasons, would I miss the passing of years? At my pace would I one day look up and realize that it was time to die, with no thought ever having been given to how I wanted to live?

It was during these cozy, restful baking days that I realized that I wanted to be a minister. And while I rarely bake anymore I still set aside one day of the week, Saturday, to be restful. My Sabbath. My day for recreation- re-creation-literally, to re-create myself. A day to take stock and rise above the minutia and dream big. A day to notice the seasons passing and the years passing. A Sabbath day for reinvigoration.

I am making this sound terribly easy, aren't I? Just take the day off, and rest. But it wasn't easy, not at all. For years I had to make my Sabbath look like work, by disguising it as a baking day. The day I had to bake bread for the week. It is just recently that I have come out of the closet as a lover of rest. And often I fall off the wagon- I work "just this once", I give in to a world that presses me to keep going- but now that I know the power that rest has to lift me up out of chaos of unimportant busyness, the power rest has to re-bind me to what is most important- a time of rest seems as essential as breathing in and then out.

Because isn't it an impossible-sounding proposition? Taking time off? When busyness is now something we gloat about- "oh, I'm so busy," business is next to Godliness. It is like sloth jumped to number one on the list of deadly sins. If we aren't busy we aren't important. If we aren't busy we won't get ahead. But what is the purpose of all this busyness if we don't know why we are rushing?

Imagine if you were wandering in a desert frantically looking for some undefined thing. You have no map, no GPS. But the thing you need, it is right in front of you, there are neon arrows pointing at it, there is a spotlight shining on it. In all your hurry will you pass it by?

When we rush around trying to accomplish *something* without taking into account what is important to accomplish, what is worthy of our time, we risk wasting our time and energy on

things that don't matter. The danger is that we might spend our lives working toward goals that don't matter. Perhaps an evening of rest, an afternoon, even an hour of rest and reflection once a week would give us new purpose and direction.

When I had the irresistible urge to bake bread it was my soul finding a way to make me slow down and listen. Without the baking days that turned into a Sabbath observance I probably would not be here. I might still be in Ohio working at an office job that I hated. Observing the Sabbath gave me time to consider what I was searching so hard to find, to figure out what my greater purpose is, to re-create my life. It gave me time to listen to my heart.

Did you know that the Chinese pictograph of the word busy is a combination of 2 characters: "heart" and 'killing?" That pictograph reflects a truth- busyness kills our hearts, literally with stress-induced heart problems, and figuratively in that busyness kills the job that our hearts do. Our hearts lead us to epiphanies; our hearts lead us to our greater calling. When we are busy our hearts can't do that job. Busyness is heart-killing. Contemporary Catholic writer and monk Thomas Merton believes that succumbing to busyness is succumbing to violence, because busyness kills our inner wisdom that makes us fruitful. The rush of modern life, running from one appointment to another, picking up a sandwich at the drive-through to eat in the car- this is violence, because it silences our inner wisdom. This is violence because it kills our hearts.

This month our theme is creation, and we also just began a New Year. And the New Year is a time of new creation- how will we form our lives this year? How many of you made New Year's resolutions? I know that resolutions are on our minds- resolutions to change, to start something new, to leave something behind. How can we re-create? How can we listen to our hearts?

Today Christian churches all over the world are celebrating Epiphany Sunday- a celebration of the day the Wise Men- or the Magi- first saw Jesus. The Magi were from an ancient priestly caste in what is now Iran, and they practiced an art that combines astrology and astronomy, investigating the movements of celestial bodies and interpreting how those movements affected people. They helped rulers make decisions by interpreting the heavenly bodies, even advising rulers on choosing kings.

Christian tradition has it that the Magi advised Herod that the stars told of a king being born to the Jews. Herod was worried, he didn't want any uprisings from the Jews in his kingdom, so he sent the wise men on a journey to investigate the star and the rumor of a Jewish king.

Traveling on foot or by camel, the journey of the Magi was long and quiet- thousands of steps in a mostly empty desert, finding their way by the light of the stars. The book of Mark tells that when the Wise Men saw the baby Jesus they fell down and worshipped him. The day that Christians celebrate as Epiphany Sunday marks this day- the first time Gentiles (the Magi) recognized that Jesus was holy. But how did they know? The wise men weren't Jews, they weren't looking for a Son of God. But according to the book of Mark they felt exceedingly great joy and worshipped him. How did they know? Epiphany. I would guess that they listened to their hearts. After walking in the silent desert for so long they were well in touch with the Spirit, and they listened to their heartstrings and worshipped the child. But what if they had been preoccupied- too busy with errands and working long hours? Would they have walked right past the manger? Would they have missed the very soul they were looking for?

The magi had time to reflect in the desert, and in that time they listened to their hearts and were recreated. In the story of the three wise men, the three kings from the Orient, we always focus

on what they brought with them- the gifts for the child. But what about what they carried away from the journey? What did they receive in the silence of the desert? Epiphany. A new birth. A recreation.

At this time – the New Year- what is reaching out to you? Is there a star in the night sky waiting to guide you, if only you had time to look up? What is your heart trying to tell you? Are you in danger of walking right past just what you are looking for?

It is epiphany- a time of discovery, a time of suddenly knowing the truth. What epiphanies are hiding in the shadows, in the dark corners you don't have time to investigate? Do you have a silent place where you can listen? What has to happen so you can know those epiphanies?

Yesterday we started a New Year, and contemplated resolutions- new ways to change our lives for the better. How can we create a new life this year that includes time for listening? Time for gazing up, looking for a star?

Observing the Sabbath allowed me to listen and find who I truly am, it allowed me to re-create my life. It gave me a chance to gaze at the sky to find direction. The Sabbath that started with the urge to bake bread took me off the ever-churning hamster wheel. The Sabbath gave me a pause, and in that pause rushed in the sacred. In that pause the sacred reminded me of my greater purpose, reminded me that life isn't about earning money and worrying about a 401k.

On the Sabbath I read a Mary Oliver poem and felt God whispering right in my ear:

“Tell me,” the Holy whispered, “tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” And without even having to think about it I answered ‘Love.’ And God said “And is that what you are doing?”

Well, of course not. No. I am rushing. I am flailing. I am doing the best I can! But God already knew that. God already knew I was doing the best I could. But in the rush of wandering in the desert of my life I had forgotten to stop. And to gaze up. And to find a bright star to give me direction. In the rush of my one wild and precious life I was too busy to consider where I should go.

And so in the quiet winter afternoon of that Sabbath I began to explore what “love” as a life goal could mean. And slowly and sometimes painfully, I reshaped my life around my new direction.

In our opening words today we read a poem by Unitarian Universalist minister Kathleen McTigue that said in part:

We come together this morning to remind one another to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives.

To Resist the headlong tumble into the next moment until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude.

Can we rest on the forming edge of our lives? Can we listen long enough to be aware, to hear the message our heart has for us, to let the Holy ask us what we will do with our one wild and precious life?

What would it mean for you to keep the Sabbath? A quiet breakfast, eating without the distraction of newspaper or television, watching the way the early light falls across your cereal bowl? Would Sabbath mean board game night with your family every Friday, cell phones and Blackberry’s turned off? Would it mean coming home from church on Sunday to a day of rest,

spending time with friends, walking in the woods. What Sabbath fits your life? What Sabbath will allow you to listen to your heart's wisdom?

The Spirit of Life knows that we are doing our best. But perhaps you too sometimes wander in the desert without pausing to seek direction from a bright star. Without their time of quiet in the desert the Magi may have wandered right past the manger- are you in danger of wandering past your one wild and precious life?

Sabbath time allows space to find your path, to be re-created, a time to start again, a time to bake bread and listen to holy voices. A time to put the world on hold and stop doing violence to our own hearts. In this New Year, a year that is just beginning, a time for creation- what is rising up in your life, like fresh bread dough? Listen: can you hear your heart calling? What wisdom does it have for you? Can you pause and can you listen?