

The Roots of Restlessness

By Michael A. Schuler

January 31, 2010

From Sylvia Boorstein, *It's Easier Than You Think*

Restlessness is the mind scanning the horizon for the next impending catastrophe. Energetically, it is the polar opposite of torpor. Torpor is low-energy mind, and restlessness is high-energy mind.

Sometimes restlessness manifests as fidgety body ... but what is more problematic is fidgety mind, mind unable to remain calm. It is as if the mind, with energy to spare, looks around for potential sources of worry. People with restlessness as their predominant hindrance become habitual fretters. ...

I know more about restlessness than any other hindrance, because it has been my predominant hindrance. My mind has the capacity and the tendency to take essentially neutral data and spin it into worry.

As a case in point: I am on a street corner in a foreign country where my husband and I have agreed to meet at 5:00 P.M. It is two minutes before the hour. I have thought, "What if he doesn't arrive in the next two minutes? That will surely mean he has been mugged or even killed! Or held hostage somewhere. Or had a heart attack! I wonder where the American Embassy is. If he doesn't arrive, I'll go to the Embassy."

This thought takes three seconds, during which adrenaline fills my body, my heart beats rapidly and I start to sweat. ... More worry arises. "Who do I know in this country? How can I phone our children?" At five o'clock he arrives. I am relieved. And I am very tired.

In the mind of the habitual fretter, this type of scenario is commonplace. Only the names and characters change to suit each particular situation.

Reflections, Part One

Perusing the newspaper last week I came across a cartoon in the comics section that showed a family of three—two parents and their teenage son—watching the morning weather report on television. A fierce snowstorm was in progress and the newscaster was warning viewers to stay home and off the highways.

"All right!" the mother says, "We have a snow day! No school. No job. No obligations whatsoever." Then, getting up from her chair, she says, "Let's get busy."

"What is it about free time that makes mom so hyper?" the teenager asks.

"Probably lack of exposure," his father responds.

How many of us are like that? Bestowed with the unexpected gift of a few free hours, we hurry to fill them with yet more activity. There is always something to do. The necessity of accomplishing something, making "good use" of our time keeps us constantly in harness. "Demands of all kinds weave like vines through our lives," Anne LeClaire writes.

We have come to accept pressing schedules as normal and rest as an aberration. We have become human *doings* not human *beings*.

Where does this restlessness, this proclivity for action, come from? Why is it so hard for human beings to experience more than a few fleeting moments of ease and contentment?

Perhaps this is the downside of the evolutionary forces that endowed us with such a powerful intellect—a mind that is endlessly curious, a glutton for stimulation, and is able to create imaginary scenarios far more captivating than life as we find it. Apparently nature has given us brains that need to be constantly in motion. As that pioneer psychologist, Gautama Buddha, observed more than 2500 years ago, "The human mind is like a monkey ranging through the forest. It grabs one branch, then letting that go, deftly seizes another." It finds it hard to simply sit on a branch and settle in.

On the one hand, with minds so limber and inventive we human beings have mastered our environment, created vibrant cultures, made startling discoveries, and become the predominant species on the planet. On the other hand, because our minds and bodies *are* so agitated, we don't know when to stop, which is a major reason why human civilization and the planet are now in grave in peril. Restlessness is more than a nuisance; it causes us to over-function in ways that may threaten our survival.

There have always been those who have tried to resist the insistent urge to action, the instinct to make, do, and achieve. "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far," the ancient author of the Tao Te Ching warned. "But if you practice non-doing, everything will fall into place." Similarly, Henry David Thoreau retreated to the woods in order to cut his obligations, min-

imize distractions, and concentrate his attention. Even in the early 1800s Thoreau was feeling disconcerted by a society caught up in a spasm of industrialization, expansion, and ever-increasing speed. “Men say that a stitch in time saves nine,” Thoreau wrote,

... and then they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. We have the Saint Vitus dance and cannot possibly keep our heads still.

Thoreau’s contemporary, and fellow eccentric, Walt Whitman shared his dismay over the increasingly complex and anxiety-producing civilization humankind was fabricating. “I think I could turn and live with animals,” Whitman muses in *Song of Myself*.

... they are so placid and self-contained. I stand and look at them long and long. They do not sweat and whine about their condition; they do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins. Not one is dissatisfied, not one demented with the mania of owning things.

These reservations were expressed over a century and a half ago and, if anything, advanced technology presents us with even greater challenges. To read a book in a TV-equipped waiting room, to hold a conversation over the loud rock music in a restaurant, to enjoy temporary respite from cell phones, e-mail, and other forms of electronic interference, to experience the luxury of patiently pursuing a task in a deadline-driven world—all of this has become much more difficult.

Because we carry cell phones, we are expected to answer them. Because we all feel so pressured, every issue and every endeavor is imbued with a sense of urgency. Because stations broadcast the news 24 hours a day, we feel compelled always to know what’s going on.

When we feel we’re falling behind, not measuring up, unable to contend with life’s frantic pace we begin to feel inadequate and unworthy. We begin to blame ourselves—we’re too slow or stupid—instead of honestly confronting the unreasonable and unhealthy demands that are being placed upon us.

In an effort to meet the culture’s expectation that we increase our productivity and make maximum use of our time, we resort to multi-tasking—a peculiarly modern tendency made possible by technology. In fact, the ability to split our attention and per-

form more than one operation at a time has become a point of pride for many people. The more balls we can keep in the air at once, the higher functioning we are, or so we think.

Ironically, recent research doesn’t support that belief. Studies at Stanford University suggest that in many instances performance suffers significantly when a person tries to do two or three things at once.

Multi-tasking increases distractedness and leads to greater restlessness. The folks who function at the highest level and achieve excellence in their work are able, more often than not, to maintain exceptional focus. They are the sort of people who can filter out distractions, keep

The folks who function at the highest level and achieve excellence in their work are able, more often than not, to maintain exceptional focus. They are the sort of people who can filter out distractions, keep restlessness at bay.

restlessness at bay, and concentrate for extended periods of time on a single activity, whether it be practicing their tennis serve, learning a musical score, analyzing financial data, or turning out a gourmet meal.

There appears to be two kinds of busyness, Philip Simmons observes. First, we have the neurotic kind in which we compulsively add activities to the point of being overwhelmed. But there is also a healthier variety in which we thoughtfully “align our doing and our being with our highest purposes.”

The first kind of busyness is about quantity; the second is about quality. The first is the product of a jagged restlessness. The second flows smoothly out of centeredness. The first leaves us feeling ill at ease, anxious, and inadequate. The second yields an inner satisfaction that allays our fears of not being fast enough or busy enough to meet society’s expectations. Which way would you choose?

From Ram Dass, *Still Here*

I was visiting my guru in India after a two-year absence. After traveling at 600 miles per hour on a 747, I was deposited in the middle of the night at the Delhi airport. The moment I stepped out of the plane and smelled the air of India—dust and heat with a hint of flowers—all notions of speed and efficiency stopped, and a new rhythm began to set in.

Once inside the terminal, we passengers queued up for the long wait at customs, dazed, confused, exhausted, and ornery. It was 3:30 AM local time.

The line moved so slowly that it seemed not to be moving at all. As Westerners accustomed to speedy service, we were universally annoyed, grumbling, and exchanging dirty looks, stamping our feet like impatient children. I'd been through this time shift before on arrival in India, and knew that my clock-watching mind would have to stop if I didn't want to suffer intolerably. But for the moment I was caught, as miserable as the Westerners around me, while the Indians in line stood stoically nearby.

A few hours later, I was on board the Taj Express train bound for Agra. . . . Traveling by train in India is full of rich lessons. The trains go *slowly*, express or not, and we moved at a prehistoric pace, the countryside creeping by, palm tree by palm tree, until I wanted to open the windows and scream.

But then something began to shift. Rather than resist the slowness and count the minutes, I told myself a little story. "This trip is going to go on forever," I said inwardly. "This present moment will never end. I've been on this train my entire life, and will never, ever get off. Now what?"

Meditating on this story, I began to surrender into the rhythms and speed of the train, looking out the window at the passing images without the anger of moments before. My attention fixed upon a young woman in a field. She was wearing a colorful sari and walking along a path by herself, a large clay jug balanced on her head. Her undulating gate allowed her head to remain still as she moved. She was close enough for me to see her eyes, which were underlined with black kohl. She wore a pink hibiscus flower behind her ear and silver bracelets on both wrists. . . .

To my eyes, she was like a Gauguin figure, caught in an action that would never end. . . . Although she was only in view for half a minute, her existence seemed to penetrate me, forming a profound impression. I was both attracted and repelled—attracted in the part of me that yearned to slow down, to move to the rhythms of earth and sky, the seasonal cycles of planting and harvest, the coming and going of generations; repelled in the part of me raised in the West, accustomed to material life and great stimulation. In that moment I saw these two aspects in stark relief and wondered which of those parts was "me."

Reflections, Part Two

When I embarked on a book-writing project four years ago I doubted myself. I had selected a topic, consulted with other authors about how to

proceed, set aside four months of sabbatical time for dedicated writing, accepted the offer of a lovely work space far from Madison, so how could I fail?

And yet I told more than one person that I was going to "try" to produce a manuscript but would not be disappointed if that ambition was not realized. The only other book-length project I'd ever undertaken was my doctoral dissertation, which I found so uninspiring that a similar effort seemed out of the question. Still, I had this feeling that after years of composing weekly sermons, newspaper columns and magazine articles, it was time to explore an important subject in greater depth. I just didn't know if I was up to the task. I felt too restless.

The fact is, the reason I like writing sermons is because mentally I have a hard time settling down. It suits me to take up a new topic each week, rather than keep plugging away at a single project for months, or even years at a time. How do writers of books maintain their focus? How do they conquer boredom? How do they stay motivated?

Well, as you know, I did eventually finish that book—*Making the Good Life Last: Four Keys to Sustainable Living*. I found an enthusiastic publisher and been pleased with the book's reception. But what has surprised and gratified me even more is the fact that during that in the initial four month sabbatical I was able to churn out a 200-page first draft—a feat that strengthened my confidence and bolstered my hope of succeeding.

Like Sylvia Boorstein, my predominant hindrance in writing or any other activity that requires continuous effort has been restlessness. My biggest challenge in writing a book was learning to stay—remaining steadfastly "on task" long enough to make real progress.

It's a very hard thing to do because we're surrounded by so many tantalizing distractions. As it happened, the house we were renting didn't have Internet service or a television that picked up more than two or three fuzzy channels. Moreover, Trina had insisted on intercepting any phone calls that came to the house—all of which made a big difference. The fires of our fretful, fidgety nature burn hotter when fuel like this is near at hand.

But one's outlook has to shift as well. We need to be discriminating, become better judges of what's important and what's not. The fact is, a great deal of what we do doesn't really matter that much. A person only has so much energy, and a lot of it typically is wasted on the trivial and the inconsequential.

It's also important, I found, to create a structure that allows one to *thrive*, to be both productive and healthy. It was much easier and more rewarding to write for five or six hours at a stretch if the day began with outdoor exercise, fifteen minutes of T'ai Chi, and if it ended with a glass of wine, a good meal, and an opportunity to watch a spectacular western sunset. For those four months, Trina and I developed a simple regime that worked exceptionally well for both of us. As Anne Morrow Lindbergh observed 50 years ago,

Instead of adding more centrifugal activities to our lives, which tends to throw us out of balance, we need to focus on the axis of the wheel and bring more stillness to the center.

We also tried to avoid haste—the only deadly sin that we moderns have added to the original seven. “Men travel faster now, Willa Cather wrote, “but I do not know if they go to better things.”

It was such a relief in the fall of 2005 *not* to be in a hurry, not to feel pressed, to surrender to the natural rhythms of the day and let inner need rather

Speeding along, you miss so much. When you choose to slow down it's as if a whole new dimension of existence springs into being before your amazed and suddenly open senses.

than outer necessity determine our agenda. Ironically, as Trina and I slowed down we became increasingly aware of how *fast* the urban world around us was moving and how indifferent people were to sights and sounds that made us stop in our tracks. Speeding along, you miss so much.

When you choose to slow down it's as if a whole new dimension of existence springs into being before your amazed and suddenly open senses.

We live in a sped-up world, but it's our own anxiety and restlessness that makes us want to keep up. “We have to slow down in order to notice how fast we are going,” Michael Carroll observes, otherwise we'll continue stepping on the gas. The practice of mindfulness, Carroll says, is like tapping on the brakes. It checks our momentum just enough for us to become aware of our feelings and, if necessary, make better choices.

Finally, there is the issue of boredom to contend with. When we get bored, we get antsy. That's when restlessness really kicks in with a vengeance. And in a culture that has conditioned us to want constant stimulation, 24-hour entertainment—a culture that has become increasingly impatient and unfo-

cused—completing a major project or mastering a difficult skill has become uphill work. When an enterprise is new and fresh, putting forth effort is easy. We're always eager beavers in the beginning, but the longer we are at it, the less appealing the task becomes. Progress seems to come at a snail's pace, and the wellsprings of our enthusiasm start to dry up. We get bored. “It's when the gloss of novelty wears off,” Anne LeClaire writes, “that the practice truly begins.”

So we have to find some way to stay interested and engaged, otherwise distractions will overwhelm us. How do we do that? A traditional Zen Master had one answer. One day a student complained to him that following the breath—a basic meditation practice—was boring. And indeed, contemplative techniques are generally simple and repetitive. It can be hard to persevere.

The Zen master confronted the problem directly. He grabbed the student and held his head under water while the young man struggled desperately to come up. When he finally released his hold, the student gasped and the master asked, “Did you find breath boring in those moments you were underwater?”

In order to achieve steadfastness in a spiritual practice, an artistic discipline, or in pursuit of a long-term goal, we must figure out how to maintain interest and focus during those lengthy periods when no discernable change or improvement seems to be occurring. This is what Akido Master George Leonard calls the “problem of the plateau,” when the practitioner feels like he or she is trekking through an undifferentiated, barren landscape. The secret, Leonard says, is to let go of our hunger for the spectacular and learn to love the subtleties—as Ram Dass did in India.

Ultimately, I found in the slow, deliberate process of writing a book an antidote to restlessness. That experience convinced me that restlessness can be tamed and that a life of greater serenity and centeredness is achievable, even in this impatient, over-anxious environment we've created for ourselves. We just have to be mindful and remember to tap on the brakes a time or two each day.

May this, then, become the focus of our mid-winter meditations, as we consider how nature's creatures conserve their energy and thus survive to see another spring. May we, too, attend to what is essential, to our heart's desires, and to our dearly held values. To our surprise, we may discover how easy it is to let the rest go.