

## BEING LAZY IN ALL GOOD CONSCIENCE

Although I'll be away at our UUA General Assembly, then on family vacation, for the next several weeks, San Dieguito lies deep in my prayers as well as in good hands with your fine lay leaders shouldering the Sunday services. Furthermore, your superb Board is on top of all current issues, and if there's a Fellowship emergency, I can be reached by the office.

And although today, I'm promoting the benefits of a Summer tempo, the gifts of rest and renewal for us all, after a most productive Fellowship year, have no illusions, when I come back in mid-August, we're going to hit the ground running, and during my final interim year among you, your 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary celebration, I'm giving my all and invite you to do likewise...each in your own way. As the spiritual reminds:

“Together we can move mountains, alone we can't move at all...”

*Psychology Today* shared the results of a survey on how Americans view our vacations. One feature of the report was an invitation for readers to relate their “dream vacation.” There were those who dreamed in heroic tones...rescuing folks from burning buildings or even going back in time to prevent President Kennedy's assassination. Even more so, men and women envisioned vacations that would bring about a dramatic change in their lives, changes that would somehow make them more carefree, adventurous, and elegant. A few people dreamed of eating their fill of the most exotic cuisine, even while losing weight...the most improbable fantasy of all.

One woman wanted to go on vacation to avoid her own wedding and a man expressed a wish to start out fresh by moving to another planet. But, perhaps to no one's

astonishment, few of us succeed in any remarkable transformations while on vacation, and, alas, we routinely carry the same psychological baggage with us wherever we go in the Summer.

Thus workaholics only transfer their compulsions to a new locale; they bring their briefcases along in order to catch up. Health nuts hardly need any more recreation; for they already play tennis, jog and swim when they're at home. Indeed, the majority of those who say that they enjoy their vacation most are the same people who report that they enjoy their work most. A discovery that's rather sobering but not surprising.

The overall survey disclosed that Americans hold considerable ambivalence toward vacations, because we have enormous unease in general with leisure, loafing, just being lazy.

As one who works at a rather swift pace during the year and has done so for 41 years in ministry, I've had to mature considerably, during my summers, in terms of being a human *being* rather than a human *doing*. I'm flawed, if you hadn't already noticed, and I've made more than my share of summer mistakes. For example, I used to plan sermons for the next year while away from preaching, and, I even wrote some books during my vacation time. But I'm reforming; I've been a recovering workaholic for a decade or more. I'll be playing the guitar and refining my magic tricks this summer...albeit, with a serious bent, since I'm not totally reformable.

And this summer we're taking our 10 year-old granddaughter, on an intergenerational eco-adventure to Costa Rica, where most of the time, we'll be riding rivers and tickling turtles. Then we're going to be in Park City, Utah, for a week, just the two of us, essentially "vegging out" on movies, music, and massage. You see, ministers

normally have to clear out of town to be fully free on vacation. You'll want to remember this fact when your settled minister arrives.

Henry Cadbury, the Quaker biblical authority, tells about a small boy who, when asked which story in the Bible he liked best, quickly replied, "that one about the multitude...you know, the multitude that loafes and fishes."

We chuckle, and so we should; yet the truth is that most adults are rather uncomfortable with the thought of just loafing and fishing. The bulk of Americans, women and men alike, are comfortable being productive yet far less satisfied while lounging about, kicking back, and loafing.

Unitarian Universalists tend to be high-achievers, type *A* folks who have difficulty being lazy in all good conscience. I know that's been my story. Loafing simply isn't in my genes or my calling.

So I share this morning several quick tips on the theology of loafing, tips which might just come in handy during the summer...and should prove useful for the rest of the year as well.

Each of us, it seems to me, is about as lazy as we have the courage to be. I mean that. In a world of competition, productivity, status-seeking, and work addiction, to be lazy is to be despised, or at least misunderstood.

"Lazy" is a nasty four-letter word, oft-used for people who exasperate us, wear out our patience, and defy our understanding. Laziness by definition means aversion to labor; even indolence, idleness, sloth. Therefore, it takes real *chutzpa* to be lazy by deliberate choice.

I confess to emerging from a family heritage of workaholism. My Dad sold insurance up until his very death at 82. He never retired, driven mainly by dogged internal urges and pressures. I can still picture him massaging professional finances, sitting in the den, while listening to UCLA Bruins basketball. Dad was a classic multi-tasker...working even while lounging! The only time I saw my Father rest and restore was when he was playing the lead guitar in the Lion's pep band.

My own struggles with workaholism were a major factor in my divorce. I gave more at the office than at home—behavior of which I'm now ashamed. Only in recent years have I been able to shake this malaise, recover, and partake of the blessings of purposeful inactivity. Singing, tennis, playing with our grandkids, and now magic are incredible gifts in helping me be a bona fide merrymaker.

Our Unitarian buddy Henry David Thoreau, in his essay on the art of sauntering, encourages us to walk through life like a camel, a beast which ruminates while walking. Ruminants are even-toed, hooved mammals who saunter, chewing cud repeatedly for extended periods of time. They masticate instead of gulp down their food. They amble instead of race through life. Saunterers, from the French *sainte terrier*, are literally holy-landers who meander through life with one eye on their soul and the other on nature.

Each of us will require different dosages of laziness. What is moderate for one, may prove lethal to another. But there's no doubt that some dosage of rest, leisure, loafing is mandatory for the spiritual nourishment of our lives.

Now what do I mean by laziness? I mean a serene kind of unambitiousness. I mean being able to live on the periphery of life and not always smack dab center-stage. I mean the ability to empty yourself of daily duties. I mean the willingness to step aside

and step back in order to reflect, to re-create, even to be bored and listless, and be unworried at being so.

The Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang wrote: “The true purpose of travel should be to become lost and unknown.” He would remind us to enjoy abundant moments this summer of unadulterated anonymity: living without fixed hours or e-mail access. As Yutang concludes: “if you can spend a perfectly useless afternoon in a perfectly useless manner, you have learned how to live.” Or as one of my favorite chants puts it: “I am moving on a journey to nowhere, taking it easy, taking it slow. No more hurry, no more worry, nothing to carry, let it all go!”

Perhaps you’ve heard that the fanatic is a person who’s lost their sense of direction yet redoubled the effort. This is very different from the person who lived to be one hundred and claimed that the secret of her long life was learning early on when to give up. This centenarian said that many people keep flailing away at tasks that can never be accomplished anyhow or trying too hard to succeed at tasks that are pointless, even if accomplished.

Well, since sermons are often criticized for being too theoretical, let me transmit some practical counsel this summer solstice morn, what I would call a “Lazy Person’s Survival Kit”.

***(1) What kind of promises are you making in your life?***

Rank the promises according to the way they fall either at the center of your life mission, toward the circumference, at the periphery or currently have nothing to do with really matters to you. In blunt language, the further from the center of your life-purpose, the dumber the promise is.

Start getting in touch with the people to whom you've made foolish promises. Cancel the engagements, the deadlines, or the plans. Naturally, I hope that our Fellowship's shared ministry doesn't fall into that category, but sometimes it may, and I've already given my share of sabbaticals around here, even as I'm vigorously nurturing fresh leadership.

***(2) Always have a good excuse for everything.***

You've heard it said, "an excuse is a neglect of duty." Well, phooey; we all need fitting excuses, sometimes, in order to exercise our right to laziness in all good conscience.

So have a large repertoire of proper excuses. You'll find a fiendish glee in lying supinely on your bed while you develop the list. And rotate them. No one excuse or one target should be used repeatedly. Be a creative loafer.

I recall a person calling me recently to cancel a promise he'd made to me. He was very nervous and apologetic. What he didn't know was that I was contemplating using my most recent ideal excuse to cancel myself. I even had to reassure him several times that he was doing me a great favor. Wow, the amount of neurotic guilt you and I choose to endure!

***(3) Your schedule has become overgrown: mow it or at least weed it out!***

Since we were most likely baby-fed at specific times, we've been taught to live according to a set, unchangeable schedule. I say: our schedule needs changing more often than the oil in our cars.

While pruning, it's always wise to grant first place importance to non-repetitive events in your life history. For example, there are precious passages with our grandkids

that can't be missed—recitals or ballgames, special moments of love and meaning. Moments that won't come again.

***(4) Do what you uniquely can do!***

You've always heard that no task is too lowly to perform. You may not have heard that you're responsible to do only what is best done by you. Therefore, recommend others for that which either they uniquely can do or for that which any number of persons can do and do well. It's crazy to keep doing things that others can do equally well!

***(5) Let others do a few things for you!***

So often our family or friends enjoy, note that, enjoy doing things for us, but we all too rarely allow them to do so.

Kick back and learn how to live in the passive voice.

***(6) Dare to let things happen!***

Agenda anxiety frequently oozes out of my pores. Ask my wife. I need to live more serendipitously. I confess to being a high-control person, so I'd do better to practice relinquishment, the art of letting be and letting go of outcomes. One of my homestretch goals is to learn how to be free and lazy enough to respond to the luminescent stuff that occurs without plan. Like the Zen archer, I want to hit the target sometimes precisely because I didn't aim at it!

***(7) Do it now, loaf later!***

There's real merit for me in not laying a piece of paper down until I've made a decision that gets it off my desk. You may say, "Well, I need time to think about such decisions." And yet I find, don't you, that my first careful response is often my most

honest and accurate one? You and I need to find healthy ways to live between the negative poles of procrastination and impulsiveness.

Piles of stuff have a way of keeping us awake, cutting off initiative, robbing us of the enjoyment of our lazy times. If we do it now, we can loaf later.

***(8) Perform a disappearing act!***

Our image, so we're told, banks essentially upon our visibility. But that maxim, my friend's, a 100% half-truth. The other side of the coin, and a worthy side indeed, is that if people can't find us, they can't pressure or stress us. Whenever we leave our work station covered by responsible people, we've every right to go incommunicado for a space of time, yes, even turn off our cell phones.

Our very human spirits need "combing out" as surely as does our hair. Maybe, now that I'm a budding magician, I can work on some sort of disappearing act!

***(9) Quit running from your Solitude!***

This is a biggie. I suggest that for our own survival we come to terms with our aloneness rather than run from it. Look our solitariness square in the face and deal with it creatively. After all, we enter existence alone and will be leaving it on our very own.

Years ago, Carl Sandburg spoke most eloquently of solitude in an interview with Ralph McGill. He and McGill were walking about Glassy Mountain, near Sandburg's home. He said to McGill: "I often walk here to be alone. Solitude is an essential part of a person's life, and sometimes we must seek it out. I sit here and I look at those silent hills and I say, 'Who are you, Carl? And where are you going?'"

Here's the nubbin of the matter. The best way, ever to discover our true selves, whether we're 20 or 40 or 80, is to spend sufficient moments alone. I don't know about

you, but I simply don't want to go to my grave without a more intimate knowledge of who I am, this singular, maddeningly complex yet resourceful creature whose skin I've been inhabiting...me, myself, and I...truly, my first and final friend.

Tom Owen-Towle  
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