

# Ministry: a True Calling, Active Laziness or Violence?

By June Etta Chenard

*I have so much to do today; I need to meditate twice as long. - Gandhi*

Ministry, as it is interpreted today, means service, and it is a rare person who does not seek to be of service in their family or community. In fact, many of us spend so much time and energy being of service that it may be helpful to look at how this affects the quality of our spiritual lives, and our testimony to simplicity. The questions considered here are: how much ministry we are truly called to offer, how much ministry may be too much, what the effects of too much ministry might be, and how to find exactly what our true calling is.

Busyness is one of the chief complaints and problems of the modern-day world, affecting all aspects of our lives, including our ministry. How often, when someone asks how we are doing, do we hear ourselves say that we are doing well, but are really too busy? Being too busy seems to be the normal state of affairs for most of us—a state of affairs which is actually viewed as virtuous. In fact, it somehow seems we would not quite be doing our proper share, if we were not too busy and somewhat overwhelmed. Let us question that unstated belief, wondering whether it is not only one of the least helpful ways to offer ministry, but that it is actually counterproductive to our stated goals of increasing peace and well-being in the world.

Shantideva queries us about such an over-active life in this way, How many of us are swept away by what I have come to call an active laziness? It consists of cramming our lives with compulsive activity, so that there is no time at all to confront the real issues. Might it be possible that we keep very busy so as not to have to sit and hear more from the small, still voice within?

In *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton looks at it from another angle, writing,

*Douglas Steere remarks very perceptively that there is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.*

Most of us would agree (at least in theory) that the way we do our work is as important, or more so, than what it is we do. I

think most of us would agree that we are too busy in our own personal lives. Might it also be true of our corporate lives in the Religious Society of Friends—our Monthly Meetings, Half-Yearly Meetings and Yearly Meeting (not to mention our many committees)? This is not to say that Friends are different or worse than other spiritual communities in that regard. Our meetings usually have agendas that are crammed full of requests. Too often, we feel pressured by ourselves and others to participate wherever there is a stated need, and wherever we might be able to cram in yet one more task. Might it be fair to say that if we were well-rested and had spare time, we would probably feel very obliged to accept a request that we sit on another committee, or work for yet another concern, or to attend just one more event, whether or not we felt called to do so? How can we fit in the time to pause regularly and often to listen to what we are being led to hear, or to give thanks for our many blessings? How often can we renew our strength in the Divine?

Patricia Loring writes:

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua ...rejoiced in the sabbath as a temple made of time, set aside for appreciation, enjoyment, blessing, celebration and praise of the holiness of life, of creation, of what is. We can only appreciate and enjoy what we have been given, in this way, if we set aside our busyness. So much of our busyness amounts to a factory built of time, rather than a temple. Our time is too often ordered by the Protestant work ethic in which our value is defined by what we produce—or its permutation: by how full our engagement books, or answering tapes, are.*

For most of us today, this is a challenge. Often it seems as if our calendar is like a vacuum, abhorring any empty space and sucking in some worthy cause or task to fill every available moment. Thomas Kelly stated it well in *The Simplification of Life*,

*We Western peoples are apt to think our great problems are external, environmental. We are not skilled in the inner life, where the real roots of our problem lie...The outer distractions of our interests reflect an inner lack of integration of our own lives. We are trying to be several selves at once, without all our selves being organized by a single mastering Life within us... Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center. Each one of us can live such a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence and simplified multiplicity, on one condition—that is, if we really want to. There is a divine Abyss within us all, a holy Infinite Center, a Heart, a Life who speaks in us and through us to the world. We have*

*all heard this holy Whisper at times. At times we have followed the Whisper, and an amazing equilibrium of life, amazing effectiveness of living set in. But too many of us have heeded the Voice only at times... We have not surrendered all else, to attend to it alone.*

Not only individuals, but corporate bodies can seek to better hear this Voice. Last summer Philadelphia Yearly Meeting decided to truly slow down, listen deeply to the Holy Spirit and make space in their lives to grow by taking a year's sabbath. During this sabbath they are seeking to better live into the covenant they have with God and with each other. The preparatory quarter, which began in September, is a time of individual and corporate preparation, examining queries such as: *How and what do I/we need to do to enter a sabbath time authentically?* Over the year 2001, each quarter will consider specific queries during a retreat. The following month there will be small group meetings to wrestle with the topic, as well as actions for the Monthly Meetings. The first quarter will consider queries such as, *What*

*does it mean to be in right relationship with God (or what some call God)?; the second quarter, How has God spoken to us, as Quakers, in the past?; the third, What is God saying to us today? and What are the consequences of radical faithfulness?; and finally, in the fourth quarter, queries such as, What have we learned and how do we integrate it into our lives, individually and corporately?*

Through this exercise they are seeking to do what they are led to do, not less than that and not more than that, and to find themselves more in right relationship to improve the quality of their spiritual lives, as well as to increase peace and well-being in the world. Such an exercise, for an individual or a Meeting, can surely help discern whether specific ministry is a true calling, active laziness or violence.

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