

# IMMERSE

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## Learning to Be Still

By: Libbie Patterson

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The other day I experienced a small epiphany in the dentist's chair while I was getting my teeth cleaned. No, it wasn't a sudden clarity about the need to floss more regularly (although that probably is a good idea). In that chair, where I could do nothing but be there, I was able to stop being my multi-tasking, easily distracted, non-focused self. Instead, I relaxed. I thought through a few things that have been nagging at me, I made some plans, I even made a mental list or two. In that apparently confined place, I was set free. Finished, I joked with the hygienist that I'd like to come more often, I got so much good thinking done. She surprised me by saying "I hear that all the time."

What is it about our lives--my life--that the enforced "quiet" of a dentist chair becomes the place for retreat and reflection? In a situation of forced immobility, I could finally turn to my inner noise and give it attention. The ability to stop, to attend to what is needful at the moment rather than running out ahead, living so distractedly that little in the present gets its due--have we lost that ability, in our busy, over stimulated lives? When, during a typical day, do I really attend to what is there to see and know? Certainly our high-tech environment offers a myriad of opportunities for distraction. But the biblical Mary and Martha story tells us that our challenge is not only a 21st century one.

I find that many of my friends, particularly women friends, are troubled by that story. Dinner does need to be served. Letting go of responsibilities isn't the way to make life run smoothly. Who has not occasionally felt put upon, unappreciated, even used? We all need to be thanked, helped,

acknowledged for our efforts, and I think it is any experience of feeling the lack of that which responds to this story with a “no fair!” Making peace with Jesus’ apparent dismissal of Martha’s concerns requires, I think, the ability to free the story to make its own point. Jesus isn’t telling Martha she doesn’t matter; but quite the opposite. He wants her with him. It is an affirmation of her importance to him--she matters more than his dinner.

My dentist chair experience was reinforced by a different experience a few days later. A friend who just returned from a wonderful leisurely walking vacation along the Thames in the English countryside was showing me pictures of the trip. I found myself drawn by the quiet beauty, so much so that as I left her home, for just a few minutes I saw the neighborhood with different eyes. Trees, yards, gardens--places I drive by every day were suddenly filled with newness and beauty. Then my focus shifted again, and life was back to its normal routine. But for just a minute or so, I’d seen with new eyes.

“Be still and know that I am God”. I find it extraordinarily difficult to be still. But both of these experiences tell me that daily life itself has the potential for what I need. Brother Lawrence, the humble monk whose reflections are recorded in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, discovered that God can be found in kitchen duties. Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes the same point in a poem (I’ve made the language inclusive):

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only (the one) who sees, takes off (their) shoes--*

What kind of stillness allows attentiveness? Or alternatively, what kind of attentiveness creates such stillness? It is a letting go, for one thing, a stepping aside that is not just about foregoing action, but handing it off for a while.

The ability to stop, to be present to the moment, is also the grace of God, as is all of life and every breath that we take. My prayer--my intent--is that it won’t require a dentist chair epiphany to be reminded of that reality. Daily life is what we have, and God is present in every moment of it.