

Between the lines, between the pages

By Karen Hering

June 21, 2009

Behind our house, when I was a young child, there was a wide green field where the grass grew tall every summer, its tasseled tips stretching higher than my head. My three sisters, older and taller than I, would venture into the field first, flattening a path through the grass as they went, and I would follow. Eventually, in the middle of the field, we would stop and make a small clearing, stamping down a patch of grass that we pretended was our house. And there we would rest, lying down on our backs between the green swaying walls, looking up at the blue-sky ceiling and telling one another stories that formed and then lost their shape as readily as the clouds that drifted by overhead.

Like this, the work of an author is to carve a path through the world's jungle, the poet William Stafford tells us, and the reader then keeps the way open, traveling that path again with the turning of each page. Musicians, too, make their own clearings in the world's thicket of noise, and each time we listeners stop to take the music in, to hear a song or to hum it, we keep the clearing open, within us and beyond us. All around us are examples of art and artists doing this slow but important work of clearing, of carving paths through time and space, of keeping the way open in a world grown jungly with the clutter of busy days and hurried habits.

The invitation of summer and of Sabbath, for me, is an invitation to make or keep open this kind of creative clearing. To slow down. To pay attention. To take time. To move, as a friend of mine says, at the speed of art. Never doing in one day what might be spread out over seven, including a day of rest.

The trouble is – taking time can be more difficult than you might think. It is so easy to fill life to the edges, to the day's brim of early morning and late night too, until there are no remainders. Just a second, I say, borrowing time from one task to finish another, slipping out of one meeting to attend another down the hall. It is all borrowed in a day like that; there is no time that sits fat in my lap like a cat that has no intention of moving.

By contrast, on a good day of rest, I can sit down with a book opened flat as a map before me. Between the pages, I discover a world that holds my own neighborhood in a wider context. Between the lines, I find a story that beckons me beyond my own life. Between the words, I find space in which my own life grows bigger and more connected to others. In the crowded condition of many of my days, I welcome this kind of opening. It makes room for the question “what if” and that is, after all, the first step in working for peace and justice in a world of so much violence and injustice. We must begin by taking the time to ask “what if?”

A book artist friend of mine once told me the beauty of her art form is that it cannot be done in a hurry. Like the stepping stones in a Japanese garden intentionally placed to slow our pace as we walk through it, almost any creative act will in some way require that we stop hurrying. Whether it is a painting laid down in careful strokes, a meal thoughtfully prepared over an entire afternoon, a quilt lovingly stitched over weeks or months, or a book written across the span of years. Both the making and the enjoyment of creative works require that we take our time. “Poetry is about slowing down,” a poet once said. “You sit and you read something, you read it again, and it reveals a little bit more, and things come to light you never could have predicted.”

The invitation to rest is an invitation into creative living, with its slow pace and its space for encounters with the unpredicted. New possibilities. Divine surprises. Revelations that will take your breath away and give it back, time and time again.

So on this summer solstice day and on this Sabbath, I remind myself to slow down. To pay attention to the unpredicted. To take the time to read a book. To take the time to write a poem, or to read one. To read it again. And one more time. This is how things come to light. By taking time, and sometimes repeating things. Never doing in one day what could be spread out over seven, including a day of rest.

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