

“Be Still”

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Reading: a reinterpretation of Psalm 46 by Barbara Gibson:

Psalm 46: The presence of Spirit

Spirit is our refuge and our strength,
always present, even in times of trouble.

Therefore we are not afraid,
even when the earth rumbles
and volcanoes erupt beneath the sea
when ocean waters foam and roar
and mountains tremble and shake.

There is a calm river which flows in our hearts,
the place where Spirit lives.

Spirit lives in the cities, moving
among people, comforting us.

Spirit is present to give help when the changes come,
when nations are in uproar and governments totter.

Spirit inspires us to break the grip of war,
to shatter the power of missiles and bombs,
to ban all nuclear arms forever.

Come, let us see what Spirit can do
when people find their strength,
when Spirit brings hope.

Be still and know the One!
Among the people and on earth,
nothing is higher or deeper.

Spirit is with us, our refuge and our strength.

Sermon/Homily

When I lived in Salem, Oregon I practiced with a weekly meditation circle that met on Wednesday evenings at the Salem UU congregation. It was the Compassionate Mind Sangha led by the teacher from the Salem Zen Center. The Wednesday evening meditation circles were more informal than the usual Zen practice and open to whoever showed up, but structured with expectations about silence and lots of bowing.

The teacher is Sensei An, a social worker who has studied Zen Buddhism for many years. Often when we were sitting together in silence in the church social hall, Sensei An would say in a soft but firm voice, “Be still.” Her words would help me notice that my mind had wandered as it so often does in meditation, and that perhaps my body was restless, too. I often hadn’t noticed that others in the circle were restless of body and mind, but Sensei An did. She was attuned to the feel of the sangha, our breathing, our presence, our stillness. And, because Sensei An was also a dog trainer, her soft but firm voice had a hint of command that made you want to “be still.” Her voice called us to attention, but mostly called us to an awareness of our intention.

In this month of darkness and holiday lights, we explore the spiritual theme of stillness. A dictionary definition of stillness will tell us that stillness is a calm, quiet, motionless state, the absence of movement or sound. But, I think the spiritual meaning of stillness is somewhat different than that.

Many faith traditions have stillness as part of their teaching. In Buddhism and other Eastern traditions that use meditation as a spiritual practice, “be still” is the

instruction—be still of mind and of body. There is a long lineage of teachers, like Sensei An, who instruct meditators to “be still.”

In Islam, silent stillness is a foundation for prayer, including the daily prayers, one of the pillars of Muslim practice.

In the Jewish Bible, “be still” is taught in Psalm 46:10. The traditional translation is “Be still and know that I am God.” Barbara Gibson’s translation offers us “Be still and know the One.”

In the spiritual context, “be still” is not as much about being motionless as it is being present. Author and healer Serge Benhayon puts it this way:

(quote) “Stillness is an energetic quality of being... Stillness is a choice. It can be felt by living in a state of presence where we remain connected to ourselves and are completely present in our body...” (end quote)

Stillness as active and intentional, a choice. It requires our awareness and determination, especially in our culture of doing and then doing even more. Stillness doesn’t necessarily mean that our bodies are motionless, it means that we are fully present in what we are doing, calm of mind and intentional in our doing. Author E’yen Gardner says: “Being still does not mean don’t move. It means move in peace.” Walking meditation is an example of stillness in motion. I’ll bet you can think of other examples from your life, such as being in nature or kneading bread or knitting.

Serge Benhayon continues:

“...it is our beingness that remains unaffected by any movement, action or doing even though it moves, acts and does. It is the depth of the ocean unaffected by its waves. It is the ability to surrender to our inner-heart and live from here in all that we do.”

And, here is a paradox of stillness: it is both active and requires surrender. Stillness asks us to stop doing, which means we have to actively stop. And, stillness requires that we let go, which means that we have to actively let go. Active and surrender, both.

Christian writer Lisa Apello teaches that:

(quote) “The instruction to be still in Hebrew means to let go, stop striving, slacken and let drop. It’s a picture of loosening our clenched grip on the circumstances and outcome and trusting God... I’m the first to admit that being still goes against my instinct. We are fixers. We want to make it happen and just keep pushing through. But the call to be still is a call to surrender.” (end quote)

Now, I want to be clear that the spiritual teaching of stillness doesn’t suggest that we never do or fix or push through anything. There are times when action is called for, such as in our work for justice. Stillness is not an excuse to do nothing. It is an instruction to tune in to ourselves and all that we are connected to (which is everything!) Stillness is part of the spiritual grounding of our work for justice.

The second part of Psalm 46:10 is about knowing: “be still and know....” Stillness is a way to know in the spiritual sense, to know the divine in us, between us and beyond us, the divine in whatever way you wish to name it. The spiritual teaching of stillness is a path to knowing truth, to knowing ourselves, to knowing the Oneness of All. In the stillness we hear the call to justice; the stillness informs our actions.

This is another paradox of stillness. Calming our bodies and minds may not lead to calming our emotions. In fact, it may lead to something quite different. One teaching of mindfulness meditation is that we don’t meditate to be calm, we meditate to be awake. Being awake sometimes means that hard emotions and memories arise in the stillness—sometimes we wake the bear! And, that bear can roar! But unlike the mouse and the squirrel and the fox and the badger and the hare, our work is to not flee, not in

body or in mind, but to remain present to whatever arises in the stillness. Feelings pass, we survive them even when they are hard. For underneath the roar of the bear in the stillness is the holy. That is the ancient teaching of faith traditions; be still and know the holy. The depths are unaffected by the waves up top. As Barbara Gibson's interpretation of the Psalm tells us, it is the stillness that we find our refuge, our strength and our hope.

I invite you now into the spiritual practice of stillness. This is the practice of centering prayer, which is a Christian form of meditation. We'll use the passage from Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God." As we move through the meditation please feel free to use the words that work best for you: God, Love, Peace, One. Allow the words to center you, to bring you into your body and into this moment.

Right now, settle into a comfortable position, and begin by focusing on your breath. Feel the rise and fall of your belly. Soften your gaze or close your eyes. As I speak, repeat the words, silently or out loud, allowing space and silence between the words.

(slow down!)

Be still.

Be still and know.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Be still.

Be still and know.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know that I am love.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Be still.

Be still and know.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know that I am peace.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Be still.

Be still and know.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know that I am One.

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Let's be in silence together.