

Bee Time: Do One Thing by Susan Chernak McElroy

On these cold autumn mornings, I make it a habit to walk up to my bee yard no matter what the weather and take a peek into the plexiglass viewing windows on each one of my hives. My hives are kept under a shed-type cover and this every-morning hive check is a precious new ritual here at MillHaven. I call it “bee TV,” and it is always educational. Sometimes it is downright flabbergasting, what you can see through that window. Yesterday, I watched a very disoriented yellow jacket being chased up and down the hive walls by some very determined guards. They did not waver in their task. They ran the butt off that poor wasp, until they finally ran her out the door. I imagined them yelling, “And good riddance!” as the flustered invader flew off.

In the spring and summer, one of the most magical things I can see sometimes through the viewing windows is the bees “festooning.” This is a mysterious activity in which the bees hold onto each other foot-to-foot and create an amorphous, amber veil that hangs down softly from the upper bars of the hive. Why they do this is completely unknown. All we understand is that this behavior has something to do with comb building, but exactly what and why, we have no clue. It must be important to the bees, however, because the festooning bees will suspend themselves in this dangling veil for days, never moving.

Wherever mystery appears, we are free to let our imaginations roam, unconstrained by the borders of science—or what we think we know for certain. I like to imagine that the festooning bees are urging their comb-building sisters on by creating a living curtain—a visible prayer—to inspire the work.

I am daily inspired by the culture of the bees in my yard, and find them to be exemplary models of right living. They work independently, set their own tasks, but do all their work for the good of the whole. We'd do well to live more like bees.

Today, I'm reflecting on another quality of bees: Their single-minded focus. Bees do not multi-task, I remind myself as I'm running around the house, filling the dog water bowl while frying eggs, talking on the phone, and flinging a pile of dirty clothes toward the laundry room.

I was never any good at multi-tasking. I avoided all the job listings in the papers that said "multi-tasking required." The older I get, the worse I get at trying to do several things at once. Research tells us that we are fooling ourselves when we believe we can juggle multiple tasks and do it well. But what research doesn't talk about much is the toll on the multi-tasker: The more balls I try to juggle, the more exhausted I am at the close of the day. The more muddled my mind becomes as the hours of juggling progress, until I am left staring vacantly at a mindless TV show come evening, because that is all my mind can process.

Bees don't look like that at day's end. Trust me. They are on to the next task, or headed for some well-deserved rest, and that is another good reason to learn from bees: They know when to rest.

Although we think of bees as perpetually laboring from birth to death, they actually spend two-thirds of their lives at rest. The other third of their existence is spent in zen-like devotion to one task at a time. When they festoon, they festoon. When they make wax, they give themselves over heart and soul to the wax and comb.

At the rare times I find myself so completely engaged in a task—say writing, or following a complex recipe—I am always surprised to find the work invigorating rather than exhausting. I'm sure you know the feeling at the end of certain days when you dust off your hands and smile at a job fully, deeply completed. As opposed to those days when you have shuffled phone calls, errands, house chores, and kids, and at the end of the day all you can do is sigh and slump.

There is a deepening to be had in doing one thing and sinking into it all the way. Even the most mundane chore can become a sacred ritual when it is done mindfully. The other day I was digging up a small tree to replant, and it was resisting me all the way, with roots far stronger and more determined than my hands and stiff back. Just when I felt the tension start mounting in my belly like burning gasoline, and just before I blurted out a string of

expletives, I thought to myself “Bee time. Do this in bee time.”

I took a deep breath. And another. I let myself settle down on the wet ground fully. I slowed my fingers and began gently, deliberately untangling the roots from the mud and gravel. I tugged just a bit to test the resistance and felt the pull all the way down into my sacrum. I noticed—for the first time—my sacrum. How it felt twisted and anxious. So I shifted my hips, and felt a calm creep up into my back and shoulders. I felt a sound of some sort was needed, so I began to hum an old folksong.

I don't recall how long it took me to disengage the sapling from the ground, but I recall the look and the smell of the black, wet soil. I recall how the feathery roots looked so much like the veins in the backs of my hands. I noticed how quickly my jaw tenses when I try to hurry myself up, and how I did not notice the cold because the tree and the soil had me captivated. And I had a sense of actually *knowing* that small tree, not just digging it but *knowing* it because I had given it my full attention.

Do just this one thing, the bees seem to say. I think it is splendid advice.

This winter, I am giving myself over to bee time. I might not get as much done, but whatever I do get done, it will be accomplished with more care and more polish. I invite you: Do just this one thing, whatever that one thing is. And then the next, and the next.

