

PLAN BE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
March 10, 2019

Reading:

From a 1999 essay by Amy Krouse Rosenthal, author of the bestselling memoir *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*.

Busy. How you been? Busy. How's work? Busy. How was your week? Good. Busy. You name the question, "Busy" is the answer. Yes, yes, I know we are all terribly busy doing terribly important things. But I think more often than not, "Busy" is simply the most acceptable knee-jerk response.

Certainly there are more interesting, more original, and more accurate ways to answer the question how are you? How about: I'm hungry for a waffle; I'm envious of my best friend; I'm annoyed by everything that's broken in my house; I'm itchy. Yet busy stands as the easiest way of summarizing all that you do and all that you are. I am busy is the short way of saying — suggesting — my time is filled, my phone does not stop ringing, and you (therefore) should think well of me.

Have people always been this busy? Did cave dwellers think they were busy, too? This week is crazy — I've got about ten caves to draw on. Can I meet you by the fire next week?...

As kids, our stock answer to most every question was nothing. What did you do at school today? Nothing. What's new? Nothing. Then, somewhere on the way to adulthood, we each took a 180-degree turn. We cashed in our nothing for busy. I'm starting to think that, like youth, the word nothing is wasted on the young. Maybe we should try reintroducing it into our grown-up vernacular.

Nothing. I say it a few times and I can feel myself becoming more quiet...

Nothing. Now I'm picturing emptiness, a white blanket, a couple ducks gliding on a still pond. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

How did we get so far from it?

Sermon:

“A husband and wife walk into the emergency room in the late evening on Sept. 5, 2015. A few hours and tests later, the doctor clarifies that the unusual pain the wife is feeling on her right side isn’t the no-biggie appendicitis they suspected but rather ovarian cancer.

“As the couple head home in the early morning of Sept. 6, somehow through the foggy shock of it all, they make the connection that today, the day they learned what had been festering, is also the day they would have officially kicked off their empty-nesting. The youngest of their three children had just left for college...”

“This is when [they] entered what [they] came to think of as Plan “Be,” existing only in the present.”

These are the opening lines of an essay, titled “You May Want to Marry My Husband,” written by Amy Krause Rosenthal and published 10 days before her death two years ago at the age of 51. The essay casts Rosenthal’s essay on busyness from 20 years ago, which served as our reading for the morning, in a decidedly different light. “Busy,” she says in the earlier essay, “stands as the easiest way of summarizing all that you do and all that you are. I am busy is the short way of saying — suggesting — my time is filled, my phone does not stop ringing, and you (therefore) should think well of me.”

The key insight here is that busy isn’t just what we do; it’s who we are. Indeed, Rosenthal says, it’s all that we are.

For my part, I don’t happen to know the answer to Rosenthal’s question about the cave dwellers. My guess is that they were busy too, though probably not because they had too many cave walls to draw on. They probably had their hands full just surviving.

As human civilization has developed over the centuries and millennia, we’ve invented countless means of saving time. Things that once were done by hand now get done by machine. Things that once were done slowly now get done quickly. Yet we stay busy — arguably busier than ever. Maybe Amy Krause Rosenthal was right. Maybe busy is who we are.

I wonder what would happen if we weren’t busy. Would we get left behind? Would our lives start falling apart? Would we find ourselves confronting some existential reality — a crisis of identity, or role, or even faith — that we’d rather not face? For whatever reason, human beings are quite focused on staying busy.

I ran across a parable some time ago that illustrates this point brilliantly. It’s a poem by the contemporary American poet John Martin, titled “Bear In Mind.”

A bear is chasing me through a meadow
and I’m running as fast as I can but
he’s gaining on me — it seems
he’s always gaining on me.
I’m running and running but also

thinking I should just
turn around and say,
"Stop it! Stop chasing me. We both
know you aren't going to catch me.
All you can ever do is chase me. So,
think about it — why bother?"
The bear does stop,
and he sits on his haunches and thinks,
or seems to think. And then
the bear says to me,
"I have to chase you, you know
that. Or you should. And, sure,
we both know I'll never catch you.
So, why not give us both a break and
just stop thinking about me?"
But, with that said, he gets back on four feet,
sticks his long pink tongue out, licks down
both sides of his snout. Then he sighs, looks
behind himself, then at me and says, "Okay,
ready when you are."

If you look at most of our lives most of the time, you can easily conclude that we're always thinking about the bear. We're always ready to be chased. The identity of the bear differs from day to day and person to person. But on an average day, most of us are running most of the time. We're busy. That's what we do. That's who we are.

What's the alternative? In her essay from 20 years ago, Amy Krause Rosenthal advocates occasionally replacing the word "busy" in our vocabularies with the word "nothing." It was our stock answer to almost every question when we were kids, she says, and maybe it's time to reintroduce it into our grown-up vernacular. She wants us to make time in our lives for doing nothing.

What would it look like to do nothing in the middle of a busy life? I don't know exactly what Rosenthal had in mind, though she did mention emptiness, a blanket, and a couple of ducks gliding on a still pond. This sounds like a setting where you might be able to focus on being — "Plan Be," as she put it just before she died — rather than on doing. It sounds like a place where you might have time to catch up with yourself — to find out who you are apart from the things you do and the role you play. You might have time to think about things in your life that need serious thought. You might even have time to think for yourself.

After all, it takes time to think for yourself. In his book titled *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, the American author and essayist William Deresiewicz talks about the importance of setting aside time

to think. In order to think, he says, you need to concentrate on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it. Thinking is not the process of learning other people's ideas or memorizing a bunch of information, however useful these strategies may sometimes be. The goal of thinking is to develop your own ideas — to think for yourself. He says, "You simply cannot do that in bursts of 20 seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube."

He goes on to say that our first thought about something is never our best thought. Our first thought is always someone else's thought: it's what we've already heard about the subject. It's always the conventional wisdom. He says, "Only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw connections, take me by surprise... I need time to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses, to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing."

For thinking like this, you need time — an ample stretch of time. It's time that requires patience and diligence. It's time that you may appear to be doing nothing.

This is the domain of spiritual experience: worship, meditation, contemplation, prayer. It's a process of thinking for yourself — sometimes in the company of others — about the meaning of life and the meaning of your life. You have to concentrate, stick to the questions, be patient, and let every part of your life come into play. You need to give yourself a chance to make connections, draw conclusions, make mistakes, and even be surprised. You need the patience to defeat your desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing.

Plan Be — a way of living that emphasizes presence more than production — requires setting aside time to focus on life's meaning. It means setting aside time each week for worship, as we have done today. It means setting aside time each morning to express our gratitude for the gift of another day and to focus our intention for the hours ahead. It means setting aside time each evening to reflect on our experience of the day — what we have taken from the people and world around us, and what we have given to them in return. It means setting aside time to think about our lives — who we are, what we stand for, and what difference we are committed to make.

If we fail to live thoughtfully, our lives will fly by us in a blur of busyness. We won't take time to live thoughtfully and intentionally until it's too late.

Last Father's Day, Amy Krause Rosenthal's husband, Jason Rosenthal, published a response to Amy's column about someone maybe wanting to marry her husband. In Jason's column, he talked about the desire Amy had expressed for more time to be with him and with their children. In response, Jason said "I wish I had more of all of those things, just as Amy had wished for more. But more wasn't going to happen for her or us. Instead, as she described, we followed Plan "Be," which was about being present in our lives because time was running short."

The truth is that time is running short for all of us, no matter our age, or current health, or family history. How short? I don't know, and you don't either. In light of this nonnegotiable reality, we need to set aside time to ensure that we don't fritter away the precious moments of our lives in a blur of busyness. We need time to savor our lives, to celebrate the moments as they pass. We need to do our best to live each moment fully, until we too have no moments left.