

I was visiting with my mom and dad this week, and *Jeopardy* came on. My mom patted the couch and said, “Come sit beside me and let’s watch *Jeopardy*.” So I did what we all do when we watch *Jeopardy*—call out the answers before the contestants, then feel smart when it’s the right answer. I’ve been doing this for years with my mother, ever since Alex Trebek started hosting the show in 1984. Alex Trebek reminds me of the smart kid who wore cardigan sweaters to school and wrecked the grade curve. My mother loves Alex Trebek. So I call out the answers and whenever I’m right my mother pats my knee and says, “You should be on *Jeopardy*.” But I know she’s just saying that because she wants to meet Alex Trebek. She’s been scheming her whole life to meet Alex Trebek.

I know a lot of the answers because of my parents, both of whom, when they were at their mental peak, were very curious people and filled our heads with all sorts of information. Nothing of significant depth that would prepare us for a vocation, but enough to make us good at *Jeopardy* and Trivial Pursuit.

On the way home from our visit, I began thinking of all the things I learned from my parents—how to tie my shoes, how to resolve conflicts with my siblings, how to ride a bicycle, how to mow the yard, clean my room, make a bed, and on and on.

What my parents never taught me, and maybe what your parents never taught you, was the wise use of time. Of course, they gave us general advice about time. Mostly about not wasting it. But nothing about the stewardship of time, the understanding of time as a valuable resource, not just to be used and capitalized upon, but also savored and relished. We probably weren't taught the wise use of time, because when we were growing up, our parents were in their 20's and 30's and 40's, and probably hadn't grasped that concept yet themselves. We can't teach what we don't know, after all, and the stewardship of time is something we learn over time. It's one of the great benefits of aging. Aging helps us have a deeper appreciation of time. It's one of the gifts the decades bestow.

Of course, some parents are intuitive and wise and understand these things and pass them on to their children. If your parents were like that, that's wonderful. Count your blessings! But generally, the knowledge of how best to use our time is something we acquire over time. So this week I've been thinking about the relationship between our well-being and happiness and our use or stewardship of time. We Quakers talk often about simplicity, but when we do, we tend to attach a financial dimension to simplicity, associating simplicity with financial restraint or moderation. What we usually don't do, when we think about simplicity, is consider the relationship between simplicity and how we spend our time. We don't think about what we will call *the simplicity of schedule*.

Because we don't think about or practice a simplicity of schedule, we find ourselves stressed out, tired, and scattered, doing many, many things, but doing few of them thoughtfully, happily, and well. Our culture associates busyness with success and virtue, and idleness with failure and immorality. As a child, Joan had a neighbor who loved to read, an activity Joan's mother described as a waste of time. So Joan rebelled and became a librarian. Some kids smoke pot, Joan became a librarian.

Because our culture values busyness, we have developed the habit of saying *yes* to all we can. This is reflected in our language when we occasionally have to say *no* to a request. We say something like, "Regretfully, I'm unable to do that." But why regret it? Why is saying *no* a cause for regret, and not an indication of one's discernment and wisdom? Richard Foster, in his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, writes about letting your *no* be as holy as your *yes*. Friends, consider this: Sometimes the holiest, noblest thing we can do is say *no* to something, something that from every angle seems virtuous, except that in this moment it is not for us to do.

A few years after we moved into our house a woman in our town asked if I would work with her to eradicate burning bush in the nature preserve across the street from our house. Burning bush is an invasive species, had blanketed a dozen acres of the nature preserve preventing new trees from taking root, so she asked if I would help remove the burning bush by digging it up.

I agonized about it for several days, because I hated the thought of our nature preserve being taken over by an invasive species. But the boys were little and needed me, I had my work here, I was writing books to feed my family. What spare time I had, I didn't want to spend in the woods with a shovel digging up acres of burning bush all by myself. So I went to her house and told her I couldn't do it. She was furious with me. She said, "I have never been so disappointed in anyone my entire life." She was 80 years old, so that covered a lot of ground. I came home, feeling terrible for saying *no* to an 80 year-old lady.

Joan asked how it went.

I told Joan that the woman had never been more disappointed in anyone her entire life.

Joan said, "Really, more disappointed in you than she was in Hitler, in Stalin, in Pol Pot? Give me a break."

So that's why I'm married, because without Joan I'd be an idiot.

Don't let other people determine your *yes* or your *no*. Rather, let your decision to do or not do something arise from your commitments, your priorities, your values. Let your *no* be as holy as your *yes*. When Jesus became an adult, before he said *yes* to anything, he first said *no* to three things. You remember the wilderness temptation scene of Jesus, don't you? Before Jesus said *yes* to anything, he said *no* to other things.

We over-commit because we associate busyness with success. That's one reason. We also over-commit because we've convinced ourselves if we don't do something, it won't get done, which, when you think about it, is kind of narcissistic, this belief that the world's well-being depends upon entirely me, that no one else is capable, that I must do it all, that if I want something done right, I must do it myself.

There was a prophet in the Bible who suffered from that delusion. His name was Elijah, and one day he complained to God about his heavy burden. He was hiding in a cave at the time, having a psychotic episode, which is a common consequence of the over-committed.

God said, "What's your problem?"

Elijah said, "I'm the only one in the entire nation of Israel who has been faithful to you."

God said, "Don't strain your arm patting yourself on the back. There are thousands of folks in Israel that are just as capable, just as faithful, as you."  
(1Kings 19)

Remember this, friends.

Elijah said *yes* to everything and ended up in a cave talking to himself.

Jesus let his *no* be as holy as his *yes*, he said *no* to some things so he could say *yes* to other things.

May the years help you and me be as wise.