

A Pastor's Sabbath

Judith Jenkins Kohatsu

*When did you last Sabbath? Yes, that day of rest . . . Yesterday? Last week? Last month? Can't remember? Do you remember the Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8)? Remember the tradition: God rested on the seventh day after the work of creating (Genesis 2:2-3)? Do you confuse Sunday and Sabbath? Sunday is when we United Methodists traditionally gather for public worship; Sabbath is when we rest from our labor and intentionally revel in the gifts of God. Note the word is **revel**, not use, catalogue, understand, or cultivate the gifts of God.*

My anxiety level begins to rise when I encounter questions such as these. Here it comes: another clergy self-care tirade. Or worse, it is one of the people I mentor in ministry asking how I practice good self-care (always at a time when I have been most negligent of that aspect of my ministry). We all have heard the statistics about clergy burnout, clergy stress, clergy misconduct; all laid in some way or another at the feet of lack of good self-care. I presume we all have good intentions about self-care—it's just that stuff happens; our plans are derailed so often they become the vaguest figment of our memory. Let's try another tact.

Care of Soul

A colleague and pastoral counselor in my annual conference insistently reminds me that my job, our job, is the care of souls. Ministry is care of souls: church souls, individual souls, corporate and institutional souls, personal souls, sick souls, tired souls, exuberant souls, troubled and troubling souls. Somewhere on that list is *my* soul. Part of my ministry is care of my soul. Truth be told—I care better for other souls when I take good care of my soul also.

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We know the basics: healthy living is essential – nutritionally good meals, adequate sleep, and exercise. Items one and two I usually accomplish, item three most often gets put off to later—as in “after all the work is done . . .” When did you last publicly worship at a service for which you had no leadership responsibilities? Was it a district meeting, annual conference session? How often do you nurture yourself in this manner: weekly, monthly, semiannually, on occasion? For those of us with concerns for inclusive, diverse and vibrant worship, many of these official occasions are more trials than celebrations. For more than a decade I was a ‘constituent’ of a Sunday evening church; I had a church community that I chose. This was a Mennonite congregation just outgrowing their house-church phase. Like other members I took my turn reading scripture, presenting a program,

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bringing refreshments, even leading worship—as a volunteer! I was nurtured, loved, and inquired after. Unfortunately my current appointment makes attendance a logistical problem—and my soul hungers for that experience. Colleagues tell me of visiting Saturday night or early Sunday services at local houses of worship. A wise seminary professor gave a helpful tip when doing this type of “church shopping”: choose a tradition that is liturgically different enough from your own style so that you don’t spend much of the service scribbling notes about ideas you could borrow or making mental notes about what you do better. For me I cherish the times I worship at the Weston Priory (Benedictine). I come hungry for a taste of the Realm of God and the Word and am welcomed into a tradition that both shares and challenges my practices.

Care of Relationships

Many of us are discovering or rediscovering the practice of spiritual companionship. It is relatively easy for me to find partners with whom to parse the latest conference politics, stratagem, or edict. It is more difficult to find a place to question and struggle with my relationship with God. I’ve discovered that trained spiritual directors can both willingly and effectively help me probe that vital relationship. Prayer partners or covenant groups are alternative ways to continue to cultivate a deepening relationship with God. When was the last time you went on retreat (directed or self-guided) that was more than a series of workshops? Such times are ideal for refreshing and opening your soul. Care of my soul demands I do my best to keep my relationship with God in good working order.

Since we are considering companionship, how is your network? Have you seen the cell phone commercial in which one consumer must choose between the phone plan backed by a network of line and service technicians, engineers, customer assistance personnel, even executives or a network which appears equally comparable—until the wind blows and most of that second network is revealed to be mainly populated by cardboard figures? The middle of a personal or pastoral crisis is not the best time to go looking for referrals to a skilled therapist, counselor, supervisor, or even trusted friend or colleague. Many of us check in regularly for “preventive maintenance” on an individual basis or in supervisory groups professionally facilitated. I know this sounds expensive; most medical plans provide some coverage and supervisory groups often are available at “clergy” rates. Networks are buildable—even on minimum salary. For those of us who itinerate, building networks can be a repetitive process, one we practice just when we most need a stable network.

Care of Minds

Caring for our minds is equally important. In some places I was privileged to find an active and stimulating lectionary preaching group. I prefer the ones that are ecumenical and cover the waterfront from conservative to outrageously radical. This at least kept me fresh exegetically. Other times I’ve been part of a clergy reading group—again ecumenical is more fun. We have read feminist theology, spiritual autobiographies, and on

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occasion practical “how-to” books. Sometimes I’ve benefited from a book I would have never bought on my own. I enjoy attending Alban Institute seminars every few years. Not only are the presenters top-notch and the material “hot off the presses,” the participants tend to be interesting characters in their own right. Some seminaries sponsor “pastor as scholar” programs that allow one to audit a course for a mere pittance.

This is a great way to brush up on recent developments or take that course that never quite made it on the schedule. Not only do I read for professional stimulation but also I read for pleasure—sometimes it’s poetry, other times current events, politics. Biographies provide useful food for thought. At the retreat center I frequent, both the dinner and supper meals feature a period of reading aloud. Often I return home and buy the book to find out how it ended (or began). I read for respite and laughs: mysteries—Andrew Greeley and Susan Howatch top my list, and personal commentary—Bill Bryson, John Grogan, and David Sedaris offer good laughing-out-loud writing. Sometimes when I’m preparing for a study or formation group, I note my energy level rising as I peruse possible pieces to share with the group. “So,” I ask myself, “what keeps me from reading just for myself what energizes and stimulates?” My mind needs and deserves nourishment too.

Care of Place

The last piece of care of soul I’ve recently noticed is “care of place.” For me a bit of clutter is creative, more than that is spirit-depressing. Simply taking a brief morning to reorganize my office raises my energy level—and desire to minister. The same goes for the place in which I live—my soul is sapped by massive untidiness. I think this is less about being a “neat freak” and more about allowing the cleaning time to penetrate my soul and psyche. I live in a part of the country where wood stoves augment the oil burner. Stacking (and, for some, splitting) wood is excellent care of soul after a stressful interchange: a workout for my body, a time out for my mind, and my soul has a moment to ponder the belovedness of all the individuals involved in the controversy.

The point is less how I practice clergy self-care and more about when and whether we all do. I am convinced we are eminently gifted with a wide variety of ways to care for our souls—the gifts of God are there. The question is will we avail ourselves of them. I am equally convinced that ultimately each one of us is responsible for the care of our soul—as we care for other souls. Many will aid and support us in this undertaking; no one can do it for us. When others must step in to save our souls, it is an intervention, an intervention that will interrupt and possibly derail our ministries. Now, having cared for our own souls, we can Sabbath.

So, how is it with your soul? When is your next Sabbath? □



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