

George Phillips, an elderly man from Walled Lake, Michigan, was going up to bed, when his wife told him that he'd left the light on in the garden shed, which she could see from the bedroom window. George opened the back door to go turn off the light, but saw that there were people in the shed stealing things. He phoned the police, who asked, "Is someone in your house?" He said, "No," but some people are breaking into my garden shed and stealing from me."

The police dispatcher said "All patrols are busy, you should lock your doors and an officer will be along when one is available." George said, "OK." He hung up the phone and counted to 30. Then he phoned the police again. "Hello, I just called you a few seconds ago because there were people stealing things from my shed. Well, you don't have to worry about them now because I just shot and killed them both; the dogs are eating them right now," and he hung up.

Within 5 minutes, 6 Police Cars, a SWAT Team, a Helicopter, 2 Fire Trucks, a Paramedic and an Ambulance showed up at the Phillips' residence, and caught the burglars red-handed. One of the Policemen said to George, "I thought you said that you'd shot them." George said, "I thought you said there was nobody available!"

OK, we have the famous Martha-Mary text – which always ticks off the workaholics because they think they get a bad rap from Jesus, because Mary gets praised for not helping in the kitchen. But this story is linked to the Gospel text we had last Sunday about the Good Samaritan – a story that is all about action – compassion expressed in real deeds of mercy and risk, love with feet on it, and a final command from Jesus to "go and do likewise." If we had that lesson alone, we could conclude that the only way to please God, and the only measure of discipleship in the Kingdom of God is action. That would make Christianity defined by a resume of activity and accomplishment in the name of God. And of course, Christian action is crucial if faith is to make any impact on a world that knows little about the love of God. But that was the message of last week.

This week, we hear about Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. There are a number of layers to this simple statement. A woman's place in the first century was in the kitchen, not out among the men in the circle of discipleship. First-century rabbis even forbade a woman from sitting at their feet. One famous Rabbi even said, "Better for the scriptures to be burned than fall into the hands of a woman!" The place of learning, the place of a disciple, was a closed club for men only. But Jesus came to create a new kind of definition of discipleship, a family of God that included men and women, adults and children, rich and poor, saints and sinners, all races, including the foreigners among them. It was a radical idea in the first century. Even 21 centuries later, we still haven't quite caught up to Jesus' bold idea of inclusivity. Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus, just like Peter and James and John. The very idea of a person so losing their sense of place would have been offensive to some, and embarrassing to Martha. And beside this, why didn't Jesus make Mary at least help her sister? (help from GRACEWORKS, 17 July 2022, p. 13-14)

Second, there is no single correct interpretation of this story of Martha & Mary, and it requires a look at its context. It seems that Luke sandwiched it between the story of the generous Samaritan and Jesus' teaching on prayer which we will hear next week. Luke seems to be indicating that the tension itself is important. Martha and Mary both chose the good, but there can be too much of a good thing. Christian disciples must continually seek the balance. (Mary McGlone, REAL PRESENCE, CELEBRATION PUBLICATIONS, July 21, 2019)

Given our American context, I'm going to suggest that our biggest issue is our hyper-busyness. We've never had an outbreak of quietism and prayer in the United States! David Steindl-Rast writes that we are "saturated with information – but often bereft of meaning; we feel caught in a never-ending swirl of duties and demands, things to finish, things to put right. Yet as we dart anxiously from one activity to the next, we sense that there is more to life than these worldly agendas." (THE MUSIC OF SILENCE, p 5)

The reality is that American culture is a powerful narcotic, for good and for bad. It is important that we first underline that there's partly a good side to this. A narcotic soothes and protects against brute, raw pain. Our culture has within it every kind of thing (from medicine to entertainment) to shield us from suffering. That can be good, but a narcotic also can be bad, especially when it becomes a way of escaping reality. Where our culture is particularly dangerous is in the way it can perpetually shield us from having to face the deeper issues of life: God, faith, forgiveness, morality, and mortality. It can constitute what has been called "a virtual conspiracy" (Jan Walgrave) against the interior life by keeping us so entertained, so busy, so preoccupied, and so distracted that we lose all focus on the deeper things.

We live in a world of instant and constant communication, of mobile phones and e-mails, of iPads that contain whole libraries of music, of television packages that contain hundreds of channels, business open 24-hours a day, of restaurants and clubs that stay open all night, of sounds that never die and lights that never go out. We can be amused, distracted, and catered to at any time.

While this has made our lives wonderfully efficient, it also has conspired against depth. We've never had an outbreak of deep thinking in the United States either! The danger is that we are all developing permanent attention deficit disorder. We are attentive to so many things that, ultimately, we aren't attentive to anything, particularly to what is deepest inside of us.

This is not an abstract concept! Typically our day is so full of work, noise, pressure, rush, that when we do finally get home and have some time when we could shut down all the stimulation, we are so fatigued that what soothes us is something that functions as a narcotic: a sporting event, a game show on TV, a mindless sitcom, or anything that can calm our tensions and relax us enough to sleep. It's not bad if we do this on an occasional night, but it is bad when we do it every night.

What happens is that we never find the space in our lives to touch what's deepest inside of us and inside of others. Given the power of our culture, we can go along like this for years until something cracks in our lives – a loved one dies, someone breaks our heart, the doctor tells us we have a terminal disease – or some other crisis suddenly renders empty all the stimulation and entertainment in the world. Then we are forced to look into our own depth, and that can be a frightening abyss if we have spent years avoiding it.

Sometimes we need a narcotic. But we have to know when it is time to unplug the television, turn off the phone, shut down the computer, silence the iPhone, and resist going out for coffee with a friend, so that, for one moment at least, we are not avoiding making friends with that one part of us, the deepest part, the God part, that someday will accompany us into the sunset. (Rolheiser, PRAYER: OUR DEEPEST LONGING, p. 11-13) Anne Lamott puts it in her usual pithy fashion: "Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you."

Third, the solution. Balance. What if when we die, God says to us: "What I wanted you to do was play more?" Life is ultimately about love – and that means friendship. Friendship is play, and play, like everything else, takes time. One of the secrets of successful businesspeople is, invariably, balance between their personal and professional lives. They'll say that their weekends are sacrosanct and they don't work much

more than 40 hours a week. But so many fail at balance. We have all kinds of seemingly good reasons: My boss expects that we stay past 7 pm.; I need the quiet of the weekend to get this project off my desk; just another hour or 2 will really help me, and I have no plans tonight anyway; I've got my kids' tuition to worry about, so I have to put the extra hours in to get a promotion. Sooner or later, though, the moment of truth comes along when we realize our life is passing by and we worry that all we have to show for it is work.

An accomplished physicist, college professor and novelist writes that he recently came to a 'horrifying realization' – "I no longer waste time."

"From the instant I open my eyes in the morning until I turn out the lights at night, I am at work on some project. For any available quantity of time during the day, I feel compelled to find a project....Unconsciously, without thinking about it, I have subdivided my waking day into smaller and smaller units of 'efficient' time, until there is no fat left on the bone, no breathing spaces remaining. I never goof off....

"I rarely imagine and dream beyond the 4 walls of a prescribed project. I hardly ever give my mind permission to take a recess, go outdoors and play. What have I become? A robot? A cog in a wheel? A unit of efficiency itself?

"I can remember a time when I did not live this way. I can remember those days of my childhood, when I would walk home from school by myself and take long detours through the woods. With the silence broken only by the sound of my own footsteps, I would sit on the banks of Cornfield Pond and waste hours watching tadpoles in the shallows or the sway of water grasses in the wind. My mind meandered. I thought about what I wanted for dinner that night, whether God was a man or a woman, whether tadpoles knew they were destined to become frogs, what it would feel like to be dead, what I wanted to be when I became a man, the fresh bruise on my right knee...

"What have I lost when I no longer permit myself to 'waste' time...? I believe I have lost something of my inner self. By inner self, I mean that part of me that imagines, that dreams, that explores, that is constantly questioning who I am and what is important to me. My inner self is my true freedom. My inner self roots me to me, and to the ground beneath me....

"When I listen to my inner self, I hear the breathing of my spirit, of GOD'S Spirit. Those breaths are so tiny and delicate, I need stillness to hear them. I need aloneness to hear them....Without the breathing and voice of my inner self, without the whispering of the Holy Spirit, I am a prisoner of the world around me. Worse than a prisoner, I do not know what has been taken from me; I do not know who I am, WHOSE I am." (Alan Lightman, adapted from an essay in LIVING WITH THE GENIE: ESSAYS ON TECHNOLOGY AND THE QUEST FOR HUMAN MASTERY, in CONNECTIONS, July 2004, p 3)

I conclude with words of Jesuit Fr. Thomas Sweetser, who puts it this way: "Simplify your lives. Don't push so hard to produce and keep up the pace. It will only lead to failure. Enjoy life. Separate work and home life. Love each other. Find some quiet time and pay attention to inner longings and desires. It is the God within who is speaking to you. Be gentle, be generous, be a blessing, be at peace. Find time for a Sabbath day while you have the energy and health to enjoy it. Work hard but work smart. Do not let work consume you and all you hold dear. Take time to cry, make time to laugh. Enjoy your friends. Above all, be grateful – for God has been good to us, through it all. Amen." (THE PARISH AS COVENANT – I freely adapted this, p. 65)