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A Ministry of Availability

by Patricia C. Thomas

Years ago I was working for the American Baptist Churches of Ohio, and under the glass on my desk was a sentence I'd clipped from *Christian Century* magazine: "Busy-ness is spiritual laziness." But at the time I wasn't able to incorporate this idea into my life and it remained one of those thought-provoking statements. A mother of two active teenage boys, we scurried between JV and Varsity soccer games, into Columbus for lessons, rehearsals and Youth Orchestra concerts, then out to the high school to attend student plays. Our family sponsored a South-African student, hosted travelling peace workers and took leadership positions in our small Quaker meeting. I was delighted that the pages of my date book were so full there was never more than half a day without 'something to do'. Occasionally I squeezed in a bit of reflective writing usually drawn from the anti-nuclear or anti-Contra demonstrations I took part in. My days and evenings were full of *Good Works*. Corporate worship and private meditation served as my Touchstone to God, and I drew strength from the Social Gospel and the book of James. It was a tremendously satisfying life and even after our sons were grown it might have continued at that pace had I not taken courage in hand after my husband died, resigned my campus ministry job and headed for a new post in London, England.

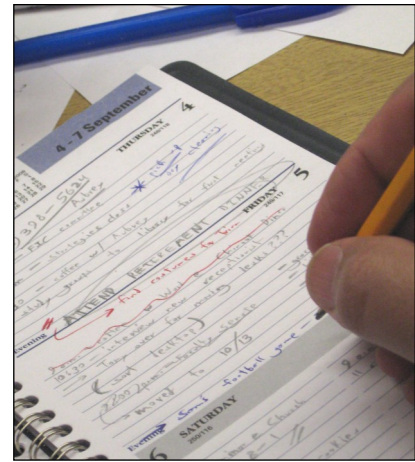


Photo by Mark Oppenlander

After a year I returned to Ohio, remarried and joined my new husband on his family farm convinced I would 'get back to work' after a brief respite. But as spring turned into summer, the only clarity I received was 'do not return to campus ministry'! When the oomph required to re-enter the job market dissipated as well, a brand-new thought began to grow: it is time to shift from overdrive to first gear, from a datebook chock full of meetings and engagements to . . . well, to what exactly? Then the debate began and all of the internal voices weighed in:

How am I supposed to shift gears without feeling like I'm being lazy, like I'm not doing ENOUGH?

*Enough for whom? By whose standards? My socially active mother? My gung-ho peace activist friends?
The alpha types around me whom I so admire?*

You've quit feeling guilty for saying 'no' to most of the good causes that ask for your money.

OK, so to whom do I give (owe) my time, my energy, my talents and my training?

For the next two years I lamented over a date book with lots of blank space. How on earth was I going to refill those empty pages with enough activities to convince the persistent nagging thought-voices I had not turned into a lazy ego-centric? There was that pesky word again: LAZY! I accepted the offer to teach "Introduction to Quakers" while the professor took a sabbatical, with a grateful sigh of relief. Preparing for class one morning, I read *Making All Things New* by Henri Nouwen, and right there on page twenty-four, the author spoke directly to my condition:

"Being busy has become a status symbol. People expect us to be busy and to have many things on our minds. Our friends often say to us, 'I guess you are busy, as usual,' and mean it as a compliment . . . In our production-oriented society, being busy, having an occupation, has become one of the main ways, if not *the* main way, of identifying ourselves."

The quote under glass on my desk those twenty years ago returned: "Busy-ness is spiritual lazy-ness".

Then suddenly from out of the blue – which is how I experience God as Initiator – came the instruction I'd been longing for. "Yours is a **Ministry of Availability**. If you do not take charge of your date book, filling it with self-initiated activities, Spirit will guide the entries. In that way yours will become a Ministry of Availability to God. If you persist in stuffing your days full of activities in order to feel busy and useful, you hinder your ability to answer 'yes' to unexpected requests."

A feeling of relief and identity swept over me simultaneously. I had a title, a calling, something to write on the 'occupation' line of all those forms we are asked to fill out! I re-claimed the validity of my seminary training as preparation for a career. And by golly, entries began to appear in my *Week-at-a-Glance*: invitations to teach and develop a "Personal Spirituality" course at a local three-year private college, to adjunct at Wilmington College when vacancies remained, to fill a request for spiritual direction from seminary students and other seekers, to clerk two major committees for our Yearly Meeting, to provide leadership to a variety of local workshops, and to fill the pulpit on Sunday. Because my calendar remains available, I am the sibling able to travel back and forth 1200 miles to be present to our elderly and increasingly frail parents.

I wonder if perhaps the verses in Matthew 6:31-33 could be amended to include: 'Do not worry; do not say, "What are we to do all day?" . . . Your heavenly Father knows you need to feel useful . . . Set your hearts on his kingdom first . . . and this will be given you as well.'



Patricia Thomas has served on the Board of GOOD NEWS Associates since its inception in 1998 and as President of the Board since 2004. A graduate of the Earlham School of Religion in 1990, she is currently serving as Clerk of the Board of Advisors. She is an active member of the Wilmington Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) and joyously living into her retirement years on her husband's family farm complete with hogs, cows, chickens, ducks, dogs, cats and horses.

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