

## **“Blursday”**

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Online Service via Zoom  
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"Let the stillness carry me...let the silence carry me."

This is our hope, in times when we seek rest...  
perhaps especially after times of busy activity.

When life slows down,  
when it recedes and boils back...  
when the vibrant energy of summer gives way  
to the stillness of autumn, and then to winter.

At such times, we may welcome the new quiet  
that comes with the change of season.

But of course, it's not always easy to rest in stillness.

There are times when quiet  
can be deeply disquieting...

When silence can be unsettling.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed  
our activities and social lives,  
it may seem sometimes that our days are losing  
some of their most interesting features.

This happens in autumn anyway,  
as Mary Oliver say:

“Things are changing...  
Things are starting to  
spin, snap, fly off into  
the blue sleeve of the long  
afternoon...”

But perhaps no more so than *this* autumn...as the brief  
enchantment of summer is overtaken by particularly long  
shadows...

As we return to our homes, driven in not only by the  
falling temperatures but the rising numbers.

Mary Oliver uses the word “oblivion” and indeed,  
that’s what some of us may feel.

Indoors once again, often by ourselves,  
still missing our former routines,  
we may find ourselves losing track of time:

It is Thursday or Tuesday?  
October or August...?

I myself am grateful for the anchor of Sunday...  
which seems to focus my week in a way that’s  
especially important now.

Making matters worse are several other factors.

The unseasonably warm weather over the last few weeks made November feel suspiciously like mid-June.

After the recent time change, the sun setting at five o'clock seemed more disorienting than ever.

And then there was the recent American election, in which "election day" stretched out over an entire week, prompting even the news anchors to wonder what day it was.

Finally, there's the continually displacing effect of Zoom... in which every meeting seems much like the one before, because they're all taking place in the "no-place" of the virtual world.

As one person said to me recently, it's like we're living in a "Twilight Zone"...a state of suspended animation... a limbo period of neither here nor there.

And it's especially intense, of course, for anyone who is grieving, living with illness, caring for a loved one, or going through any major transition...as so many people are right now.

As Arielle Pardes put it in *Wired* magazine:

"The virus has created its own clock,  
and in coronatime, there is less demarcation  
between a day and a week,  
a weekday and a weekend,  
the morning and night,  
the present and the recent past."

More than one writer has called this new time "Blursday."

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Steven Johnson of the Washington Post offered a weeklong course of e-newsletters designed to help readers create meaningful patterns in their days.

And the African-American poet Marcus Wicker described the disorienting times in a long poem called "Blursday Blues."

Here's an excerpt:

"When the fire up & seized me,  
I had high blood pressure.  
A history of asthma.

My days an antique carousel on the blink.  
Wincing up & down.

Eyeless ponies. Dusty bulbs.

I framed my phone inside an L  
between thumb & middle digit.

Indexed a scroll of crisscrossed  
ankles, wrists, brown paper dolls  
intertwined by headlines,

ending in a campaign ad.<sup>1</sup>

His poem speaks not only to the painful blur of illness  
but also that of systemic racism and injustice,  
all set against the blurred backdrop of the pandemic's  
altered reality.

In these times, we may seek "true harmony"  
but feel instead, like  
"antique carousels on the blink,  
wincing up and down."

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All of it...the repetition of days...  
the altered patterns...  
the absence of comfort in the ordinary...  
the continual stream of difficult news...

All of this has led many people to feel not only disoriented,  
but also deeply fatigued, even dulled or apathetic.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2020/10/poem-marcus-wicker-blursday-blues/616736/>

And it's led some people to remember a very old word:

Acedia.

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The word acedia goes back to the 4th Century, when a Benedictine monk named Evagrius of Pontus called it one of the "eight trains of thought" that needed to be overcome.

These "eight bad thoughts" were slimmed down to become the Seven Deadly Sins.

Even now, we're familiar with them: Pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth.

I sincerely hope that they're not a significant part of your pandemic experience.

But acedia may be!

Over time, the word fell into disuse, and as far as the list of sins went, acedia was pretty much lumped in with "sloth."

But in fact, it's a very different state-of-mind than laziness... and it's also distinct from depression and anxiety.

The words “apathy,” “boredom” and “torpor” come close...but some say the word is impossible to translate.

(Maybe that’s because they can’t muster the energy to try!)

Writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, John Cassian wrote that the monk “seized” by acedia experienced:

“...such bodily listlessness and yawning hunger as though he were worn by a long journey or a prolonged fast ...

Constantly in and out of his cell, he looks at the sun as if it were too slow in setting.”

Jonathan Zecher of Australia Catholic University was perhaps the first person to apply the word “acedia” to our current situation.

In August, he wrote an article entitled, “Acedia: the lost name for the emotion we’re all feeling right now.”<sup>2</sup>

He says that by recognizing acedia, we add to our emotional literacy.

We give a name to the complex feelings brought on by isolation, uncertainty, and the continual flow of bad news.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Zecher, “Acedia: the lost name for the emotion we’re all feeling right now” in *The Conversation* (Australia Catholic University), August 26, 2020. Acedia<https://theconversation.com/acedia-the-lost-name-for-the-emotion-were-all-feeling-right-now-144058>

By naming this experience, we can bring it out into the open, talk about it and find ways to respond...thus reducing its negative impact.

Another writer who wrote helpfully about acedia is Kathleen Norris, in her book "Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer's Life."

In her view, "much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress."<sup>3</sup>

And she was writing in 2008, well before the pandemic.

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We may think we're quite different than the early Christian monks...but our current lifestyles do have some similarities.

Lack of distinguishing features between days, repetition of a limited number of activities, and of course, solitude.

Monks and nuns were told to "pray without ceasing"... but in practical terms, this meant actually doing very little...

Which led some of the faithful to a bland boredom with life in general...which was surely not the point.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me*, 4.

It was said that acedia could cause the monk to “forget the reason of his profession, [and that] if he succumbs to one diversion after another, he will lose the capacity to pray, and become [even] more prone to despondency.”<sup>4</sup>

As a result, acedia was viewed as one of the most dangerous states-of-mind into which a monk could fall.

A noted spiritual writer herself, Kathleen Norris was very aware that her devoted readers would be surprised to know that she was experiencing acedia.

Perhaps they wouldn’t have been so surprised, had she been writing during the pandemic.

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In a very fortunate stroke of timing, the writer and artist Jenny Odell published her book “How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy” just last year.

Its very first sentence reads:  
“Nothing is harder to do than nothing.”

She quotes John Cage who put it well, when describing Zen meditation:

“If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four.

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<sup>4</sup> Acedia and Me, 19.

If still boring, then eight.  
Then sixteen.  
Then thirty-two.

Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.”<sup>5</sup>

Jen Odell recommends re-directing our attention in ways that do not require constant stimulation—

Exactly the opposite of the “doomscrolling” on our phones and other devices that rob us of our sleep and our peace-of-mind...both of which are so very precious right now.

As more research is coming out almost daily on how this experience is affecting us, it’s becoming clear that our brains are working at maximum cognitive load, as we strain to adapt to new tasks and keep up with a constantly changing stream of worrying information.<sup>6</sup>

Being able to direct our attention is especially important now...  
to find meaning in small things, and open up “small spaces” for stillness and quiet.

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<sup>5</sup> Odell, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Christian Jarrett, “Cognitive Load Theory: Explaining Our Fight for Focus” in BBC Worklife, Nov. 12, 2020.  
<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201103-cognitive-load-theory-explaining-our-fight-for-focus>

Odell writes, “Regaining control of [our attention] can also mean the discovery of new worlds and new ways of moving through them.

...This process enriches not only our capacity to resist [the attention economy, but also enriches] our access to the one life we are given.

It can open doors where we didn’t see any, creating landscapes in new dimensions that we can eventually inhabit with others.

In so doing, we not only remake the world, but are ourselves remade.”<sup>7</sup>

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So in practical terms, what can we do, to cope with the “Blursday blahs” or the malaise of acedia?

How can we care for our attention...  
how can we “caretake this moment”  
during this difficult and disorienting time?

Several of the writers I’ve drawn on today recommend creating simple new routines and mastering them:

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<sup>7</sup> Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, April 2019), 94.

Patterns that help distinguish times of day and days of the week.

They recommend setting aside time to do nothing...even better, to meditate, do yoga, pray, or sit quietly in nature.

Also, simplify. Let go of routines that no longer serve.

But perhaps pick up a small way to be of service to others.

Give yourself breaks from pandemic updates and the news.

Build regular social contact into the pattern of your week, meeting with people online, on the phone, or safely in person.

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All of these suggestions, it seems to me, return us to the excellent advice we heard from the Stoic philosopher earlier in this service.

With this reading, we can add “What century is it?” to our list of questions...because it’s ancient wisdom recast for modern times.

It reminds us that the challenges we’re experiencing are part of the human condition, linking us with people from all centuries, whose lives were very different than ours...and yet, in essence, were much the same.

Here again is Sharon Lebell's modern interpretation of Epictetus, who lived from the year 50 to 135 of the Common Era.

“Caretake this moment.  
Immerse yourself in its particulars.  
Respond to this person, this challenge, this deed.

Quit the evasions.  
Stop giving yourself needless trouble.  
It is time to really live; to fully inhabit the situation  
you happen to be in now.  
You are not some disinterested bystander.  
Exert yourself.

When your doors are shut and your room is dark  
you are not alone.

The will of nature is within you as your natural genius is  
within.

Listen to its importunings. Follow its directives.

As concerns the art of living, the material is your own life.  
No great thing is created suddenly.

There must be time.

Give your best and always be kind.

When our doors are shut and our rooms are dark,  
we are not alone.

The will of nature is within us, as our natural genius is within.

Perhaps this is another way  
to understand the essence that we seek,  
and the stillness in which we can rest.

In doing so, may we be carried  
through these very difficult times...  
in harmony and in peace.

Amen.