

Autumn People
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
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"Try to remember a kind of September when life was slow and oh so mellow... Try to remember, and if you remember, then follow." We sang these memorable lines in the service this morning. We love the melody and the familiar lyrics. The song elicits a warm, fuzzy, nostalgic feeling.

Yet, I'm wondering: try as you might, *can* you remember that kind of September? I must admit, I have trouble remembering living in such a slow and oh so mellow time. I think many of us, plagued as we are by constant distractions, might have some trouble remembering my opening words! Do you? But, if we could *remember* a slow and mellow September, would we, could we, *follow*?

In our reading earlier, the Rev. Patrick O'Neill reminds us that poet T.S. Eliot called April, "the cruelest month." I'd argue that here, in modern-day America, once-mellow September gives April a formidable run for its money.

September is not slow and mellow anymore for many of us. It's the first week of church, the first month of school, we've packed away our beach chairs and flip-flops. We're ramping up...school lunches, work, committees and causes, dinner and dishes, checkbooks to balance, relationships to keep afloat, gardens to prepare for winter, books to read for the book club, cookies to bake for social hour. The list is endless, even for some of you retired folk.

In O'Neill's words, "autumn people slow down, enjoy a certain pace." Sounds appealing, doesn't it? Some of us run around being bouncy Spring people 12 months straight, not looking very closely at much except our fitbits and our smartphones.

We may confess silently to ourselves and aloud to one another: "I love my family and my work (or at least the cash flow it provides), I love my friends, my volunteer work, my church, my alone time. But there aren't enough hours in the day. How long can I be a Spring person in autumn? I'm stressed, I'm tired, I'm frustrated and I'm feeling guilty." How long, indeed?

O'Neill also explains that "Autumn people need alone time; time to think, time to ponder, time to take their bearings in a world where the seasons are ever-changing, where the colors are varied and the paths are covered over."

In my view, this description makes *all of us* "autumn people" because, in order to lead balanced and sane lives, we all need time alone, time to ponder, to take our bearings, even us predominantly extroverted Spring people. I know I do.

And yet, many of us are busy around the clock, claiming to crave downtime as we jot yet another commitment into our google calendars. Is "downtime" a euphemism for sanity? for Autumn time? We suffer from what one pundit calls "scheduled

hyperactivity." Others refer to it as "over-functioning." Some simply say, "That's modern life. Deal with it."

According to sociologists, a jammed household calendar is the new status symbol. You constantly hear people say, "*You should see how busy we are.* It's like this hamster wheel of life. We didn't know how to get off. Priorities which we might want to set, like school, church, activism, or healthy personal development are undermined (one could even say, hijacked) by strangers or by new social norms like incessant texting.

Coaches claim to have been deluged with e-mails from disgruntled and frustrated parents who spent Christmas afternoon at a game and Easter morning in the rink. And why shouldn't they be frustrated?

24/7 is a catchphrase we're all used to by now...as in "I'm hooked up to the Internet on my watch; my fitbit is always on; I get notifications from Instagram 24/7." Yikes! When do we quietly reflect and ponder? We seem to be "connected," but not in the right way. Are we actually "engaged?" The society we've created is one which is always wired (but detached) and scorns rest (unless you pay a pretty penny for time at a spa or spiritual retreat and literally remove yourself from the madness).

Friends - this busyness is lethal. I learned recently that the Chinese pictograph for "busy" is the combination of two characters, "heart" and "killing." A successful, busy life can become a violent enterprise.

Psychologists warn that this scheduled hyperactivity actually robs kids and adults of what they need most -- time to connect with themselves and with family and friends; to keep mental health and emotional ties from withering. So, how can we set limits and set priorities, for ourselves, for our families, for employees, for committee chairs, for Board members? How can we reclaim time and reclaim an identity as "Autumn people?"

For our ancestors, time was not linear; it was seasonal and circular and cyclical. In his book Time Wars, Jeremy Rivkin reminds us that we once lived in a more pagan, or earth-based way : by the summer and winter solstice, lunar cycles, planting and harvesting crops, remembering births and deaths.

It was an internal calendar oriented to the past and to commemoration. Part of being on the internal clock, so to speak, had to do with paying attention to changing seasons and constellations, the rooster crowing, the ebb and flow of tides, the growing of children, the sap flowing, the bees taking to nectar, birds migrating and returning.

Folks worked hard, to be sure, but time *was* slow and mellow. Even today, in some parts of Africa and on Papua New Guinea, the concept of time as we understand it simply doesn't even exist. There is no equivalent word for "hour" or "minute." It is day when the sun rises and night when it sets. Work is a holistic aspect of living. No one knows or even cares how old a relative is when he or she dies.

The ancients knew what we have forgotten. But we can try to remember; we need rest in order to be whole! We need *Sabbath* time. Yes, I fully appreciate that it's hard, if not impossible, to spontaneously take off an entire day unless you are retired.

But Sabbath doesn't have to be an entire day. We can incorporate Sabbath pauses in our rhythms- moments when we take back time, when we settle into a slower pace; pauses in which to be autumn people. I saw a bumper sticker recently that read: "I'll rest when I'm dead." What an insidious concept.

When we rest, we don't *miss out* on life. We learn to appreciate and notice life, free from perpetual distractions. Sabbath pauses and full days of rest (what a concept!) allow us to reflect, to heal, to savor a sweet peacefulness.

What will help us to reclaim Sabbath time and in the process, reclaim one another, is to shift from time management to time *awareness*. We'll also have to train ourselves to get over any guilt we might feel when we are relaxing that we are *slacking off* or being *unproductive*. We'll need to do less multi-tasking and more focusing: on our state of mind and spirit, on one another, on what is nourishing and intuitive and worth remembering, on what we are feeling and experiencing, even if that something is difficult or painful.

Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon warns, "We spend a lot of time wishing we were elsewhere and otherwise. We are like the character in the movie *Postcards from the Edge* who sends a card home from vacation, "Having a wonderful time. Wish I were here."

Our attempts or tendency to label certain activities as worthy and others as worthless is equally disheartening. "We often hurry through the so-called boring things in order to attend to that which we deem more important, interesting. Perhaps the final freedom will be the recognition that every thing in every moment is "essential" and that nothing at all is "important." (Helen Luke) The quality of presence determines the quality of life.

In his book, TimeShifting, Stephen Recht-shaff-en, the co-founder of the spirituality center, Omega Institute, offers us six concrete ways to slow down, to make time for your soul; six achievable ways to live as autumn people.

1. *Learn to be more in the moment* and to be aware that you are actually breathing. Lets' try it...deep breath in, deep breath out.

2. *Establish Time Boundaries* which help you reclaim time in which there are no *goals* to achieve. Creating and maintaining these boundaries requires the willingness to evaluate and set clear priorities that reflect what you value most. Hopefully Beacon is one of those things.

But creating good time boundaries also requires the resolve to say, "No" to distractions (like the sinkhole of social media). Shall we practice that? On the count of three, we'll all say, "No."

3. *Honor the Mundane*...the color of the tomatoes you are slicing for a salad, the smell of your child's hair after a morning shower. Life is more than highlights and a things to be done list.

4. *Create Spontaneous Time.* Paradoxically, in our over scheduled lives, to do this you'll have to schedule spontaneity! Pick a Saturday to be spontaneous or a Sunday afternoon after church. Schedule the day and then let the spirit move you.

5. *Do What you Like to Do.* Color in coloring books, play basketball, garden, fish, do Tai Chi, bang out a song or two on the piano or the kazoo. You have permission.

6. *Create Time Retreats.* We usually refer to these as vacations, but often our vacations are more hectic than our everyday lives. On a time retreat, one rests and reflects and slows down the internal and external rhythm.

Each of these six ways to reclaim time is a life affirming act; a heart-affirming choice.

You may be wondering what church has to do with all this. Simply: Lets not have church be another arena of over functioning, scheduled hyperactivity, and fatigue. I'm preaching to myself, of course. I'm often trying to do more in a day than is possible or healthy.

Yet, part of my calling as your minister is to try to model a saner pace, an autumn pace, even when we gather here together nine months hence, amidst the bright green bounty of Spring for a Flower Communion.

My hope is that this church will be your locus to balance passion and pause; good stewardship and good self-care; activity and reflection, sacred covenant with self and others. There is certainly work to be done and wonderful ways to be involved and active here. But let this place be an autumn place for you, too; a Sabbath place to be refreshed.

We need to help one another with this endeavor, because it is so very hard to do. Who knows where a commitment to an autumn pace might lead? Given our competitive and trendy culture, the next big status symbol could be the number of times folks get together face-to-face for dinner or study circles or spirituality groups and actually talk to one another and look at one another.

Heck -- the whole Sabbath concept might make a whooping comeback! Here's a hopeful sign - amusingly, according to the WSJ, people worldwide are going gaga over the sloth -- you know, the wide-eyed animal who takes up to a week to eat a leaf! Apparently, folks burst into tears when they see one. What does the sloth, a languid Zen master, teach us? -- "Go slow to go fast."

That phrase was first coined to me by my good friend Stephanie Bennett Vogt, a renowned space clearer and teacher who has written some terrific books on spaciousness, including the excellent "A Year to Clear What's Holding You Back." Her latest email series is called "The Overwhelm Solution," and the first message? It's aptly entitled "Slowing Down."

Stephanie and I used to talk long leisurely strolls in the Punkatasset Woods and stop at what she called "soul crossings." Sometimes she would use a pendulum or

dowsing rod to discern where water flowed underground, under our feet, holding power. We would have missed these moments if we had been sprinting or texting.

Stephanie tells us that “if we can’t see it and feel it, we can’t clear it or heal it.” Start with presence and slow the pace. It **does** all go so fast anyway -- why are we speeding it up? What are we doing to ourselves? We watch recitals and our children's birthday parties through our mobile video apps. Why don't we look intentionally at one another and try to remember autumn time?

One hour north of Concord, MA sits the picturesque town of Peterborough NH, the real-life location for Grover’s Corners – the setting of Thornton Wilder's classic stage play, Our Town. In Act 3, the character Emily Webb Gibbs, many years dead, is given the opportunity to return home on the occasion of her 12th birthday. She enters with the Stage Manager. "Good morning mama." Her mother crosses, embraces her, and kisses her in a characteristically matter-of-fact manner.

Then, Mrs. Webb continues her cooking, distracted. "Birthday or no birthday," she explains, "I want you to eat your breakfast good and slow. I want you to grow up and be a good strong girl. Chew that bacon good and slow. It'll help keep you warm on a cold day." And they jabber on about gifts and wrapping paper and milk deliveries.

With mounting urgency, the Emily who is looking back on this scene from within in, pleads, "Oh mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, 14 years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it. Don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment, we're happy. *Let's look at one another!*"(she pleads)

The trivial chattering continues. Emily turns, anguished, to the Stage Manager, and laments, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. "She breaks down sobbing. "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back, up the hill, to my grave. But first, wait. One more look. "

"Good-bye. Good-bye world. Good-bye Grover's Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food, and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you."

She looks towards the Stage Manager and asks, abruptly, through her tears, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -- every, every minute." "No," replies the Stage Manager, "The saints and poets, maybe -- they do some." And Emily goes back up the hill.

In autumn, we are free to choose. Our agendas are full. What about our lives? What do our hearts long to choose? To be Autumn people or to be perpetually exhausted and distracted?

May we strive to practice time-shifting and allow for Sabbath pauses. And may we try to remember to look at one another more and at our smartphones less.

Good-bye to clocks ticking. The leaves will begin to turn and fall. The season reminds us, "Oh, Earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you."

It all goes so fast.

Blessed be. Blessed we.

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