

spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship, Sunday 21 June 2015

My brother David conducted the annual service for the Ministerial Old Students Association's Meeting at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, on Wednesday 2 July 2003. His sermon was on "Spiritual Economy". It was an excellent sermon, and I want to share it with you today.

A couple of years previously, David represented the Ministerial Fellowship at a conference at Whalley Abbey, just down the road from Padiham where he was then Minister. The conference was put on by an organisation called MODEM, an acronym standing for Management and Organisational Development in Ministry. The purpose of MODEM is to bring the skills of management into closer harmony with the mission of ministry, and vice versa, to bring the spirit of ministry into the workplace. David is interested in such things, so he went along very willingly.

It was a good conference, and he learned some interesting things. Some of those things were some fairly basic principles of good self-management, like how to manage one's time efficiently. Things like:-handle a piece of paper only once. It sounds straight-forward, of course, but when he heard it some while ago for the first time, it was like a revelation to David. Up until that time his modus operandi was to handle a piece of paper at least a dozen times before he would finally deal with it.

If he received a letter to which he had to write an answer, he would first read the letter, then put it aside to answer later. Then he would pick it up several times as he stumbled across it amidst the litter on his desk, and maybe read it again each time. When he couldn't put it off any longer, he would finally write his reply; but of course he would have forgotten the content of the original letter so he would have to read it again. Then it would lie around on his desk for another week or so, getting in his way, covering the other pieces of paper he was looking for, until he would file it away. In such a way a great many hours could be happily wasted, keeping him from doing anything productive. Being told to handle a piece of paper only once opened a door for him to become much more efficient in his administrative abilities.

Then there is filing. Or rather, then there might be filing. There are ministers who have amazing filing systems. Not just for committee minutes and that kind of thing. But sermons too, for example. And sermon illustrations. There are ministers, he and I are reliably informed, who, if you mention a theme to them, can go to their filing system and pull out their little index cards on which will be written every reference to that theme they have ever made in forty years of preaching. Wouldn't

Instead, how many wonderful references or readings have David and I come across and used in our more than thirty years of preaching, and now have no idea where to find them again. David commented that he could have probably been Archbishop of Canterbury by now, if only he had written down and filed away his ideas for the job in the first place, and could find them again in the second.

And lists. Let's not forget lists. We ministers love making lists. Are you a list-maker? Do you recognise yourself in the following scenario? At Upper Chapel in Sheffield I went into the vestry on a Monday morning, and I made a list of all the things I needed to do that week. I went into the vestry on other mornings, and made a list of the things I needed to do that day. Sometimes I had my list prepared before I got to the Chapel. Letters to write, services to prepare, meetings to prepare for, telephone calls to make, people to visit, things to buy. Lots of chores managed to appear on successive lists - I didn't always get them done on the day I initially thought I would - but at least they had been on my list. And it really was satisfying to cross something off the list. There were days when I had a page full of things to do, and at the end of the day every single item had been crossed off the list, and I went home thinking I had achieved something that day.

But there is a remarkable capacity for self-deception. I made my list, and then I worked steadily through it, crossing off each thing as I went. But then I would do something which was not on my list. So, after I had done it, what did I do? What would you do? Write it on the list, and have the satisfaction of crossing it off again!

Anyway, said David, the MODEM Conference was very good, very helpful. We ministers can always use some more assistance in learning the art of efficient management and administration. There is virtue in good management. There is no inherent virtue in mismanagement. There are ministers who scorn the very idea of using the words "ministry" and "management" in the same sentence. But David and I would both be glad to be able to do some things better. And do more things in less time.

But, there are two things to remember. The way to salvation is not through an efficiency drive. And being busy is not the same as accomplishing something worthwhile.

Some of you know that my son Andrew is a cellist as well as an organist and pianist. He plays the 'cello in the University of New South Wales Orchestra. A month ago Ann and I went to the Sir John Clancy Auditorium at UNSW for a concert. The first half was the UNSW Wind Symphony; the second half was the Orchestra, which played two pieces: Franz Schubert's Symphony No 8 in B minor (the 'Unfinished

The Managing Director of a large company was given a ticket to a performance of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, but when he found he could not go, he gave the ticket to his Vice-President for Operations. The next morning he asked his Vice-President for Operations how he had enjoyed the performance. Instead of getting a few observations about the symphony in general, and the pleasure of the evening, the Managing Director was handed a formal memo from the Vice-President, which read:

Time and Motion Study of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony

1) For considerable periods, the four oboe players had nothing to do. Their number should be reduced, and their work spread over the whole orchestra, avoiding peaks of inactivity.

2) All twelve violins were playing identical notes with identical motions. This seems an unnecessary duplication, and the staff of this section should be drastically cut, with consequent substantial savings. If volume of sound is really required, this could be accomplished with the use of an amplifier.

3) Much effort was involved in playing the demi-semi-quavers. This appears to be an excessive refinement, since most hearers are unable to distinguish such rapid playing. It is recommended that all notes be rounded up to the nearest semi-quaver. If this were done, it would be possible to use amateur musicians, instead of experienced and expensive professionals.

4) No useful purpose is served by repeating with horns the passage that has already been handled by the strings. If all such redundancies were eliminated, the concert could be reduced from two hours to twenty minutes, with great savings in salaries and overheads.

5) The symphony had two movements. If Mr Schubert didn't achieve his musical goals by the end of the first movement, then he should have stopped there. The second movement is unnecessary and should be cut.

6) In the light of the above, one can only conclude that had Mr Schubert given attention to these matters, he probably would have had time to finish the symphony.

well, maybe he would have, but would anyone have wanted to listen to it?

The thing, of course, is this. Just as music is much more than the efficient arrangement of sounds, so living well, being present to the moment, is much more than the efficient management of time. As is living faithfully, living

Isn't it curious? There is one thing we never put on our daily or weekly lists of things to do. We never write: Do Nothing. Yet, often, that is the most important thing we should be doing. Nothing.

Bill Bryson became a very popular writer with his eccentric mix of travel and witty observation. In one of his books - David had forgotten which one (See: If he had written it down and put it on an index card, he would have known the title of the book and the page number, everything else about it) - in this book Bill Bryson tells of an incident which happened once to him. He was living in Hanover, New Hampshire. He had abandoned Britain where he had lived for twenty years to return to his native land, and had chosen Hanover as a suitable place to hang his hat. Hanover is a delightful New England town, which happens also to be the birthplace of David's wife, Chasey. Anyway, late one afternoon, Bryson was beavering away at his word processor, furiously writing something or other which he should have sent off days before. He was feeling oppressed by a deadline. His son called to him to come outside and play catch.

I can't. I'm busy.
Come on, Dad.
I can't. I have to finish this
piece. Aw, gee, Dad, come on.

Those of you who have been a parent, or for that matter a child, will recognise the exchange. For some reason, even though he really did have to meet that deadline, Bryson relented. OK, he called back.

And he and his son went outside for an hour of playing catch. which they did. No big deal. It was something he had done a hundred times before with his son. Except that this time it was a big deal. It was a gorgeous, crisp late afternoon, with the brilliant sunlight filtering at a sharp angle through the dazzling hues of the New England foliage. The kind of New England autumn day which can take one's breath away. And there he was, playing catch with his son, doing what American Dads have done for generations: the simple rhythmic bonding of throwing and catching a baseball to and fro.

And Bryson was overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with the beauty of it, the wonder of it, the appreciation for the miracle of being alive and so blessed, that there he was amidst that glory of creation, doing something elemental with his child. It was an afternoon to savour in the memory for a lifetime, so perfect was it, so vivid to all his senses, and most especially to his sense of joy.

But, you know what, says Bryson. "I nearly missed it. I nearly

If you never look up, how are you going to see the sunsets?
If you
never stop, how are you going to smell the daisies? If you
never give thanks, how are you going to know how much you
have to give
thanks for?

There is no such thing as being too busy to stop. Usually,
it is not
that you are too busy to stop. It is, more likely, that
you have forgotten how. Or are afraid of the stillness.
Saying no to the
rush, stepping off the carousel on which everyone else is
mindlessly going around and around, takes a lot more courage
and self-confidence than might be imagined.

You don't need me to tell you how busy your life is; you don't
need me to recite all the things you have to do, the many
things on your
daily list; you don't need me to tell you how the joy of it
can drain away in the weariness of work to be done. But
remember: the
life of the spirit is not subject to time and motion experts.
It is often not the more you do, but the less you do, which
is important.

This is not an advocacy for laziness. But it is a reminder
that we neglect our spirits at our peril, and we cannot tend
our spirits if our shoulder is always to the wheel and our
nose always to the grindstone. So don't just do something;
sit there. Waste time. It might be the best thing you can do
with it.

But here is a question. Suppose the next time we write down a
list of things to do, we put on it: Do Nothing. How much
nothing will we have to do before we are allowed to cross it
off?

This sermon was delivered by Rev Geoff Usher at the Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship, Kirribilli, on Sunday 21 June 2015. It is based almost entirely on the sermon "Spiritual Economy" given at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, on 2 July 2003 by Rev Dr David Usher, whose permission to publish is gratefully acknowledged.