

Spiritual Rhythms in the Life of the Leader

By Ruth Haley Barton

“We are blessed with inner rhythms that tell us where we are, and where we are going. No matter, then, our fifty and sixty hour work weeks, the refusing to stop for lunch, the bypassing sleep and working deep into the darkness. If we stop, if we return to rest, our natural state reasserts itself. Our natural wisdom and balance come to our aid, and we can find our way to what is good, necessary and true.”

—Wayne Muller

I remember sitting in a staff meeting once at a church I was serving; the purpose of the meeting was to talk about how we could attract more people to join the church. At one point someone counted the requirements for church membership already in place and made the startling discovery that there were at least five time commitments *per week* required of those who wanted to become church members!

Outwardly I tried to be supportive of the purpose for the meeting, but on the inside I was screaming, *Who would want to sign up for this?* I was already trying to combat CFS (Christian fatigue syndrome) in my own life and couldn't imagine willingly inflicting it on someone else. How is it, I wondered, that life in and around the church often gets reduced to so much activity, so much busyness, such weighty expectations?

One of the main reasons life in and around the church is full of so much activity, so much busyness and such weighty expectations is that that is the way its leaders are living. Most of us only know one speed: full steam ahead. And we have been stuck in that speed for a very long time. If we do not establish saner rhythms in our own lives—life patterns that curb our unbridled activism and calm our compulsive busy-ness—we will not make it over the long haul and neither will the people we are leading.

Rhythms of Work and Rest

Jesus seems to understand how quickly our passions, even the most noble, can wear us out if we're not careful. Early in his ministry with the disciples, he began to teach them about the importance of establishing sane rhythms of work and rest. In Mark 6, Jesus had just commissioned the disciples for ministry and had given them the authority to cast out demons, to preach the Gospel and to heal the sick. They went off on their first ministry excursion and returned all excited about their new-found powers and crowded around Jesus to report in on all they had done and taught.

But Jesus didn't have much time for their ministry reports. Immediately he instructed them “to come away with me and rest awhile.” He seemed to be much more concerned about helping them to establish rhythms that would sustain them in ministry rather than allowing them to be overly enamored by ministry successes or inordinately driven by their compulsions to do more.

When we keep pushing forward without taking adequate time for rest and replenishment, our way of life may seem heroic but there is frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we have lost the ability to be present to God, to be present to other people and to discern what is really needed in our situation. The result can be “sloppy desperation”: a mental and spiritual lethargy that prevents us from the quality of presence that delivers true insight and spiritual leadership.

Charles, a gifted physician illustrates the point: “I discovered in medical school that if I saw a patient when I was tired or overworked, I would order a lot of tests. I was so exhausted, I couldn't tell exactly what was going on ...so I got in the habit of ordering a battery of tests, hoping they would tell me what I was missing. But when I was rested—if I had the opportunity to get some sleep, or go for a quiet walk—when I saw the next patient, I

could rely on my intuition and experience to give me a pretty accurate reading of what was happening...when I could take the time to listen and be present with them and their illness, I was almost always right.”¹

When we are depleted, we become overly reliant on voices outside of ourselves to tell us what is going on. We react to symptoms rather than seeking to understand and respond to underlying causes. We rely on other people’s ministry models and outside consultants because we are too tired to listen in our setting and craft something that is uniquely suited to meet the needs that are there. When we are rested we bring steady, alert attention to our leadership that is characterized by right discernment about what is truly needed in our situation, and the energy and creativity to carry it out.

Rhythms of Engagement and Retreat

One of the most important rhythms for a person in ministry is to establish a constant back and forth motion between engagement and retreat—those times when we are engaged in the battle, giving our best energy to taking the next hill and times when we step back in order to gain perspective, re-strategize and tend our wounds—an inevitability of life in ministry.

One of the occupational hazards for those of us in Christian ministry is that it can become hard distinguish between the times when we are “on” and working *for* God and times when we can just *be with* God for our own soul’s sake. We might notice that Scripture has been reduced to a textbook or a tool for ministry rather than an intimate personal communication from God to us. Perhaps prayer has become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity or a public display of our spiritual prowess.

Times of extended retreat give us a chance to come home to ourselves in God’s presence and to be with God with what is true about us in utter privacy. This is important for

us and for those we serve. When we repress what is real in our lives and just keep soldiering on, we get weary from holding it in and eventually it leaks out in ways that are damaging to ourselves and to others. But on retreat there is time and space to attend to what is real in our own lives—to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed tears, sit with the questions, feel my anger, attend to my loneliness—and allow God to be with us in those places. These are not times for problem-solving or fixing because not everything can be fixed or solved. On retreat we rest ourselves in God and wait on him to do what is needed and we return to the battle with fresh energy and keen insight.

Silence and Word, Prayer and Action

“In the multitude of words there is much transgression” the Scriptures say. This is a truth that could drive us ministry folks to despair given the incessant flow of words from our mouths, pens and computers. Those of us who deal in words are at great risk of misusing words and even sinning with our words due to the sheer volume of them! I don’t know about you but sometimes I can literally feel it—deep in my bones—that if I do not shut my mouth for awhile I will get myself in trouble because my words will be completely disconnected from the reality of God in my own life.

Silence is the only cure for this desperate situation. “Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech” says Dietrich Bonhoeffer². In silence our speech patterns are refined because silence fosters a self-awareness that enables us to choose more truly the words that we say. Rather than speech that issues from subconscious needs to impress, to put others in their place, to compete, to control, to manipulate, and put a good spin on things, we are able to notice our inner dynamics and make choices that are more grounded in love, trust and God-given wisdom.

The Psalmist says, “When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your bed and be silent. Offer right sacrifices (in other words, stay faithful to your spiritual practices) and put your trust in the Lord.” There are times when the most heroic thing a leader can do is to remain in that private place with God for as long as it takes to keep from sinning. In this place we consciously trust ourselves to God rather than everything else we could be doing in the moment.

Practicing rhythms of silence and stillness helps us learn to wait on God—which doesn’t come easily for those of us who are so busy trying to make things happen. It takes energy to be restrained and to wait for the work of God in our lives and in the world around us. What I am learning these days is that *the more I am called upon to use words, the more distressing things are, the more active leadership that is required of me, the more silence I need.*

Sabbath Rhythms

I have spent much of my life bumping up against limits, ignoring limits, and pretending there are no limits. It is an embarrassing little secret that seems to be a common characteristic among leaders and we probably need to be more honest about it. Buried deep in the psyche of many leaders is a Superman mentality—the idea that somehow there are a few of us that can function beyond normal human limitations and save the world. Or at least our little corner of the world. This is a grandiosity that we indulge to our own peril.

Sabbath-keeping is the primary discipline that helps us to live within the limits of our humanity and to honor God as our Creator. It is the kingpin of a life lived in sync— with the rhythms that God himself built into our world—and yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live. Sabbath-keeping honors the body’s need for rest, the spirit’s need for

replenishment and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. It begins with the willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and then taking steps to live more graciously within the order of things.

The first order of things is that we are creatures and God is the creator. God is the only one who is infinite; I, on the other hand, must learn to live within the physical limits of time and space and the human limits of strength and energy. There are limits to my relational, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities as well. I am not God. God is the only one who can be all things to all people. God is the only one who can be two places at once. God is the one who never sleeps. I am not. This is pretty basic stuff but many of us live as though we don't know it.

Sabbath-keeping may be the most challenging rhythm for leaders to establish because Sunday, in most churches, has become a day of Christian busy-ness—and of course, the busiest person on that day is the pastor! That just means that pastors need to set aside another day for their Sabbath. Or they might consider ordering their church's life so that everyone learns how to practice Sabbath. It could begin with worship but then everyone goes home and rests and delights for the rest of the day because there are no other church activities. In that way, the pastor's commitment to Sabbath becomes a blessing for everyone.

Sabbath keeping is a way of ordering one's whole life to honor the rhythm of things—work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship and delighting in God and his good gifts, but the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make Sabbath possible.

There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our existence as human beings — physical and spiritual beings in a world of time and space. There is a peace

that descends upon our lives when we accept what is real rather than always pushing beyond our limits. There is something about being gracious and accepting and gentle with ourselves at least once a week that enables us to be gracious and accepting and gentle with others. There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God and resting into God that eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our doing. Sabbath-keeping helps us to live within our limits because on the Sabbath, in so many different ways, we allow ourselves to be the creature in the presence of our Creator. We touch something more real in ourselves and others than what we are all able produce. We touch our very being in God.

Surely that is what the people around us need most.

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¹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books 1999), p. 5-6.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), p.78.