

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

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Opinions & Observations: When New York gets quiet

May 21, 2020 Rev. Brett Younger, senior minister at Plymouth Church





Senior Minister Rev. Brett Younger of Plymouth Church. Photo courtesy of Rev. Brett Younger

New York does not sound like New York right now. Fewer cars are on the street. Fewer planes are overhead. Were the birds this loud three months ago? We bang pots and pans each night at 7:00 to show our appreciation for first responders, but as the weeks pass it feels like we are letting our neighbors know that we are still alive.

We may have thought we wanted more quiet time, but now we are not so sure. You come to the end of a long day. The dishes are done. You are by yourself. It is a perfect time to meditate on the day's events — what was good, what was not, what you could have done differently, and what you hope for tomorrow. What do we usually do? We turn on some noise. We have a hard time being quiet — especially when life is hard and we have to think about death.

I was riding in a limousine to a graveside service in Green-Wood Cemetery. Most of the people in the car were family so — except for the masks — the conversation was comfortable and familiar. Then the funeral director said, “See those smokestacks. That’s the crematorium. They’ve been going non-stop since this thing began.” We stopped talking. The

silence was painful.

In the United States, more than a thousand people a day are dying from COVID-19. That monstrous figure is not going to stop soon. We need to sit with despair, so that when a new day finally comes it will be a new day.

For many, this horrible pandemic is a chance to be still. We want everything to go back to normal, but we need to figure out how we are going to live now. We want things to hurry up, but while we are stuck waiting, we can grow in our appreciation of stillness.

Quarantine has given us time to think. Some are tired of looking at screens and have started meditating. We are thinking deeper thoughts, contemplating the meaning of life, and learning to be still.

I am reading better books, jogging without earbuds, and spending more time unplugged — praying, hoping, and listening. I am becoming more thoughtful. I have been thinking about how what I most want is what everyone most wants — I want to be loved by the people I care about. What I most need is to love others with the love I have received. Those are not earth-shattering insights, but they are worth thinking about.

We need to use this time to think. How do we want to be different when this over? How can we be better for the people to whom we are closest? To which relatives do we need to pay more attention? What have we learned about how we want to spend the rest of our lives? How will we know when it is time to look for another job? Is this virus making retirement look better or is it making going back to work look really good? How are we going to live more deeply? Can we learn to be present? Can we come out of this more attentive?

Quarantine is miserable in so many ways. We are not going to be through this soon enough, but it will finally end. Until then, we have a chance to love silence, quiet our minds, and be grateful for solitude.

In the midst of anxiety, we can slow down and appreciate what really counts, trust something other than our money, and learn to live in peace. We can be still enough to sense the hope beyond this challenging time. Read. Write. Sing. Paint. Pray. And when this is over, hold on to those practices. Listen for what matters most.

*Rev. Brett Younger is senior minister at **Plymouth Church**, which is located in Brooklyn Heights.*
