

The Idolatry of Productivity
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Just do what needs to be done, and then stop.
And.
Then.
Stop.

There was an article that went around recently, maybe some of you saw it.

I've seen versions of this article before.

It was about keeping up with Pinterest Mom.

Do you know Pinterest Mom?

Some of you have no idea what I'm talking about, so let me explain.

Pinterest is a website where you post pictures - pins - of things you find interesting, beautiful, and cool.

It's like a bulletin board.

And there's a lot of posting of recipes and decoration ideas,

kid birthday parties

and craft ideas.

You can imagine it can be overwhelming.

We'll, if she can do that, so can I!

This is often the result.

Nailed it.

Anyway, the Pinterest Mom article - it was great.

The main theme was:

just stop.

Stop trying to keep up.

Stop trying to replicate the craft.

Don't feel guilty that your meal doesn't look like that,
that your house doesn't look like that, whatever.
Stop.

The confession of the Pinterest Mom:
She does it because she loves it. Really does.
And she doesn't care that you don't.
She's too busy enjoying what she loves to care that
you are feeling guilty for not doing it,
so:
do what needs to be done
and then
stop.

A second example.

Jenny is a high-powered business woman.
She's smart, she works hard, and she's good at her
job.
And she gets emails from her boss, and one of her co-
workers,
at 11pm. On Saturday night.
At 7am on Sunday morning.
On the same weekend.
All the time. And the expectation seems to be -
if you're not plugged in every minute of every day,
then you're not working hard enough.

Any of you work for a place like this?
Any of you ever feel like this?
You have to give everything, work 12 hour days, check
in all weekend,
never misplace your phone,
don't take all your vacation.

Any of you?

Some of you are retired and you are thinking, thank god.

Right?

But I know some retired folks who are busier than ever before -

who go-go-go-go and never stop.

Here's a secret.

Jenny, the business woman, she quit that job and got a new one.

Folks work hard, it's still intense. There's travel and high expectations, no doubt.

But when you go home, you're home until the next day.

And the weekend is . . . the weekend. Off.

Here's another secret.

Jenny's co-workers, who were emailing all the time?

Their marriages are terrible. But overwork isn't the cause —

it's the symptom, the distraction so they don't have to deal with what's closer to home.

Can't talk, honey, gotta work.

Here's another secret.

They weren't really getting anything done.

They were just looking busy.

A recent study of a high-powered international consulting company showed that folks had three approaches to the question of "work/life balance."

Some folks worked long hours and were rewarded with bonuses and promotions.

Some asked for time off to care for kids and be balanced - they were punished with poor reviews and a lack of advancement.

Others didn't ask for time, but they took it anyway. Without asking permission, they arranged clients close to home, they slipped out for kids plays and soccer games but didn't draw attention to it. And they got the bonuses and promotions just like the ones who missed their family.

Of course, the study did show that it was the men who felt more comfortable taking it, and the women who asked for the time and paid the price.

Do what needs to be done, and then stop.

If you thought that my sermon on the "idolatry of productivity" would just be about how we should take it easy this summer, well, not exactly.

I mean, yes to that - take some time! Enjoy the world!

But also, the question of productivity is a question of justice.

It is about economic justice and gender justice. It is about what ails our society, hurts our families, tears away at the time required to be citizens, volunteers, and members of a church.

It is about how we expect more and more and get less
and less;
we are running faster just to stay in place.
It is about this chart.

No wonder we feel stressed out.

This isn't just work.
It's parenting.
It's keeping up with the news of the world.
It's activism.
It's everything.

We do more and more but seem to get less and less.

Do what must be done,
and
then
stop.

[slide]

Productivity is a cruel master.
It is a false god.
It will not make the world better to move faster, it will
not make you happier,
or a better parent or person.
It won't even make you a better employee.

Do what matters. Do it well.
Breathe out the rest.

And take your time to restore yourself.
Sleep.

Rest.

Take a Sabbath and don't do things.

Oh, if you have young children, trust me, I know.

Sabbath is hard to come by.

Take them to the park.

Sit on the bench and tell them to go play.

Don't hover.

Don't check your phone - lord, I know it's hard.

Just sit there.

Take a Sabbath.

Take a walk.

Take a breather.

A poem.

One of my favorites, by the poet Barbara Crocker.

Called "In The Middle"

In the Middle

of a life that's as complicated as everyone else's,
struggling for balance, juggling time.

The mantle clock that was my grandfather's

has stopped at 9:20; we haven't had time

to get it repaired. The brass pendulum is still,

the chimes don't ring. One day you look out the

window,

green summer, the next, and the leaves have already

fallen,

and a grey sky lowers the horizon. Our children almost

grown,

our parents gone, it happened so fast. Each day, we

must learn

again how to love, between morning's quick coffee

and evening's slow return. Steam from a pot of soup rises,
mixing with the yeasty smell of baking bread. Our bodies
twine, and the big black dog pushes his great head between;
his tail is a metronome, 3/4 time. We'll never get there,
Time is always ahead of us, running down the beach,
urging
us on faster, faster, but sometimes we take off our watches,
sometimes we lie in the hammock, caught between the mesh
of rope and the net of stars, suspended, tangled up
in love, running out of time.

We'll never get there.
Time is always ahead of us.
So, maybe, stop trying to keep up.

When you stop being productive, you have a chance to restore yourself.
To relearn who you are, without the stuff to fill the spaces.
This, let's be clear, can be terrifying.
There's a reason, remember, why Jenny's former colleagues
worked all the time.
They were distracting themselves from the rest of their lives.

When you stop being productive, you have to just be.
This isn't easy.

It is, though, the most profound invitation to the spiritual life.

Give up the idea that productivity makes you valuable. There's a river flowing in your soul, you are somebody, and the length of your to do list has nothing to do with it.

You are somebody. You matter.
And you don't have to prove it.

This is why "productivity" is an idol - a false god - the real god, the real spirit, the real truth, is that you, each person, is beautiful and sacred and they don't have to do a thing, except be themselves.

Get in touch with your longing for life, and stop filling every second with something to occupy your hands and your mind.

Just be.

Look, the living ain't always easy.

The fish don't always jump
and sometimes things are hard.

We have important things to do.

I like to be busy, to feel like I'm contributing to the world,

just as much - if not more - than anyone else.

But all things in moderation. [slide]

Sabbath, rest, renewal, a time to not be active - these things provide essential space.

Productivity doesn't just distract us from the problems of our lives.

It also distracts us from the joy.

It also means that we don't see when living is easy and when the fish are jumping.

When we cut ourselves off from sorrow, because we are acting too busy,

we also cut ourselves off from thanksgiving.

From remembering that we are a child of the universe, and we are enough.

That we are somebody,

and that we are loved,

and we belong,

and we don't have to prove it.

It just is.

We have a lot to do today.

We've welcomed new members and thanked volunteers

and heard from our wonderful youth.

There will be the annual meeting in a moment, and then meetings after that for some of you.

Others have more to do this afternoon - the grocery store, yard work, housework, social obligations; this, that and the other.

I do to.

But I want you to stop a few times -

maybe once an hour or so - don't set a timer, just let it come -

but stop,

and just be.

And don't be productive.

Don't be distracted.

Revel in the beauty of life.

Let the sorrow and the joy fill you up and empty you out.

Be alive without any expectation of doing more than that.

Do what needs to be done,
and
then
stop.

Don't compete, don't rush.

Just be.

Lay your burden down and sing hallelujah.

Just be.

If we all do it together, maybe we'll have a chance to change this crazy culture,

this unjust way of living and being.

But we've got to do it together.

So tell your friends, tell your neighbors, tell your boss.

And slow down and relax a little.

You'll never catch up with time, so stop trying.

You are good enough as is.

The gift of life is given unto each.

Celebrate that gift.

And let it be.

Let's sing.