

Time out: Twenty quiet minutes

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

When I served a church full time, I grew used to greeting people at the door on Sundays who apologized for not having been there the week before. Most offered up faulty alarm clocks or out-of-town visitors as excuses, but a few confessed, “It was so quiet when I woke up . . . ” or, “It was such a beautiful day . . .” They did not have to finish their sentences, since I knew exactly what they meant.

For most of them, Sunday morning was the one still point in their spinning lives, the one chance they had all week to move slowly, breathe deeply and remain mute until noon if they wanted to, or to enjoy an unhurried breakfast of blueberry pancakes with the whole family. They knew about their duty to worship God in community, but every now and then they decided to worship God in creation instead. For some reason they thought this would anger me, but they were wrong. The emotion they sensed in me was envy.

Now I greet college students at the door on Tuesdays and Thursdays instead, but the dynamics are much the same. Some of them are taking five courses while working full-time jobs and caring for small children. Others are trying to keep their scholarships along with their commitments to coaches, school newspaper editors, theater and choral directors. A few still live at home, where their families count on their help with the chickens or cows.

Like other Americans, 95 percent of these students say they believe in God, but this belief offers them no relief from their exhaustion. Most will tell you that God expects the same things from them that everyone else does: high marks, full attention, top performance and complete devotion. Some days, when I see their eyes like burned-out coals in their puffy faces, I want to cancel class and make them all go back to bed. “Look in the mirror before you do,” I want to tell them. “Look at what you are doing to yourself.”

But even if I did tell them that, I know that they would not do it. They are sold on a culture in which a B+ equals failure and sleep is a waste of time. Hungry for connection, they stay tuned to media that batter their senses all hours of the day.

Spooked by their own deep feelings, they move too fast to feel anything. If I send them back to bed, then they will use the time to catch up on something else. I know this about them because I know this about myself.

Recently I fell upon a brilliant solution. Rather than assign them a research paper on the topic of meditation, I required my students to do it—not once but three times—to sit or walk for at least 20 minutes, staying fully present in the moment. When the busy monkeys of their minds tried to yank them into the past or the future, their assignment was to resist. When they were tempted to judge their own success at this, their assignment was to desist. “Who are you when you are not doing anything?” I asked them. “Tell me what you find out.”

When the papers came in, most students admitted that doing nothing was the hardest thing they had ever done. One turned hostile after his third try. “This is just plain stupid,” he wrote. “It’s basically vegging out and I’d rather do it my way, watching television with a beer. Who am I when I’m not doing anything? It’s a stupid question, but my answer would have to be no one. I am no one at all.”

Another reported what happened when she felt the wind in the trees blowing across the hairs on her skin. “When I stopped to notice this, it gave me chills,” she wrote. “Then I began to cry. I cannot explain it, but I did. I believe I was in shock that I do not notice and appreciate the little things in life that are absolutely wonderful. How many times have I picked flowers and never even noticed them—what kind they are, how different they are?”

One hunter who did his meditation in a deer stand confessed that he went temporarily insane. “For one crazy moment, I thought I was the deer,” he wrote. “I thought I was the forest, the sky, the sun coming through the leaves. Man, was *that* weird.” If he had ever read the mystics, then he would have recognized this glint of divine union, but his religious education did not include the odd notion that God might value his stillness enough to meet him where he was.

When I handed the papers back, I assured my class that what they had done was perfectly biblical. Proverbs is full of wisdom gleaned from God’s work in creation, I told them. Didn’t Jesus tell his disciples to consider the lilies of the field? If they thought 20 minutes was eternity, I told them, then they should try observing sabbath some time.

I don't know if I convinced them, but they did look more rested. Now if I could only convince them to repeat this act of resistance on a regular basis—to stop running for a few moments each day, to stop answering all the sirens long enough to hit the bottom they never hit, feel the wind they never feel, sense the union they never sense—although no coach, no boss, no congregation I know will honor them for it. Their only hope is to remember how alive they felt, for 20 minutes at least, and to want that as much as they want the customary rewards of their busy lives.

If I mean this, then I may have to start requiring my students to miss class from time to time—on the condition that they do nothing the whole time, of course—and that they offer me no apologies when they return.