

A SPIRITUAL ANTIDOTE TO THE TYRANNY OF THE URGENT

What is important is seldom urgent, and what is urgent is seldom important.
— Attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower

Ask a few of your colleagues at work, “How are you?” and you almost always will hear, “Very busy,” “What a crazy time,” “I have never experienced so much change.” Although no doubt these comments are true, they reflect a habit and are one of the many symptoms that can taint a work culture with the “tyranny of the urgent.”¹



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If you already are scanning this page and moving on — one of my habits — you may be getting caught up in what novelist Nicholson Baker calls “time’s cattle drive.”² Like a herd, we all are moving faster, uncertain as to why and to where.

CHAOTIC BUSYNESS

Author James Gleick’s commentary “Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything” covers — timesaving devices that don’t measure up, the swiftness of movies and television commercials, grazers who change channels 22 times a minute, all-night banks and drive-in funeral parlors, the place of email and texting in our revved-up work lives, the reverence bestowed upon quick thinking over long-term perspectives, the pressure in the business world to maximize efficiency and save time, and the shrinking realm of reflection and time for silence. Everybody, everywhere, seems to be busier.

This short reflection is not an attempt to evaluate busywork versus value work, or to explore the research that maintains we are finite human beings, with finite energy and abilities, attempting to get through a tsunami amount of “stuff,” resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed. This reflection simply wants to suggest one an-

tidote to the chaotic busyness and the tyranny of the urgent that most of us find ourselves caught up in, both in our personal and professional lives.

AN ANTIDOTE

The most obvious antidote is to slow down and transition to the inner world from the pull of the demands of the external world. The Gospels often mention that Jesus intentionally moved into silence and solitude: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35). In fact, Jesus explicitly advises, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.” (Matthew 6:6).

Yet it is not that easy. We often find in silence, in our interior world, just as much noise in our thoughts and feelings as we encounter in the outer world. Abbess Syncletica, a fourth-century desert mother of the church, left behind the cities and

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towns to live in the solitude of the desert, to get away from all the busyness and noise, only to discover that there was an even more frenetic racket in the constant flow of her own thoughts and feelings.

A new situation confronted her. What can we do to offset this habitual temptation to be distracted, in the world and in our minds? She discovered the truth of spiritual traditions: “Peace is an inside job.”

This should be no surprise. K. Bayly reflects, “In daily life, our minds are constantly being distracted and we are often used to juggling a multitude of things on an hourly basis. Our senses are bombarded much more frequently than we are consciously aware of. Is it any surprise then, that when we come to sit quietly, we don’t feel comfortable? We become familiar with what we are surrounded by and the habits we form. Therefore, if we are used to being on the go, it’s natural to find it hard to be alone, in silence.”³

When the busy person stops, the busy mind keeps going.

Virtually all spiritual traditions describe practices to deal with this phenomenon. Today we are blessed with a huge range of options that can support us in slowing down and being more present. Ironically, there is so much being taught and written on the topic, that it, too, can feel overwhelming in and of itself. That said, the foundational spiritual teaching is the same: that the ever-busy highway of thoughts and feelings is always there, but we do not have to engage or identify with the internal noise. There is a space between identifying the thoughts and feelings and identifying *with* the thoughts and feelings. This sacred space offers incredible freedom from the tyranny of noise in both our internal and external worlds. But like all freedom, finding it and using it take choice, commitment and practice.

THE PRACTICE AND THE BENEFITS

Many meditation or contemplative practices are relatively simple to describe, yet they take a significant commitment to build it into one’s life on a regular basis. Many of us are familiar with the terms meditation and mindfulness, but not neces-

sarily with the practices. Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us. Mindful meditation is no longer some strange, esoteric practice that requires you to completely disconnect from your life and travel to a retreat in a remote part of the world. It’s as accessible as your phone, or even your local neighborhood. In fact, most of our facilities utilize “Mindful Based Stress Reduction” in pain clinics to great effect.⁴ Mindfulness meditation is a staple of employee engagement and development in several Fortune 500 organizations, including General Mills, Goldman Sachs, Google (part of the company now called Alphabet), Apple and Nike.

Are we, as Catholic health care, offering and supporting mindfulness meditation for our associates in our departments, facilities and system

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office? The *Harvard Business Review* reports that neurology clearly shows how mindfulness meditation enables brain activity to be redirected from the limbic system to the prefrontal cortex — basically from the reactionary part of the brain to the rational part of the brain. This change causes us to “change the way we react to everything,” and enables us to rely more on our executive functioning rather than on impulses.⁵

Simply, mindfulness meditation enables us to be more centered, present to ourselves and others, and focused in our often-scattered days and lives. There are numerous other empirically demonstrated benefits that are to be gained from a regular practice of meditating.⁶ An interesting side effect of the practice is increased concentration and, in turn, increased productivity. Studies currently are taking place to review the effects of mindfulness meditation on employee retention and contributions to a positive culture.

THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION

This genre of mindfulness meditation is a relatively recent phenomenon, while the Judeo-Christian tradition has had a similar practice for thousands of years.⁷ Contemplative prayer, which has its roots in Scripture and in the lived reality of the desert fathers and mothers of the church, is a prayer of silence, a receptive prayer of resting in God. Fr. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and one of the contemporary exponents of contemplative or centering prayer, teaches that this form of contemplation is the opening of mind and heart, our whole being, to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer, but it can put other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. Like all forms of meditation, the results of the practice are not necessarily experienced while engaging in it, but over time, the benefits are immense as one grows in relationship with oneself, others and the Absolute Other, the source and ground of our being, God.

Fr. Keating, among others, maintains that this practice is the key to overcoming the tyranny of the urgent in one's personal and work life. Like other practices discussed here, centering prayer creates a freedom to not over-identify with the constant flow of thoughts and emotions, but to

identify the flow rather than identify *with* it. The practice cultivates what is described as a "contemplative interiority" allowing an inner peace to develop over time and that is often more noticeable to others.

While I was teaching a three-year leadership formation program, one CEO approached me and said, "You know all that stuff you have been teach-

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ing on centering? Well, I have been doing it now for a few months, but I noticed little or no change, so I dropped it. That same week, my wife said to me, 'Have you stopped your alone time (her words)?' I said yes, and without mincing words, she told me to keep doing it, that it made me so much easier to be around!"

Contemplative practice leads to less reactive behavior, greater self-awareness and the ability to be more fully present to others. In other words, it subverts the tyranny of the urgent with a sensitivity to the present. But most importantly, centering prayer is a receptive method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. It is a method of prayer that is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.⁸

Practice, patience and perseverance are the key to engaging in meditation and contemplation.

Reflection Questions: Do you have a practice that helps you to slow down and be reflective about how you are and what you are doing? Does it include periods of silence? If not, would that be helpful?

Would you be interested in incorporating a mindfulness practice or a contemplative practice into your daily routine?

Practical Suggestions: Inquire at your organization, perhaps in your mission and spiritual care department, if there is a mindfulness meditation group or centering prayer group. If not, what would it be like to help spearhead one?

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

1. Choose a word to symbolize your consent to God's presence. Sitting comfortably, with your back straight and eyes closed, slowly become aware of your breathing.
2. When ready, silently introduce the word you chose, in rhythm with your breathing.
3. As thoughts, emotions and distractions come and go, don't engage with them. Instead, return your mind ever so gently to your breathing and/or your word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, gently return to everyday consciousness and remain in silence for a couple of minutes.
5. Remember the principal effects of contemplative practice are experienced in daily life, often by others, and not necessarily in the period of contemplative prayer itself.

— Adapted from *Contemplative Outreach.org*

To sustain a meditation/contemplative practice, you need support. This can be with a spiritual director or with a group that meets regularly — ideally, weekly.

If you “google” centering prayer or mindfulness practices, you will find all the resources you need.

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NOTES

1. Charles Hammel, *The Tyranny of the Urgent* (Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the United States of America, 1994).
2. Nicholson Baker, *The Fermata* (New York: Random House, 1994), 47.
3. Kat Bayly, *Why are We Scared of Silence?* www.ekhartyoga.com.
4. A process developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.
5. Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter and Gitte Dyb-
kjaer, “Spending 10 Minutes a Day on Mindfulness Subtly Changes the Way You React to Everything,” *Harvard Business Review* website, Jan. 18, 2017. <https://hbr.org/2017/01/spending-10-minutes-a-day-on-mindfulness-subtly-changes-the-way-you-react-to-everything>. It is noteworthy that neurological science now can empirically legitimate the benefits of contemplative practices.
6. Studies at the Mayo Clinic show how mindfulness meditation helps people to gain a new perspective on stressful situations; build skills to manage stress; increase self-awareness; focus on the present; reduce negative emotions; increase imagination and creativity; increase patience and tolerance. The practice also benefits cardiovascular and immune health. See Mayo Clinic staff, “Meditation: A Simple, Fast Way to Reduce Stress,” Oct. 17, 2017. www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858.
7. There are important distinctions to be made between Buddhist meditation; secular mindfulness; Christian contemplative practices and many more, but that is beyond the scope of this reflection.
8. For more information about contemplative practices and centering prayer, see the Contemplative Outreach website, <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org>.

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