**September 17, 2023: Psalm 46**

***Stillness Speaks*-Eckhart Tolle**

***Stillness is the Key*-Ryan Holiday**

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I would imagine that, for some people, maybe some of you, the idea of being still doesn’t seem like something a person would have to learn or practice. We should just do it. I also imagine there are people who, like me, have found the psalmist’s instruction in Psalm 46:10 to “be still…,” daunting, to say the least. What I found at the beginning of my sabbatical was that the harder I tried to be still the less still I was. I did so much preparation for stillness. I chose the right spot, brought the right things into the space, and took some of them back out because they weren’t the right things. I made sure I had done everything that needed to be done so I wasn’t interrupted in the event I achieved stillness. I did all of that, and yet, stillness did not come.

I would sit down in my comfy chair, take a couple of deep breaths, and…my mind raced. I wonder how things are at the church, I would think. Did I take the meat for dinner out of the freezer? What’s that noise? Is something burning? Maybe I’m doing this wrong. How will I know? What if I finish my sabbatical and I find out I’ve done it all wrong? I’m pretty sure I don’t get a “do over.” Trying to be still was exhausting. I was surprised to find that my body didn’t seem to know how to be still any more than my mind did. What was the right way to stillness? And what was wrong with me that this was so hard?

After several dismal attempts at stillness, I decided to circle back to that later and just do what made me happy. So I went to H2Oasis in Tulsa where, outside there was a sign that said, “DO more of what makes you happy.” I took that as a sign that I was on the right path. H2Oasis is a cool place where patrons experience sensory deprivation. You float in darkness in a tub of salt water that is the same temperature as the air temperature. The first time I floated a few years ago, I was surprised to discover that when I put my ears underwater, I could hear my heartbeat. At first it was sort of anxiety producing because, since I could hear it, I felt like I should monitor it for irregularities, because of course I would recognize them if I heard them. All of that to say, floating makes me happy.

So does cleaning and organizing. I am not a keeper of things. I’ve learned that I am just as happy with a picture of a thing as I am a thing and pictures take up less room.

John has learned that if he wants to keep something, it better have a home or I will find a home for it, usually in the trash. When I cleaned out our hallway cabinets, I found a shower curtain I bought almost 7 years ago when we moved to Bartlesville. I decided I needed to use it now or pass it along. So, I changed the color scheme in our guest bathroom to match the shower curtain and it’s perfect. I passed our old shower curtain and towels along. When I cleaned out one of the closets in a guestroom, paperwork got organized and shredded. I took my grandma’s wedding dress out of its box and read the write-up in the local newspaper about their wedding. I found the family Bible I was given when my grandparents died and even with its white Jesus pictures and King James text, I decided it is still a keeper.

Along with the perpetual cleaning and organizing I enjoyed, I rode my bike…a lot. As you know, John and I rode our bikes across Iowa the last week in July. The ride is called RAGBRAI and this was the 50th year for the ride. It was the 5th time we have ridden it together. I logged over a thousand training miles before the ride, some of those miles on my new bike. She’s blue and her name is Liberty. A whole lot of my training took place on our Nordic Track indoor bike. It has a big screen that allows the videotaped trainers to take riders anywhere in the world to work out. So, I spent time riding in Utah, Iceland, Arizona, and Ireland without leaving home. I also ended up with a crush on my favorite trainer who reminded me again and again that we each have more in us than we think we do. This came in really handy in Iowa. RAGBRAI was hot, humid, hilly, and so much fun. It was fun to prove to myself that I could still do it and do it well. The most I rode in one day was 92 miles.

It was fabulous to have nothing to do all week but ride our bikes and make sure we ate enough pie to sustain us. Rhubarb is my favorite, but I am fickle. I love all the pies. Each time I’ve ridden RAGBRAI, people have asked if I lost weight that week. I have never lost weight riding this ride. There is way too much food available to be losing weight. One of the vendors I visited most days was called PB Peddlers. They make grilled peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, some even with bacon on them. My mom used to make grilled PBJs for me when I was little, so I ate one every day on the ride. And did I mention the pie?

When I wasn’t on the bike, our 5-year-old lab, Shadow, and I took long walks and spent hours at the dog park with his friends. And his friends’ parents became my friends too. In fact, our little dog park group ended up being one of the biggest gifts to come from sabbatical. In the beginning, it didn’t seem like we had much in common. It turns out, being dog lovers was enough. We met every day and laughed at the dogs while they played, compared stories about funny things they did at home, and we learned about each other’s kids and careers and faith. You know the end of my sabbatical was also the end of our time with Shadow. When he died, Kirby (Shadow’s best friend), and his mom, wrote John and I a note and it ended with, “We loved him too.” So many people have said that to me and that has been a source of joy. I know I probably overshared about him on social media (he was so handsome), but that ended up being a good thing because people in my life knew what a loss we were experiencing and we have not felt alone, not even for a minute. Shadow was the sweetest soul I’ve ever known and a very good boy.

Even before sabbatical, he helped me begin to restore some balance to my life. He came to work with me and throughout the day, he insisted I stop working to play with him. He chased so many balls in the soccer field and sniffed every inch of the church property. At the end of our work days, he reminded me it was time to go home because he was ready for a walk…and dinner, of course.

This summer, I started going to yoga twice a week. Practicing yoga made me physically stronger and I found that it felt, and still feels, like a little gift I’m giving myself every time I go. I love how the studio smells and the music, and I love the people I practice with. My yoga friends cheered me on before the big bike ride and were sad with me when Shadow died. It was after yoga one day, about three weeks into my sabbatical, that I realized I hadn’t wondered what was going on at the church for a few days. I wondered, if I wasn’t thinking about what was happening here, what had I been thinking about?

During yoga I think about breathing and how good it feels to be able to move my body. While I ride my bike I think about the pedal stroke and relaxing my shoulders and jaw (the places my body holds tension). Yuri, my favorite trainer, taught me something about biking that I think is applicable to life in general. When you ride a road bike, the two areas of the body that do the work are your legs (to power the bike) and your core muscles (that hold you upright). A rider’s wrists and hands on the handlebars should not bear the weight of the upper body. Shoulders should not be tense, and the jaw should not be clenched. For efficiency, a good rider should relax everything except the legs and the core so blood can flow freely to them so they can do their work.

So many of us live life in a constant state of hyper alertness, anxiety, and tension. To continue the biking metaphor, it’s like we live with all our muscles engaged all the time. We don’t have energy for what is important because being on high alert constantly robs us of the energy we could use to tend to what is really important. Being anxious, being in constant fight or flight, is exhausting. And it turns out worry doesn’t change anything. The second part of verse 10 in Psalm 46, after “be still” is “and know that God is God.” In other words, we can only control our own actions and attitude. We are not in charge of all the things and all the people. We are not God. I am learning that giving energy only to the things I control frees up a lot of my mind and heart.

This learning has been helped along by a lot of sabbatical reading. What I found really interesting was that I didn’t know where my sabbatical would take me, yet the right reading materials and activities seemed to find me at just the right time. I think at last count I read 24 books. I started sabbatical with a list of books I planned to read and when I finished them, I added more. Most of what I read were theology, philosophy, and leadership books. Some were biographies of theologians, philosophers, and great leaders. I recognize that for many of you that sounds awful, but really, that is what I read for fun.

I have always enjoyed learning from the stories of other leaders and this season in my life was no different. I’ve talked before about Fred Rogers. I believe he was one of the great theologians of our time. He taught so many of us that every person matters. I was talking to a friend about him and about trying to slow my life down a little bit and he shared with me that most of the 895 episodes of Mister Rogers Neighborhood began with the camera panning to the traffic signal in Mister Rogers’ House**.** And the yellow light was flashing, a reminder that for the next 25 or so minutes, life was slowing down. I kind of wanted a traffic signal when I learned that.

I didn’t have one, but I did have wind chimes and I discovered the sound of them caused me to slow down and notice the present. And now that I’m back working in my office, the wind chimes outside my window continue to remind me to slow down and notice that the world is still happening beautifully outside my window, without my constant intervention. A very good thing to note.

In his book, *Stillness Is the Key*, author and Stoic, Ryan Holiday, wrote about another leader, very different from Fred Rogers, Napoleon. Whatever history says about his motives and quest for power (and there is a lot to say), we can’t deny he was an effective military leader, and he wasn’t so by accident. “As a general, he made it his habit to delay responding to the mail. His secretary was instructed to wait three weeks before opening any correspondence. When he finally did hear what was in a letter, Napoleon loved to note how many supposedly ‘important’ issues had simply resolved themselves and no longer needed a reply…to be active and aware of what actually mattered, he had to be selective about who and what kind of information got access to his brain.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Napoleon figured out how to filter the essential from the inconsequential. This filtering creates time and space for deep thought and reflection on priorities. This filtering creates stillness. It allows the mud to settle to the bottom of the jar so we can see clearly. In this age of 24-hour media coverage, filtering is even more crucial. While I was on sabbatical, I caught up on the news once a day. I stopped constantly checking to see what was happening in the world. Guess what? I found out the same thing the narrator in Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* did, when I didn’t listen to the news, absolutely nothing happened. Again, the world just kept going. He concluded that all along he had been afraid of the silence. When I changed the way I take in news, I wasn’t less informed, and I created space for other things, important things that I can really impact, like my health, my decisions, my life, and I created space for stillness.

As the summer went on, I observed about myself the same thing Randall Stutman, advisor to the world’s biggest CEOs and Wall Street leaders observed about his clients when he studied how successful leaders recharge. He found they do things like sailing, long distance cycling, listening to classical music, scuba diving, riding motorcycles, and fly fishing. He noticed all these activities had one thing in common: an absence of voices. The things I found myself enjoying, the things that put me back in touch with who I really am, are the things that lacked other voices; I was left alone with myself, with stillness, even when I wasn’t physically still.

Apparently, unbeknownst to me, stillness has been within me all along. I just had to give myself the space to find it. And once I did, I could hear all kinds of things and I could hear nothing and I learned to love that. I believe what I learned about stillness, about myself as a human and a leader, has made me better…a better wife, mom, grandma, and yes, a better minister. But here is the best part…I can now recognize that making me better was never the “why” of sabbatical.

Sabbatical was a gift because, as poet, artist, and musician, Morgan Harper Nichols wrote, “You are worth the quiet moment. You are worth the deeper breath. You are worth the time it takes to slow down, be still, and rest.” Thank you for the opportunity to remind myself. I am worth it, you are worth it, we are worth it. Amen.

1. Holiday, Ryan, *Stillness is the Key: An Ancient Strategy for Modern Life* (Profile Books: London, 2019), 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)