

**IN PRAISE OF GOOFING OFF**  
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**The UU Congregation of Danbury**  
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Many years ago, around this time of year, I went on a weeklong retreat at the magnificent Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia. This was in conjunction with a program I was taking in how to be a spiritual director. One of the features of this retreat was a full day of silence, beginning Saturday evening and ending 24 hours later.

I was not looking forward to this. True, I have my introverted side. True, I need some quiet time each day. But 24 hours? That seemed like a lot. It sounded like an ordeal, something to be gotten through. It sounded, frankly, like hard work!

But Don Grayston, the program's director, encouraged us not to see it that way. He said, "Think of the silence as a gift. Go anywhere you want, do anything you want. We just ask that you do it in silence." Hearing that helped me relax – a little.

After Don's orientation, we had a worship service, and then dispersed. I decided to begin my silence with a walk outside. As I left the building, the very first thing to confront me was a tree – a very tall, very green, very full evergreen tree. I had passed it dozens of times before, without paying much attention.

But tonight was different. Tonight, the tree seemed to beckon: "Notice me! Notice me!" it seemed to say. And so I stopped and, well, *noticed* – noticed its height, its fullness, its deep, deep greenness. "Yes indeed – you are a beautiful tree!" I acknowledged silently.

But that wasn't all. Suddenly it occurred to me that there was actually something comical about this tree! Rather than being neat and sedate, it was asymmetrical, a bit droopy. Its branches pointed every which way, and absolutely dripped with green cones. As I stood, transfixed, peals of laughter welled up inside me – joyful laughter, not *at* the tree, but *with* the tree! And not only laughter, but a deep sense of communion, as well.

That was pretty much the way it went for the next 24 hours. I roamed the campus, overwhelmed by the sheer extravagance of it all. Joy and laughter were everywhere: in the sky blue-pink sunset, in the rose garden full of blooms, in the bulge-eyed, slow-moving *koi* in the Japanese garden. Everywhere, there was mirth. Everywhere, there was ecstasy.

The finale came at suppertime. I sat on the lawn outside the Student Union with my sandwich, and watched three crows fight over an abandoned, half-eaten box of onion rings. They made an elegant game of it – one would sneak up on the other and snatch one of the treasures, and the other would chase, cawing in indignation. Then they would switch roles, and start all over again.

As I watched and laughed (silently, of course) I could feel some inner healing take place – healing from 60-hour work weeks and too much to get done. In that moment, a new way of seeing took root in me: At the heart of life, is play. We, in the midst of creation, are called to play – to laugh, to frolic, to enJOY. Play and laughter are not a pleasant distraction, making “reality” bearable. Rather, they lie at the core of reality, at the heart of creation.

As it turns out, this is not a new idea. For example, Meister Eckhart said it in the 1300s: “In the heart of the Trinity the creator laughs and gives birth to the child. The child laughs back at the Creator, and together they give birth to the Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to creation.” Even as a Unitarian Universalist, I have to admit that’s a pretty good argument for the Trinity!

Now, Meister Eckhart was declared a heretic – but even the orthodox can’t dismiss Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is not only a saint, but a Doctor of the Church. What he said is in line with Eckhart: “The goal of the contemplative life is pleasure.” Pleasure – not asceticism, not virtue, not morality. In the life of meditation or prayer, the goal is to find “that in which the enjoyment is greatest, and that which we find most attractive.” And “from this, love comes about.”

Neither of these medieval thinkers got this out of the blue – it is part and parcel of Western religious tradition. For example, the Hebrew prophets describe the time to come, the redeemed time – and it’s a time of joyous feasting and making merry. Another example is the Song of Songs – beautiful, ecstatic, not to mention erotic, poetry.

And then we have Jesus of Nazareth. As far as anyone can tell, Jesus *never* turned down an invitation. Over and over, through his parables, he taught that the kingdom of God is a party.” He also reminded people, “The Sabbath is made for humans – not humans for the Sabbath.” In other words, the Sabbath is meant to liberate us, not enslave us. Finally, in the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus chided Martha for being “worried and distracted about many things” and praised Mary for taking the time to just sit.

How about you? When you were growing up, is this the message you got? If you were raised in a Christian home, were you told the story of Mary and Martha? And if you did, did anyone agree with Jesus – that “the good portion” is to be like Mary? To sit and just listen? Just *be*?

Or did you get a different message? Rather than the Song of Songs, were you quoted the Book of Proverbs, with its warnings about the dangers of idleness? Were you admonished to “stop sitting around and wasting time – all you’re doing is goofing off”?

My friend Robert Jonas writes about his growing up in a way that rings true for me, and perhaps you, too:

[N]o one ever told me that there was a spiritual dimension in the expectant silence of waiting for a cedar waxwing to come back for more berries. I thought that when I

sat silently on a log, waiting to hear Canada geese pass overhead, I was doing something I should be ashamed of – doing nothing. I was a good Lutheran, and doing nothing was just being lazy, practically a sin.

Growing up in our culture, we may have been treated more to the “gospel of Aesop” than to the gospel of Jesus. Do you remember the fable of the ant and the grasshopper? It’s the one where the grasshopper plays and sings all summer long, while the ant gathers food industriously. When winter comes, the grasshopper is starving, and comes to the ant for help. But the ant turns away, and in a self-righteous tone says, “Since you sang all summer, you may dance all winter.”

Now clearly, there’s a certain realism to this. But there’s a problem, too – beyond the obvious one that the ant is nasty and sanctimonious, hardly a role model! The real problem, I think, is lack of balance. One is *either* like the ant, *or* like the grasshopper. There’s no middle ground.

Our culture is clearly skewed to the ant’s side of the equation. Perhaps this has always been true to some extent – our society has been fueled by “the Protestant ethic” of hard work. But studies show an insidious trend in just the past two decades or so. In this time, leisure has shrunk drastically. This is ironic, since half a century ago all the futurist thinkers were saying that by now we’d have more leisure than we knew what to do with.

In her book *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor reminds us that in the late 1950s the four-day work week was thought to “loom on the immediate horizon.” “Experts” estimated that by now we’d have either a 22 hour work week, a 6-month work year - or a standard retirement age of 38! There was a lot of hand wringing about what Americans would do with all that spare time.

By the 1970s, leisure had become a non-issue. And by the 1990s, nine hours had been added to the average work week, and people were complaining about a shortage of free time. Now, of course, most people are as overworked as ever, while some languish in unemployment.

Even children are affected by overwork. Parents talk about how their kids are overscheduled, and so many teens speak of feeling under constant pressure. Family psychologist Dan Kindlon talks about a new medical issue: a rash of orthopedic problems caused by the weight of students’ backpacks. He also claims that most teens these days routinely suffer from sleep deprivation – a serious health issue.

Overwork is also a serious *spiritual* issue. The problem is not with work *per se*, nor even with working *hard*. There is joy in working hard to get a task accomplished. Work becomes a problem when it takes over our lives, when we lose perspective. It becomes a problem if we’re driven to work for the wrong reasons – out of guilt, or to avoid intimacy, or out of a deep sense of unworthiness. It becomes a problem if our lives are fueled by workaholicism. This may seem like a healthy, or “clean” addiction – but like any addiction, it’s deadening in the long term.

Work also becomes a problem if we believe that the world will collapse if we stop working. If we believe that, then we're putting ourselves in the place of God – and that's always spiritually dangerous.

The late, legendary family therapist, Rabbi Ed Friedman, talked about “overfunctioners” – people who take on more of the workload of a system than truly belongs to them. In doing this, they unwittingly encourage the people around them to “underfunction” – to do less than they can, or ought to do. The overfunctioner gets locked into a chronic pattern of overwork, most likely accompanied by anger, resentment at not being appreciated, and nagging. This can happen at work, at home, and even in congregations!

The way out of this cycle is *not* to work and nag more intensely. It's also not helpful to walk away in a huff, abandoning the whole project. Rather, it's to “defect in place” – to stay in relationship with people, but to quietly back off from taking on what's not ours – and trusting the system to right itself.

In Biblical tradition, Sabbath is not an option, but a command. There's a *justice* component to Sabbath – it was a safeguard against oppression and exploitation. But it's interesting to note that the Sabbath is also commanded in reference to *cosmology*. Even *God* didn't work all the time, but rested on the seventh day, in the very beginning. In other words, Sabbath is woven into the very fabric of the universe. There's a pattern of work and rest – a Sabbath rhythm - that connects us with the heart of life, and makes us whole.

If work has taken over our lives, then we're no longer fully alive. We're in what Tagore called The Great Separation. We're divorced from our soul life, cut off from the springs of our inner being. And that, I think, is what the myth of “The Fall” is really about. The “Snake” reading is light-hearted, but spiritually, Anne Herbert is right on target.

If overwork is in our bones, then we're invited to recover a sense of Sabbath. In the beginning, we probably have to be very intentional about this – to build it into our schedule. We may have to plan new patterns and rhythms that leave time for play, and even for goofing off. We may need to schedule our time to do things that are totally unproductive, that have no redeeming social value.

And we may need to think of sabbath beyond “one day of rest a week” or “two or three weeks of vacation a year.” With all our recreation concentrated into one time period, we may spend it all just recovering, rather than re-creating! And so we might consider cultivating “sabbath consciousness” - weaving sabbath into *all* our days. Not just every week, or every year – but every hour, every minute, every second. With sabbath consciousness, our work can become play – and even prayer.

What about congregations? As spiritual communities, they're called to put forth alternative visions of what the world could be like – and to *be* the change we want to see.

Part of this is embodying sabbath consciousness. As people of faith, we can be careful not to fall into lockstep with the workaholic culture around us.

We can make sure our church work is spiritually nourishing – not just one more activity on an already long “to do” list. We can make sure that no one burns out from carrying too much of the load.

We can also weave playfulness into all that we do together. We can make sure that *everyone* has a chance to frolic!

To do this is to be part of the healing of the world.