Columns
Spirituality



Nature follows its own rhythm on the grounds of the Brandt Oyster River Hermitage on Vancouver Island. (Julie A. Ferraro)



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April 8, 2025

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For many years, my personal emails have included the phrase "It's the being, not the doing" below my signature. This has served as a reminder to me — more so than the recipients of those emails — that life is about *being*, and not about what we accomplish.

We're human *beings*, after all.

I will be the first to admit that this reminder often went unheeded. For the majority of my "career" — if you can use that term to describe a myriad of jobs doing assorted tasks — I have been a workaholic. From the instant I woke in the morning until I crawled into bed at night, I was always *doing*, whether for my employers or my family. Even in moments of "leisure" I would park myself at a desk, creating bits of fiction, driven until I jotted the final sentence on the notepad or, later, a computer screen.

So it is with many people — religious included — in this 21st century. Just a glance around, wherever we live, shows us how much must be done to alleviate the suffering of the poor, the homeless, the children, the immigrants — and on and on. We spend ourselves in service to others, and forget about simply *being*.

But we can't forget that aspect of life; we *shouldn't* forget.

Living on Vancouver Island the past few months, as contemplative-in-residence at the Brandt Oyster River Hermitage, I have had time to remember that *being* is the most important part of life. In the midst of these 28 acres of woodlands, with the rapids creating a soothing background of natural music — not to mention the birds and animals adding their distinctive voices to the mix — I have been able to let go of my attachment to work. Though I still lend my skills to a number of projects on a remote basis, those tasks are not the focus of my days. I have put such efforts into proper perspective.

Perhaps the weeks when it rained almost every day — heavy rains, too — helped me achieve this new perspective. I sat at the window and watched nature react to the winds and the wetness. I listened as the river's level rose and the flow of water over the rocks grew more enthusiastic (or, possibly, violent). There was no need to fight the situation, though the recurring gloominess was rather annoying.

The brief glimpses of sunlight during breaks in the clouds were all the more appreciated.

A contentment claimed my soul, proof that we humans don't have to be bustling about through the days — that nature can do and has existed without us for millennia. In fact, what we humans *have* done in our quest for knowledge has nearly destroyed our environment.

If we'd been satisfied with simply *being* — living in harmony with nature and the other occupants of the planet — we might not be facing such a tenuous future.

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My personal sense of contentment played a role in a bizarre event that impacted my holidays. In mid-December, I woke in the middle of the night when my body alerted me that my heart had abruptly decided to cut my pulse to half speed. I don't wear any device that would have triggered an audible alarm.

Despite the seriousness of this situation, I didn't panic. My amazement at having no other symptoms allowed me to keep a clear head. When I went to the hospital, I was prepared for almost anything, except the behavior of the health care staff (but that's a story for another time). I wound up spending a week as a patient, watching my pulse fluctuate wildly on a heart monitor — including dropping to zero a couple times — and finally having surgery to implant a pacemaker.

Unlike previous experiences caused by an extreme fear of needles, I was even able to tolerate having intravenous tubes inserted in my arms and multiple vials of blood drawn on a daily basis.

Returning to the hermitage, I have resumed just *being*, roaming the grounds and capturing evidence of nature's rhythm with my camera — phenomenal sculptures in their own right, or plants illuminated in unique ways as the sun travels on its pre-spring course.

Perhaps, this Lent, we can all delve more deeply into just *being*.