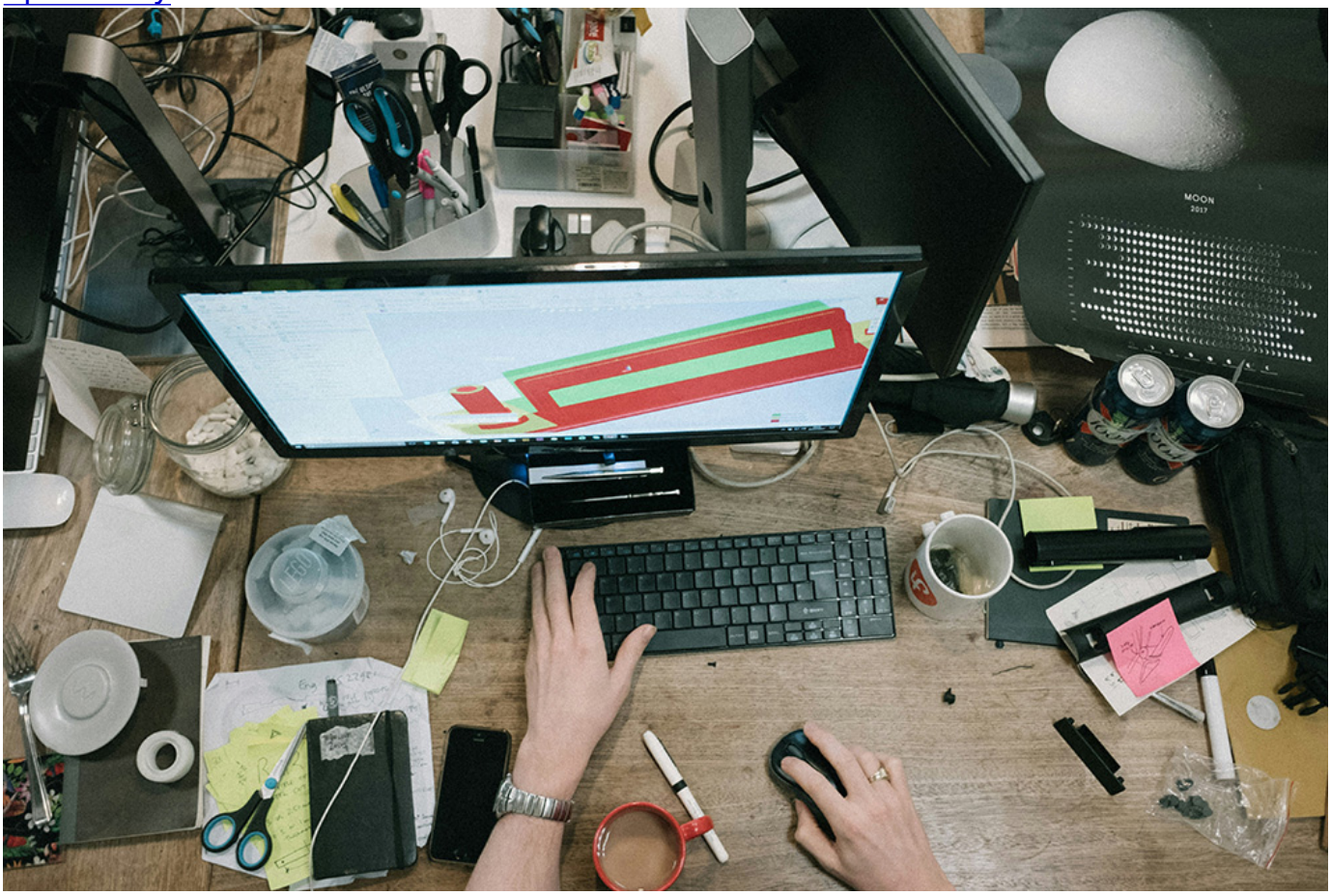
Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Robert Bye)

by Jennifer Wilson

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

July 11, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When I was a young sister new to the convent, I came across a book. I don't remember the exact title, but it was something like *We are human beings, Not human doings*. I remember rolling my eyes thinking, "of course we are human beings, and we have to also do stuff."

I didn't read the book, but I sure judged the title, wondering why someone would spend energy on this concept. I don't know what themes the book explored, but I can guess that it was about slowing down and not always doing. It has been 20 years since I saw that title and I still remember it.

When I think about my life and the life of others around me, I think about busyness. I know that often I have a running to-do list in my head. I am guilty of having a conversation with someone and at the same time thinking about what I am going to do next after I leave the person. The person didn't know that I was not 100% present in the conversation.

Advertisement

This constant busyness that I and others around me experience takes a toll on relationships. I feel like I am on a hamster wheel that doesn't stop. In this modern society, we have cell phones at our disposal. We can use phones at any time to relieve the boredom we feel at just doing one thing at a time. I have been at meetings and see people on their phones instead of listening fully to what is being said. I am guilty of this as well.

For the past three weeks, I have been working with Arise Adelante to host groups of volunteers from across the country. They came to Alamo, Texas, to participate in a week of service and learning. In the morning and in the afternoon, they do summer camp activities with children in the local area. They learn about immigration and what is happening — or not happening — at the border right now.

I had a conversation with one of the young people and she talked about how surprised she was by this service trip. She had been on previous service trips, and on those trips, she did something. Those trips consisted of building something and she left the area knowing she did something. She said, "I didn't do anything here except play with children." I saw her struggle to listen and understand as we talked about the value of presence.

I recently moved to South Texas and was busy with all that moving brings. I also had to pay attention to the last minute details for the groups coming. The first few days of the camp, I finally stopped all my doing and looked around at the beautiful faces around me. What I saw were Sisters of Mercy having conversations with young adults — conversations that bridged several decades between them. I saw students not from South Texas bridging divides as they reached across language barriers and shared smiles over beadmaking, tie-dying, gameplaying. I did not see a cell phone in sight.

Sr. Jennnifer Wilson, on the left in the back, joins volunteers from Mother McAuley High School in Chicago at Arise Adelant's summer program for children in Alamo, Texas. (Courtesy of Jennifer Wilson)

I remember thinking, "Well they are all engaged, what should I do?" That little voice in my head was telling me I should be doing something but instead, I sat down on a bench and did nothing. A little girl came up to me and had a whole conversation in Spanish and I didn't understand a word. I did understand the smile. The children

helped each of us remain in the present moment. We didn't need to be doing anything except be in that moment with them — to rejoice in their innocence and to take in what they can teach us about living.

The women that work at the center also modeled the value of presence to us. They took the time to tell us about their lives and to teach us about immigration from their perspective. I and the others I was with did not have to do anything but listen and be with them. I felt joy and gratitude. I am reminded of a quote by Thich Nhat Hanh "The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it."

The young woman who struggled to understand that she was not doing anything talked in her reflection later about how she saw God in the people and that she could see the value in being present. She smiled and said, "I thought I wasn't doing anything and actually God was telling me to listen."

I thought that was a pretty good way to think about the value of presence in our lives. It is a reminder to me to slow down to see where God is calling me to listen and to appreciate the small moments of joy and gratitude in my life. We can all slow down some and find the moments in our days where we are called to be truly present to those around us.