

Uncertainty, Boredom and Patience: Entering the New Year

Advice to Myself

Louise Erdrich

Leave the dishes.

Let the celery rot in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator
and an earthen scum harden on the kitchen floor.

Leave the black crumbs in the bottom of the toaster.

Throw the cracked bowl out and don't patch the cup.

Don't patch anything. Don't mend. Buy safety pins.

Don't even sew on a button.

Let the wind have its way, then the earth
that invades as dust and then the dead
foaming up in gray rolls underneath the couch.

Talk to them. Tell them they are welcome.

Don't keep all the pieces of the puzzles
or the doll's tiny shoes in pairs, don't worry
who uses whose toothbrush or if anything
matches, at all.

Except one word to another. Or a thought.

Pursue the authentic - decide first
what is authentic,

then go after it with all your heart.

Your heart, that place

you don't even think of cleaning out.

That closet stuffed with savage mementos.

Don't sort the paper clips from screws from saved baby teeth
or worry if we're all eating cereal for dinner

again. Don't answer the telephone, ever,

or weep over anything at all that breaks.

Pink molds will grow within those sealed cartons
in the refrigerator. Accept new forms of life

and talk to the dead

who drift in though the screened windows, who collect
patiently on the tops of food jars and books.

Recycle the mail, don't read it, don't read anything
except what destroys

the insulation between yourself and your experience

or what pulls down or what strikes at or what shatters

this ruse you call necessity.

In this poem, Erdrich calls upon us to disengage ourselves from those things we think of as "necessities" - the mail, cooking dinner, cleaning the house - and to attend instead to "pursuing the authentic"; to breaking down "the insulation between" ourselves and our

experience. A wonderful wake up call for the new year. What exactly do we tend to treat as "necessary" in our lives, and do those things deserve as much time and attention as we give them? Assuming that in fact it is a good thing to occasionally cook dinner and clean the fridge, I still appreciate Erdrich's call to let it go and turn ourselves instead to our hearts, to our bigger intentions for ourselves in the new year.

It's not news to say that we like to keep ourselves busy. Whether it's sorting paper clips, as Erdrich suggests, or perhaps spending inordinate amounts of time at work, or compulsively checking our email every few minutes, or being on social media at all hours, we know how to keep ourselves distracted. And as Erdrich notes, it is far too easy to call any and all of that "necessary." "This ruse you call necessity" applies to probably most of what we occupy ourselves with each day. But if we want to follow Erdrich's instructions, to "destroy the insulation" between ourselves and our experience, to "pursue the authentic," then we need to create the space to necessary to get reacquainted with our own hearts, with our hopes, our fears, our intentions.

But how do we do that?

There was an article in the New York Times this past July that a number of you may have seen, called "No Time to Think" ([http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/sunday-review/no-time-to-think.html? r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/sunday-review/no-time-to-think.html?r=0)). The article begins by talking about all of our crazy busy-ness, how we all seem to feel, in the author's words, "overscheduled, overcommitted and overextended." The bulk of the article focuses on a series of experiments with people who were asked to just sit and think for a few minutes. It reports, "In 11 experiments involving more than 700 people, the majority of participants reported that they found it unpleasant to be alone in a room with their thoughts for just six to 15 minutes."

"They found it unpleasant to be alone in a room with their thoughts for just six to fifteen minutes." The implication, it seems, is that we actually prefer to be constantly distracted, because it is so difficult just to sit and be.

I was intrigued by this, and through the wonders of hyperlinks was able to go directly to the original article about the experiments, in the journal Science (<http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~dtg/WILSON%20ET%20AL%202014.pdf>). In a variety of experiments, people of all ages were asked to sit - some in a room with nothing in it, some at home - for 10 or 15 minutes, and were invited to "spend the time entertaining themselves with their own thoughts, with the only rules being that they should remain in their seats and stay awake." 57% of the participants responded that it was difficult to concentrate, and 90% reported that their minds wandered. About half reported the experience as being less than enjoyable to downright unenjoyable; the other half reported some amount of enjoyment.

The part of the study that got a lot of attention was an attempt to see if people would actively choose something unenjoyable - even painful - as an alternative to just sitting and thinking. After participants rated the level of unpleasantness of being given an electric shock, they were asked if they would pay to not have to repeat the experience. Then, they

were given the instructions about just sitting and thinking, and they were also told that if they wanted, they could receive another electric shock by pushing a button. Of the people who had said they would pay to not have to receive a shock again - 25% of the women, and 67% of the men—did in fact give themselves a shock, an average of one or two shocks over the 15 minute period. (My favorite part of the article was a note here, that these results "do not include one outlier who administered 190 shocks to himself" (!) - I want to meet this guy!).

As part of their research, the scientists tried testing a few hypotheses of why exactly people have such a hard time just sitting and thinking; in the end, they don't come up with much by way of insight. The article concludes: "Research has shown that minds are difficult to control, and it may be particularly hard to steer our thoughts in pleasant directions and keep them there. This may be why many people seek to gain better control of their thoughts with meditation and other techniques...Without such training, people prefer doing to thinking, even if what they are doing is so unpleasant that they would normally pay to avoid it. The untutored mind does not like to be alone with itself."

This summer, as I've done for the past number of years, I had the experience of letting my mind "be alone with itself." I went on my yearly week-long silent meditation retreat, a setting in which all distractions are removed - no screens, no phones, no reading or writing or speaking - where there is really nothing to do but be with my own thoughts over the course of seven or eight days. And my experience wasn't radically different than the people that participated in the experiments in the Science article: my mind wandered a lot; sometimes the experience was enjoyable, sometimes not so enjoyable.

The difference is that I was aware that the goal was not to direct my thoughts to the pleasant. The overall intention of the mindfulness practice is not to direct one's thoughts at all, rather just to notice what is happening in any given moment - in the body and in the mind. Of course the mind wanders, it's what minds do, they keep themselves busy - the mindfulness part is noticing when the attention wanders, noticing where it's wandered off to, and making a wise choice about whether to follow the thoughts or not.

Something I've learned as part of my mindfulness practice is that any experience I might have will fall into one of three categories - pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The mind will tend to respond in fairly predictable ways to each kind of experience. When something is experienced as pleasant, I want more of it - so I might start feeling desire, or I might try to hold on to what is happening in order to prolong the pleasant experience. If something is experienced as unpleasant, I want it to go away - I might try to figure out how this bad thing happened and how to get rid of it, or I might distract myself to get away from the unpleasant feeling.

What is most challenging perhaps is what happens in response to the neutral - to those times, which are many - when my experience is not particularly pleasant or unpleasant. This is often when I feel the need to entertain myself. I get bored, I desire stimulation - and as the studies I discussed earlier show, it doesn't always matter if that stimulation is pleasant or unpleasant. It's hard to know what to do with "neutral."

There was a wonderful article in the Boston Globe about 6 years ago called "The Joy of Boredom" (3/9/08). The author, Carolyn Johnson, explored the growing obsession with electronic devices and the need so many people have to spend every spare moment on their device. She noted a 2006 campaign by the Motorola company, assuring people that their phones would rescue them from "micro-boredom" - the boredom of even the smallest slices of time with nothing to do.

In the article, Johnson reports on interviews with a variety of scientists who talk about the value of boredom, of what happens in a mind that is not doing anything particular. She writes,

"We are most human when we feel dull. Lolling around in a state of restlessness is one of life's greatest luxuries - one not available to creatures that spend all their time pursuing mere survival. To be bored is to stop reacting to the external world, and to explore the internal one. It is in these times of reflection that people often discover something new, whether it is an epiphany about a relationship or a new theory about the way the universe works."

She goes on to talk about creativity, and the need for the imagination to have time when nothing particular is going on. One of the most interesting findings she discusses is the idea that the most creative people are known to have the greatest toleration for "long periods of uncertainty and boredom."

This brings us back to Louise Erdrich and the invitation, over these Ten Days of Teshuvah, to attend to our hearts, to our "authentic" needs, and to leave behind the distractions that tend to keep us from doing so. We might see these days as an opportunity to cultivate these two qualities, "uncertainty" and "boredom," as stepping stones to deeper insight.

"Uncertainty" is certainly an important quality, heading into the new year. The truth is that, despite all that we tell ourselves, we really have no idea what lies in store for us this year. We might have all kinds of good intentions, but reality doesn't always respect our careful plans. Here are some words of wisdom from the sportswriter Alex Speier, who wrote this in February during baseball's spring training, commenting on his colleague's efforts to predict which teams would be going to the World Series at the end of the season. He writes, "I would like it noted somewhere that I think that predictions are exercises in futility, gestures that deny the richness and texture of life and that wrongly privilege the pretense of knowledge instead of acknowledging the dazzling certainty of uncertainty."

The "richness and texture of life" are found precisely, according to Speier, in everything that we don't know yet, in the "dazzling certainty of uncertainty." This speaks to our ability to not know, to wonder. So perhaps we can spend some time over these ten days not making long lists of new year's resolutions, but instead preparing ourselves to be open to whatever might come. It may be that at this moment in your life something is happening that wasn't foreseen, not planned for or even desired. But here it is. We tend to do everything in our power to avoid uncertainty, to fight it, to somehow get control of it. But

what would happen if instead of pushing uncertainty away, we actively embraced it? If uncertainty has made its way into your life, then welcome it, make room for it at the table.

And if we're not in a particularly uncertain moment in our lives, we could try actively cultivating a bit of uncertainty. What would it be like to wake up one morning with the intention to just see what happens, to be willing to ditch your schedule if something unplanned and interesting arises? Or maybe you could sit and make a list of all the things you know absolutely nothing about, and take pleasure in all that not knowing!

We can practice cultivating uncertainty by actively opening ourselves up to experiences that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Our High Holydays services are one place to try this out. If you're a bit skeptical about the whole idea of prayer, you could experiment with saying the words of the liturgy as if you actually believed in some kind of Something beyond yourself. Or you could try doing something that feels weird - like the full prostration for the Aleynu that we'll do tomorrow morning, or trying out a the meditation service this coming Shabbat morning.

Or most simply, as you sit in services or at your desk over the coming week, you can pay attention to how often your mind goes into planning mode - thinking out every step of what's coming next, as if you can actually control the moment that comes after this one. Notice the planning, and then just let it go. One intention we might make for this new year is to embrace "the dazzling certainty of uncertainty," to answer - when someone asks us if this or that is going to happen - "I have no idea."

As for boredom, the holidays give us so much opportunity to practice this! If you find services boring, awesome! You're already a step ahead. It's okay to be bored, as long as you don't immediately look to fill what feels like an empty space with your phone or another trip to the bathroom or chatting with your neighbor. What would happen if you just sat, and let your mind go where it goes? What would happen if you decided to explore this sensation of boredom, to see what it actually feels like - in your body, in your mind? You might notice that it passes, or that you re-engage in a new way. Or you might just find that things are a bit neutral, and that that's okay, it's not a terminal condition. Or you might decide to come back to the page of the machzor, the prayerbook, and find a word that catches your eye, and see where your mind goes. Something interesting might emerge. Or you might just close your eyes and notice what it feels like to be sitting here, in this moment, with nothing else that you need to do. Just as we can embrace uncertainty, we can embrace that feeling that we habitually call "boredom," but that becomes something else when we start to pay a bit of attention.

Coming back to the Erdrich poem, I think she is ultimately telling us that to do this work, to fully engage with our lives and with what is important in them, we need time. And it's not that we don't have time - we have all the time in the world - it's what we choose to do, and not do, in the time that we have.

I read another wonderful article last year, a kind of companion to "The Joy of Boredom," called "The Power of Patience" (Harvard Magazine, Nov-Dec 2013), by a professor of art history named Jennifer Roberts. She begins the article by talking about how she has begun to feel that she, quote, "needs to take a more active role in shaping the *temporal* experiences of the students in my courses," to pay attention to the "pace and tempo of the learning experiences." She goes on to describe how she gives her students the assignment of writing a research paper on one single painting, and that the first thing they have to do is go to the Museum of Fine Arts and spend three hours looking at the one painting. She writes, "At first many of the students resist being subjected to such a remedial exercise. How can there possibly be three hours' worth of incident and information on this small surface? How can there possibly be three hours' worth of things to see and think about in a single work of art? But after doing the assignment, students repeatedly tell me that they have been astonished by the potentials this process unlocked." Roberts concludes by noting that as our lives have radically changed, so has the meaning of the word "patience." She writes:

"The virtue of patience was originally associated with forbearance or sufferance. It was about conforming oneself to the need to wait for things. But now that, generally, one need *not* wait for things, patience becomes an active and positive cognitive state. Where patience once indicated a lack of control, now it is a form of control over the tempo of contemporary life that otherwise controls us."

Tonight, we are invited to step out of one stream of time - the tempo of our daily lives, the schedules of work and school and family responsibilities that define us - and into the stream of Jewish time, into sacred time. Sacred time, when we first learn of it in the Torah, is called "Shabbat" - meaning to stop, to pause, to shift into an entirely different mode of being. Every holy day described in the Torah is called a "Shabbat" - and these Days of Awe culminate in the great Shabbat Shabbaton, the Shabbat of Shabbats, Yom Kippur.

Sacred time is like those three hours in front of the painting, taking the time necessary to notice all the richness held in this moment. There is no "micro-boredom" to be overcome in sacred time, because there is nothing we're supposed to achieve, no particular place we're supposed to be, besides right here, where we already are.

Sacred time is when we can relinquish the need to tend to the daily and mundane, all the distractions of our daily lives, and remind ourselves of what is really important. It is a time to reacquaint ourselves with our own hearts, our own spirits. Whether or not we think of ourselves as particularly "spiritual," each of us does indeed have a spirit, and a spirit needs tending, just as bodies and minds need tending. We can use these days to reflect on what nourishes our spirits, and how we might structure time for that nourishment into the regular course of our lives.

And finally, sacred time is an opportunity for joy. Uncertainty, boredom, patience - none of those things sound particularly fun. But the point of these holidays - the point of all spiritual practice - is not misery and drudgery, but joy. By gently letting go of our illusions of control, by refocusing our attention from mundane distractions to the richness of the present moment, by reveling in the possibility of having nothing to do, we can achieve a kind of joy that cannot be manufactured or purchased. It takes some effort, it takes intention and practice, but this joy is within reach of all of us.

As we enter into the Jewish year 5775, may each of us find exquisite moments of uncertainty, illuminating moments of boredom, and glorious times of patience, along the way. May each of us be written for a healthy, nourishing, and joyful new year - *l'shanah tovah tikateivu!*

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