

STAND STILL
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls NYC
July 20, 2014

I find it intensely challenging to stand still—just to stop my body from moving for a few moments. But what’s even more demanding is to quiet my mind and just focus on what’s before me.

May Sarton writes in her poem [Now I Become Myself](#):

“Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
‘Hurry, you will be dead before—’
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)”

Until a few years ago, I didn’t see any value in standing still. I thought the busier I was, the more productive, the more my life mattered. Cultivating peace of mind requires my steadfast vigilance.

I discovered how to be still through chaplaincy--when I am with patients I can be quiet in body and mind while I am immersed in conversation. For me it is a bountiful privilege to talk with people about how they are suffering because I hear so much more than that. Many of my friends and family wonder how I could find such energy and hope in this work. Yet I have hundreds of stories about patients who inspire me and breathe new life into me.

May Sarton writes:

“My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.”

The fruit of this plant is the stillness, but there is more. It is a life enriched by a respect for death. Dr. Betsy MacGregor is the author of [In Awe of Being Human](#), a book of stories from her work as “a hospital-based inner-city pediatrician and a research physician in charge of a...project entitled “Dying and the Inner Life...” She began her work as a physician here in New York in the middle of the AIDS epidemic. One of her stories is about Angel, a two year old boy dying from AIDS. She describes a night toward the end of his life when she heard noise coming from his room very late.

“I was tired and still had chores to do, but the wistful sound called to me, and so I followed it, curious to learn what its source was...Yet what I saw through the doorway as I approached made me pause and remain in the quiet shadows of the hallway rather than enter. For it was clear that more was taking place in Angel’s room than the sad

wasting of an unfulfilled life. Something more intimate was happening, something that needed not to be disturbed.

With Angel was his father. I had never seen the man before, but during discussions on our daily morning rounds, I had heard that he often came in the wee hours of the night to visit his son. He was a tough-looking person, unshaven and stamped with the harsh signs of inner city life and his own battle with the AIDS he had acquired during years of drug addiction. I wondered what factors in his life prevented him from visiting in the light of day as other parents did. Perhaps he was fully occupied with trying to survive, I thought, or maybe he just preferred the lonely hours of the night, when he was less likely to encounter the accusing stares of strangers' eyes.

[Angel and his father] were in such a rapt communion that I remained bound in unmoving silence outside their door. It seemed that I had been summoned not to enter, but to stand as an observer of this exquisite scene, witness to an act of meaning that lay beyond my mind's measuring.

What I had been called to witness, my heart said, was the love that was shining brightly in that little room...In the light of that love, the tragedy of Angel's pitiful life—of both their lives—was being lifted up and set aside. I could feel the truth of that as surely as anything my medical books had ever taught me.”

Like Dr. MacDonald, I find that chaplaincy nurtures my own spirit. One of the best parts about the work is that I see people at their most loving. While working at Memorial Sloan Kettering, I saw friends and families forgive each other and clarify for each other what mattered most to them. I saw people wrestle with their suffering and calm themselves as they made peace. Years ago I watched my own father struggle for six years with a neurological illness that robbed him gradually of his mobility, his sight, and his ability to speak—while his connection to his children became closer by the day.

I can't imagine a world in which we live forever, in which time doesn't really exist. Could I recognize the preciousness of life? Would we all feel so compelled to come together to worship and to seek solace in this community? What would happen to my sense of purpose or to my sense of urgency to be with the people I love?

A passage from Yom Kippur liturgy puts it like this: “If some messenger were to come to us with the offer that death should be overthrown, but with the one inseparable condition that birth should also cease; if the existing generation were given the chance to live forever, but on the clear understanding that never again would there be a child, or a youth, or first love, never again new persons with new hopes, new ideas, new achievements, ourselves for always and never any others — could the answer be in doubt?”

What we have is a world of constant change in which each new moment offers illumination and nourishment for love to grow. But it is easy to be distracted by all the change and forget the opportunity to embrace the moment in which we're living right now.

I recently heard [Sharon Salzberg](#), a Buddhist writer and teacher, tell a story about a conference she attended for the past couple of years in Washington DC. The

conference coincides with the blooming of the cherry blossom trees, but Sharon was too busy with meetings to see them last year. This year, her colleagues told her they would accompany her to see the trees, that they wouldn't allow her to miss them again. She stood before the trees in awe of their beauty, fully absorbing the horizon. And then someone next to her said, "Oh what a shame, they're past their prime." Sharon, who has written books entitled The Power of Meditation and Unplug, didn't describe her reaction, she went on to talk about the rewards of calming the mind.

"Check your watches and you'll see that the time is precisely now." I borrowed that from Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the renowned [University of Massachusetts Center for Stress Reduction](#). He is a vanguard in bringing mindfulness to our Western culture.

May Sarton concludes her poem

"O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!"

I'd like to give you some experience with mindfulness through a guided meditation. I've adapted this meditation from a recording by Dr. Kabat-Zinn. Try to give me your full attention for the next few minutes. If you start to drift, that's ok, just forgive yourself and come back to my voice to try to stick with the meditation as much as you can.

In your mind's eye picture yourself as a mountain, maybe one that you love or you've climbed or one that you've seen in photographs. If you care to, close your eyes. Sense the support you have from your chair, paying attention to the actual sensations of contact.

You're elevating right out of the base of the rock, the solidity of your being from the floor, from the earth, right up into the air. You have this very stable base and this lofty peak, and a profile of the sides that's uniquely you.

Now bring your attention to your breath. Feel each breath as it comes in or goes out, letting it be just as it is, without trying to change or regulate it in any way. Now bring attention to your smile—not a social smile, but a smile from your eyes, the dignified smile of your mountain.

While you stay in touch with your breath, unify your body as a sitting mountain with the image of the mountain in your heart until they become one in you sitting here.

Mountains are very good at sitting. Night follows day and day follows night and the seasons move one into the next and through it all the mountain just sits. Through all kinds of weather patterns, pelting rain and fog and snow and sleet. Sun and warmth and water flowing and birds chirping and flowers blooming. There may be trees at its base, maybe it has rocky granite sides, streams, waterfalls, meadows, high lakes, maybe it is one peak or a series of peaks.

People may come to see the mountain and comment on how beautiful it is or how it's not a good day to see the mountain, that it's too cloudy or rainy or foggy or dark.

The appearance of the mountain changes moment by moment as the light changes and as the seasons change, but the mountain in its intrinsic self just sits being what it is. Majestic, massive, unmoving. Settling now into a sense of the body as a whole mountain scene, when thoughts come just watch them move through the field of the mind, the space of the mind, like birds flitting through the sky. Coming and going without having to pursue them, without having to reject them, without having to delve into the content of them. And the same for emotions or fluctuations in mood or sensations of the body. Allowing it all to be seasonal, fluctuations and weather patterns that we don't have to identify with being intrinsically us. Allow yourself to really be at home, just like the mountain. Fully here. Fully awake. Fully who and what you already are—way beyond name, form, history, narrative. Just this moment. Just this sitting. With no agenda. Just this being human.

And now, as best you can, imagine bringing this expanded, more spacious and accepting awareness to the next moments of your day, whatever circumstances you find yourself in, as it continues to unfold. Take a moment to sustain the mountain in your mind and then open your eyes slowly when you're ready.

Isn't it great to be a mountain?

There are infinite other ways to go about practicing mindfulness. I depend upon our Benediction which I try to recite every morning. I also depend upon [The All Souls Common Meditation](#). In fact many of my ideas and interests are spawned by these daily emails from Galen. In October of 2011 a quote from Jon Kabat-Zinn inspired me to look into his work for the first time, and two summers ago a quote from Einstein comforted me as I began to examine my fear of death.

I have spent the past year as your Student Minister, and during that time you have helped me learn how to stand still. Though I am no longer in that role, I will continue to serve as a [Lay Pastoral Associate](#). I cherish the time I spend with you hearing about your challenges, coming to know the images and ideas that give you hope, and what faith means to you.

When I stand still I can gaze at the mystery of the eternal present, the same mystery which will be there for me when I die and which was there for me before I was born.

Amen. Peace be with you.