

A day with no agenda: Time to enjoy the world

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue



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Even my mother joked that her youngest child emerged with an inclination to save the world. Despite my middle class / Long Island housing development / bourgeois origins, I discovered World Sorrow early and wanted to spend myself on the Greater Good. What else could I have been but a minister?

In my vocation I took Paul's guilt-provoking admonition to "be all things to all people" with staggering literalness. I started my day scanning the horizon for disaster via local, national, and international news. My car was an annex to my office, as were jails, courtrooms, diners, hospitals, and psyche wards. Wherever my parishioners went, I went. I prayed my way through the church directory and along the marginalia of that same directory where nonmembers hovered in the white spaces the same way they sat uncomfortably in the back pews ready to bolt.

The mighty river of urgency fed into my innate ocean of anxiety. Add to this a sense of duty, workaholism, perfectionism, and not-quite-but-pretty-close-to-pathological people-pleasing, and you get much "vanity and striving after wind" (Eccles. 1:14). Not to mention burnout.

I burned out. Spectacularly. Twice. And there was no mercy.

But these last few months, for the first time since about ninth grade, I'm not overly stressed. I don't have a church job, for one thing. A bout of ill health has curtailed traveling to preach and teach, and a writing project is on hiatus. My husband, now retired, seems to crave my company. We actually eat supper together. We do two

crossword puzzles every day. We go drumming together on the town square on Sunday afternoons. (We live in Woodstock, New York, after all.) We take off for a drive into the Catskills without a plan. We watched the bluebirds raise two sets of hatchlings this summer from our back porch. Not watching them while doing something else . . . just watching. Oh, and I read books for pleasure.

It never occurred to me in all these years to enjoy my life.

In the thick of ministry I often joked that the best place to hide from God is in service to the church. “Be sure to take your day off!” colleagues piously admonished each other with a wink. Why the wink? Because, we reasoned, shouldn’t we live at the insane pace of our parishioners—the working poor—who struggle along with two jobs, rare days off, and no flexibility? Like those parishioners who are docked pay when they need to go to the doctor or the DMV or get called to school to pick up their sick kid?

Am I ready to say now, in retrospect, that my solidarity only masked my natural tendencies to overdo it? Would the example of taking a regular holy sabbath have been a bad thing? A monk I know likes to talk about “holy leisure” as having enough time to do the things you have to do meaningfully and well. It also means allowing time to handle emergencies.

One frantic morning years ago a young woman knocked on my office door. I was preparing for a program later in the day, so I asked her if she could come back another time. The look on her face woke me up to her distress, and I asked her to stay after all. I’m glad I did. She had been raped the night before and after a long night of medical procedures and questioning had come directly from the clinic to talk with a chaplain.

How many times, I wonder now, did my insane busyness make me unavailable to God and to my neighbor? Not to mention my family?

E. B. White wrote, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” What I’ve discovered during these last few months of guilty inactivity is that the world doesn’t seem to need me to improve it. Rather, I appreciate the work or play or the rest at hand. I watch the bluebird fledglings as if that’s what I’m supposed to be doing and with only a slight heaviness of heart that I should be doing something else. I can almost imagine being present in the moment, being loving in a new way to God and

to neighbor. Sometimes I'm almost drunk on birdsong and the scent of the breeze.

I can even imagine waking up one day with no agenda except to enjoy the world.