

Luke 10: 38-42  
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*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Scriptures are the source of many misunderstandings about women. It begins in the beginning, of course, with Eve: a topic for another day.

The story of Martha and Mary is one case. The misunderstanding leads all kinds of women, especially those named Martha, to apologize for being active, for serving--as if that were a failing! God bless you, ladies: it's not!

A close look at the text helps set the record right.

Here (as in John's gospel) it's clear that the sisters and Jesus are close friends. He leaves the disciples and comes to visit them on his own. In the privacy of Martha's home, he honors Mary by teaching her. He welcomes her to break out of the serving role conventional for women. Now a disciple, Mary sits at Jesus' feet and learns from the master.

Like all people in that culture, Martha took hospitality seriously. So her reaction is surprising. Frustrated, angry, jealous perhaps (?), she breaches hospitality when she shares her feelings with her guest and bids him to intervene. Jesus declines. And he validates Mary's behavior.

The common misunderstanding is that Jesus is scolding or shaming Martha for being an active hostess. Look at what he said and how he said it. He didn't say "Martha, don't care for your guest". Instead, he said "Martha don't worry." What's more, according to rhetorical scholars,

the repetition of her name means that Jesus said it with compassion and kindness, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

Scurrying and worrying, Martha was not present to her work--or to her guest. In contrast, Mary was fully attentive to Jesus' teaching. Mary offered Jesus the greatest hospitality of all--the hospitality of mindful presence: an open heart and spirit.

If ever there was a Martha, it's me. A worrier by nature and nurture (on my mother's side), I'm easily distractible in the most distracting culture in history. **Medication** helped temper the anxiety underlying my worrying. **Meditation** has helped even more--helped me be present to the very fact of worrying, to the fretful, distracting voices in my head. I sit for 20-30 minutes every morning. After 20 years I'm far from adept, but I know it makes a difference in my day and in my development.

When I caught myself worrying in the past, I would bring to mind Mark Twain's recollection that he had so many worries in his life, most of which never happened. Lately, thanks to this gospel, taking deep breaths, I try to imagine Jesus' voice gently saying "Susan, Susan, you are worried and distracted by many things. Be here, now. Be still and know that I am with you."

The Middle Ages saw Mary as an example of the *Vita Contemplativa*, or contemplative life. Then, it was contrasted with and valued more highly than the *Vita Activa*--the active life embodied in Martha.

But contemplation and action are not in competition. They aren't contradictory; they're complementary. So says Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr. That's why he named his institute in Albuquerque the Center for Action and Contemplation. At a talk I heard years ago Richard said if you do the contemplation piece, the right action will follow. Contemplation comes first. 'Contemplation transforms human consciousness,' Rohr wrote.

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What's more, contemplation transforms the physiology of the brain. U of Wisconsin Neuroscientist Richard Davidson's MRI brain-scan studies of Tibetan monks and other meditators have shown it.

The result is that meditation, mindfulness, contemplation change the way we feel and the way we behave. Meditation increases our ability to concentrate, to be present in the present moment; it makes us less reactive.

Dr. James Doty discovered that when he began the practice of mindfulness as a boy. He was a troubled youth, age twelve. Doty's parents were impoverished; his father a chronic, sometimes violent alcoholic, his mother a suicidal depressive. Ashamed, afraid, angry, sometimes acting violently himself, he was on the path to delinquency. Now he's a professor of neurosurgery at Stanford, an entrepreneur, and a philanthropist.

In his riveting, readable autobiography *Into the Magic Shop*, Doty tells how his life was transformed by a providential encounter with a spiritual master. Her name was Ruth, The mother of the Magic Shop owner, she was on a visit minding the store for her son, when young Jim wandered in. The boy loved practicing and performing magic tricks. That gave him the sense of being in control--a feeling so rare in his chaotic home life. Ruth offered to teach him a different kind of magic. Her son--the master magician in the shop--assured Jim that her "magic" was real and worth the time and practice it would require.

Ruth began by making Jim aware of the feelings in his body, teaching him attentively to relax, to recognize and release the stress in each part. Then she brought him to awareness of the voices in his mind. Every evening as Jim practiced what he had learned in the day's session, he felt the changes in his ability to recognize what was taking place in his body, in his mind, finally in his heart. The practice of mindfulness that Ruth taught him over the next six weeks gave him the tools to succeed against the odds, to overcome the extraordinary challenges that still lay ahead.

Perhaps the greatest effect of mindfulness, of contemplation, is that it fosters compassion. Doty's life and research have led him to found the Center for Compassion and Altruism at Stanford. There Doty is drawing on neuroscience, psychology and contemplative traditions to create programs that cultivate compassion in schools, prisons, hospitals, the military, and society at large. The Dalai Lama is one of his supporters.

Doty is no pure saint. He had to ride the roller coaster of fame, fortune, and failure that are part of the human condition. Even in that ego-driven time, he was the wellspring of acts of compassion and mercy.

Contemplation/mindfulness can change our consciousness, change our brains, change our emotions, change our behavior, change our hearts, change our lives. If they can change individual lives, they can help change our culture, change the world.

And mindfulness is something anyone can learn with practice.

At the end of another week of tragic news worldwide, and fearing that one will begin in Cleveland tomorrow, I was going to end this sermon with some of the ways that mindfulness can address the issue of violence--as, indeed, it can. Then I drove home by Lake Calhoun where people of every kind and color were reveling in the soft summer afternoon. I saw how joyful and beautiful life can be--as it is most of the time in most of the world. And I heard Jesus' voice: "Susan, Susan. You are worried and distracted by many things....Be here, now."