

“Nothing” July 9, 2017  
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“You can only lose what you cling to.” – Buddha

**Opening Reading:** Dharma, Billy Collins

The way the dog trots out the front door  
every morning  
without a hat or an umbrella,  
without any money  
or the keys to her doghouse  
never fails to fill the saucer of my heart  
with milky admiration.

Who provides a finer example  
of a life without encumbrance -  
Thoreau in his curtainless hut  
with a single plate, a single spoon?  
Gandhi with his staff and his holy diapers?

Off she goes into the material world  
with nothing but her brown coat  
and her modest blue collar,  
following only her wet nose,  
the twin portals of her steady breathing,  
followed only by the plume of her tail.

If only she did not shove the cat aside  
every morning  
and eat all his food  
what a model of self-containment she  
would be,  
what a paragon of earthly detachment.  
If only she were not so eager

for a rub behind the ears,  
so acrobatic in her welcomes,  
if only I were not her god.

### **Readings, Stories, and Reflections on the Topic of Nothing**

A few weeks ago, I stumbled across a fabulous poem, and I set it aside for this service. I titled this service “Nothing” because of the poem – not because its own title was “Nothing” (it wasn't), but because the poem was evocative in addressing the space nothingness – or, better, emptiness – can open up. Ironically, I cannot share the poem with you. It has vanished into nothingness itself! I have spent the last two weeks searching for it but to no avail. Remembering neither title nor author, I might say I have nothing for you today. However, I have found some other evocative offerings. Perhaps one day that poem might reappear. Perhaps not. For now, I resolve to go with what is, instead of what might have been. (But I will say the title, “Nothing,” is not quite right for today's reflections. See what you think.)

**Reading:** *Wash the Dishes in order to Wash the Dishes*, Thich Nhat Hahn

Anyone can wash the dishes in a hurry, try this for a change: While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes.

At first glance this might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There's no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves.

There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first way is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second way is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes.

If while we are washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as [if] they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes.' What's more **we are not alive** during the time we are washing the dishes....If we can't wash the dishes, chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either.

**Reading:** *It Boils Down to Dishes*, (A reflection I wrote 16 years ago, when in the process of cleaning out my parents' house)

It boils down to dishes. Boxes and boxes of them.

When my mother died, I, being the only daughter, inherited her dishes. And, when my husband's parents moved to assisted living, my husband, being an only child, inherited their dishes. So now we have every kind of dish, more than you would ever believe, more than we will ever use.

I know my mother saved that little pitcher because it reminded her of my grandmother. That vase was Auntie Cook's. And, the little plate with the bluebirds on it came from Mrs. Morgan, whom I visited with my mother many times, and who lived, as near as I could tell, on sour balls alone.

As I pick up this dish or that I think, "How can I part with it? Mom loved it so." Or, I remember some little story or person I knew myself, and I feel a little tug at my heart.

My kitchen is cluttered with boxes, a summer's work ahead of me, and I am unhappy. What am I going to do with all those dishes?

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Funny that *dishes* should be the subject of reflection. Thich Nhat Hahn's dishes remind him to stay in the present moment. Soaping this dish, then rinsing and putting it on the drain to dry. And now this dish, soaping, rinsing, drying. For him, washing the dishes is a meditation, an invitation to still the mind. There is nothing to concentrate on, except this dish, now, the one he is washing.

I recognize myself in Thich Nhat Hahn's meditation, because sometimes I wash dishes that way. Long ago, without knowing much about Buddhism or mindfulness, somehow I taught myself the simple pleasure of washing this dish, then the next, then the next, one at a time, stilling the mad rush around me – and, in particular, stilling the mad rush within me. I get what Thich Nhat Hahn is after.

But, even though I know the art of washing the dishes to wash the dishes, most times, I rush through the dish washing event, viewing it as a chore to get through, focusing on the metaphorical cup of tea that comes after. Often I rush through that, too.

I understand what Thich Nhat Hahn means when he says *we are not alive* when we engage in such unconscious action. When I don't experience the moment that is given, what is that moment, exactly? The unconscious moment is wasted, lost, nothing. Life frittered away.

So I appreciate those times when I remember to quiet myself. Those times when I remember to focus on this event, now, letting go of attachment to past stories or desired future outcomes. Such quieting brings me closer to my heart, closer, even, to the larger heartbeat of life. Such quieting gives my life back to me.

*My* meditation on dishes, on the other hand, is the stuff of overwhelm, of confusion, of too much. I've long since sorted through those boxes of dishes. But that place of confusion and too much is familiar to me, nonetheless. In fact, lately my family has been engaged in sifting through a new batch of parental possessions that have arrived in the wake of Steve's father's death. Oh, the boxes and boxes. As if a human life could be contained in boxes of possessions.

And yet I, at least, and perhaps others, find myself clinging to things as though they are keys that unlock the door to what once was. At my father-in-law's apartment, for instance, I was drawn up short by a plaid woolen throw blanket. Frank Wellcome had that blanket on his bed for years, folded just so, so that he could easily pull it over himself if he needed extra warmth during the night. That blanket had warmed Frank's very old body, the body that had cranked along valiantly bearing Frank's lively spirit for 103 years. There was something about that blanket that just slayed me.

The blanket came home with me. I don't need another blanket. But there it is.

Here's what I understand about the dishes or blankets or a thousand other things that might hold memories. What I really want is not the possession, but the person. I want my mother. Or my father-in-law. Or someone else I have lost through the vicissitudes of life. The *thing* merely evokes a memory, but it can't give me what I really want.

Here is what I also understand about the dishes or blankets or a thousand other things that carry memories: The possessions are sometimes keys to unlock stories. And stories are important to individuals and to families. Stories help us to understand who we are. But is there a balance between capturing the stories and letting go of what once was and is no more? Can Thich Nhat Hahn help here? Is sorting through the detritus of a human life a little bit like washing the dishes?

We can sort to get everything all taken care of and packed away, or we can sort ... to sort ... watching what emerges from the human heart and mind as we do so. Accessing the stories as we do so. Noticing the feelings as we do so. And then maybe letting go as we mindfully move on to the next thing.

Carl Sandberg writes:

*Gather the stars if you wish it so.*

*Gather the songs and keep them.*

*Gather the faces of women.*

*Gather for keeping years and years.*

*And then...*

*Loosen your hands, let go and say goodbye.*

*Let the stars and the songs go.*

*Let the faces and years go.*

*Loosen your hands and say goodbye.*

**Story:** *God in Hiding*, Margaret Seif's retelling of a traditional story (slightly adapted)

A legend tells how, at the beginning of time, God resolved to hide ... within [God's] own creation. As God wondered how to do this, the angels gathered around.

“I want to hide myself in my creation,” God said. “I need a place that is not too easily discovered, for it is in their search for me that my creatures will grow in spirit and in understanding.”

“Why don't you hide yourself deep in their earth?” the first angel suggested.

God pondered, then replied, “No. They will learn how to mine the earth and discover all the treasures it contains. They will discover me too quickly, and they will not have had enough time to do their growing.”

“Why don't you hide yourself in their moon?” a second angel suggested.

God thought, and then replied, “No, they will learn how to fly through space. They will arrive on the

moon and explore its secrets and they will discover me too soon, before they have had enough time to do their growing.”

The angels were at a loss to know what hiding place to suggest. There was a long silence.

“I know,” piped up one angel finally. “Why don't you hide yourself within their own hearts? They will never think of looking there.”

“That's it!” said God, delighted to have found the perfect hiding place.

And so it is that God hides secretly deep within the heart of every one of God's creatures, until that creature has grown enough in spirit and in understanding to risk the great journey into the secret core of its own being. And there, the creature discovers its creator, and is rejoined to God for all eternity.

**Reflection:** Just for this moment I put aside the riches of the earth that sustains all life, that human beings have plundered in the quest to possess more and more material riches...

Just for this moment, I put aside the ability to fly through space or even to dive into the deep sea – abilities that have led human beings farther and deeper in the quest for knowledge.

Just for this moment, because this is a tender moment, a moment of the spirit, I look to the sanctuary of my heart.

What is there? What is most important?

To be sure, I have to do a certain amount of sifting there, to find the key. I have to sift through grievances, petty annoyances, angers, hurts, and doubts. I have to sift through urges and distractions. I have to set aside a great deal to find the most important thing.

There was a time, years ago, when I was dying of a hemorrhage. As I lay in my hospital bed, sifting through the contents of my heart, I came to only one thing: My love for my family. It came down to love.

There was a time, years ago, when I sat by my dying father's bedside, singing to him, talking to him, telling him what was on my heart. In those last moments, it all came down to this: love.

There was a time, just weeks ago, when I sat by my dying father-in-law's bedside. In those last moments, again, the words, the songs, all came down to one thing: love.

Now I know life can dish up plenty of suffering, cruelty, and unhappiness – enough to blot out love. But I also believe we are born with love at the center and love as our calling. Today I look around our world, our divisive, polarized, and angry world, and I cannot reconcile what I see with what I know to be true in my heart. Humanity has lost its way. Will we all come to the end of time, and, suddenly, in those last moments, realize that the only thing that matters is love? Couldn't we find our way to that truth now instead of later?

Devout Muslims face Mecca five times a day and bow to what they find holiest and most true. What if, starting right here, today, human beings could turn to love with such intention and devotion? Because in the end, the possessions mean nothing. In the end, the annoyances, the grievances, the angers, mean nothing. In the end, nations mean nothing. In the end, ironclad certainties mean nothing. In the end, it's simple. The only thing that means anything is love.

And that means everything.