

“To Do Or Not To Do”

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‘Keeping Quiet’ (excerpt)

Now we will count to twelve
And we will 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...

in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity
Life is what it is about...

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 to twelve
and you keep quiet...

~Pablo Neruda from Parabola Vol. 30 No. 2

To do or not to do, that is the question. Ok, maybe that isn’t the question

Shakespeare posed exactly, but it seems that our lives are filled with choices of doing and

occasionally of not doing. Do we play soccer or take violin lessons, do we go the birthday party or stay home and watch a movie, do we take a new job or stay in a familiar place, do we leave an unhappy relationship or work things through? Our lists of choices are endless and every day we are faced with more and more decisions demanding our attention, demanding that we choose to *do* something. But the question underneath all the 'to do' is can we not do?

We have become (or maybe we have always been) a society in which doing and achieving is very important and is a gauge of one's success at being human. We mark our history in accomplishment and invention; we measure our lives by what we did when. What we do is often the first question at meeting someone new, and 'how was your weekend' is really meant to ask 'what did you *do* this these past couple of days?'

And yet, "Every [person] is," writes Samuel Johnson, "or hopes to be, an idler." We long for vacation time, time away to do nothing, or so we say. The reality is, however, that even in our leisure time we tend to *do* something – whether a cruise or camping, an amusement park or canoeing. How often is it that you sit and simply do nothing...and sleeping doesn't count?

We see those who do nothing as lazy. Which translates to mean of less worth than those who *do* stuff. We New Englanders with our Puritan heritage of the work ethic have a hard time resisting the doing. Even if what we are doing is enjoyable, we tend to be much happier if we can do rather than to simply be.

I remember when my grandma had her hip replaced not long ago. After the initial stage of recovery in which she was heavily medicated and slept most of the day, things

got ugly, at least for those of us going to see her at the rehab center where she was staying. You see, my Grandma comes from good German stock where idle hands were the tools of the devil and being productive was practically saintly. She was always sewing or gardening, reading or cooking, working on puzzles or cleaning. So after her surgery, when she finally was conscious for more than ten minutes at a time she wanted to *do* something! However, she didn't feel well enough and didn't really have the concentration to accomplish much and thus spent much of her waking time frustrated.

We have all been there, recovering from the flu, not sick enough anymore to justify remaining in bed, but not healthy enough to return to work. It is the not being *able* that drives many of us crazy. David usually gives me two weeks following my return from General Assembly each summer before I start going stir crazy and begin some project around the house. Some summers I don't even make it two weeks before just being quiet and sitting in the sun or floating in the pool evokes a sense of restlessness instead of relaxation and rejuvenation. Each summer I long for the time to *do nothing*, but somehow when that time arrives I can't quite handle it so I fill up with things to do!

Paul Reyner in an interview in Parabola magazine's summer 2005 issue talks about how he learned to restrain himself from excessive doing. He says, "...this notion of effort. This word at first means something you strive for. But you understand at a certain point that the kind of effort you need to comprehend is different, that what is meant by effort is letting go. It is an effort because I have to struggle against what is ingrained in me about the idea of effort: I want to *get* something, to *do* something. Finally, after years

of trying, I begin to understand that the nature of effort is to allow something to appear. This new meaning of effort has to do with relaxation.”

Relax? How? It isn't something many of us do well. We are used to deadlines, demands, expectations of duty and responsibility. But in all that doing what is happening to the us underneath? Maybe Shakespeare had it right to begin with...the question is “To be or not to be.” Can we simply be? Can we stop the doing long enough to recognize who we are and what in life we actually *wish* to do?

“Restraint,” writes Joseph Bruchac, “has always been regarded as a great virtue among most, if not all, of the original peoples of North America. Holding back, observing the situation, and not acting too swiftly characterize the behavior of many of the great heroes of various tribal nations.”

An example of which comes in the story of the Osage Plains Indians. “One day the chief of the Isolated Earth People was hunting in the forest. He was hunting for a symbol to give life to his people, some great and powerful animal that would show itself to him and teach him an important lesson. As he hunted he spied the tracks of a huge deer. The chief became very excited.

"Grandfather deer," he said, "surely you are going to show yourself to me. You are going to teach me a lesson and become one of the symbols of my people."

The chief began following the deer's tracks. His eyes were on nothing else, and he went faster and faster through the forest. Suddenly the chief ran right into a huge spider's web that had been strung across between the trees. It made him stumble. When he got to

his feet he was angry. He struck at the spider, but the spider dodged aside and climbed out of reach.

"Grandson," the spider said, "why do you run through the woods looking at nothing but the ground? Why do you act as if you were blind?"

The chief answered, "I was following the tracks of a great deer. I am seeking a symbol to give life and strength to my people."

"I can be such a symbol," said the spider.

"How could you give strength to my people?" the chief asked. "You are small and weak and I didn't even see you."

"Grandson," said the spider, "look upon me. I am patient. I watch and I wait. Then all things come to me. If your people learn this, they will be strong indeed."

And that is the lesson that many religious traditions teach – that if you wait, if you sit in quiet and in stillness truth will come to you, wisdom will come to you. If we are always rushing about we shall never hear nor see the beauty of life around us and in us. If we do not stop to smell the roses they will simply become a colorful blur we pass by on the way to somewhere.

Of course action and doing are necessary and valuable, but their results cannot be the destination we are heading toward. We must slow down, be still and patient, and learn to do nothing. But remember from the words I began with, do not let doing nothing be confused with inactivity...it is Life that it is all about. "Be content with what you have;" writes Lao-Tzu, "rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking,

the whole world belongs to you.” And that is the point, to see that within us, when we are quiet and still, the whole world belongs to us as we belong to the world.

“A great grove of trees once stood on the hill where just one gnarled tree now stands. Long ago, the woodcutters had passed it by, saying, "We will never cut a good straight board from that twisted tree." So they let it be and cut another and another.

Then the loggers came after logs to sell and said, "The twisted tree will burn with a foul smell." So they let it be and cut another and another.

Then the carvers came after soft-grained wood and said, "This twisted tree won't do us any good. It is a knotty old tree." So they, too, let it be and cut another and another.

In time, the large, gnarled tree stood alone on the hill. Now during the day, the children come and play in its shade. In the evening, the old men gather about its huge trunk. They sigh and talk about their lives.

"Oh, what is the use of being useless?" one elderly man said.

Another pointed up and replied, "Just look above your head! An entire grove of trees once stood on this hill. Now only one crooked tree still stands, thick with greenery. Had this useless old tree been useful, my friend, it would not have grown ancient with fine spreading limbs!"

And so I leave you with these questions to ponder: to do or not to do? To be or not to be?