



Abandoning the Bondage of Busy

Do we let the weight
of our calendars define
our worth? | ELLEN M. KOGSTAD

I would like to suggest that a new expletive be added to the English language. It can join the list of other four-letter words not generally welcomed in polite conversation or formal print. My *Random House Dictionary* describes expletives as profane words characterized by irreverence or contempt for God or sacred principles

or things. The four-letter word I am suggesting fits that description in its modern usage. The word is *busy*.

In its traditional context it meant assiduous, diligent, industrious, or zealous—all good things. In recent decades, however, *busy* has evolved into a concept-word, transitioning from a simple ad-

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jective to an emotionally thick word denoting the level of one's self-importance, stature—even value. That is a lot required of such a humble word.

For the past twenty years or so I have been an intentional observer/listener in a completely unscientific study of the social use of the word *busy*. As a result, more than fifteen years ago I made a conscious decision to delete *busy* from my vocabulary when describing my life. There have been two significant, observable results: I feel freer internally, and others invite me more regularly for coffee and conversation!

Even though I stopped using the b-word, technically I was still very busy. I was industrious, even zealous. Twenty-five years ago I began and directed an urban ministry in Chicago serving teenage mothers and their children. We fed the hungry, clothed the naked, housed the homeless, and diapered the bottoms of hundreds of extremely vulnerable little ones. Of course I was busy. I was both paid to be busy and expected to be busy. If I wasn't busy raising funds and supervising staff and programs, how could we pay for rent, food, salaries, diapers, clothes, and bedding for our guests?

I had a job to do, a calling to live out. And I wanted to do it with an attitude that conveyed gratitude for the job, for the organization, its clients, and its donors. When people asked how I was doing, it was expected and accepted that I answer, "Oh, I'm so busy." People could then nod in that knowing way which conveys "poor you" and "important you" in the same gesture.

But I didn't want false approval for my work and worth anymore. Indeed the load was too burdensome at times, but that didn't make me special or increase my personal value. Moreover, I wanted the barriers created by the

phrase "I'm so busy" to come down between others and myself. Without the cover of those three words I made myself available to others; I wanted to be more approachable, more accessible. And, by omitting *busy* from my speech, I had to alter my perception of myself.

One experience remains with me. A couple from church lived not too far from my home. We were friendly but not close. One afternoon I happened to be home when they called. Meg was early in her second pregnancy and feeling especially unwell. Roger had raced home from work. Seeing his wife's distress he called an ambulance. Then he called to ask me to come and stay with their toddler daughter while they were at the hospital.

I rushed over. I was available and accessible and therefore asked to aid in a unique family situation. Sadly, Meg miscarried. Together we shared a profound grief and a holy encounter. And I knew I wanted to continue giving up "doing busy" for fullness of life.

Nowadays being busy has expanded to the stylish term "24/7." Once, students were busy during finals, or pastors were busy during holiday seasons. Now if someone is not available 24/7, one's stature is questioned. During a conversation after church many years ago, I approached a man with a time-sensitive issue. "I don't usually bring this up on Sunday, but..." Before I could finish he said, "Not a problem, I work 24/7."

A friend of mine said it best when I asked her advice on this busy versus full theme: "Busy is easy, fullness takes focus," she said. When Jesus told Mary's sister Martha that "there is need of only one thing," what could Martha have envisioned? Indeed, if Jesus were to tell any one of us to pick *only one*

thing, would any of us know what to choose?

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46). *Only one?* We are accustomed to grabbing everything with all the gusto we can—choosing only one of anything seems outrageous. Stroll the cereal aisle. We thrive on many, much, lots. We can't choose so we take it all: "One of each, please."

Creating a full life does indeed take focus; it takes discernment. To discern is to choose well. Each time we pack a suitcase, we practice discernment. What goes on the trip and what stays home? In some ways each day is like a suitcase: What is necessary today? What do I need and what can I leave out? With busy lives, though, we buy a second even larger suitcase to stuff, losing perspective on what is important for the day. Rather than do the work of discernment, we slip into the default mode of *busy*. We boast that with better time management, Day Planners, Blackberries, or _____ (fill in your personal favorite), what used to fill a day remains but, as with the addition of yeast to dough, has multiplied exponentially, consuming us 24/7.

One thing.

One pearl.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) in his *Spiritual Exercises* warns of the unfreedom of pride. He notes that life's first temptation is riches. What once was received as gift (experiences, degrees, relationships, positions, or actual wealth) is now coveted and hoarded as necessary for security. The second temptation is honor: honoring God is replaced with self-honoring. And finally full-blown pride: *I am self-suf-*

ficient; *I* deserve all I have; *I* have built my reputation/name/portfolio. This is the pride of those who cannot choose the one pearl of great price.

It begins with a genuine humility and surprise that God would call such an unlikely one. I think Moses and Mary felt the surprise of being chosen for a task, Esther and Zechariah too. King Saul, on the other hand, forgot God as he climbed his culture's version of the corporate ladder. At the beginning Saul was aware of God's hand in his many military successes. Eventually, however, he claimed them as his own. In time the delusion is that the gifting for ministry and life is one's security. And so the pride of busyness becomes the lie of worthiness.

Eventually the allure of the lie is so harmful in body and soul that the search for real freedom begins. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). Here is the pearl that is worth giving up everything for: being who God made us to be and living into that true self. There are many pearls, but they are less brilliant when compared to the one of great value. There will always be many good activities from which to choose. But what is the better thing—even the best thing—for God's call on my way of life? Living into the best releases us from the bondage of 24/7. Value comes from the Creator, not from being busy.

Several years ago I taught in the human services department of a small college. For one lecture I brought in an apple and a knife. I began peeling the

skin and asking my students to write down observable qualities, those things everyone could see. Many of these obvious, public traits are givens. But there is also a psychological dimension to the skin of the apple that corresponds to the



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self we willingly show or expose to the world. Underneath is the fruit, more details about our being, roles we play, accomplishments and failures we've experienced. The fruit is affected by the care or lack of care the outer skin has received. Like most apples, everyone is bruised in some way. Finally there is the core of the apple, the pearl. Each person is made in the image and likeness of God and each one has been created in Christ Jesus for good works to be his or her unique way of life. I couldn't be that specifically Christian in my class, but the idea of the core self brought tears to more than one set of eyes.

Embracing freedom and fullness at the core releases us from bondage to 24/7. It is an affirmation of Sabbath

time. One can stop for a day (or more) from doing the things that make one feel important, instead getting to the core where security is found in God alone. Those who choose fullness remember that life and opportunities are gifts. Humility is welcomed and God is again honored.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the religious professionals got busy. They went to Pilate, worried that the followers of the "imposter" would steal the body and fake a resurrection. The chief priests and the Pharisees received Pilate's permission to secure the tomb. They went and sealed it with a stone (Matthew 27:62-66).

After the crucifixion, the women prepared spices and ointments for Jesus's body and then "on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56).

Regardless whether the participants in the story were busy or resting, the tomb was unsealed. Resurrection happened apart from human intervention.

I am not sure if the editors of the Oxford or Webster or Random House dictionaries will approve the addition of one more listing for the b-word. But perhaps in polite conversation b#%* will no longer refer to a person's value based on activity level. And perhaps we can begin to believe that our intrinsic worth comes not from frenetic motion and perpetual availability but only as a true gift from God. That truly is the one pearl worth selling all else for, the one true thing. □

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