

## **Stillness is Elusive, With Reason**

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I need you to breathe.

Stillness is not always within reach these days, so I need you to breathe.

Stillness is a lovely concept, but I am not sure I have experienced *stillness* since sometime in March or April of this year.

The notion of stillness brings with it – at least in my mind – the presence of calm, of quiet, of waters undisturbed by ripples, of the stars in the night sky when there is no wind and noise.

A colleague who is parenting four children under the age of 8 scoffed at the idea of stillness. “I literally do not have an hour in the day when someone is not touching my body,” they said. The idea of stillness seems elusive in the extreme when confined to a house with other living beings. Even I, who live “alone,” cannot seem to sit without one or more of my three animal housemates wanting to be on top of my person.

Even having a sleeping animal on me does not entirely feel like stillness these days.

And I am not sure what stillness is supposed to feel like anymore.

Stillness brings to my mind the sound of snow falling at night in the country.

Stillness feels like daybreak on a pond without another human being around.

Stillness feels like a time and place where the sound of my own breathing, my own heartbeat, is a noisy intrusion.

Honestly? I cannot name a time in my recent memory – meaning in the last five years or more – when I have experienced that level of stillness.

This line of thought leads me then to consider whether my expectations need to be adjusted to prevent perpetual disappointment when I seek stillness. Can I adjust my understanding of stillness to include the sound of my computer’s hum, the furnace rumbling quietly in the cellar, and the truly remarkably loud clock ticking in the bathroom down the hall?

Buddhism teaches us that the stillness must be found within ourselves, not in our environment, but we are not all skilled at letting go of the noise around us. I think of my

minister parent colleague at home with a nursing infant, a toddler, a preschooler, and a first or second grader, plus a spouse also working from home doing full time ministry, and I cannot imagine how anyone in that house finds stillness except perhaps for the children when they are sleeping. And children do not typically appreciate stillness in the same way adults do.

Human nature is such that we tend to seek what we do not have. If we must live in noise and chaos, we long for quiet respite. If we are isolated and alone, we tend to seek the company of others, or some form of distraction to entertain our minds.

That strikes me as the need to find a balance, equilibrium, between chaos and quiet in our lives. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the rules of natural physics seem to keep our planet busy in a never-ending attempt to achieve that balance. The tides go in and out, water dries up, then rains down again, the planet spins as it orbits the sun. It is all in pursuit of, or perhaps the fine-tuning of, balance.

It is human nature as well to describe things in terms of what they are not. We speak of stillness as the absence of distractions – the lack of noise or visual things that pull our attention in one direction or another.

We describe our emotions that way as well sometimes. We think of courage as fearlessness, of being calm as being without passion or outrage, of being at peace as being free from conflict.

We all know these are false dichotomies – things that do not simply exist one or the other. We know that courage is not being without fear so much as it is acting even though we are afraid. We know that a person can be calm while still feeling intense passion or outrage, and we know quite well that being at peace does not mean that we must be free from conflict.

Seemingly contradictory things can be true at the same time.

Let's look again at stillness.

The natural next step in this discussion would seem to be to conclude that if we can be calm while passionate, and courageous while afraid, that we should be able to be still amid chaos.

And to this I say yes, AND.

Yes, it is possible to achieve stillness amid noise.

AND it is much easier to achieve that stillness with a little space to breathe.

Every beginner's lesson in meditation I have ever seen says something like "set aside some time to devote to meditation. Put away any distractions and allow yourself to settle into a comfortable place like a cushion or a chair..." right? You've all seen and heard that stuff, yes?

Only now we are all stuck inside the house – more so here than in more southern areas – and finding time and space that is not already occupied can be a real challenge.

The very real experiences of sheltering in place make the pursuit of stillness both more difficult and more necessary.

The distractions are extreme.

This pandemic

This presidency

This election season that seems as though it will not end

This economy.

The only reason we do not see ourselves in the same light as those old images of bread lines from the Great Depression is that now people are lining up in cars. Cars stretch for miles in lines to pick up food. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, only the wealthy had automobiles. Today, most US residents either have a car or have access to one.

Those old photographs show men lined up in long black wool coats and hats. That was the uniform of the day. Today the uniform is the automobile.

The reality is the same.

We're in bread lines.

If we aren't, then our neighbors are.

Millions of people are out of work.

Millions more are forced to work because they are considered "essential employees."

Everyone is stressed.

Everyone is scared.

Everyone is tired.

Everyone is *really* tired of being stressed and scared.

Seeking stillness now means we're working uphill to get past all of those stress barriers. The scared parts of our brain tend to have veto control over the more logical parts of the brain, and to get to a place where we can seek stillness, we must first get to a place where our brains are not concerned about being eaten by a saber toothed tiger.

We need to feel at least a little bit safe, somehow.

We need room to seek stillness.

We need room to breathe.

Which means that the seeking of stillness for rejuvenation, for filling our spiritual battery packs is as much more challenging as it is to get through our day.

Depending on which theory you subscribe to, living whatever is your normal life under the kind of stress we are experiencing now requires anywhere from twice to ten times the amount of energy we normally would expend on living that life. Think about that. Its no wonder we're tired.

Getting through work is harder.

Cooking is harder

Doing laundry is somehow more difficult, even if it entirely composed of sweatpants and t-shirts.

Thus, it makes sense that spiritual self-care also requires more effort.

And it also means that that spiritual self-care is that much more important.

Imagine if you took your car on a long trip. You drove across the continent in two days and then drove up and down all the hilly grades and scenic mountain roads of the Rocky Mountains. Your car would need some special care during and after that, don't you think? You'd want to check the brakes and tires and transmission fluid and coolant and all the rest more frequently, wouldn't you? You'd want to schedule an oil change sooner rather than later than the standard 3,000 to 5,000 miles, right?

And on that trip, away from home, in hotels and on the road, doing that maintenance would be more of a hassle than it normally is. And again, that makes it all the more important that it gets done.

Well, our bodies and spirits right now are going through a similar kind of stress.

This adventure started out as an impromptu road trip we weren't necessarily prepared for, but we stopped at the Wawa and picked up road snacks on our way out of town. We expected to be back in a few weeks.

Only now we are on the trans-Canadian Highway, with no sure destination and no clue how long before we can rest. We've run out of beef jerky and trail mix, the tires are bald, the oil hasn't been changed since we can't remember when, and the engine is overheating.

Some of us were able to stop at a Jiffy Lube along the way and got an oil change, but the fact remains that we never expected our cars – in this case, our bodies and spirits – to have to endure this kind of treatment and for this long.

Some of us are really wishing we'd stopped at the last small town and gotten some of this stuff taken care of. And maybe picked up some blankets and matches just in case while we were at it.

The idea of stillness seems elusive, at best.

Don't tell me to be calm  
when there are so many reasons  
to be angry, so much cause for despair!

*I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,  
I said to breathe.  
We're going to need a lot of air  
to make this hurricane together.<sup>1</sup>*

Oh, right. We don't have to be calm. We need to breathe.

We don't have to achieve perfect stillness; we need to breathe.

We don't need to buy a new car; we need a checkup and some basic maintenance. And that is maybe not as hard as we fear.

I need you to breathe.

I need you to breathe.

Yes, things are bad. Yes, things are scary.

I need you to breathe.

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<sup>1</sup> Ungar, Lynn, Poetry and Other Writings (blog) <http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/breathe/> undated, accessed Dec 3, 2020

I need you to live.

When this madness is over [and it will be, I promise] I need us all to be here, alive, present, and ready to gear up for what's next.

I need you to breathe.

We're going to need a lot of air to make this hurricane together.

Keep breathing.

Keep breathing.

May our breathing be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.