

The art of puttering

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [Apr 03, 2013](#) issue



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In our hypermediated age, there is much talk of multitasking. Multitaskers come equipped with Internet connections and attempt to engage several tasks with their keyboards, televisions and music players. The multitasker is marked by flitting, fractured attention and a sustained sense of urgency. Since multitasking is mediated by communication devices, it concentrates on the virtual world rather than the physical world surrounding the multitasker.

An older but not entirely lost practice is known as puttering. I know puttering is not a lost art because my spouse, Sandy, and some friends engage in it regularly. Sandy, as an expert putterer, will start a load of wash, then grade some papers (she is a teacher), check her e-mail, do some dusting, then pay some bills. Puttering differs from multitasking in that most of it is grounded in the actual, physical world. Puttering is also marked by a gentle, even leisurely rhythm; it involves moving back and forth from one chore to another at a sedate pace. Puttering, unlike multitasking, is not marked by a sense of urgency. Puttering allows for breaks in the work, for a cup of coffee or even a burst of play.

My father-in-law was also an accomplished putterer. I remember him working on car engines, seeing to his farm animals and often stopping to play with cats. My own father was not as comfortable with puttering, but I remember that we puttered at our farm chores. Fill the milk cow's feed box, clean a stall, feed the horse, call in the cow for milking—it all happened at the relaxed pace of the animals themselves.

In this process, Dad could find some time for some merry mischief. Once, when I was in grade school, I arrived home from school and went straight to the barn to join Dad in the chores. As I approached the barn door, I heard a moaning sound. When I went inside, Dad was leaning against the wall, grasping his mouth. He groaned. "Tell Mom," he muttered through his hand, "that the stud horse kicked me in the mouth." Then he lifted his hand and spit out white fragments, which I took to be broken teeth.

I dashed to the house and told Mom that Dad was hurt, kicked in the mouth by the horse. She was on to his tricks, however. He's all right, she told me; just go back to the barn. Confused, I returned to the barn, where Dad was chuckling. He had chewed and spat straw, acting as if distressed, and I was the victim of a practical joke. Puttering leaves time for such play.

In the spirit of playfulness and with puttering in mind, we could visit anew the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-41. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. "She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

Perhaps the main difference between Mary and Martha is that Mary knows how to putter and Martha does not. Martha is so task-oriented that she is "distracted." She can see her service only as a series of urgent tasks. She is unable to imagine and enact a rhythm of puttering, of moving unhurriedly from one task to another and taking time to pause—to pause, in this case, to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him speak. Mary, on the other hand, knows how to putter. She follows the gentle rhythms of puttering and takes time to stop and devote attention to their visitor.

Mary's story points to another aspect of puttering. Puttering is, or can be, meditative. Puttering does not fight the flow of time but moves at peace along with it. Puttering allows space and time for rumination not only on the tasks at hand but on other things in and around them. Like Mary, the putterer has time to listen, to mull things over, to attend to the day mindfully and meditatively. Putterers are at peace with the world—the actual, physical world in front of them—and their work. They are not "worried and distracted by many things" but instead move in and

among their chores at ease.

Perhaps puttering helps one do what the apostle Paul called praying without ceasing. Puttering leaves or opens space for a frequent and leisurely return to prayer throughout the day. Its rhythms are freeing and relaxing. Putterers have “chosen the better part, which will not be taken away” from them.