

Slowing Down for the Holidays

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Sylvia Boorstein has sometimes been jokingly referred to as everyone's Jewish-Buddhist grandmother. She's a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California and a trained psychotherapist. She is also the author of many bestselling books, including *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There*, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*, and *Happiness Is an Inside Job*.

I was listening to an [interview](#) with Boorstein recently and was fascinated to learn that for many years she has, everyday, carried around with her the poem "Keeping Quiet" by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The themes of this poem resonate with our focus this morning on "Slowing Down for the Holidays." I invite you pay attention especially to any words or phrases from this poem that particularly resonate with you:

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,

would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

—from *Extravagaria* (translated by Alastair Reid, pp. 27-29, 1974)

The word “**holiday**,” **it turns out, is a conflation of the words “holy” and “day.”** You can see the root words visually, of course, by simply turning the “i” in holiday into a “y.” And, indeed, the original intention of a holiday is to celebrate a *holy day*, a day “set apart” from our normal routine. And at its best, holidays can be a form of sacred time.

Holidays have the potential to be sacramental holy days that reconnect us with the Sacred, the Divine, or the Holy (as we understand and experience the reality toward which those words point). And holidays are a time for reconnection with those we love, those who love us, and our own deepest self. At the same time, as we all know, holidays can also be like opening a big, gift-wrapped box of stress and conflict. So this morning, as we prepare to enter into the final stretch of the holiday season, I would like to invite us to reflect on the ways we each might be able to make our respective holidays more authentically *holy days* of rest, rejuvenation, and reconnection.

Turning back the calendar a month to remind ourselves of one of our most recent national holidays, we saw how the commercialization of the Thanksgiving holiday is making that day increasingly less holy and set-apart, especially for low-income retail workers. And one of my colleagues posted on [Facebook](#) that, “In the midst of Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber-Monday (**what's next — Credit Debt Tuesday and Loan Consolidation Wednesday?**)” That comment invites us to see that choosing to celebrate the holidays as simple, slow, set apart holy days can be one of the most subversive practices you can do to begin resisting the forces of commercialization and commodification that threaten to invade every moment of our lives.

In the 18th-century, Jean Pierre de Caussade (a Jesuit priest, the same order as today’s Pope Francis) wrote a spiritual classic titled [*The Sacrament of the Present Moment*](#) about how being present to the fullness of each present moment can connect us to the sacred depths that infuse every aspect of our life if we slow down enough to notice. Similarly, the late Gerald May, a psychiatrist and spiritual teacher, describes the sacrament of the present moment this way:

one is not lost in memories of the past or fantasies of the future, but is **directly conscious of what comes to awareness in the here-and-now**. When memories, fears, hopes or plans happen within contemplation, they do not take one out of the moment. Instead, one has a subtle, soft appreciation that they are part of what is happening right now, right here.

The second quality is **openness, a simple receptiveness** to all the thoughts, feelings, sights, sounds and other perceptions that each moment brings. In contemplation, one is not concentrating, focusing on one “important” thing to the exclusion of other “distracting” things. Nor is one avoiding, denying, or distorting what is given. Instead, there is a **gentle willingness to acknowledge whatever comes**.

In contrast, however, to the sacrament of the present moment that can transform a holiday (or an ordinary day) into a holy day, the **more common experience of our own time is described in Douglas Rushkoff’s recent book [*Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*](#)**. Rushkoff writes that, “Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It’s not a mere speeding up.... It’s more a diminishment of anything that isn’t

happening right now — and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is” (2). In particular, **the deep, extended focus needed for long-term projects that can take us to the next level in our life or work is often increasingly difficult to carve out when we’re constantly distracted with pinging minutiae** in the present: a phone call, a text message, an email, a Facebook comment.

And distinct from all the spiritual writing that calls us to mindfully and heart-fully embrace the fullness of each present moment, with all the technological devices and demands on our time, Rushkoff writes,

we are not approaching some Zen state of an infinite moment, completely at one with our surroundings, connected to others, and aware of ourselves on any fundamental level. Rather, we tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored. (4)

Whereas **the sacrament of the present moment, invites us into a greater fullness, connection, and depth, present shock leaves us distracted, fragmented, and always on the shallow surface of our self.** Most distressingly, Rushkoff reports that the 24/7 demands on our time and the ways we have set ourselves up to be potentially called/texted/emailed/Facebooked, etc. at anytime — with no time off — have resulted in a increase in **average citizens “experienc[ing] symptoms formerly limited to air traffic controllers and 911 emergency operators” (99). In other words, being “crazy busy” all the time is making us crazy unhealthy.**

We all have our different versions of this struggle, part of our life that are easier or harder for us individually in regard to self-care. For me, it’s fairly easy — and I’ve found vitally important for me to avoid exhaustion — to get approximately 8 hours of sleep most nights. (It helps, I’m sure, that Magin and I don’t yet have any children.) But it’s also easy for me, especially if I’m traveling or have a lot of special events in my schedule, to skip exercising or meditating. And I am working on being more intentional about not letting those important components of my long-term health slip — sometimes for days or even weeks at a time — between the cracks of my schedule. As we near the beginning of a new year, **what do you need to let go of or prioritize more intentionally for your long-term health or to reconnect to your family, friends, or deepest self?**

There's an old story about a pilgrim visiting a Zen master. The student bows to the master, asks her to teach him the practice of Zen. He then proceeds to ramble on about the many Buddhist sutras he had studied in preparation for meeting with the master. The master listens patiently and then begins to make tea. When it was ready, she pours the tea into the pilgrim's cup until it begins to overflow and run all over the floor. The would-be student sees what is happening and shouts, "Stop, stop! The cup is full; you can't get anymore in." The master stops pouring and says: "You are like this cup; you are full of ideas about Buddha's Way. You come and ask for teaching, but your cup is full; I can't put anything in. Before I can teach you, you'll have to empty your cup." **Like the overflowing tea cup that spills messily onto the floor, overcommitting leaves us fragmented, over-saturated, and internally scattered.**

In a similar vein to that Zen story, I had an experience a few years ago on a cold day early in January 2009. I entered a classroom in San Anselmo, California for the first day of a program in Art of Spiritual Direction. The director of the program began his opening lecture with these words, "**We're going to start slowly, so that later we can *slow down*.**" I still remember that opening line now, years later, because his invitation to us was so counter-intuitive.

More than 30 of us had traveled from all across the county for the first in a series of three annual three-week intensive residencies. We had completed all our assigned reading in advance, so I expected him to say that we would hit the ground running then sprint to the finish line to make the most of our time together in person. And we did work hard and learn a lot, but there was also a crucial sense in which he was inviting us to experiment with a profoundly counter-cultural perspective: "We're going to start slowly, so that later we can *slow down*." The singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer expresses a similar sentiment in [lyric-form](#) when she confesses that she's "**Been traveling faster than my soul can go.**" I suspect many of you can identify with that feeling of "traveling faster than my soul can go." The holidays are a chance to catch back up with your soul: you inner sense of calm, connection, and peace.

For now I'll give you just one example of how, during that first three-week intensive, we were challenged to "to start slowly, so that later we can *slow down*" in order to give ourselves the opportunity to let go of the surface distractions and sink more deeply into the sacrament of the present moment. In this case, we were invited to read the Bible in a particular way, although this

same technique could be fruitfully applied to any text you find sacred from any of the world's religions to poetry to an inspiring scientific insight. In the case of the program I was in, each day in both morning and evening chapel, a scripture was read aloud twice. All the verses were from Acts chapter 16. The catch was that we read only one verse a day. On the first day, we read Acts 16:1. The second day, Acts 16:2 — and so on. I have read the Bible contemplatively before, but moving through Acts 16:1-15 at the pace of one verse each weekday over the course of *three weeks* was an entirely new way of experiencing scripture.

In our culture, we most often read (or skim) texts for *information*. But in this case, we were being challenged to read the text **not for information, but for formation** — not just to glean information about the passage's historical context, but to be *formed* by the meaning that emerged from the ways the words and phrases intersected with our life.

So, Monday morning, day one, I'm sitting in chapel, and the scripture is read: "Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek." Then we heard it read a second time, followed by a time of silent reflection. That's it. One verse. And that was far from the oddest verse.

During the closing program, a group of students performed a skit that spoofed this one-verse-a-day practice. The winner of the stupidest scripture was day eight, when the verse was Acts chapter 16, verse eight: "so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas." Hearing anything profound yet? Seriously...notice the voices in your head. You might be hearing, "Where is Mysia? Where is Troas?" Even after eight days, my first reaction to this verse was "Wow. That was short." My second reaction was to intellectualize the passage with questions of geography. But as I sat with the verse in silence for a full ten minutes, what stood out to me was the phrase, "passing by." How did Paul and Timothy discern to *pass by* Mysia and go instead to Troas? More importantly, from there I heard an invitation to reflect on what I was called to pass by in my own life.

And I would argue that I received much more benefit from spending 10 minutes reflecting contemplatively on this one verse of only nine words that I would have gotten from an hour skimming historical commentaries on the whole of Acts 16. Similarly, Dorothy Day, the

political activist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, famously said that as much as she cared passionately about politics, there were times in her life when she only read the newspaper once a week on Sundays. In so doing, she kept up on the major flow of current events without getting lost in the day-to-day rabbit trails that often lead no where and which have become even more common in our 24-hour-a-day news cycle. Day found that this practice freed her to spend time the other days of the week — that she might have spent reading the paper — delving into classic works of literature and studies of classic spiritual works.¹

From a different perspective, some of you may remember the story from back in 2007 when the world-famous, virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell participated in a social [experiment](#). A hidden camera was set-up, and Bell play a 45-minute concert on his \$3.5 million Stradivarius violin starting at 7:51am on Friday, January 12 at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington, D.C. Of the more than a thousand people that passed by, “Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run — for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.” And although I realize that this impromptu concert is anecdotal, I still think about this story periodically as a reminder to slow down and notice all the unexpected beauty there is to savor in this world, and to shift my experience of the world from “present shock” to the sacrament of the present moment. Similarly, regarding the potential of transforming our holidays into holy days, the singer-songwriter David Lamotte writes that **“There’s no time like the present, no present like time.”** He means, of course, that far more valuable than any present we can buy is the gift of being fully present to our friends and family on holidays that can become for us holy days.

Relatedly, a recent *New York Times* article was titled, **“[Step Away From the Phone!](#)”** It includes the story of a group of friends who all stack their phones in the middle of the table when they meet at a restaurants so that no one is distracted during the meal, a family who all toss their smart phones into a vintage milk tin when they come home until after dinner, and individuals who have banned digital devices from the bedroom both to avoid distractions during the night

¹ I remember this story about Dorothy Day from reading William Miller’s [biography](#) of her life; however, I have been unable to find the reference in my notes about the book. I will continue looking and post the reference when and if I find it. If anyone knows an explicit reference to this story, please let me know.

and to not have technology be way they start their day. As wonderfully helpful as technology can be, digital detoxing is equally important and even empowering. One high-end party planner reported a trend in banning cell phones during parties except in an area outside beside the smoking area. She says, “Public cellphone use has reached an uncivilized fever pitch, so now it’s **chicer behavior to exempt yourself from that. You’re not answerable 24/7, and that’s a powerful and luxurious statement.**”

Yesterday was Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, marking the official beginning of winter. And last year about this time, I preached a sermon titled “[Can You Feel the Wheel of the Year Turning? A Spirituality of Winter.](#)” In that sermon, I invited you to consider that at this time of year, spiritual practices of darkness, silence, letting go, and saying “No” can be particularly fruitful.

If a spirituality of winter is about the inward journey, when is the last time you spent some quality time with yourself, being attentive to what is going on inside of you? If a spirituality of winter is about simplicity, is there anything you feel led to *let go* in your life? As we enter fully into the season of bare trees and stark landscapes, we have the opportunity to see the transformation of the external world as an invitation to ask what we need to allow to fall away from our lives.

In this season, are there ways that you feel led to give yourself permission to let go of distractions and experience the sacrament of the present moment? In so doing, may you and yours experience the upcoming holidays as *holy days*.