

Appreciating Rather than Avoiding Life's Pauses

by Ralph C. Martin

“I grieve how forcefully we push
the world away
rushing our lives
into greater loneliness and fear
failing to notice where we are.”

Margaret Wheatley, How Does Raven Know?

I caught myself chafing at the bit when I had to wait for a recent appointment without something to read. My initial disappointment gradually shifted to an appreciation of this special opportunity to let my mind wander and wonder.

I recalled similar meditative meanderings as a farm boy going round and round the field with a tractor and watching mama killdeer steer me from her nest, anticipating collisions of clouds or singing half a country song only to blend it with a hymn. Some of my best ideas in 4-H and high school popped into my awareness on that old Cockshutt 40 tractor.

Many have commented about how being bored can augment creativity. While I'm not convinced that such moments are necessarily boring I can accept that they are pauses from action and focused thinking.

It was in the pause noted above that a very short news item about fires in Indonesia rattled in my consciousness and lingered. Why wasn't there more information? Within days I noticed an article by George Monbiot in the Guardian Weekly. He posited the probability that the fires were set deliberately to clear diverse forest systems. These burning trees and peat release as much carbon dioxide in three weeks as Germany does in one year. Is this travesty designed to clear land for cheaper palm oil, timber and pulp wood?

I'm not sure this issue would have come to my attention had I not paused for the impression to register. By the time Monbiot's article did appear, I was ready for it. Nevertheless, pauses without directive thinking can be unsettling. Does staying too busy to pause, allow us to dodge uncomfortable realities? In busyness, we can reassure ourselves that we are contributing or are being amused with well-earned entertainment.

Thomas Merton, a mystic and advocate for interfaith dialogue, wrote “To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to the violence of our times.” While Merton reasonably warns about doing too much, one could argue that as long as there is time to pause and reflect then it is possible to enter the fray again with regenerated capacity. It is when pauses are no longer possible or perhaps avoided because of an addiction to action, that we hurt ourselves and others.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter, *On Care For our Common Home*, <http://laudatosi.com> states that “inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-racking distractions, or the cult of appearances? Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them.”

It is the possibility of listening for inner peace, wonder and love that stands in contrast to imbalance and constant hurry. Pope Francis’s words can also be seen as a call to slow down and not do too much. However, sometimes it is necessary to hurry and to be focused in determined and intentional activity. If this is balanced with pauses, in our hurry, and/or with reflections or meditation or prayer, then there is an opportunity to reset our intentions while being open to action that is not rough-shod and is pertinent to the essential issues of the time and place we are living. As Margaret Wheatley reminds us above, we may otherwise “fail to notice where we are.”

Pausing can also delight us with moments of gratitude, otherwise neglected. Pausing can sharpen an awareness of humour, wonder and patience to be gracious.

It may not be enough to appreciate pauses. We can go further and fortuitously grasp available pauses and deliberately seek them.

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