

Caring for our Souls: Practicing the rhythm of Work and Rest

By Jim Van Meter, D.Min.

As I write this article, I am in the mountains of Colorado in the loft of a barn that has been dedicated as a place for day retreats for people in ministry. It is winter time and the snow has begun to fall. I came here for two reasons: one was to do the work of writing this article, and the other was to seek a place of rest, because my soul has become “restless”. The Christmas holidays were wonderful celebrating the birth of our Lord with friends and family. Lots of wonderful “work” and activities. But it has taken a toll on my soul, because my times of solitude and communion with the Father were crowded out, and I am now finding myself “off center”. I got out of the rhythm of working and resting, and I am finding myself impatient, hurried and easily irritable.

I share this because, isn't this the way it is with us in ministry? We are committed to the Great Commission, and in obedience to the Lord of the harvest, we have dedicated our lives to discipling the nations. In the process of living for and serving our Lord, many times we become pre-occupied with the task of ministry, while neglecting the care of our own soul. We as leaders don't need to be motivated to work harder. However, it is my opinion that we need to be encouraged to learn how to better find rest for our souls. We have forgotten that our Lord, who was sent by the Father with the huge task of redeeming the world, showed us the way to live, a life characterized by a rhythm of work and rest, and ministry and communion with the Father. By becoming so driven by the task, and taking little time to pull back for rest and reflection, we may be in danger of losing our souls! Souls die when there is no time for rest, reflection, retreat, and communion with the Lord.

Why is rest important when the task is so great? Why take time to care for our ourselves, when there is so much to do?

First, God Himself modeled rest by ceasing from His work of creation on the seventh day. God's creation itself demonstrates His intention and desire that we practice a rhythm and life style of rest. It is obvious in the day/night cycle, the seasons (dry and monsoon, winter and summer), the tides of the sea (high and low tides). I had the privilege of living near the ocean for a period of time. One day, I went to the ocean during low tide, when the waves were minimal. I saw scores of seals laying on the rocks. As I started to move toward them to get a photograph, someone warned me not to get too close, so as to not disturb the seals' rest! Even seals need to rest!

Second, rest gives us the opportunity to reflect upon and assess our work, just as God Himself assessed his work of creation, and to ask ourselves if what we are doing is really “good”. God did not finish the work of creation, but entrusted the on-going process to us humans. As we pull back to rest, we are given insight to access if our work is aligned with God's purposes and desires for His creation.

Third, Jesus modeled for us a life style characterized by both serving and resting. Dallas Willard says, “My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live.” (The Spirit of the Disciplines, p. ix) We get a glimpse of Jesus’ rhythm for living from Mark 6. The disciples had been chosen and sent out with authority to preach and minister to the needs of the people. When they returned to Jesus, they reported all the wonderful things that had happened. Because there was so much commotion going on around them, Jesus’ responded by saying, “Come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place and **get some rest** (v. 31)”. After much ministry, Jesus invites us to be with Him and get some rest. This was Jesus’ pattern for living. During times of rest and solitude was where he reflected with the Father in prayer over what had happened in ministry.

Fourth, communion and solitude with the Father brings rest to our soul, which gives us the strength to face the needs of the multitude. “Compassion is the fruit of solitude and the basis of all ministry. The transformation that takes place in solitude manifests itself in compassion.” (Nouwen, The Way of the Heart, p. 33) Compassion is not our natural response to the needs of people, unless we have been alone with the Father, have His heart, and have come to a place of rest in our souls. Jesus could have compassion for the people, because He had been with the Father and he knew he would have more time with the Father very soon (Mark 6:34, 46).

We are better prepared to face the demands of the ministry when we are at rest. I had the privilege of attending the National Pastors Retreat, led by Ruth Haley Barton from the Transforming Center. I was attending this retreat as part of my plan for the intentional care of my own soul. During the retreat, Barton said, “The most important thing we can do is to be extremely tenacious in the care of our own soul...The best thing we can bring is a transformed self, stripped of compulsive behaviors, and then replaced with basic rhythms, rhythms of work and rest, engagement and retreat, solitude and community, Sabbath keeping, and celebration and self-examination.”

Rest prepares the soul to contribute and serve in sacred, rather than destructive ways. As we rest, we are able to assess how those around us are impacted by our lives. Bill Lawrence of Leader Formation International in an email to me said, “Leaders lead best when they are at rest.” When we are at rest, our souls are restored and a restored soul gives birth to joy, passion, kindness and contentment, and those around us are positively impacted.

What are some ways that we can practice the rhythm of work and rest in our missions contexts?

1. Get a good night of sleep. Many times I hear leaders say (usually with pride), “I only need 5-6 hours of sleep. Archibald Hart in his book Adrenalin and Stress (Word Publishers, 1986) says that people were created basically to get 8-9 hours of sleep. When we are in the habit of sleeping much less than that, adrenalin may be interfering with our basic need for sleep, and in the long run this can be

- damaging to our health, because our bodies were not designed to live on adrenalin day after day. Adrenalin is God's tool to help us cope with emergencies, and is not to be used to help us work more and rest less as a life-style.
2. Daily communion and solitude with the Father. Communion with the Father puts our souls at rest, because He reminds us again that He is with us, and it is His strength, not our own, that we are relying on to face the demands of the day. A day without a time of solitude and silence is to subject ourselves to the noise of both the world around us as well as our hearts, missing the opportunity to hear God's still small voice speaking quiet into the storms of the day.
 3. Weekly Sabbaths. For us in ministry and leadership, we are often called upon to minister on Sundays, the traditional day of Sabbath for most Christians. The challenge we face is how to observe the purpose of the Sabbath, which is to cease from work. "The important thing is that a particular day is set aside as the Sabbath, and that it is observed faithfully every seven days so that God can imbue us with his rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing work." (p. xi, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, Marva Dawn, Eerdmans, 1989)
 4. Periodic Personal Retreats. A personal retreat is simply a concentrated and consecrated time to be alone with God for some days. It is that resting place where we remove ourselves from the demands of our life and give the Lord an opportunity to speak and minister to us in an unhurried setting. It can be anywhere, as long as solitude is possible and distractions are minimal. Jane Rubietta's book Resting Place (InterVarsity Press, 2005) is an excellent guide for that retreat time, with quotes and passages of Scripture to meditate on along with reflection questions and hymns to guide one during the time.
 5. Sabbaticals. "Sabbatical years are the biblically based provision for restoration. When the farmer's field is depleted, it is given a sabbatical—after six years of planting and harvesting, it is left alone for a year so that the nutrients can build up in it. When people in ministry are depleted, they are also given a sabbatical—time apart for the recovery of spiritual and creative energies." (The Contemplative Pastor, Eugene Peterson, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 145.) For some unknown reason, people in ministry seldom take sabbaticals. After 35 years in missions ministry, I had never heard of missionaries taking a sabbatical, until a missionary friend shared with me his sabbatical experience. Something stirred in my heart when I heard his story, because I was depleted spiritually and physically, and my walk with God had plateaued. After taking this sabbatical, I never felt such love from God. I fell in love with the Lord all over again. I now know what it is like for my soul to be at rest from having had such an extended time with my loving Father. That rest has become a plumb line, a standard, by which I assess the condition of my soul. When I get off center, I quickly take corrective action.

So what does it mean and how important is the rest and care for our soul? We are not called to the monastic life, or may not have the physical constitution to survive the rigors of the desert (like the Desert Fathers), but "we are still responsible for (the care of our own souls). Precisely because our secular milieu offers us so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own. We have, indeed, to fashion our own "desert" where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing

presence of our Lord. **Without such a desert we will lose our soul, while preaching the gospel to others** (bold mine). But with such a spiritual abode, we will become increasingly conformed to him in whose Name we minister.” (Nouwen, The Way of the Heart, p. 30)

As ministry leaders (or rather as people of God), the intentional care of our souls is the single most important thing we can do. As under-shepherds, we best lead the sheep to places of green pastures and quiet waters, when we have been there. When we haven't practiced rhythms of rest, and don't know the way to places of rest, then the sheep are impacted, because they too don't where those places of rest are that bring restoration to the soul. The Good Shepherd is concerned for our souls, because a restored soul is directly related to the sheep's welfare. The restoration of a depleted soul is much more arduous than the regular attentiveness to the soul's need for a rhythm of work and rest.