



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Strategic Withdrawal: Space in the Middle,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on December 2, 2012

It's the first Sunday in Advent. I love this purple season--this time of cold days and long nights that invites us to inhabit a more interior space for a while. This season which invites us to light candles in the darkness, to be still and wait and watch. To be hopeful and expectant. To prepare for that time when we will, in the words of Joni Mitchell, sing “songs of joy and peace.”

Isn't that what we're hoping for, and preparing for? That what might come to life, in us, and in the world, at this darkest time of year, is some joy and some peace?

I experience Advent as a time pregnant with possibility, and I crave its invitation, in what can be a crazy busy time of year, to do less, not more, to trust that good things do come to those who wait, to trust in the slow work of God.

Do you know those words from the French Jesuit priest and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin? They seem just right for this season. He said

Above all, trust in the slow work of God  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to something  
unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress  
that it is made by passing through  
some stages of instability-  
and that may take a very long time.

What I want to offer you today is a suggestion and a strategy for how to be more present to this life you have been given; for how to be more glad and more grateful, how to be more patient and trusting. It's simple, really. You need to know how to step back.

By stepping back I don't mean to check out or run away. What I'm proposing is making some space right in the middle of your life, cultivating simple practices that help you to be in touch with what matters. It could begin with spending some time writing in a journal, or holding hands around the table before dinner, saying grace and naming what you are thankful for. It could be taking a walk or having a prayer or meditation practice. Who among us couldn't use more of this kind of space in our lives?

The writer David James Duncan has a little essay titled “Strategic Withdrawal.” It’s found in a book of essays, and comes, fittingly, at the end of a section called “Activism.”<sup>1</sup> Duncan is no navel-gazer; he does plenty, but he also knows the need to step back and be renewed and recharged. He calls this “strategic withdrawal,” and describes it this way:

“Strategic Withdrawal  
any movement inward

--as into a chair by a window the light of which you use only to stare into a cup of tea  
--or as into a habit of tea-drinking, as opposed to coffee, because the former behaves so much more quietly within the body, so softly helps to open the eyes and the mind  
--or as in letting the eyes come to a standstill, in some space on the page of a book you’ve been reading, in order to stare at nothing, or at something inside, or at something neither inside nor out--an association-sprung scene, an entire small world, maybe; a place so pungent you leave your body to stand in it for a time.”

These December days are a good time for this movement inward that Duncan describes. Thousands of years ago, the psalmist wrote these words: “Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10). Be still and be in touch with what you can’t know when you are busy, harried, distracted. Be still and know.

In the military, strategic withdrawal is a euphemism for an orderly retreat: “We’re not retreating-- this is a strategic withdrawal!” Duncan says the only problem he has with a spiritual retreat is the implication that such a retreat only happens once in a blue moon, and he knows we need to feed our souls more regularly than that.

Listen to more of what he says:

“Strategic withdrawal: any refusal to man our habitual political or psychological trenches or defend out turf, for though the turf may be holy, our defenses, when they grow automaton, are not... any refusal to engage with that testy or irritating or ideologically loud or theologically bloated person in your life...

any movement away from one’s “urgencies,” one’s “this-is-who-I-am” nesses, one’s responsibilities, agitations, racial guilt, sworn causes, shames, strengths, weaknesses, memories, workaday identity, public or secret battlefields  
any movement toward formlessness  
silence  
emptiness...”

Sometimes you need to just step back, and create some space, in which you can be attuned to what is going on under the surface. In which you can get lost in the patterns of bare tree branches against a December sky, or of flickering candles in a darkened sanctuary, or the beating of your own heart.

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is found in *My Story as Told by Water*, by David James Duncan.

I told our worship committee the other night that I'm grateful for the places in this church where we are holding silence. You find it in some of our small group gatherings, you find it at Vespers and in places in our Sunday worship--a time to be together in that peaceful and pregnant space, where we can be still and open to what may come.

Most of us don't get that much stillness and silence in our lives, do we? What I'm advocating today is that you take charge of your own life, and carve out some time and set aside some space to just be; some time that is not meant to be useful or productive. Time to daydream and wander and rest; whatever feeds your own soul. What I'm talking about is sabbath time.

Except for our Jewish friends who observe the Sabbath, we've lost any semblance of a sabbath in our country. Sunday morning has been overrun by shopping and sports. TV and the internet blare on, 24 hours a day. What is the cost of always being connected? What do we lose by not seeing the stars, because we have so many lights on? We need ways to make a strategic withdrawal, to create some space in the middle of our lives to be still and to know what we so easily forget. No one else will do this for you. You have to choose to make that time.

I take Monday as my Sabbath, and one of the ways I observe it is to turn my computer off on Sunday night, and leave it off, and not check e-mail on Monday. Sometimes I look at it on Monday night, just to see what's coming up, but I try not to. In an emergency, it's always best call me on my cell phone--any day--the number is on my church voicemail. I know I need some Sabbath time, and you do too. Are you getting it? If not, this season is a good time to start.

How many of us are like the person David Wagoner addresses his poem to--people hurrying through the woods of life, rushing around, largely unaware, until one day we realize we are lost?

Listen to his poem again:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.<sup>2</sup>

Where you are is called here. But it's so easy to not be here, to be looking ahead or behind. To be distracted by a million details or a cacophony of voices. It's so easy to be seduced by those voices that tell us things will make us happy, or food, or busyness. What we are really hungry for--

---

<sup>2</sup> David Wagoner, "Lost."

love, acceptance, companionship, community, a sense of the Holy--these are only available to us in the present moment. We need to practice some strategic withdrawal in order to actually be present to our lives and to these gifts.

These darkening days, and this season of Advent, are a blessed invitation, if we will accept it, to be here, now. To be open to what the darkness and stillness may reveal. If you've ever been pregnant, you know something about waiting. But you know this is not a passive kind of waiting. In the dark, your body is working at creating a whole new life. Likewise, what might be growing in your soul these days, that needs time and quiet and space in order to come to life?

So I invite you, this season, to make time for nothing. To step back, if only for a few minutes a day. Start the day off with a meditation on the cup of tea in your hand. Go out for a quiet walk at lunchtime. Write in a journal or knit or paint or draw. Or just be--let your heart wander where it will. Take time to daydream. Come to Vespers. Say a prayer as you drift off to sleep. Be still.

In the New Zealand prayer book, there's a prayer for night, that is good for this season of Advent. I'm left some copies on the table at the back of the sanctuary, and at coffee hour, in case you'd like to use it as your own night prayer:

God, it is night.  
The night is for stillness.  
Let us be still in your presence.  
It is night after a long day.  
What has been done has been done;  
what has not been done has not been done;  
let it be.  
The night is dark;  
Let our fears of the darkness of the world and our own lives rest in you.  
The night is quiet.  
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,  
all dear to us,  
and all who have no peace.  
The night heralds the dawn.  
Let us look expectantly to a new day,  
new joys,  
new possibilities.  
In your many names we pray.

My prayer is that we will enter into this season; that we will welcome its invitation to make space, to step back and slow down, so that when the time comes to sing songs of joy and peace, we will be ready.

Amen.