The other day, noticing after my shower that the bed had been made, I thanked Roger for his thoughtfulness. He looked at me quizzically, and I was a little taken aback when he reminded me that we had made the bed together, before my shower.

I must have been operating on auto pilot; I know I had other things on my mind. What makes this ironic is that what I was thinking about was this sermon. Focused on what it means to be fully present; I was totally absent in the bed-making moment.

We all do this, to some extent at least, I think. Have you ever been driving along when you suddenly realize you’ve arrived at your destination, and have no memory of the trip?

There actually is a more scientific term for this phenomenon – “dissociation” or “divided consciousness” – operating on two different “tracks.” We’re most successful in this “dissociated trance” state when one of the things we’re doing is physical in nature, and the other more mental.

It’s not exactly the same as multi-tasking, but can be confused with it, because in both cases, we’re not fully attending to any of the actions we’re attempting. I can fold laundry quite well at the same time I’m watching a movie, for instance, but neither of those acts is seriously consequential.

Multi-tasking can be a good thing, but it might also foster distraction and attention deficit disorder. It can even be dangerous. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of drivers have been ticketed for talking on cell phones while driving. Even using a hands-free device leaves our concentration divided.

And then there’s texting, which causes people to literally walk into poles while their attention is divided. This might be relatively harmless, or actually tragic. The young woman who was driving at the same time as texting her fiancé a love message, crashed her car and died comes to mind. One of the saddest memorial services I ever led was to honor the life of a sixteen year-old who walked in front of a truck while she was texting. She just wasn’t aware of her surroundings.

We are obviously capable of tuning things out; and with the near-constant stimuli of our surroundings, maybe it’s a defense mechanism. Philosopher Michael Marder says that we “become subject to… sensory overload — when incomparably strong sensations muscle out those that lay a weaker claim on our capacity to attend to the world.”

Maybe advice from the Zen Master, poet, peace and human rights activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, would be helpful. He advocates mindfulness in all aspects of living. As an aid, a collection of his meditations provides verses to recite or remember while doing something. While getting dressed, for example, he suggests saying, “Putting on these
clothes, I am grateful to those who made them and to the materials from which they were made. I wish that everyone could have enough to wear.”

What impresses me about those phrases is that attention is focused not only on the moment – that is, the moment of “putting on these clothes” – it’s that the rest of the verse extends the thought to the one who made the clothes and beyond, to everyone else.

To be clear, this form of considering others holds absolutely no judgement of others.

I’m reminded of a couple who move into a new neighborhood. Over breakfast one day, they notice their neighbor hanging the wash outside. One of them observes, “That laundry is not very clean; she doesn’t seem to know how to wash properly. Maybe she needs better laundry detergent.”

Her partner looks on in silence.

This scene is repeated several times, until a month later, when the laundry on the line appears surprisingly clean. "Look, she’s finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her!"

And the partner replies, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."

So it is with life. What we see, how we experience some aspects of life, might depend on the lens through which we look.

Thich Nhat Hanh brings his philosophy into everyday life. He has trained his staff to be fully engaged in the moment, and still reach out to others, through a breathing technique. Here’s how it works: Before they answer the phone in his office, they take two breaths. With the first breath, they detach from the task they are doing. With the second breath, they center themselves. Then they pick up the phone. By this time, they are ready to give their full attention to the caller. They are ready to listen.

“One of the easiest human acts,” writes Margaret Wheatley, “is also the most healing. Listening to someone. Simply listening. Not advising or coaching, but silently and fully listening.”

I don’t agree that listening silently is the easiest human act. Think about it. What’s your first impulse when someone shares their pain or troubles? Am I the only one instinctively wants to “fix” it?

On the other hand, what do you most need when you are sharing your distress with another person?

I think of this deep, attentive act as “listening with the ear of the heart,” a phrase borrowed from St. Benedict. The congregation’s Covenant names this as “listening wholeheartedly.”
Wanting to jump in and “fix” a problem might be a function of many issues, but sometimes it’s just ego. It’s not always easy to admit that we don’t always have all the answers.

As we consider this month what it means to be a people of abundance, this seems relevant to me, for ego is not the only barrier to being fully present. A sensation of scarcity also plays a role. Most people would probably say they multi-task to save time, after all.

What if time – or emotional investment – were not an issue? What if we approached life with the feeling that we have all the time we need; that everything we do, everyone we encounter, not only deserves our undivided attention but that we have that undivided attention to devote to what we’re doing and those we encounter, doing so without the burden of judging?

Connie Simon, who serves as Intern Minister at the Unitarian Society of Germantown, and Contract Chaplain at Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, recently shared a story from her Chaplaincy that will stay with me for a long time.

The story begins with her description of a screaming woman.

The woman was swearing and crying and upset and the nurses couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her. Did something hurt? Did she have a bad dream? She couldn’t calm down to answer them. One of them finally suggested that they call the chaplain.

My pager went off at 2:30 a.m. [Connie says]

I had just spent two hours with a family who lost their son to yet another senseless act of gun violence, and had lain down hoping to sneak in a few minutes of sleep before the next call came. The nurse on the phone said they didn’t know what to do with this patient and thought maybe I could talk to her. If I couldn’t help, they might have to move her to the psychiatric unit.

I entered the room to see a large, heavily-tattooed African-American woman sitting on the side of the bed half-crying, half-cursing at the empty room. I took a deep breath and thought to myself, *Here we go.* I didn’t know what to expect. I introduced myself and pulled up a chair facing her.

I asked softly, “What’s going on?” After fifteen minutes, I learned that she’d left her purse on the bed when they took her downstairs for tests. When she came back, the purse – containing her rent money and her deceased husband’s ashes – was gone. She tried telling the nurses and security but she said no one wanted to help her.

After I called security and helped her file a report, she was much calmer. She shared her life story with me: how she’d put herself through college and graduate school, been a singer and had even written a book. She was amazing! But no
matter how much she accomplished, she said, people would judge her by her appearance without even giving her a chance.

We talked for over an hour about all kinds of things. I prayed with her. When I got up to leave, she started to cry again. To this day, I can still hear her saying, “Thank you. I just wanted someone to listen to me.”

“I just wanted someone to listen to me.” It’s a simple request, yet not so simple to fulfill. But to be fully present with someone, even without words, speaks volumes of non-judgmental, empathetic connection.

Kate Braestrup, a chaplain for the Warden Service in the state of Maine, wrote a book about this. She chronicled some of her experiences, beginning with the unexpected death of her husband.

In her work, Reverend Braestrup has been present with parents, as they wait while forest rangers search for their six year old who has gone missing in the woods. She is still present when the child is found, hours and hours and hours later. And she is there with the search and rescue personnel too, for those parents are not the only ones who need her, should the outcome of the search be tragic.

Describing her role, Reverend Braestrup says "I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out, or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence. It is showing up with a loving heart."

This morning’s Reading affirms that we need one another, in a myriad of ways, at so many times of our lives. It’s a simple fact that none of us is entirely self-sufficient. Caring motivates us to respond to the needs of one another. Being fully present to one another is what supports us in what it means to live out a human life, filled as it is with its joys and its sorrows.

We offer the gift of our presence with hope and honesty and humility: hope for an unfolding future alive with possibilities; honesty in assessing whether our expression of caring is helping or hindering the other person; and the humility to remember our limitations.

And sometimes just being present is enough.

What we’re talking about is compassion: literally, to suffer with another person. Not to offer advice or tell our own story, but to simply be present with another person. Like a story told by Leo Buscaglia, of a four year-old who learned that his family’s next door neighbor had recently lost his spouse.

Upon seeing the man quietly sitting on his porch crying, the little boy went over to the gentleman, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked the child what he had said to their neighbor, he answered, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."
“Too often,” Buscaglia said, “we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

We can all do this. We really do have all the time we need. We can learn to recognize our divided attention when we are failing to fully attend to another person, and when we are marring the moment by judging another. Putting our phone down, setting aside judgement, and focusing on the person we are with: in all those ways, we share our abundance.

Giving and receiving the gift of presence, sharing one’s authentic, vulnerable, strong self in relationship – in times of joy and sadness – offers solace, respite, the chance to catch one’s breath and to find comfort. Both the giving and receiving of that gift bind us together in commonality, for although our struggles and our delights are personal, they are universal, as well. In the giving and in the receiving, we are sharing our humanity.

This morning’s story, which was based on one from Leo Tolstoy, advises us well:

There is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing to do is to do good for the one who is by your side…This is why we are here.

May we all, beginning with ourselves, as we are, practice being fully engaged in all the moments of our lives. Blessed be.

Selected Resources:


Simon, Connie, “Someone to Listen,” Braver/Wiser: Courage and Compassion for Life as it Is, braverwiser@uua.org
