

RESTLESSNESS

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
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at the First Church in Boston

You've probably experienced it once or twice in your life. Restlessness. The feeling that seems to invade your whole being—body mind and spirit—causing you to move from place to place, from this to that, from sofa to refrigerator to television to computer to bed with no particular aim or goal or need or real hunger or desire...

We all know about procrastination—and the tremendous amount of energy we invest in doing anything except the task that seems to be towering over us. The one we keep telling ourselves we're going to complete—like organize all the family photos in albums and label every picture...And the ones we actually need to accomplish by a deadline—like your taxes (sorry to remind you), or a sermon, say.

I have to tell you this because Mike Sullivan already knows....There is a social networking tool on the web called Facebook. You've heard about it—and some of you use it! There are virtual groups for all kinds of interests and affiliations: alumni groups, people who love coffee groups, we even have a Facebook group for First Church Boston.

There is also a group called: Stop wasting time on Face Book and get back to your sermonating...! It will tell you something about the pervasiveness of procrastination among clergy: there are about 1100 people in that group. Recently some have been sharing their favorite activity to employ while procrastinating writing their sermons (besides being on Facebook). Cleaning the bathroom and folding laundry are right up there....

But this feeling of restlessness, well, it seems like something categorically different from procrastination. While procrastinating is about avoiding a task, restlessness has the quality of avoiding something deep in ourselves...

I don't think I noticed this restlessness quite so acutely while living in the city. I suppose one couldn't be too surprised about that...All the action surrounding us in city life is the perfect mask for an underlying restlessness. Just managing daily activities in the city—getting from place to place, negotiating the stray bricks on the sidewalks, weaving among pedestrians, cars, dog leavings, and bike messengers—these are practically accomplishments!

But when we return home and close the door on the general clamor, in the relative quiet, after dinner is eaten and the dishes are put away, it's back: The restlessness....The thinking that we might be doing something better with our time...The feeling of boredom—like looking out the window of a bus or waiting at the airport....

Perhaps you are listening and thinking: what is she talking about? Just pick up a book and start reading, for goodness sake. Or take up knitting; do something useful...Only boring people ever get bored! Besides, you are a minister! Can't you go pray or something?

I could. And I do. But even then, the restlessness is apt to strike.

Writings about spiritual restlessness appear in most of the world's religious traditions. In Buddhism we hear about the "monkey mind" that attacks during periods of

meditation. That's what they call the incessant chatter that issues from the brain—the ceaseless thoughts, ideas, fantasies or plans that pop like corn. Such mental wanderings are considered one of the five hindrances to spiritual practice and insight.

In an old textbook on Hindu psychology, the states of mind are characterized as extreme restlessness, partial restlessness, dullness, concentrated state, and absolute concentration. Recognition is given to the fact that “real satisfaction and happiness” cannot be realized unless we overcome extreme restlessness.¹

Kathleen Norris, bestselling author of *The Cloister Walk*, has written recently from her experience within the Christian monastic tradition, unearthing an ancient concept that has very modern application. It is called *acedia*. A-C-E-D-I-A.²

From the book jacket: “Norris first encountered the word *acedia* in a fourth century [text] by the monk, Evagrius Ponticus. ‘As I read this,’ she writes, ‘I felt a weight lift from my soul, for I had just discovered an accurate description of something that had plagued me for years but that I had never been able to name.’ Having endured times of deep soul-weariness since she was a teenager, she could now recognize her affliction [which was]: sinking into a state of being unable to care.” Defining an inability to care is what makes *acedia* so pertinent to our contemporary life: it gives name to the struggle with the “restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia and enervating despair” we see so much in our culture.

Evagrius called *acedia* “the noonday demon.” He said it attacks the monk in prayer or work, making “It seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long.” It’s a restlessness that causes the monk to look “constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine” how long it is until lunch. Searching for distractions, the monk begins to think unsettling thoughts about others, the monastery, the very life he has chosen. The *acedia* drives him to evaluate his life in light of restlessness and to construe that there is no real point to anything he is doing here, nothing worth the sacrifice he is making. Dispirited and restless, a monk under attack by *acedia* is tempted to chuck the whole enterprise without a backward glance.

Norris explains: “At its Greek root, the word *acedia* means the absence of care. The person afflicted by *acedia* refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, *acedia* offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can’t rouse yourself to give a damn.”³

It sounds a little like compassion fatigue. World tragedies reach us daily through instantaneous media coverage. It becomes impossible to care about everything. Should we care about the rapes in Rawanda, the slaughters in Kenya and Darfur? Yes. Should we care about the shootings in Roxbury and Mattapan? Yes. And what about the problems in our educational systems? Our roads and bridges? Um-hum. And the family that got burned out of their house this winter? Or the friend who just got diagnosed with cancer? The son or daughter who just got laid off? And the whales and the melting ice cap....? To

¹ Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946) 131.

² Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008)

³ *Ibid*, 3.

care is to cry out—to wake to the world and have a response. Whether it is running for office, writing a check, saying a prayer, or making sandwiches.

But it can *feel* too much. And if there is no place to put all the feeling—nothing to hold us in our overwhelm--we may be tempted to just stop feeling. If there seems no meaningful way to respond—as though anything we do won't really make a difference--we may just stop responding. Sure, we may think about a problem, and we may worry that we should be doing something about it... But a restlessness sets in. It is too much to contemplate. And we chuck the whole enterprise.

We separate ourselves from our own feelings and from our sense of accountability to act, to respond, to care. Ultimately, the cost of spiritual restlessness is high--to us and to our communities.

Remember the wonderful children's book in the little Nutshell Library by Maurice Sendak called *Pierre*? Pierre was a seemingly tyrannical child who, no matter what the enticement from his parents—from a lovely, morning bowl of cream of wheat to an exciting outing to town—Pierre's response to every offer was simply, "I don't care!" And so he was left at home while the folks went off to do their errands.

In a startling plot twist, a lion appears in the house with Pierre. The care-less Pierre is unmoved, even when the lion's asks him, "Would you like to die?" Pierre says, "I don't care!" So, naturally, the lion eats him!

When his parents return home they quickly size up the situation, take the lion to the doctor's office where, through the miracle of literary medicine, the lion is turned upside down by the tail and Pierre is coughed out whole! The relieved and grateful parents embrace their smiling son. In the aftermath of being regurgitated, Pierre sees the light in so many ways. Life is worth living! He leaps up and sings jubilantly, "I care!" And the restored family climbs up on the lion's back and home they go in joy!

When a novice monk finds himself caught in the lion of *acedia*, he is advised to "ask for a word" from a spiritual elder. As in many traditions, wise and useful guidance is handed down through the generations. In the case of restlessness, the advice might include attend to your work or prayer with renewed zeal. Get back to your routine as quickly as possible.

This is the monk's challenge when confronting the noonday demon--the one that comes in the midst of day or night to ask: what's the point of the endless repetition of the day's chores, prayers, throwing pots, weaving baskets, doing laundry, making beds, going to the office, calling clients, making a sale. What is the point? asks our restlessness.

And the answer is: It is its own point. It is the doing of it. The ritual. The episodic blessing of the washed glass, brushed teeth, wiped bottom, swept floor. Driving to work, taking out the garbage, reading the paper, making the coffee. Everything is here in this moment to be done with care. It's all practice. It's all strengthening.

In some holistic health models, spring is considered a good season to clean out the system. Detoxify. Get rid of the physical, emotional, and environmental toxins that clog up our organs and blood. It's not enough to just release the bad stuff. It's also important to increase one's intake of things that are good for your system. To help strengthen the system's ability to resist the next (guaranteed) onslaught of environmental toxins and disease.

What makes us spiritually stronger? Better able to resist restlessness, or lack of caring?

My word is not a new one, but one you have heard before: Community. I believe this with all my heart.

I find I want to say this now, especially during our canvass in a difficult, even frightening economy. You are always being invited to step up. All around you, cries for more caring rise up: calls to do the work of social justice; feed the hungry; care for the lonely; contribute to the coffers...One might be tempted to turn with a shrug and say “Not my problem. Not my care.”

So it is important that you also hear this: it is always an invitation. Not a demand. What makes something an invitation is that you may accept or decline it as you feel called. For generations people have contributed from their abundance and from their commitment to support this church so we can be here when you need us.

But please, if or when you feel you cannot respond, you cannot make a certain kind of contribution—such as a monetary one—just be here. Present to the moment. Present to the community.

Having a supportive, spiritual community around you when you are confronting spiritual restlessness--a sense of just not caring--is no guarantee that one will be able to defeat the noonday demons...But it is an antidote. It is a source of strength.

Keep showing up because, the truth is, we cannot be a congregation without you. Keep showing up because you never know when grace will descend on your restless heart and free you from the feeling that it's all too much. Even when you are tempted by the demon of not caring, don't chuck it all. Come listen to the music. Let it touch your soul. Sit in the soaring spaciousness of this sanctuary. Let it lift your spirit. Be here, and give someone else courage by your very presence which says: we are here when you need us.

Show up, if only to be reminded that our restlessness, like our joy, or feeling ourselves fall, or being confused, is episodic. It may be cyclical. Even chronic. But it is not unrelieved. Like winter, *acedia* will end with a new turning toward the light and warmth of meaning, faith, hope, and love. In it's wake, we will feel something like relief, as we live with joy and care, moment to moment, “like a child hopping from spot to spot on the burning sand.”⁴

⁴ David Eagleman, *Sum* (New York: Pantheon, 2009) 4.