**Approaching the shortest day: finding rest**

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I’ve chosen to take a year off work. It started on the 1st September 2022. I wanted to experience my life without work. I did not have a grand plan and nothing that I wanted to achieve.

I have worked hard all my life and always had something I was striving for. But the illusive peace and contentment that I thought were bound to accompany the acquisition of each new achievement never materialised. Years of meditation and Buddhist study meant this was not a surprise but the groves run deep. The next promotion, the next pay rise, the next invited speaker invitation – then I will feel as though I have made a success of my life! Then I can stop and put my feet up, warmed by the glow of achievement and recognition.

In early 2022 it suddenly became very clear that I needed to know what life would feel like without being dominated by a career. I submitted the forms to apply for a year’s unpaid career break and it was approved within three weeks. I recognise how privileged I am for this to have been an option for me.

It has not been like I expected. Work has fallen away surprisingly easily. I was worried that without the structure of work I would fall into a meaningless abyss of Twitter and Netflix. But I haven’t. The experience of stepping out of my professional life has been like having a veil lifted. It was not until I stopped that I realised how everything is tinged by professional striving and the day-to-day busyness of work life. Without my diary, the landscape of my life is so different - more gentle, stiller, and real.

Finally, I can feel my feet on the turning earth without some sense that I am responsible for making the world spin. I didn’t know that I needed to know that, but I did. Not only that the University of Essex has miraculously continued to function in my absence, but also in some existential sense, it was crucial that I ‘keep going’, as though somehow the ticking off of my to-do list was essential to the unfolding of life itself.

I have been held during this time by my Buddhist practice. I am not sure I would have had the tools to put work down without this framing. Particularly with a history of depression, space can be a foreboding thing without an explicit orientation towards what is beautiful. My commitment to meditation practice, friendship and the precepts have given shape to my life and become more central in the absence of professional commitments. However, I have been weary of replacing one identity with another. Swopping ‘Lecturer’ for ‘Buddhist’ may have been convenient but I have resisted this, and not filled up my diary with excessive ‘Buddhisting’ to bypass the discomfort of finally having room to loosen my various identifications.

As we approach the shortest day, I am about three and half months into my time away from work, and  I am experiencing a sense of rest hitherto unknown to me. I sense an invitation into the rich, chilled slumber of the earth. To take my place amongst all things. This rest is as much about stillness as it is about letting go. Without the veneer of continual activity and achievement, I’ve noticed how the harried forward momentum of becoming is only stilled by letting go of the perpetual grasping for whatever it is that (always) lies just beyond my fingertips. As life becomes quieter I can sense the pull forward, onto the next thing, then the next and on and on…

True rest is not about getting everything done, working things out, deciding what the answer is, reaching a tidy resolution and then hunkering down for the winter. To rest is to drop our ideas about ourselves and the world and allow ourselves to be held within the unfolding of life. It is not about arrival, or reaching any particular place. It is to allow yourself to be pulled down by gravity and lifted by beauty. To lay down all that you carry and in so doing touch into the mystery of the everyday. To recognise our fragility, our need to belong and humbly reveal our capacity for love.

Of course, there is a time for the work of a human life.  There is certainly much to do. It feels rather obscene to talk about rest when the experience of many is so difficult and there is so much to change. I don’t think that having time off will suddenly lead to an epiphany of what it is I am meant to do, that my ‘purpose’ will suddenly be revealed - having the space to touch into this deep rest has meant freedom from grasping for answers even about myself. But by letting go again and again I allow myself to be held at the central point of my life’s conversation, participating in the dance of self and world. My unravelling continues with each new step, nothing is kept in place by expectation or demand. It is as though this tightly wound thread has always had a memory of freedom. And all I can do in response is sit, filled with love and awe, confusion and loss, knowing no better place from where to ask – what should I do with my life?