

Taking Back Our Time

Jamaica Plain, October 24, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

Last September 5th, for my Labor Day sermon, I first spoke about the Mass. Council of Churches "Take Back Your Time" campaign, part of a nationwide effort. In response to our pervasive busyness and the bleeding of work into all parts of our lives, I suggested that we follow the campaign's advice to try to take back, between September and October 24th, four blocks of time from work, time for family, friends, play, or one's spiritual life. Some examples of suggested activities for those blocks of time are reprinted on your order of service cover.

The "Take Back Your Time" efforts are in response to what many of us perceive as a relentless busyness in our lives and culture. In the September sermon I used an example from the late British writer Anthony Bloom that bears repeating. Bloom compares our frantic rushing about to a person on the London to Edinburgh train who hurries from the last car of the train to the first in order to arrive most quickly at the destination. In the past ten years our lives have accelerated with email, cell phones, and blackberries. The "Take Back Your Time" people say that we work longer hours than medieval peasants; 26% of American workers never take a vacation. The focal point of the effort is today, October 24, chosen because it is nine weeks from the end of the calendar year. Western Europeans work on average nine weeks less in hours and vacation time than Americans.

Recently I spoke to the Mass. Council's wonderful Director, the Rev. Diane Kessler, who told me that no event or activity in her over 20 years at the Council has generated as much interest as the "Take Back Your Time" campaign. It seems to have struck a raw nerve for many people across the religious spectrum. There is a rally on the Boston Common today for "Taking Back Your Time" from 1-3PM. I would like to attend that rally, but I have an old friend in town from Ohio who wants me to meet her new love, and Sunday afternoon is supposed to be family time, so I guess I'm just too busy.

That personal busyness demanded by our culture is also reflected in our church's busyness, and that of most spiritual communities. A real focus of vision is necessary to make choices between so many demands, often related to good things. The Quaker mystic and activist Thomas Kelly had the helpful suggestion to spend time, though prayer or meditation, to discern one's special justice focus. While the way one would act on that focus might change at different times of life, for example if one had small children or aging parents, the specific social justice focus would help one say "no" to many good causes.

We have trouble saying "no." This week I received a telephone call from a suburban UU minister asking me to start visiting a man in a residence in Jamaica Plain. A friend of hers thought he might be a Unitarian, and the man needs people to practice talking with after suffering a severe stroke. Often suburban ministers will ask me to visit a parishioner in a Boston hospital. However, this involves one or two visits. In this case, a long term commitment would be involved. I told the minister that I would check with my congregation (and please let me know if you'd like to visit this man), but that a long term commitment to visiting him would come directly out of the very limited time I have for my family. Conscious of "Taking Back My Time" from work, I actually said "No." Let's practice that, No! NO! NO!

As in the reading today from Lutheran William Matthews, who uses the model of Jesus, balance is crucial in avoiding slavery to work. I recently told our new interim District Executive of Mass. Bay UU churches that I thought our congregations need to play more together. She suggested a district softball league. WWJD - What Would Johnny Damon Do? On the subject of balance, I once asked the founder of Rosie's Place, the great advocate for the poor Kip Tiernan, what she did to keep from getting burned out. She replied, "I follow the example of Jesus, who at every opportunity ate and drank and partied with his friends."

In the Jewish tradition, the mystic, scholar and social activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote on the importance of observing the Sabbath. He suggested that the Sabbath

allows us to disarm and rest with holy silence, it frees us from money and from technologies that can be used to kill. I was taught by a rabbi in divinity school that the creation story was not meant to suggest that God created the world in seven literal days, but rather to stress that on the 7th day God rested. The idea of the Sabbath is instituted in the very origins of the world. To continually work is to believe that one is better or more important than God.

The Buddhist traditions focus on the importance of mindfulness at all time, to be focused on the present where we are. Whether washing pots and pans or cleaning cat litter, we are to be mindful and present to our activity. As part of spiritual practice of "Right Livelihood," we should avoid those things that are not healthful or helpful, that distract us from mindfulness.

Whether practicing saying "No" or seeking balance, observing a form of Sabbath rest or being mindful, we need the support of a wider community. So now it's time for Show and Tell. How did I do on trying to carve out at least 4 blocks of time in this past six weeks? I saw a quilt show at the Wellesley Public Library with my wife the quilter; I went to an overnight Scout campout with my son; I decided to go on a retreat for part of next weekend; and I baked a cake in honor of my late Father's birthday, and spent some time remembering him.

I did find that these activities made my work time even more frenetic, part of a Fall that is the busiest that I remember. In fact, I confess that all these activities were on days that I was already supposed to be taking time off! I also took time to attend the memorial service this week for Alex Pappas, a long time art teacher at the James Michael Curley School who taught all of my children. Alex was especially interested in my trip to St. Catherine's Monastery at Mt. Sinai. We talked for years about having coffee together, but never got around to it. Life is fragile and finite. Today we christened a child; it seems like yesterday that my children were christened, and now my son is on the verge of adulthood. We need to find time for the things truly important to us. Certainly many people find time to watch Red Sox games!

Was anyone able to take back some blocks of time? How did it go - what did you do? If you didn't do it, why not?

Where do we go from here in terms of "Taking Back Our Time"? The national campaign suggests legislation to ensure vacation portability for those who change jobs, a mandatory paid three week vacation, and that Election Day be a national holiday. We might look at a church support group, meeting monthly, for people struggling with this issue - of course that would mean one more meeting! In the past we've practiced media and television fasts. I think we also need to talk about this issue with our church school kids and youth.

The Quakers have a tradition of what they call "Clearness Committees" that help an individual make a significant decision with spiritual support. We need to help one another as individuals and as a congregation to have a clearer vision. We need to help one another say "No," find balance, practice mindfulness, and observe Sabbath. Truly, our life work is more than our job.