

On Meditation

Marion Bishop

... for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength.
Mosiah 4:27

I USED TO RUN. Fast and furiously, always anxious, always thinking I should be quicker, go farther. I had friends who had run marathons and competed in 10Ks. I envied them and wanted to be like them: longer legs, faster times, thinner limbs. I counted calories and measured miles. I ran, but never liked it, didn't like the way I beat myself up while I was running—"faster! faster!"—nor the fact that I dreaded the next run before the current one was even done.

Then I stopped. One spring morning I decided I couldn't run anymore. My life had gotten too complicated. I was pushing myself to do a lot of things: to excel at a job, to save a failing marriage, to finish a doctoral dissertation. I could no longer also push myself out the door.

I feared I would get fat. I feared my cholesterol level would rise. I feared turning into a slug who never left the sofa or the television. But none of these things happened. I stopped counting calories and fat grams and I lost weight. I stopped trying to push myself to be something I had never wanted to be.

I also began walking. Long walks. Walks that took more time than any of my runs ever had, two-hour loops along the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts, trips around and around Concord's Walden Pond, and hikes through the Blue Hills Reservation on Boston's south shore. Walks that made me slow down. Walks that made me understand myself and my environment in new ways. I soon began seeing things I had never seen before: interesting architecture on the Victorian homes that line the streets in my neighborhood, blossoms clinging to trees in late June, and the Boston skyline from forest preserve trails miles away from the city. I also began feeling things I had not felt before—the way my body moved into and against city streets, and how it felt to brace against the cold in winter or sweat out anxiety in the summer.

Walking also brought me to myself. On winter nights or summer afternoons, I had only myself to walk with. No longer pushing myself to run, I was free to hear what I had to say, and I found that in these walks I often wrote. I composed essays and finished my dissertation. I resolved relationship issues—figured out how to deal with a difficult colleague or why a family member pushed my buttons. I also healed. I found early on that walking did not cure sadness, but that it did help me move through or with it. I walked to mourn my mother-in-law's death and the end of my marriage. Once, when I was longing for Utah, I calculated how many miles away it was and how many days it would take me to walk there if I headed in a straight line west instead of walking around and around Cambridge. Daily walks were then filled with the comfort that each day I was getting a little closer—if only figuratively—to home.

A few months ago I was talking to a friend, another walker, about what it has meant to slow down in this way. "I think the only thing I've done well in the last year is walk," I said to him. "Then you've lived well," he replied. A year and a half ago, I wouldn't have known what he meant.

This spring I went to London. I did not get on the Tube the entire time I was there. To ride the train was to hurry, was to feel in a rush, was to not experience the city on its own terms. It was March: daffodils and tulips were blooming. People were out and about after spending the winter inside. I moved into and around and between them, walking through parks and city streets and common places, stopping to eat sandwiches and drink Diet Coke when I got hungry, and to notice light and trees and buildings when they called to me. One afternoon I ended up in Westminster Abbey and sat with the crowd through the Evensong service. When the choir had finished and the church emptied out, I sat alone in the Abbey and wept. I felt the presence of a million prayers—prayers of people who had walked a million miles and made a million journeys to worship, just like me.

... stand ye in holy places and be not moved . . .
D&C 87:8

I used to be unable to hold still. Perhaps it is genetic. My father is a constant putterer, an emergency room physician who, when he cannot fix people, must be fixing things: plumbing, automobiles, electrical wiring, cabinets. My mother is no different. After raising a family, she started a business based on the needlework she used to do in her spare time. I have never seen her sit down without a child in her arms or a project in her hands.

In my own way, I followed suit. But whereas my parents' busyness came from a desire to mend or create, mine came from a nagging sense

that to sit still was to have no worth. I went to school and then more school. I worked too many jobs. I made too many dinners for people and over-killed church callings. I was busy, but had no life. I was defined by the things I did and not by the person I was inside. This is because I had no inside. There was no one to come home to when I finished working late at night.

This realization terrified me, but the remedy scared me even more. I knew that the only way to get an inner life was to stop and face the things I was working (literally) to avoid. Soon, I had no choice. I had been running on empty for a long time. I burned out and had to take a year off my graduate program. I still had to work to support myself, but my time off was no longer occupied by studying. For the first time in my life, I began watching television and reading books for fun.

Soon I turned off the television, put down the books, and turned inside. I would come home from teaching my classes and lie down on the couch or get in the tub. I lit candles and put on music. Most of the time I felt guilty, indulgent. But after a while I learned that something magical was happening in those moments, in those ten or thirty minutes, or one or two hours when I held completely still. I found that I could have a conversation with myself, indeed, that I had a fascinating inner world I had never known existed. I had opinions about politics and relationships and God and the church. I had a sense of who I was and of where I wanted my life to go that I had never had before.

After a while, I found that holding still had its own rewards. I had more energy when I got up or got out of the tub. I could write more and teach more effectively after a day spent staring at the ceiling. I started to understand quiet-time, alone, as necessary and important, rather than indulgent. Now, when I feel stressed-out or harried, I ask myself "Marion, what do you need?" Sometimes the answer is food, or a nap, or a conversation with friends. But at least half of the time, the answer is two simple words: hold still.

That is what I was doing in Westminster Abbey this March when the Abbey's chaplain approached me. I was alone on a back bench in a corner staring at stained-glass. I had wrapped my arms around myself and was rocking slightly. "Do you need anything, Miss?" the man whispered in a soft, British accent. He must have seen me crying.

"No. I'm okay," I said. "But thanks for asking. I just needed a minute or two to hold still."

Yea, cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save.

Yea, humble yourselves, and continue in prayer unto him.

Cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea over all your flocks.

Cry unto him in your houses, yea, over all your household, both morning, mid-day, and evening.

Yea, cry unto him against the power of your enemies.

Yea, cry unto him against the devil, who is an enemy to all righteousness.

Cry unto him over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them.

Cry over the flocks of your fields, that they may increase.

But this is not all; ye must pour out your souls in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness.

Yea, and when you do not cry unto the Lord, let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you.

Alma 34:18-27

“What have you been praying for?” my father asked me when I was visiting my parents a few months ago. I had had a couple of bad weeks: work on my dissertation was bogged down, and I was weary and wounded from the end of my marriage. I had decided to ask my father for a blessing. He, my mother, and I were sitting around the kitchen table. My parents had listened to me and comforted me when I cried. My father’s question came, I think, by way of trying to understand where I was, what I needed from him and from God.

The question struck me as odd. It was also hard for me to answer. “My prayers are more conversations,” I heard myself say. “I don’t think I’m praying for anything. It’s more that I just tell God what I feel and ask Him to help me understand.”

My prayers have not always been this way. For years I was at odds with God, simultaneously believing that He loved me, but that I could never please Him. I asked for things, but figured I did not deserve them and so He would not give them. I had enough faith in God to pray, but not enough faith in myself to believe I could get an answer. But juggling graduate school, a career, and a debilitating marriage required that my prayers grow up. I started assuming God wanted to talk to me and that I was worth answering. When I did not believe this—which, at first, was most of the time—I pretended. After I finished praying, I required of myself that I hold still and listen. Often nothing happened. But sometimes, something did.

Soon I started praying all the time, everywhere. At the end of each day, I would come home, curl up on the bed, gaze out the window at the city scape below me, and talk to God. Like settling in for a conversation with a good friend, I looked forward to these visits. I would talk and talk and talk and talk, filling up the empty room and dark night sky with my recollections of the day, my hopes for the future, and my request that God hear what I had to say. Then I would get up in the morning and begin all over again—silently, of course—at the bus stop and while waiting for faculty meetings to begin. I have prayed in stalls at public restrooms, in theaters waiting for films to start, and while sitting in my boss’s office

waiting for my annual review.

And I pray about anything. I tell God what delights and thrills me. I tell Him when I'm sad, angry, tired or fed-up. I have even told Him when I'm angry at Him. But I also tell Him when I'm grateful, and I tell Him that I love Him, and that I'm glad I have a friend like Him in my life.

When I teach writing and have my students read each others' papers and offer feedback, I tell them, "It is not your job to tell the people who read your paper how they've misread it. Your job is to understand why they've come to read it in the way they do." Indeed, this says something about how I am trying to understand God in my life: I'm trying to find less fault with myself and the way my life has turned out and to understand better why things sometimes turn out the way they do.

I marked my progress this spring in Westminster Abbey. Standing in that holy place where millions of people have prayed for hundreds of years, I felt my singleness. My solitariness. The stones under my feet had been worn smooth by pilgrim after pilgrim bringing pain and trials and faith before God. I felt the weight of their sorrow at my back and the still coolness of their hope against my face. I looked at stained-glass windows and flying buttressed ceilings above me and at the needlepoint-covered benches at my feet. "Heavenly Father," I said, "thank You for bringing me here. Thank You that I could walk this many miles, feel this many pains, and celebrate so many joys. Thank You for taking care of me and for teaching me how to take care of myself."

"You're welcome," I thought I heard Him say, for I was holding still enough that He had a chance to speak.