

Ever notice how people can ask some really dumb questions? There was a guy standing in line at Wal-Mart with a large bag of Purina dog food. A woman behind him asked if he had a dog. There he is standing in line with a large bag of Purina...."Well, duh..." So he decided to have some fun. He told her no, he didn't have any dogs. He went on to explain that he was starting the Purina Diet....again....although he probably shouldn't because....the last time he'd ended up in the hospital....However, he HAD lost 50 pounds on the diet....before he awakened in an intensive care unit with tubes coming out all over the place and IVs in both arms.

He told her that it was essentially a perfect diet and that the way that it works is to load your pants pockets with Purina nuggets and simply eat 1 or 2 every time you feel hungry. He went on to say that the food is nutritionally complete so he was going to try again.

The lady was horrified, and asked if he'd ended up in the hospital in that condition because he had been poisoned by eating all that dog food. "No," he said, "I had been barking in the street – and a car hit me!" So much for dumb questions! (C.King Duncan, JR., DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Feb 2012, p. 17)

First, some background on this well-known gospel of Martha & Mary. There are, once again, a number of layers to the story. Many of you know that Deacon Rich is an excellent biblical student/scholar. When I have questions about the scriptures, I go to him. One of the questions I had about this text is whether or not this Martha & Mary are the two sisters of Lazarus, as he is nowhere mentioned in the text. The absence of a male presence in the house colors the interpretation of the text. If Martha & Mary were sisters of Lazarus, he was obviously NOT present for this encounter, because one of the reasons why Martha is upset at Mary is because Mary was breaking a sacred social boundary by engaging in conversation with Jesus in the absence of any other 'man-of-the-house.' By doing so, Mary was assuming the role of the man-of-the-house. That simply was not done at that time in that culture. Such an action would have brought shame to their house, which was the worst thing could happen in this honor-based and shame-based culture. Martha is attempting to find an honorable way that will allow everyone to save face. She expects Jesus to understand her coded remarks and reprimand Mary, encouraging her to return to her socially acceptable place with Martha. The shocker comes when Jesus declares that Mary has chosen the better part. That would have been incomprehensible to Martha. The better part of course is doing whatever is necessary to sit at the Lord's feet. No boundary is valid if it keeps us from the one thing necessary: access to the Word of the Lord. St. Luke no doubt wants his community members to examine themselves regarding what they allow to keep them from the one thing necessary. Whatever it is, it should not be. (adapted from unknown publication, p. 1356)

But our culture values productivity above almost everything else – so we tend to read this story through the lens of being and doing – which means that prayer and action have, for many of us, been placed at the opposite ends of the spectrum of spiritual activity. This is a typical interpretation of the Martha-Mary story – it reflects a polarized view of the activist and the contemplative. But the most important word in this argument is AND. We must combine contemplation and action.

To practice the contemplative life without the active life easily leads to self-absorption and 'spiritual greed,' as St. John of the Cross called it. Prayer, spirituality and devotions can become places to hide, even ways of inflating our ego as if we live on a higher level of some sort. Without the hands-on activity of wiping a bloody nose or scrubbing a dirty floor, or doing something for the poor, compassion can shrivel into sentimental feelings. Being 'moved with compassion' as Jesus was, involved not just sad feelings but also

action: spending hours healing the sick; risking to touch a contagious person whose contact could be life-threatening; teaching a searching group of people for hours (Mk 1:4; Mt 14:14, Mk 6:34)

To practice the active life without contemplation can result in our thinking that we must walk through every door that opens. We might not take time to discern if a presenting opportunity is appropriate-- or if we are the right person for the task. But with reflection, we might decide that the open door is, indeed, one for us to walk through but in such a way that we pay attention to the people walking with us. Without reflection, we end up running on empty and excusing ourselves because at least the job gets done. Eventually we uncover too many needs from too many people, and our service can become mechanical, artificial, and forced – sapped of spontaneity and playfulness. We weren't built to run on our own power – but on the companionship and guidance of God. (Jan Johnson, WEAVINGS XXV #3, p. 36-37)

Second, so what's the problem? For most of us, we're too heavy on the activity side. It's busy-ness, or as one writer coins it, hurry sickness. We are forever in a hurry, haunted by the fear that there are just not enough hours in a day to do what needs to be done. We will read faster, talk faster, and when listening, nod faster to encourage the talker to accelerate. We will find ourselves chafing whenever we have to wait. At a grocery store, if we have a choice between 2 check-out lines, we find ourselves counting the number of items per cart. If we have a really bad case of hurry sickness, then even after we get in line, we keep track of the person who *would have been me in the other line*. If we get through and the person who would have been me is still waiting, we're happy. We won! But if the alter-me is walking out of the store and we're still in line, we feel depressed. This is hurry-sickness. Are we nuts or what?! Which reminds me of a cartoon someone sent me of a squirrel, lying on a psychiatrist's couch. The squirrel says: "You mean I am what I eat? Are you saying I'm nuts?"

Despite all this rushing around, we are still not satisfied. So out of the desperate need to hurry, we find ourselves doing or thinking more than one thing at a time. Psychologists speak of this as polyphasic activity – a fancy euphemism for multi-tasking. We could call it 'doing more than one thing at a time' but that takes too long to say! Our cars are favorite places for multi-tasking. We drive, eat, drink coffee, monitor the radio, shave or apply make-up, talk on the phone and make hand gestures – all at the same time. Or even try to watch television, read, eat dinner, and carry on a conversation simultaneously. (adapted from John Ortberg, THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED, p. 79-80)

When we ask anyone how they are, what's the answer? "I'm busy." "SO busy." "CRAZY busy." It is obviously a boast disguised as a complaint. And the stock response is a kind of congratulation: "That's a good problem to have," or "better than the opposite."

Notice it isn't generally people pulling back-to-back shifts in the ICU or commuting by bus to three minimum-wage jobs who tell us how busy they are; what those people are is not busy but tired. Exhausted. Dead on their feet. It's almost always people whose lamented busyness is purely self-imposed: work and obligations they've taken on voluntarily, classes and activities they've 'encouraged' their kids to participate in. They're busy because of their own ambition or drive or anxiety or desire for money, because they're addicted to busyness and dread what they might have to face in its absence.....themselves. Egad! What a thought! It's actually scary to many people.

Our present hysteria is not a necessary or inevitable condition of life; it's something we've chosen, if only by our acquiescence to it. Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously our life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if we are so busy, completely

booked, in demand every hour of the day. Look at how important I am! (adapted from Tim Kreider, "The 'Busy' Trap," THE NEW YORK TIMES, June 30, 2012)

Third, so what do we DO? We work AND pray. We rest. We seek balance. We have to live life between too poles – the poles of too much – and too little. Life should be flavored by many things, not stuffed full of any single thing that consumes our energies and dampens our appetite for the rest of life. This is the reality of many people in our culture. Work is their only real thing.

Have you yet reached your homiletical threshold of pain? Here goes – now don't go nuts, my brother and sister squirrels! But the spirituality of balance has 5 attributes. This will be quick – BALANCED even! HA!)

1. It has equilibrium. We know when to quit – and we CAN quit. When we find ourselves immersed in any one part of life to the detriment of all of its other facets – family, prayer, rest, education, church, play – we're no longer running our lives; our lives are running us. We need to be able to STOP.
 2. Variety. This is the gift of learning to savor life at every level. We go to the children's baseball games or dances because we love doing it, not because we feel we must do it. We take family time and play time and reading time and rest time because each of them makes us a fuller human being. Then we have new energy to take to our work rather than feeling our work drain energy out of the rest of our lives.
 3. Self-awareness. This is the monitor of the heart that tells us when we're too tired too often to be able to really enjoy life, to be our best selves for everyone around us. When the fatigue settles into the center of our souls, when we get up as tired as we were when we went to bed, when we only half-listen, half-read, half-smile, and half-care about anything anymore, we are inclining dangerously to one side. It is time to tilt back.
 4. Re-creation is the virtue that sends us off to cleanse the palate of our souls from the noxious residues of yesterday. It is that one single activity – the piano or the team, the fishing hole or the woods, the workshop, the book, the recipe, the yoga class – that makes us forget yesterday's concerns and makes us young of soul again.
 5. Imperfection! It's the gift that saves us from destroying ourselves in the name of some notion of excellence that exists only in our own mind. It is the delusion of perfection that drives us to live so imperfectly! There are some things in life worth doing that are worth doing poorly. FAMILY for instance! They're all dysfunctional! LOVE! It's always self-serving in some way. If we wait to get it perfect, we'll never do anything! Accept that life is imperfect – that WE are imperfect – and so is everyone else. And then relax. God is in charge, not us. And that's quite ok. It will all turn out in the end. Not because I say so, but because God says so. As St. Catherine of Siena so beautifully summed up: "The worst possible thing has already happened (she was referring to the cross of Christ), and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."
- AMEN! (last section adapted from Joan Chittister, WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD, p. not given....)