

You Say You Don't Have Time for Retreat? Think again!

Ruth Haley Barton

When there is no time to do it, that's when you most need to unclutter the calendar and go apart to pray. When the gridlock in your schedule relentlessly forbids it is the time you most need retreat. That is when your heart beats against the prison walls of your enslavement and says, "Yes, Lord, I want to spend time with you." --Emily Griffin

As I prepared to leave for a recent speaking engagement, I realized how tired I was, how I longed for my own experience of intimacy with God, and how much I needed the very things I would be guiding others into on that day. After twenty five years of life in ministry, I had learned to pay attention to such inner dynamics and knew better than to wait for a better time. I packed a simple bag, made overnight arrangements as I drove to the retreat I was leading, and left right from the speaking engagement to enter into twenty four hours of silent retreat. That choice changed the tenor of the whole week and the whole month that followed. It brought me back from the brink of dangerous exhaustion. It enlivened me with a renewed sense of intimacy with God. And it gave me the opportunity to reconnect with God's call on my life and to discern very specific ways of staying faithful to that call.

One of the most important rhythms of a leader's life is a constant back and forth motion between times when we are engaged in the battle—giving our best energy to taking the next hill—and times of retreat when we are not "on" and we do not have to be any particular way for anyone. Times when we can be in God's presence for our own souls' sake.

A sobering truth about life in leadership is that we can be very busy and look very important, yet be out of touch with that place in the center of our being where we know

who we are in God and what he has called us to do—that place where we are responsive to the voice of God above all others. When this happens we are at the mercy of all manner of external and internal forces, tossed and turned by others’ expectations and our own inner compulsions. This inner emptiness then becomes the source of frenetic activity that is un-tethered from any kind of grounded-ness in God. This is a scary place for a leader to be.

Christian leaders in particular can have a hard time distinguishing between the work we do *for* God and time to *be with* God, resting in him and enjoying his presence. Over time, Scripture can be reduced to a textbook or a tool for ministry rather than an intimate personal communication from God to us. Prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity or a public display of our spiritual prowess.

On retreat we are able to be with God with what is true about us in utter privacy. There we can attend to what is real in our own lives—celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed tears, sit with the questions, feel our anger, attend to our loneliness—and allow God to be with us in those places. These are not primarily times for problem-solving or fixing because not everything can be fixed or solved. These are times to be in God’s presence and to wait for him to accomplish what is most needed within us.

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. On the other hand, the *experience* of God’s unconditional love and presence during those solitary times when we are not doing anything is our greatest human need. Such love then becomes the bed-rock of our being, the foundation of our

true identity and calling. Such rest is deeply restorative, enlivening our leadership and enabling us to bring fresh energy and keen insight to the responsibilities before us.

Setting aside time for spiritual retreat is “one of the most strengthening and reinforcing experiences of our lives. We need to yield. We have to bend. Once we embrace this discipline, we are carried along, often, by a storm of grace. Giving way to the power of this spiritual discipline becomes a step towards freedom, a movement into the wide-open spaces of the sons and daughters of God.”ⁱ

You say you can’t afford to go on retreat just now? I say, you can’t afford not to!

ⁱ Emily Griffin, *Wilderness Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 17.

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