

**Sermon: The Gentle Art of Procrastination**  
**Rev. Martha Hodges      April 26, 2009**

Raise your hand if you are *not* a procrastinator.

Why do we do it? Why do we put ourselves through the needless agony? The last-minute frenzy, the anxiety, the vows that next time will be different, that, next time, if we can only pull off this one last miracle, we'll start the assignment promptly, get it finished way ahead of time. Really, we will! Next time, we'll be one of those self-satisfied ants, enjoying the fruits of their labors, chomping leisurely on their corn while they survey their well-stocked ant-hill, enjoying the sight of those ne'er-do-well grasshoppers so pitifully scraping around in the snow for a morsel of grain.

Why do we do it? To the non-procrastinator, it must seem incomprehensible. Why don't we just pull ourselves together, get with the program, show a little responsibility?

Even procrastinators may not be able to answer this question. I have some ideas about why we do it – and I say “we” advisedly. I come by my procrastinator credentials honestly. I think it must be an inborn trait, because neither of my sisters suffers from this affliction. Whereas I, on my very first report card, in first grade, brought home this comment from my teacher, Mrs. Hathaway: “Martha is a good student, but tends to procrastinate.” “Mommy, what's procrastinate,” I asked? When I think about it, I have to wonder... How does a first-grader procrastinate? “Yeah, I'll get to that coloring in just a minute?”

Then there was the time in the fourth grade when the teacher had to call my mother because I was crying in class. I hadn't practiced and was dreading my piano lesson later that afternoon. And there was the time in high school I was supposed to make lemon tarts for the French club picnic. True to character, I chose a recipe from Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* – not exactly a beginner's undertaking. There I was at midnight, cutting lemon peel into julienne strips to boil in sugar water to garnish the tarts when there was a perfectly good package of Jell-O pudding and pie-filling sitting in the cupboard....

Aha... I detect a clue in this story. I'd be willing to bet that the procrastinators' club includes more than its share of perfectionists. This seems counter-intuitive at first glance. Wouldn't the perfectionist be the one who got the early start, honed and polished and edited – sugared that julienned lemon peel the day before it was needed – allowed plenty of time to perfect the assignment, the product, the creation? Not necessarily.

Perfectionism can go either way. It can spur us on to do better work – to work and re-work -- or it can paralyze us with the fear of not being good enough. If you're convinced you're going to fail, no wonder you put off that inevitable failure as long as possible. And if you're a perfectionist, you always fail.

When I was in grade school and agonizing over some assignment, my mother would say, “Just do the best you can.” Sounds like good advice... But my response was to get a little bit hysterical. “No, no don’t say that!” I’d shriek. “If I did the best I could, I’d never finish!” Another clue... If we did the best we could, we’d never finish, because nothing is ever good enough. We’d write that paper over and over, practice that scale until our fingers bled, rip out that seam and re-sew it until there was nothing left of the fabric.

As long as we limit the time available for the job by putting it off until the last minute, we can get it done. The clock forces us to say, I’ve done a lousy job, but it’s the best I can do – because there’s no more time! It will *have* to be good enough. The corollary to this work method is this: If I never do my best – and I won’t, as long as there’s not enough time – I’ll never have to find out that maybe my best isn’t all that great. I can continue to believe that I’m capable of better, that my abilities are infinite, even. If I really tried, who knows what I could do. I could set a new world record for tart making, for teaching, for writing, for whatever. We’ll never know. And that’s the whole idea, isn’t it? We’ll never know just how limited we are.

So if procrastination is such a swell coping mechanism, what’s the down side?

For one thing, it drives other people crazy at best and seriously inconveniences them, at worst.

For another, it isn’t pleasant. It feels bad. The more difficult the task, the more ill-defined it is and the more uncertain we are of our ability to do it well, or even of how to go about it, the longer we wait to get started and the more anxious we become. Procrastinators live with dread. Like the coward, the procrastinator dies a thousand deaths. Most procrastinators, I’d guess, aren’t exactly relaxing when they decide to clean the refrigerator, cut their toenails, make that call, read one more chapter in the novel before they get to work. It’s hard to live fully in the moment when the sword is hanging directly over your head. That grasshopper is probably saying, “My God, I can’t believe I’m chirping and hopping around while winter is getting closer by the minute. What’s wrong with me? Why do I do this? I’m going to die, I just know it.”

Now, I’ve been told by a non-procrastinator that the path of promptness, the ant’s way, is not anxiety-free either. Apparently, so I’m told, the non-procrastinator also lives in a mild state of panic. Or not so mild. The ant is also thinking, “Oh my god, oh my god, if I don’t hurry up and get this done I’m going to die.”

Well, here’s a tip for both the ant and the grasshopper. They’re going to die anyway. It’s a hard truth we each cope with the best we can. Some by hauling that corn to the nest, some by hopping and chirping. Both in mad defiance of the inevitable. There’s a heavy theological truth lurking in this story. Living is an act of defiance. Work hard, accumulate security, plan for the future. Or goof off, play in the sun, never do today what you can put off until tomorrow. Whichever works for you, because, sooner or later, we all run out of time.

Better yet, do some of each. Because we're made to do both. We're built with a need to accomplish things, to make a difference. It feels good to be satisfied with a job well done. And we're built with the need to live in the moment, to enjoy life. It feels good to surrender to temptation now and then, to take a vacation from responsibility, as long as that self-indulgence hurts no one.

And here's another theological tip for both the ant and the grasshopper. You're good enough. Your worth is not determined by the work you do. Now I know that runs contrary to everything our culture teaches us. But succeed brilliantly or fail miserably, you are still a worthwhile person, deserving of love and respect. That's what our religion teaches us. The Puritans believed that God shows his favor only to the deserving and that wealth is therefore a mark of being among the elect. Surely we don't believe that anymore, do we? That material success is proof of God's preference for us, of our moral superiority? Or do we?

Our society can be a harsh place for those who don't conform to that Puritan ideal. Maybe we don't come right out and say it, but don't we deeply believe, most of us, that we get pretty much what we deserve? And who can blame us? Who can blame the ant for resenting the grasshopper?

And the grasshopper does garner a lot of disapproval, even scorn. Procrastination is considered a shameful thing. It's a tendency to be fought and overcome. The procrastinator needs to be fixed. In this relatively tolerant age, procrastination is one of the few behaviors we're still encouraged to look down upon.

The Internet is rife with websites dedicated to overcoming procrastination. People offer helpful hints, like telling yourself your deadline is really a day earlier than it actually is. (This doesn't work, by the way. Or so I'm told. The dedicated procrastinator knows perfectly well that she has a whole day more to complete the task. She may try telling herself that the job is due the next day but this idea makes her so anxious and miserable, all she can do is lie down and take a nap. So I'm told.)

I read one story submitted by a woman who was fed up with nagging her daughter to do her homework. She decided she'd try some tough love. Quit nagging the girl and see how she liked it when she failed all her classes and had to go to summer school. Well, the kid continued to shirk and yet still passed her classes with flying colors. Was the mother happy that her child had done well? No, no, no. She still needed to teach the girl that it doesn't pay to procrastinate, so she made the poor child write an essay in which, "She will have to think up situations of when procrastinating would destroy our nation, mean the difference between life or death and the things that will hold us back in life." In addition, the mom taped this message on the bathroom mirror, on the girl's bedstead, on the fridge. "Procrastination never won a race, received a promotion or changed the outcome of any situation." Yeah, that's really gonna work.

This is just a sample. Site after site tells you how to cure yourself of this affliction. Here's what bothers me about this: It appears that most of this advice is coming not from procrastinators, but from all those who are determined to improve them. No wonder procrastination has more than a little element of rebellion lurking darkly among its roots. Not that procrastinators are necessarily aware of this while they're texting their friends or noticing that they'd really better do something about that dust before they get back to their research. But maybe you really don't want to do that research, not because you don't enjoy doing research, but just because you *have* to do it. In that case, you're a prime candidate for deciding that you'll just weed the garden first. Nobody likes to be forced to do a thing, even if the one cracking the whip is yourself.

The irony, and the sadness, is that if we could remove that sense that we're being compelled to write that brief or read that report, we'd probably enjoy it. We like to feel that we're in charge of our lives, of how we choose to spend our time and energy. The fact that we are freer than we think, and more often than we think, gets lost among the deadlines. We choose to accept the deadline, after all. So why not take that thought to its next logical level and acknowledge that we choose to do this work and are, therefore, free to enjoy it? Whom, after all, are we rebelling against?

We all have more freedom than we think we do. And freedom has its rewards and also its downside. If we have no one else to blame for the work we choose to do, where does that leave us? It leaves us with the responsibility to make it the most enjoyable, meaningful and rewarding undertaking we can. If we have no one else to blame for our lives, that leaves us with the responsibility to make them the most enjoyable, meaningful and rewarding undertakings that we can. This is a point that procrastinators like me need to remind ourselves of occasionally.

And here's another not so attractive truth about procrastination. Linked to the idea that we're rebelling against authority or societal expectations or our own sense of obligation, is the little demon of arrogance. Of ego. Those other poor suckers may need to break their backs on this project, but not me. I can sail through. Oh sure, I'll suffer the agonies of the damned in the process, but I'll pull it off.

And then there's the added bonus of the drama, the adrenaline rush. Procrastinators may just need to get over themselves. This may, indeed, be part of the reason that they're so universally condemned. And maybe they need to find a less stressful source of drama and excitement in their lives – like, say, skydiving.

Whatever the reasons for it, while we've still got time, while we still have life, some of us will continue to live on or near the edge of disaster. Pushing our luck. Sliding in under the wire. If we seem to be stuck in this habit, we needn't give up hope. I know I don't. I continue to believe that I'll change my ways, to the benefit of all, but mostly myself. I also believe I'll lose thirty pounds and buy a house on the beach...

In the meantime, what's a procrastinator to do? Ask yourself why *you* do it. Is it thrill-seeking? Arrogance? Rebellion? Perfectionism? Profound self-doubt? And ask

yourself if you really want to change or if you're just kidding yourself. If you're unquestioningly accepting the message that procrastination is wrong, bad for you, immoral... take another look. Maybe it's working for you. If those around you can stand the anxiety your behavior generates, maybe you're fine the way you are. Maybe that's just the way you get things done – Not only the dreaded job at hand, but all the little things you think up to do to avoid tackling it.

If you are among the delayers of this world, why not make the most of it? The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that this is your life – doing the dishes, sitting in the sun, weeding the garden, reading your e-mail – working, playing – your life is made up of these moments, nothing more and nothing less. The practice of mindfulness, he teaches us, allows us to make each of these moments full and complete, perfect in its way. What a gift to ourselves if we can put this into practice.

What would happen if, instead of feeling guilty for not doing the dreaded job, you simply enjoyed the thing you were doing at that moment to delay it? You'd live more happily. And what would happen if you failed? If your report was inadequate or your dishes remained undone? Not much. The world would go on.

And here's another secret: Nine times out of ten, it will work out just fine. It's enough to make a person wonder if the universe is not benevolent after all. The Tao, or God, or the interdependent web, may not have your personal welfare in mind. Nevertheless, we often find that trust in that "thing," that process, is not only justified by outcomes. It's also a sure way to a more peaceful spirit.

Life is short and not to be frittered away. The world's opinion may be that we must not waste this life by playing, by procrastinating, by dancing or dreaming. But maybe it is just as valid to say that we must not fritter this time away by joyless work that is driven by guilt or duty, by not following the urges of the heart.

Give your inner procrastinator, your inner grasshopper, a break. No, you wouldn't choose to cultivate the habit. But if you've got the habit, if this is who you are, even if you're trying to change, in the meantime, learn to trust yourself. If you get the job done, and it's good enough, and you've had some fun along the way, that's plenty to be grateful for. Maybe not if you're a brain surgeon – we hope they don't have too much fun -- but most of us can afford to be less than perfect. If aiming for perfection gives you joy, if it's a form of play, you're blessed. If it is a torment, learn to accept "good enough" and trust that life will forgive you your errors and your inadequacies, your occasional poor planning and your lapses. Life will forgive you your humanity, and so must you.