

Time For All Things

by
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The hill is like an old woman, all her human obligations met, who sits at work day after day in a kind of rapt leisure, at intricate embroidery. She has time for all things. Because she does not expect to be finished, she is endlessly patient with the details. She perfects flower and leaf, feather and song, adorning the briefest life in great beauty as though it were meant to last forever.¹

If *my sabbatical* could be painted it would be this word picture, composed by Wendell Berry. From it comes the title, “Time for All Things.”

How very grateful I am that we were not chosen to receive a Lily grant. The discussion and work which followed, as we planned our own version of sabbatical will no doubt continue to reap congregational benefit for some time to come.

As per that planning work, I am required to submit a paper in summary of my part of the sabbatical experience. What follows are selected journals entries from my sabbatical time, chosen with the idea of sharing some of what I did and some of my reflections from that time. In some cases, questions or thoughts are followed up with later reflections on reflections, written in italics.

Journal Entries

Tues Feb 19 ~ Sabbatical is two sermons and a kids’ Sunday School plan away. Everything that can be planned is. Only the unexpected remains – and it is not mine.

Monday, March 3rd ~ Ben is home with a sore throat and fever. I am home wondering what I am supposed to do. How long will it take my body to sink into this sort of ‘time.’ I’m so tired, I dream about being tired.

¹ Wendell Berry, The Long Legged House (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006) 209.

Tuesday, March 4 ~ Turns out I didn't leave the house at all yesterday. I cooked, sewed, knitted, did laundry and read. I have the same kind of day ahead today, along with taking Cody to the vet for shots. The workers keep slamming something in the garage.²

Sometimes I make spaghetti sauce by stirring cooked ground beef and a jar of Prego together in a saucepan, which takes about eleven minutes. Sometimes (rarely) I make it from scratch which takes about three hours. They taste entirely different from one another. Of course the same must be true of prayer – those made in haste and those with time to simmer and reduce.

What changes is the way I pray, the way I am at prayer. The longer I pray – the longer I take to do everything that day – the more reflective every task becomes

Thursday March 6 ~ Carl is out of town so I will drive Emily to school at 7:30 and resist the powerful temptation to do errands since I'm in town. By the time I'm home, it's hard to extract myself from that mode and settle back into meditation. Then the struggle becomes forgiving myself for not praying so much . . . or in so classical a style. My hands want to get sewing on the kitchen curtains.

The workers³ have stopped for now and left the house in disarray which drives me absolutely crazy. When the contractor himself is here, he doesn't allow it. So, I can spend the next four hours cleaning it up or treat it as a spiritual opportunity. The reality is that most of it is too heavy for me to do anyway. Intellectually, I know this is my chance to learn – or at least

² Workers were installing a new floor and painting for most of March.

practice – **being at home** when the house is begging me to “work on it” or “get it ready.” My habit is to “make it comfortable” instead of taking comfort in it.

I'd like to say I did well at this but I think it best to tell the truth as much as possible. I often cleaned up after the workers on days when the contractor didn't come. I have lots of room left to grow in this area. It definitely gets in the way spiritually and relationally.

Things I want to think about while on sabbatical:

What is my calling for the next ten to fifteen years?

What will be UBC's mission/ministry relationship to our community?

What are the spiritual needs of my church members.

Most striking for me during sabbatical was the difference when thinking/praying /dreaming about such questions in such solitude. Ordinarily, I would be jabbering on about them during ordinary conversation with other church people. The absence of those voices, particularly around members' needs, was startling but, I think, necessary. I am too easily redirected by my own desire/need to please others. Too easily do I follow or agree before I have spent the appropriate time in reflection, prayer or study. A new commitment is to be more intentional about withholding opinion, and comment until I have had the necessary time to ponder the given topic outside of conversation.

As for calling – When my children were very young, the pressure I felt to stay home was guilt driven; they needed me. But my longing was professional ministry. Early in the sabbatical,

I imagined that the appeal of focusing my day entirely on our home life was largely due to professional fatigue. But as the weeks passed, I found the pace and content of home to be deeply satisfying. Our lives are so much calmer. Our schedules so much more coordinated. As well, I genuinely like to do the work and tasks required; laundry, bills, meals, kid schedules, etc. It's the same work, but I am different. I think I needed to be part of a much bigger world when I was in my twenties and thirties. I believe all the same things about the world and my responsibility in it; I just don't feel less equipped or able to fulfill those responsibilities without a title or job description. I think it matters to be as profoundly present as possible in the moment and with nearest person or people. In a sense, the whole world is happening inside the walls, within the community of this very house and serving it seems as much a calling, as much a gift, and as much a joy as professional ministry has also been.

Friday, March 07 ~ I woke up thinking, "I have got to get a lot done on those kitchen curtains today," with the same urgency that I wake up thinking about a sermon series. Clearly, I am crazy. They are curtains. They have no Sunday morning deadline. The only deadline I am under is to return to work on June 02 rested. The daily task, therefore, is to remember that I live under no deadlines.

It is snowing and Cody is under my desk like a giant electric foot warmer.

Back at work, I am much more aware of my proclivity to approach tasks with an urgency born of my work style, not the task itself. I am happier, the work is better and life is more pleasant all around when that attitude of urgency is absent. But I have to be intentional to avoid it. Left on automatic, I can start the day hurrying, even if only mentally, hurry all day and go to

bed thinking, “I must go to sleep so I can get up and finish _____.” All of which is to say, sabbatical generally isn’t for learning new truths but remembering the same truths.

Monday, March 17 ~ Ordinarily, coming home from a trip,⁴ by the time we are in the car headed this way, I’m back in work groove. Instead, we came in and I started getting laundry caught up.

But I have no sabbatical groove yet. How easy to do nothing but keep house. Would that be bad? A poor use of the time? I love the rhythm of it, the quiet and the pace, the pushing open of mind space that happens when free of deadline.

When thinking has a deadline it loses for me the freedom to go where it will. And who knows what might be considered or known beyond the boundary of deadline?

I miss people – wonder about them, long to call. All along we thought the boundary was for them and now I see it was for me. The temptation is strong; not to go inward and to dwell there, or eat from there; a kind of fast from relationships with others in order to draw all relationship from God only.

Is this celibacy? Social celibacy? The next level – once physical absence is established – is to give up the longing, the wondering about others. How to let it go?

Prayer, of course. Prayer spent like time with one’s beloved. “Forsaking all others” - in marriage it includes everything. Why not in spiritual fidelity?

Only God can be God to us. But to find it so means having less from other people than I am inclined to desire. Being pastor, I am inclined to offer more than I have to give. We are all

⁴ We were in Gulf Shores, Alabama for Spring Break.

left pretending to have what we need because to tell the truth about our emptiness is worse than the pretense.

How is it that we know, at one level, that only God is able to fulfill our longings and yet do not ask of God what would fulfill us? Do we discount the wish for deep connection to another human as something less than God wants to give?

Is this the sabbatical point of discovery; to see if that sort of companionship with God is as available as I now suspect?

Tuesday, March 18th ~ Since the time change it is dark again at 7:30 am but light much longer. Because I am so much more rested, I easily get by on 6 hours sleep and wake up without an alarm by 6 or 6:30. I help Carl with kids' breakfast and talk to them. Usually I am stumbling in for coffee and to kiss them goodbye.

Cody is on the bed with me, almost snoring. He's only had breakfast and a trip outside but he seems worn out by the effort. Ben says, "Just think Mom, these are his active years."

It's raining out now and for the next three days, the radio says.

All day yesterday I thought about "social fasting," and the idea of pilgrimage as journey into sacred loneliness. It's all been written before – but captures me still. Sacred loneliness must include mindfulness, a pervasive and experimental sensation of the sacred near and about me in this time. It is so fragile, so easily shattered by worry or stress. No wonder Jesus forbids us to

worry. As much as, maybe more than, flagrant sin – it keeps us from God. Flagrant sin can drive us to God. Worry denies God altogether.

Since sabbatical – I have realized I worried a great deal less in that time. I don't think it is because I prayed more. I think it was because of ordinary stress. I haven't read the scientific literature but I'd be willing to bet that the same things that generate spikes in stress increase worry. It's not nearly as spiritual as it is a nuts and bolts mechanism for coping with trying to do too much in too little time. When I attempt to do less and do it reflectively I am much more aware of what is and is not possible. This was quite a revelation.

Maybe people are incapable of the divine communion that is available to us – so long as we are unwilling to leave one another's presence. Even Jesus withdrew completely. How much human longing for affection and companionship is born in our sacred selves? How much is, in fact, longing for the sacred itself but we don't know it . . . are without the language for it?

Wednesday, March 19th ~ I'm aware of a more rested sense of mind and body. It's not simply a product of sleep, but rather, emptiness; the unpacking of my brain normally stuffed with tasks and plans. I think about how much time I spend thinking about bodily fitness, exercise, and diet, and how little I spend on mental fitness. A mental 'work out' is in practice, the emptying of mind. The only way I know is solitude and a calmer schedule. I decide so very little in a day that actually matters and none of it matters outside our home.

I could sit and 'work' at emptying, which has been my idea in the past, or go about in restful mindfulness and discover emptying happens of its own accord.

Rest has so much more to do with what is on my mind than what I am doing or not with my body. Some of my very best, most restful days of sabbatical were days I spent as many as six or seven hours gardening; often doing heavy work.

Other Loves

Are sonnets ever written for loves
of other kinds
love of mist in trees at winter's end
of moments quiet as one's own breath
of old flannel and worn out wood?

Who decides a sonnet
poets or those who read them?
It is the lover I think,
whether or not the poem is ever written down.
The love of things that never love back,
or if they do it is not with kisses
but rather, their life and shape and presence.

Saturday, March 22 ~ A redwing blackbird is on the feeder today. My bird book says they arrive just ahead of spring. The workers left yesterday without cleaning up after themselves again. Grr! So much for 'spiritual exercise.' I spent way too long cleaning everything up and putting my furniture back.

Sunday, March 23 ~ Easter afternoon ~ We are waiting for the lamb to finish roasting. Big fat snow is falling outside. Carl is building a fire. It is strange to be so cold on Easter. We went to two services at _____ today. I liked not preaching but we all missed UBC terribly.

Monday, March 24 ~ So frosty outside and spring seems slow to come now that Easter has passed. I begin another week of waiting and trying to be mindful. How easily I am drawn to making order at the very get go. Ben started bacon and pancakes at 11:30 p.m. last night. The kitchen could be worse, if he'd had a friend helping for example. The urge to clean it up right away, to sink into busy mode is not easily resisted. The joke of course is that Jamie* comes later and I am embarrassed for her to see the kitchen like this!

I can wash dishes mindfully but then I will not sit, I will not write and I will not ease into the day. Sometimes the days seem to go by so quickly, but no more so than God intends. Rather it is me who is rushing. The more I stay in the present moment; time and space, a minute lasts a minute and an hour lasts an hour.

Tuesday, March 25 ~ I have the choice, the invitation to live in a larger, safer, more peaceful world than the one I can see and hear, the one reported on NPR day after day. I find it, experience it through stillness, quietness, silence. The slightest noises will quickly drown it. But that world of safety and peace can shush the noise of this world too, if given the chance.

Wendell Berry writes of 'habit of contention.'" Though I've never labeled it, I see it all around me and within me. Contention is the opposite of contentment. As a habit, it is the proclivity, the determination even, to generate something about which to feel urgent, stirred up and stressed out. Purposeful, active contentment is the only remedy of course, taken as daily, if not hourly, practices.

* our housekeeper

Swallow Me

Swallow me whole into the infinity of Spirit
Let me live there, breathe there
 feel nothing so much as your spaciousness
I am released, let go, unbound
 for no other, greater purpose
 than vision and truth telling.

Friday, March 28 ~ Published journals are always filled with deep spiritual thoughts.

All I can think of to write about is how cruddy I feel. Mariah, Ben and I are all sick with sinus infections. One side of my head is so packed with snot it's like being half sick, except that my throat hurts and my whole body aches.

Even though I didn't wish to be sick during sabbatical, I realize that normally I would go to work on a day like this. Why? Partly because it wouldn't occur to me not to, but mostly because I would think what needed to be done couldn't wait, shouldn't be done by someone else; or, even worse, go undone altogether. I learned otherwise on all counts.

Monday, March 31 ~ We went to services at _____ yesterday and I am going on the record; I officially do not like singing hymn lyrics from a screen! I could barely hear anyone singing and the preaching, alas . . . I ought be more generous, but I wonder if he studied at all. By the time announcements, prayer requests and chit-chat were through – they'd talked about themselves more than they talked about God. Do we do that at UBC? I must have some keep an actual score and see the results.

At the same time, there is power in being together; however wanting the service may be. They are working together, taking care of one another . . . and that is church too.

The war news is so depressing. Using the same statistics, pundits say it is going well or going poorly. I think about soldiers and others, driving down a road and then realize they will be blown to bits in nanoseconds. Is it terrifying or peaceful as the lights of this world blink off?

Or, maybe, do the lights come on? Are we the ones in the dark, all the while thinking too highly of this life, or at least, more highly than it deserves? If I were more conscious of death, would I also be more conscious of Jesus alive (Luke 24)? Would 'Jesus Alive' as my overwhelming reality eventually overwhelm every anxiety about death so completely that death is no more unusual than, "Oh, it's starting to sprinkle. I guess it's going to rain."

Tuesday, April 01 ~ This month I plant and my nephew Liam will be born and one of the workers at my house will have twin baby girls and sabbatical is one third over. Spring! Spring! Spring!

I've had to take a few days off sewing because my shoulder hurts so much. It's warm enough to begin clearing flower beds anyway and I'm itching to be outside. Cody follows me everywhere.

Thursday, April 03 ~ Why is it, I wonder, that I think of time and season in terms of the length of days instead of nights? December 21st is the shortest day of the year but also the longest night. No doubt it is my compulsion to work and my reluctance to rest. I treat the shortest day (longest night) as loss and the longest day as gain.

Today I read this from a novel, “The great question for the old and the dying, I think, is not if they have loved and been loved enough, but if they have been grateful enough for love received and given, however much. No one who has gratitude is the onliest one. Let us be grateful to the last.”⁵

It made me think of Donna Ritter. I think she knew this and lived it. I wish I could show her the passage. But maybe, she showed it to me just now.

No Poem

No poem is written with political intent
that is not true in the beginning,
in the life of the hand that holds the pen.
Else it is not poetry, but rather – something else.

Who is to say – in the end – if it is or it isn’t true,
not reader, reviewer, professor or friend
but the pen holder – the poet alone
obedient to the voice not of her origin
who’s only sound is ink upon the page.

Friday, April 18 ~ My very first earthquake! At 5:30 am I thought someone was stomping their feet on the deck outside our bedroom. It was felt for miles and miles but no damage really.

My hands are so beat up from yard work. Nothing on sabbatical has been as satisfying and meditative as gardening. I seem not to get tired while I am at it. After hours outside, my mind is more clear and alert and I feel so energetic.

Here’s a discovery! I’ve been lugging, pulling, carrying, dumping, spreading forty pound bags of manure/peat mixture which makes my back and legs hurt in not time. But, if I stop and

⁵ Wendell Berry, Andy Catlett, Early Travels (Berkeley CA: Counterpoint, 2006), 120.

sit down for ten minutes, I can easily get back up and work some more and I'm not sore the next day. The same goes for hot, thirsty and hungry. Go figure!

This has been very hard to remember and repeat since my days are back to sitting at a desk for long stretches.

I only garden now. I don't do laundry or cook or anything else until I put my tools away for the day, usually around one o'clock. I hardly get distracted. I've been thinking about 'multi-tasking.' Do we really do it – or do we just think we do by trying to cram as many errands into the smallest amount of time? Is it possible to really, truly do two (or more!) things at one time? Or do we actually have two or three pots on the stove, so to speak? Yet, we can only look at one of them at a time. I get so much more gardening done in a morning than I ever got done at 'work,' even though it feels like I work much slower in the garden. I am struck by the difference in productivity when focus is so singular.

I'm realizing that 'hurry' has more to do with relationships than with tasks. I hurry because I know people expect things from me; congregants, kids, friends, etc. So the 'hurry' isn't something that happens at task time. Rather, it happens at planning time; when I am committing to someone else to do something inside a certain time frame, I either set up a 'hurry' situation or not. If I am truthful with myself about what I am able to do (not what I think I should be able to do), I am far less likely to hurry.

How am I to tell the truth to others if I do not know it myself?

How am I to know it without the emptiness of self to hear it?

How am I to hear it without listening?

How am I to listen without being still?

How am I to be still and hurry at the same time?

Monday, April 21 ~I was awake and up at 5 am then got back in bed when I discovered that our coffee pot was shattered. The pathetic thing is that I didn't think, "Oh, wonder how that happened?" Instead I thought, rather frantically, "Oh no, now what am I going to do? How am I going to get coffee?" I might be a junkie.

I tried and failed to live without the coffee machine, for about two days. Until the new pot came, I drove to the convenient store down the highway each morning.

Tuesday, April 23 ~ Cecil passed away at 11 p.m. last night. Carl has been up all night writing his obituary. We feel so lucky they agreed to stay with us when Myra got sick. Now it is so very strange to realize that all our parents are gone.

Tuesday, April 29 ~ One of my favorite parts of sabbatical has been supertime at home. Having time to cook and have it ready when they come to the table* makes it so much more pleasant. Carl and at least one kid clean up. We stay at the table longer and the kids talk about their day and things that make them laugh.

* Instead of everybody helping to make salad, set table, etc so we can eat before bedtime!

Wednesday, April 30 ~I imagined writing more in these weeks. Writing demands a sinking into self as disciplined as anything I know – a degree of discipline I am not willing to devote. The payoff, I think, must be more than worth the effort . . . the self knowing, the act of clearing the self of what is yet dense and hard and hidden beneath the surface of my lethargy and denial. Writing is the very opposite of denying the truth of myself.

So, is it lazy or is it fear? Lazy, I think, a preference for the activity which soothes and tires (gardening) rather than upsets, exhausts and relieves. Plus, it's just plain hard work; digging for words that won't come, like working a jigsaw puzzle without the box.

Monday, May 05 ~ We worshipped at _____ yesterday. Parts of the service I liked very much. But I am left wondering what must happen in order for worship to be transforming? What is the pastor's part? What is the congregant's part? Do we truly believe that when we enter that hour we collectively enter the presence of God?

Wednesday, May 08 ~ Getting a new puppy may not be the best sabbatical idea. We have to go outside every 20-30 minutes (when she's awake) or I'm cleaning up the floor. She runs herself ragged and then sleeps for an hour and starts all over.

Tuesday, June 03 ~ My first day back to work. The person on sabbatical seems like someone else. This office, this act of 'work' is like a uniform that once donned, does the work while I merely live inside it. I miss sabbatical and yet feel right at home here too.

I had an interesting dream. A church member asked me to help redecorate his/her house as a surprise for the spouse. I said yes but the project didn't go exactly right and I feared it was entirely my fault. I told them, "I've been working on this since March. I'm really sorry it's not like it should be." But no one was upset. I think it means that sabbatical is meant to help more people than just me – but its success isn't entirely up to me. A lot depends on how we all choose to think about it.

Conclusion

As I left the church one day recently, I found myself saying to myself, "I really like this job." It felt really good to be there for the day and really good to be going home for the rest of the day. Without a doubt, the sabbatical time was critical for me. In every way I am better equipped and able to be about the work of ministry than I was a year ago. My energy level is deeper and creativity stream much more vibrant. By intention I am scheduling differently, highly attentive to how each day's activities drain these resources.

Spiritually, I am drawing from a deeper well. Prayers, study, meditation and writing are more deeply engrained habits now than before. Whether they show themselves in preaching and pastoral care is not mine to evaluate and, in some ways, beside the point. More and more I find spiritual life to be the way of life, not a tool to make life more productive or easier. Life lived closely tuned to the presence of God is complete in itself. Nothing else is necessary except as it contributes to living completely immersed in the way of Jesus.

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