

Loose Time and Solitude

When from our better selves we have too long been parted ...

By Marjorie Kelly

*"When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude."*

William Wordsworth, "The Prelude."

Time management theories have always seemed slightly askew to me. There's an assumption hidden within them, that building a day is like packing a suitcase: a matter of finding space for each item. "There's never enough time," we lament. But if we had it, we'd just stuff it with more of the same: more appointments, more correspondence, more paper work. What's really at issue, I've come to think, is not the quantity of time but its texture or tone. When I'm working too hard, too long hours, what I crave is a different kind of time: slow, loose, alone time, when a different side of me emerges.

When I don't have it—when stress and work and worry keep me from solitary time—it's as though a part of my being is literally missing, or dead. The point was driven home a month ago, when I had taken an afternoon to read in an uptown cafe, planning to draw up ideas for my latest column. And no ideas came, not one. Nothing. That part of myself I count on to speak had gone mute, and it left me close to panic.

When this voice—this loose, creative, interior side of myself—re-emerged in the following days and weeks, I began paying closer attention to it: when it was available to me, when it wasn't, and why. I noticed it came always unbidden, unplanned. Invariably, I was "supposed" to be doing something else when this subtle urge would come, almost imperceptibly. I can only describe it as an urge *not* to be doing what I was doing, a longing to be cut loose, set free. If I followed the urge, even for a moment—if I allowed myself to drop into a delicious and forbidden reverie, an interior free space—thoughts would often begin flowing, effortlessly. An outline I had been struggling with might come clear, something would gel, a new pattern emerge.

As I paid more attention to this urge, I began—once in a great while—to push aside my guilt and actually follow it. If I was at a restaurant for lunch, it might mean a sudden whim to stay another hour or two, reading, jotting thoughts. If I was on an errand,

it could mean taking the long way back, driving around the lake for an hour, thinking. It might mean turning from my desk to watch a crow sit out a rainstorm in a tree, or stealing time in the office parking lot, reclining my seat back and closing my eyes for half an hour.

On one level, such urges were frustrating, because I had never planned to spend the afternoon or the morning quite that way. I had deadlines to meet, phone calls to return, and here I was wandering aimlessly, playing hooky, dreaming. But I found that if I virtuously stuck to my schedule, doing all the pressing things that had to be done, it left no space for my inner voice—and it ceased to speak. Stress especially silenced it, and worry.

This voice, this interior self, would not follow schedules, would not emerge on cue. It could only exist free and unbound. Indeed, the hallmark of these times was a feeling of expansiveness, vastness. If my normal work life left me feeling pinched for time, these hours left me feeling spacious, as though time itself were boundless, immeasurable.

At such moments I came home to my better self, that part of me that knows life is more than the next deadline or the next dollar. It was like stepping into a vast self, a vast aliveness beyond ego or fear, beyond ridicule or praise.

Experiencing these moments was like touching a different texture of time, not the texture of minutes and hours—each of which is to be measured and filled—but the seamless texture of life itself.

It is tragic, really, that such times are so little valued in business today. This loose, rich, dreamy time is in fact the antithesis of what we value as professionalism. When I look up the word "loose" in the thesaurus, for example, I find synonyms like careless, lax, vague, inexact, even immoral. The antonyms, on the other hand, are tight, secured, precise, and virtuous. The word "professional" itself connotes polish, precision, control—the very opposite of looseness.

In our conception of professional life, there is simply no room for the kind of solitary sojourns that bring us back to our better selves. If business life at times seems grating, if it fails to nourish—if it seems to lack full integrity in the world—we might well look here for the cause. For when we live exclusively

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in our professional selves, we can grow out of touch with our our true instincts, our authenticity.

Being successful as a professional is, to a large extent, a question of managing image: looking right, being noticed by the right people, putting on a good face. But when we are more attuned to the wishes of others than to our own needs, we develop what psychologists call a "false self." We become unauthentic.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung observed that people become neurotic at mid-life because, in some sense, they have been false to themselves, they have strayed too far from the path that is truly their own. He spoke, for example, of the many successful, well-adapted clients he saw who suffered from a feeling of senselessness or aimlessness in their lives. "I should not object," Jung concluded, "if this were called the general neurosis of our age."

Jung's antidote was a scrupulous attention to the inner voice of the psyche, which he believed could be found in dreams, fantasies, and other signs from the unconscious. When he himself was at a difficult crossroads in his own life, unable to decide what path to take next, he decided there was nothing to do but abandon himself to his fantasies; he followed the urge to build castles out of sand, on his lunch hour—and from this process gained the insights he needed.

It isn't easy to begin trusting inner urges like these, when the full weight of business culture militates against it. It isn't easy to listen to our small inner voices, when the pressures of daily work loom so large.

But how frightening it is, really, to think of corporate power in the hands of those alienated from their deepest selves. How frightening, to think of powerful executives cut off from their own rich, inner wisdom—instead leaving decisions in the hands of ego, or ambition, or revenge. It's rather like leaving an enormous oil tanker in the hands of a drunken sea captain.

The most dangerous of all the petty emotions might well be narcissism—and narcissism is precisely what corporations tend naturally to reward in managers, warns Charles Kelly in his new book, *The Destructive Achiever*. He outlines a new class of managers he calls Destructive Achievers: those who are charismatic, self-aggrandizing, yet who lack per-



Greve

"Contemplations," Gerrit Greve, 1988. 30" x 24", black alkyd on white canvas ground. Courtesy of the artist.

sonal integrity. They're the kind who are inclined to steal credit from subordinates. And they're the ones likely to be promoted at the expense of those who are more compassionate and committed yet lack the will or the polish to exalt themselves.

The destructiveness of people like these brings home the message that heeding our inner wisdom—reconnecting with our deepest selves—is more than a nice idea: it is the very essence of living well in the world. Such people can remind us, too, that the true challenge is not just to succeed on business terms but to integrate both sides of oneself: the polish of achievement with the richness of inner knowledge. To attain one without the other is to leave half our being—perhaps the better half—buried, invisible, mute. ☘

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