

*Janet Ruffing*

# Resisting the Demon Of Busyness

**C**LASSIC CHRISTIAN SOURCES often identify, with an uncanny sense of spiritual wisdom, the “demons” which possess those who would walk a spiritual path and which subtly subvert our good intentions. Today, we prefer to call them personal or cultural compulsions or addictions. The fourth century desert writer Evagrius describes eight such demons or passionate thoughts which afflict the solitary desert dweller. They are none other than the seven capital sins plus one. These, when traced phenomenologically to their root manifestations, simply suggest how we might be tempted. In Evagrius’s historical context and milieu, the most serious demon was *acedia*, a spirit of boredom, restlessness, and deep depression which tempted the solitary to abandon the contemplative life altogether.<sup>1</sup> The fiercest passion, however, was seen as anger which led to either a constant state of irritation or, when inverted, to a paranoid depression.<sup>2</sup>

John of the Cross described with great psychological accuracy temptations which may last a long time, but which eventually lead to integration and wholeness. He identifies three spirits which create severe disequilibrium in those who pursue a contemplative path. They are the spirit of fornication, the spirit of blasphemy, and the spirit of dizziness. The first one is an upsurge of unintegrated sexual passion from the unconscious. The second is an anger which is focused directly at God. The spirit of dizziness, however, is another matter. It is a spirit of confusion, restlessness, and poor judgment. People who have grown accustomed to relying on their good sense and judgment suddenly find themselves spun around, lacking equilibrium and balance.<sup>3</sup> John tells us that all of these unpleasant visitations are good news because they indicate that God is preparing such people thus afflicted for total transformation.

## The Fourth Demon

I would like to suggest that all of us, lay or religious alike, in our North American, contemporary lifestyles must contend with a fourth demon, unnamed in these classical texts: the demon of busyness. Perhaps this demon of busyness is closely related to John's spirit of dizziness. Some years ago I was asked to give a retreat to a group of teachers. When they were asked what they wanted from this one-day retreat, almost every single one of them mentioned something about how their busyness interfered with their relationship with God. No one, of course, questioned whether or not they had to be this busy.

These statements had an all too familiar ring to me. I was not unacquainted with the demon of busyness myself. I alternately resist and surrender to this demon. In our times, we prefer to talk more about compulsions than about demons. We recognize that many of the so-called demons are nothing other than parts of ourselves. We assume responsibility for them as complexes, unconscious impulses, addictions, or compulsions. This particular demon, however, is more than a private, personal, psychological vulnerability. This demon is at least equally a cultural creation. Resisting its domination and its numbing and deadening effects requires both consciousness and ascetical choices many of us would prefer not to make. If we should succeed in making them, I can guarantee they will go unrewarded in both the secular and religious cultures in which we participate.

## American Addiction

The April 24, 1994 issue of the *New York Times* carried an essay on the erosion of genuine leisure in our culture as a result of our high tech communication culture.<sup>4</sup> All those odd "spaces" in between focused activities which we used to call idle time, relaxation, daydreaming, or just "goofing off" are now invaded by faxes, telephones, and e-mail. With the increasing popularity of cellular or portable phones, still more islands of solitude have been invaded. The phone comes with us out into the garden, onto the porch, into the bathroom, and along in our cars. The *Times* reported that cellular phones are now available for rent on the ski trails at Vail! Technologically we can stay "plugged in" twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Either our work or our obsession about being reachable can encroach on every moment of solitude or leisure. There is virtually no activity that cannot be interrupted by a summons from outside of us via some communica-

Such a situation is, I believe, a consequence of our peculiarly American addiction to busyness. Further, I propose that busyness is a state of mind and a habit of the heart rather than merely a result of the number of tasks to be accomplished in any specific unit of time. Finally, I am convinced that this love of busyness is profoundly destructive to self-intimacy, intimacy with the Divine, interrelationships, reflective thought, the social fabric of our society, our care for the planet, and our own psychological and physical health.

## The Nature of Busyness

What then is this state of mind, this habit of the heart we so love? Why do we find it so difficult to resist? When I reflect on this cultural and personal compulsion, I discover that there is something about the feeling of busyness that is exhilarating. There is an altered state of consciousness I experience when I swing into action and begin working through today's "to do" list. A burst of adrenalin carries me from one activity to another. How many things can I get done in the shortest amount of time? Racing against the clock becomes a game, sometimes an unhealthy competition, but nonetheless a game. While I am occupied orchestrating this internal race against time, I can feel both strong and important. My ego is firmly in control. I am clearly the center of these activities. This particular state of mind is, of course, illusionary.

When I am busy being busy, my field of awareness constricts and I tend not to notice my surroundings or other people. I tend to be unresponsive either to the needs of those who cross my path or to my own. I lose my contemplative attitude and so deprive myself of moments of beauty, surprise, delight, or love. When I am busy being busy, I avoid making time for leisure, for play, for relationships, for reflection. I take delight in moving fast, being caught up in the rhythm of an institution, a city, a community that runs me, that overwhelms my internal sense of self and my felt responses to internal and external events. I am actually being captivated by a "false" consciousness that is largely generated by the culture outside of me. I go on automatic while believing I am still in charge. When I am busy, I can believe myself to be incredibly important to the scheme of things. I become indispensable, necessary. My ego becomes reassured (while this state lasts) that I am productive, accomplishing something worthwhile and valuable. After all, time is money and I am spending it well. I am measuring out the least amount of time possible for each task. By being so efficient, I become free to accept several more engagements, talks, tasks. I am so good at being busy, I continually escalate the demands on my time, attention, and care.

This illusory state of mind is continually reinforced by my social world. If I project a state of busyness, others will notice how important I am. Maybe I will appear to be so important they won't disturb me. Maybe I will appear to be so important they will seek me out for something even more important.

Most work environments, including academic ones, reward participants not for the quality of their thought, but for the sheer quantity of published text or service to the institution. In contrast with some other jobs, the work of teachers could fill every minute of every day. I could always prepare my lectures more thoroughly or spend more time reading student papers. I could always do more professional reading. I could always write one more article. I could always spend more time counseling and advising students or more time doing spiritual direction. Many professional people face similarly escalating demands as work expands from forty to upwards of sixty hours per week for many. The busier any of us is, the more valuable to the system he or she becomes.

For those whose daily round is not a clearly defined set of professional tasks but all those activities of care and household maintenance, the habit of busyness can be just as driven. For those who engage in repetitive tasks, the cycle of life itself creates endless sets of dishes to wash, rooms that will need cleaning again soon, weeds that will never be eradicated from the garden. It is sometimes even easier to be driven by the demon of busyness while accomplishing tasks or activities that do not absorb as much mental attention as some kinds of professional work. This problem is not one that infects only one group of people.

### Avoiding Times of Quiet

We have been taught many things that make us fear idle moments or even feel guilty when we happen to find ourselves in a moment of contemplative reverie. One of our maxims is: "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." We have been admonished not to waste time. Contemplative leisure is assumed to be an impossible luxury rather than an alternative choice. Although at one time in the history of culture, leisure was the privilege of an elite class, it is a matter of choice with us. Our society enjoys a greater amount of leisure time than at any period in our history, yet we persist in filling up every odd moment with some form of busyness.

It is easier to take regular time for aerobic exercise than quiet time for prayer. We have a choice whether we fill up the natural pauses in between activities with some kind of spaciousness of consciousness or with some form of stimulation such as radio or television shows. We

dash from one entertainment to another, each of them becoming yet one more busy activity. We become so time conscious and so time efficient that we fill up all these natural spaces by adding to our "to do" list or rearranging our priorities to decide what to do next: the second our minds are released from the last activity. If we are honest, we are forced to admit to ourselves that there is something about all this that we love. We somehow like it this way despite our half-hearted protests to the contrary.

Why should this be so? For one, our culture reinforces this busy, time-bound consciousness. We are meant to be busy. According to our culture this is the desired way to be. Many people I know create quite elaborate excuses or cover stories to justify why they dare to do less, take a day off, enjoy a few minutes or a few hours of idle time, or take time for contemplative practice. When someone calls, if they are thoughtful they will ask, are you busy? That usually means, "Are you alone or in the middle of a social event?" It almost never means are you praying, thinking, writing, journaling? If you happen to be alone and answer the phone, the assumption is that you can be interrupted, that you are not "busy," and after all, having answered the phone you have already been interrupted.

Second, should we dare to stop our busyness, some people become intensely anxious and restless. We have become so unaccustomed to moments, hours, or days of open ended time with nothing to do, that such an opportunity can fill us with anxiety. In order to avoid this unfamiliar experience and this anxiousness, we keep busy. In order to avoid any other uncomfortable feeling, we keep busy. If we aren't doing our regular work, we will make our leisure activities into another work project. If we do stop our busyness by physically changing our environment, the return can be simply overwhelming. So many messages have come in, so many new items have been added to the "to do" list in our absence that the contrast and the return is too painful to tolerate. It often feels like a deluge of new business to attend to.

Third, I believe there is a yet more sinister side to this busyness. If we are as busy as we pretend to be, then we are too busy to allow ourselves to be affected by the pain and suffering of our world. We are too busy to be addressed personally by the social, political, or ecological disasters occurring in our times. We are too busy to make the connections between our artificially driven consumerism and what we as a society

 *In order to avoid any other uncomfortable feeling, we keep busy*

are doing to the rest of the world. We are too busy to feel our own suffering or that of another deeply enough to respond. We are too busy to listen to our own feelings or those of others. Our busyness insulates us from care and from compassion. Our busyness deadens our feelings and numbs our responses.

I have a deep suspicion that this climate of busyness and efficiency is one of the ways we support the ever escalating levels of violence in the culture. When we are too busy, we become not only uncaring, but we also become volatile and violent. When anyone or any circumstance interferes with our self-importance or the level of productivity that our busyness and overly tight time-control foster in us, we erupt in some form of aggression. Emotionally, we become irritable and angry. Behaviorally, we may express it in outbursts of temper, blasting car horns, fighting over parking spaces, cutting into lines, verbally or physically attacking family members, or co-workers, etc.

If we don't erupt noticeably in our social world, most likely we deny or swallow the accumulating frustration. This latter response leads to increasing levels of depression or lack of enjoyment in what we are doing. Yet in all of this, we feel somehow that we are not responsible. We are only barely getting by. The expectation that we must be busy all the time feels as if it is an external expectation with the result that we do not recognize that it is also self-generated in collusion with the culture.

### Being Present

Many of us, however, do experience at times the opposite state of mind and heart. Traditionally, this is called a contemplative attitude, creative leisure, recollection, or mindfulness. If we reject the fantasy of busyness, and instead, do what we are doing with full attention, something else happens. We experience a sense of mindfulness, a feeling of undivided attention. We become centered, relaxed, and serenely present. We find ourselves able to delight in our day as it unfolds, able to receive each person, able to receive ourselves and the delicate movement of loving mercy all around us. We inhabit an enlarged contemplative awareness instead of a compulsive busyness.

This habitual, achieved attitude, is ironically not necessarily related to the actual amount of time we have or the amount of work we have to do. After all, we all have the same amount of time every day, twenty-four hours. Often "very busy" people, that is people who carry major responsibility, manage to "have all the time" in the world. They do not create an added infusion of "busyness" in their internal attitude toward the work of the day or the conduct of relationships. They do not

appear to be racing against the clock. When you are with them, you feel as if you are the only one with whom they are concerned. They do not rush you. They do not rush themselves. They are present, spontaneous, relaxed, receptive. They are able to pay attention to deeper levels of reality.

This different sense of time and way of being in one's daily round is affected by temperament, disposition, and above all, choice. Everyone seems to have a comfortable, natural sense of what is about right for a day. When our choices or our normal work patterns are in harmony with this natural rhythm, we are less vulnerable to the internal temptation to fall in love with being busy. Internal and external stress is considerably reduced. In such situations, it becomes increasingly clear what habits of "monkey mind"<sup>5</sup> or what habit of self-preoccupation with our very busyness is self-induced, another passionate thought rather than an objective reality.

I was reminded of these subtle internal changes of attitude in me. I have been enjoying a research leave from my academic institution, choosing to spend ten weeks living in a cloistered, contemplative community of religious women in a rural area. By so doing, I was choosing to become "less busy" physically and psychologically even while I also met some objective, externally generated expectations of productivity related to my writing. I chose to live in a contemplative rhythm while writing about contemplative things. The contrast between how these women live and how I often live during the teaching term is remarkable.

While living with them, I have noticed how very much I expect of myself every single day. I am accustomed to working long hours even though much of what I actually do doesn't even necessarily feel like work because I enjoy it so much. But their contemplative rhythms of work and prayer run on a very different clock than mine. They, too, struggle with this demon, but some of their structures of life-style serve as reminders not to succumb to it. I left recently for a week in the city. As I shifted from my own natural, more contemplative rhythm of prayer, liturgy, contemplation, and writing to this week of business in the city, I began to wonder how I could possibly manage to do all that I had scheduled while functioning out of my city time-consciousness.

Even before I got to the city, I felt as if I were facing an endless round of activity from early morning until late at night every day for a solid week. I couldn't remember how I usually managed it until I actually began. I wondered once I began this round of activities how I could have forgotten that I would do it as I frequently do, one present moment at a time. Once I give myself over to each conversation, each task, the

way it feels changes. When I anticipate it, it looks impossible and may even feel “driven.” When I live it, it is often a different story. Even though this schedule pushed my natural rhythm faster than was entirely comfortable, there were, nonetheless, surprising moments of grace, and even a few empty spaces that became contemplative times.

Because of the stress of the pace and of New York City itself, I arrived back at the monastery very tired yet ready to return to my research and a more balanced round of activities and passivities. I welcomed the quieter mood of the house which, by its daily rhythm, supported my small attempts to resist being overrun by my own demon of busyness and by the endless and ever escalating expectations of my situation. I also chose to live in a setting for a few weeks in which I didn't have to perform all the daily maintenance tasks of cleaning, planning meals, cooking, shopping, etc. I chose to do fewer activities. By living away from home for awhile, I could more easily forget all the undone tasks waiting for me at home. By removing myself from my milieu which constantly presents the unfinished items on my “to do” list, I was tricking my demon of busyness to let go of me for a while. It has been an enjoyable break from this quality of consciousness.

### Achieving Balance

I sometimes have trouble moving back and forth between these two types of consciousness. I tend to keep some semblance of balance by alternating very “busy” periods of time during the day, the week, the month, the year with relaxed and open time—time for exercise, for walking or sitting in the botanical gardens, for quiet prayer, for a lengthy retreat, for time away with friends and family. Yet something in me usually can still resist honoring the slower contemplative rhythms and something in me resists speeding up again to a more rapid, sometimes frenetic pace.

If I lived in a more steady, balanced rhythm, I would have to make a number of hard choices. I would have to curtail my outside speaking engagements even more than I already do and my publications would probably suffer. I would miss the variety and challenge of many of these events. There would be much good that I now do that would go undone. Why don't I make these choices? Why do I so often choose to push myself to respond to some request that intrigues me, attracts me, or challenges me? I would like to think that some of these responses are graced movements. And they are. But there are others about which I wonder and which I question. It seems as if everyone I know is working just as hard, pushing just as much. Were I to choose to do less would I just be-

come lazy? Would I be judged negatively for making different choices. Would I choose to fill the time that would open up in the day or the week with superficial entertainment and only become restless as a result? Difficulty in making wise choices about commitments beyond my regular job is influenced as much by cultural expectations as it is by my own temperament and predispositions.

Sometimes much of what exhausts me is not the volume of work but a quality of split consciousness. As I begin the day's work, the mail arrives or the telephone rings. Once I open the mail or answer the phone, I find myself distracted. Shall I accept this invitation or not? How much time shall I wait and think about it? In the meantime, I have already become distracted from today's work or what I thought today's work or activities are. If the mail contains bills, why not pay them immediately; handle the papers only once? I become flighty, moving from one thing to another, sometimes intuitively, sometimes impulsively and unreflectively. By this time, I am divided in my consciousness. It requires a different kind of discipline not to allow my attention to get caught in these ways.

This divided, distracted consciousness is a large part of the demon of busyness. This state of consciousness is literally illusion. It is something I keep going in my thoughts. It is something our collective consciousness keeps going because we all agree to it. By keeping it going, getting captured by it, I fail to ask myself what I really want. I collude in frustrating my deepest desires by indulging the demon of busyness so that I never have to ask what I really want to do or really need to do. Were I to do so, I might make a different set of choices in response to it.

Any number of spiritual practices addresses this state of the divided, distracted consciousness. Buddhism fosters a condition called mindfulness in which one holds such distractions at bay by maintaining, a clear steady consciousness of the present. Christian tradition speaks of recollection, unscatteredness, a focusing of one's internal energies and consciousness on the deeper reality underlying the present moment. Times and places of external silence and solitude provide an environment for self-observation in which one can notice which distractions are self-generated and which are externally generated.

I propose that our personal and cultural addiction to busyness makes such practices seem unthinkable, impossible, and unreasonable

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unless we harness them in the service of ever more busyness. Our culture aids and abets us with the expectation promoted by the information and communications industry that more information is always better and always potentially available. Therefore, we must always be available to receive any such piece of information that is sent, solicited or not. If we succumb to this illusion, we cooperate in maintaining a persistent dividedness of mind and heart. We deaden and numb our feelings, we fail to ask the deeper more essential questions. We are so busy sending and receiving fragments of information that we can increase our tolerance for violence, escalate our consumerism, and impair our compassion.

### Resisting the Demon

Resisting the demon of busyness is a habit of the heart much needed in our times. We seem to have no positive word for the practice which opposes this demon. Its opposite appears to be laziness or idleness. We love efficiency too much to even consider the merits of the Italian phrase, *il dolce far niente*, "the sweet doing of nothing." Doing nothing feels like wasting time. Too often, in the state of busyness our internal self-talk engine is racing, using up more energy than the actual task at hand requires. Perhaps, we need to imagine a version of activity that is vigorous and alert, that is engaging all of us at once. The Buddhist concept of mindfulness, a one-pointed placement of attention, comes closest.

What we need to resist is the sense of time-urgency and all the internal diffusion of consciousness which is simultaneously thinking of the future, basking in self-importance, and maintaining an illusion of control. All of these internal "thoughts" actually divert us from all dimensions of the present reality. They are literally useless and exhausting, yet somehow we love them although none are necessary.

Since I began reflecting on this demon and its effects on me, I have often jokingly acknowledged that I have been too busy to write this essay. That, of course, makes for a good joke on myself, but it is not entirely true. The problem is that when I surrender to the demon of busyness, I am too fragmented or pressured to write an essay such as this. If I have managed to resist this demon for awhile and I am enjoying a saner, more balanced rhythm to my life, I don't want to embrace the discipline of writing about a habit of the heart I sometimes avoid practicing. Yet I also deeply desire to foster those habits of attention in myself that could make a statement of the Sufi masters be true of me: "I went into that marketplace and only God I saw."<sup>6</sup> Now a mid-Eastern marketplace is hardly any less frenetic than Times Square.

God is as present to us in the marketplace as in the cloister. But to find God in the marketplace and live in an open-hearted love requires a developed capacity of attentiveness. To do so, I need to cultivate a quality of heart that enables me to see the invisible, a quality of presence in the present that is aware of all that is really there, but which I too easily miss if I am so in love with busyness that I cannot receive the deeper dimensions of my experience. I need to continue to struggle against this cultural and personal demon of busyness.

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### NOTES

1. Evagrius Ponticus, "The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer," trans., with intro. and notes, by John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O., *Cistercian Studies 4* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), pp. 16-26.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. John of the Cross, the *Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1973), book 1, chap. 14.
4. Bryan Miller, "Got a Minute?" *New York Times*, Sunday, 24 April 1994, Style section.
5. "Monkey mind" is a term used by some teachers of Buddhist meditation which describes the constant, restless flow of thoughts at a superficial level of consciousness which divert the meditator from the focus of the meditation practice. This activity of the mind is thus compared to monkeys which constantly chatter and move about.
6. Cited by Ewert H. Cousins in "Experiencing God in the Marketplace," *New Theology Review*, May 1987, p. 5.

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