

# “The Power in Stillness”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I am reasonably certain that most, if not all of us, would agree that there is power in action. One definition of power provides an explanation for the level of agreement we have. That definition states the “ability to do, act, or produce.” But when it comes to the proposition that is the focus of our service this morning—namely, that there is power in stillness—it is quite probable that there is less agreement amongst us. Action and stillness are different enough from one another that they could be considered opposites. Power and action on the other hand are closely related. So how is it that there is power in stillness? My hope is that by the end of today’s service you will have found some answers to that question.

In typical UU fashion, I would encourage us to approach the question, how is it that there is power in stillness, from multiple angles. One of those angles was highlighted in our Story for All Ages this morning. In the story there were multiple references to what we can hear and experience in nature when we make space for silence. Silence and stillness are often associated with one another. They are so closely associated that stillness is a synonym of silence.

In the busy world we live in today, it can be a challenge to slow our pace. But if we make the effort and slow our pace sufficiently, we can experience many things that can energize us. I offer this example from my own life. In my late 20’s I was in a graduate program at Western Michigan University. I recall how the demands of the program would at times leave me feeling overwhelmed and physically drained. I had a friend in the program who knew the local area well. He could also tell when I was under strain. When he saw me approaching my lowest points he would take me out to a hard to reach section of Lake Michigan’s beach. Once there, I would sit on the beach for hours watching and listening to the waves. As I recall my time on that beach, I am convinced that the stillness I experienced there helped me successfully complete the program. My time sitting still on that beach provided me the respite I needed at the time. I am sure all of us can recall times in our lives when we needed such stillness, and the respite such stillness can offer. Stillness and respite can be found in many other ways than on a beach listening to waves. Maybe you found your stillness amongst the flowers, in the forest or walking in a gently falling snow. Wherever you may have found stillness in the past, or seek stillness today, I invite you to think about the power that you find in such stillness.

A second way to approach the question, how is it that there is power in stillness, might be to look for situations where something that is still has significant power that we may or may not recognize. Returning to the reference I made earlier about power and action going together well, and power and stillness seeming not to go together as easily, I would suggest we consider Newton’s First Law of Motion. Here is what can be found on the NASA website about this law. “Newton’s First Law of Motion states that a body at rest will remain at rest unless an outside force acts on it, and a body in motion at a constant velocity will remain in motion in a straight line unless acted upon by an outside force.” A body at rest has the power to remain at rest, or still, unless an outside force acts on it. All of us have, at many points in our lives, been the outside force that moved some object that was at rest. But all of us have also been unsuccessful on multiple occasions in our attempts to move something that was at rest or still. In those situations, we might not have had the strength, the mass or the tools that were needed to move whatever it was we wished was somewhere else.

Newton’s First Law of Motion may be applicable to more than just physical objects. His law can also apply to beliefs and the behaviors that accompany such beliefs. Here I would invite you to think of some situation where a person or a group of people hold a belief that is “solid” and “still” or “unmovable.” There are plenty of very current examples that come to mind for me—examples related to whether climate change or the corona virus are real or pose a threat. And there is also the example of beliefs regarding who won the recent Presidential election. These examples stand out for me because the beliefs, and the behaviors associated with them, hold so much power that I perceive to be, at the least, unproductive and, at the worst, very harmful.

But there are many other examples as well—examples that I view in a much more positive light—examples where beliefs that are “solid” and “still” or “unmovable” are much more beneficial. I think of the power that can be generated from beliefs in things such as love, hope and peace. With all of the conflict, turmoil and upheaval in our world today and throughout human history, it might be difficult to imagine how any of us can maintain beliefs in something as intangible as each one of these. And yet people such as the Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela, and so many others, have stood solidly and unmoved upon the foundation of beliefs that love, hope and peace were and are what we are all called to live into. These people demonstrated the power that can be generated by rooting oneself in such beliefs. Each of these people demonstrated, through the way they lived their lives, the stillness that resided within them, and the power that emanated from them, as a result of the beliefs they held.

A third way to approach the question, how is it that there is power in stillness, would be to think about physical objects that have stored power or energy, such as a compressed spring or a rubber band that has been stretched taut. The compressed spring and the stretched rubber band may remain still for a significant period of time. But when they are allowed to release their stored energy amazing things can happen. I can recall playing with both stretched rubber bands and compressed springs as a youth. I have to admit that my play wasn't always viewed positively by the adults in my life such as my parents and teachers. But there were times, when my play was more constructive and less mischievous, when the stored up power of a stretched rubber band being allowed to release was quite amazing to me. I recall well a small wooden airplane I had as a child. The airplane was powered by a rubber band connected to the propeller and held by a staple at the back of the plane's tail. I would spend hours turning the propeller until the rubber band was twisted and stretched from end to end. When I would let go of the propeller the rubber band would send the plane into flight. Once all of the tension was released from the rubber band the plane would come to rest on the ground and I would run to pick it up and start turning the propeller again.

I cite each of these approaches to answering the question as a way to demonstrate that there is, in fact, power in stillness. There are many in our culture today who are so invested and engaged in action, that the idea of stillness generating and holding power can be missed or downplayed. I would suggest that we could all benefit from taking the time to consider how our lives, and the lives of those around us, could benefit from finding time to be still. And by taking time to be still, to discover the power that exists there.

So now I would invite us to think about ways we might engage in stillness practices that can energize us. An entire sermon could be devoted to the many types of stillness practices there are. Next Sunday I plan to devote time in my sermon to a number of these practices. As we do in many of our services, at the beginning of our service this morning we engaged in a time of silent meditation. A bit later, we will have a spoken meditation. Meditation, contemplation and prayer practices are three ways that we can seek and find stillness that can be of benefit. I have a daily meditation practice that I am certain has helped me find the energy and stamina that has been required through my years of doing ministry. There are also other ways to practice stillness that may be more spontaneous yet just as beneficial as meditation, contemplation or prayer. As I was writing this sermon I would sometimes look up from my computer screen and just stare out the window at the gently falling snow. After several minutes of watching the snowflakes drifting slowly downward I would go back to writing, often with new clarity and fresh ideas. My moments of staring at the falling snow did just what was stated in our reading this morning. Let me share again the last line of our reading. “The point of ‘doing nothing’ is to clean up our inner lives...” Staring at the snow cleared the clutter from my mind and allowed me to find the words I wanted to share with you this morning.

As I stated at the beginning of this sermon, my hope is that the thoughts I have shared this morning have helped you answer the question, how is it that there is power in stillness. And I hope, with the answers you have found, that you will be energized to engage in stillness practices often. May the power of stillness be with you and within you.

So may it be.