

A Long Obedience: Self-Care for the Journey of Ministry

By James A. Harnish

The essential thing “in heaven and earth” is... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.

— Friedrich Nietzsche,
Beyond Good and Evil

It's not often that Nietzsche finds his way into Christian ministry, but this word from the atheist philosopher has stuck with me since I first found it in one of Eugene Peterson's books. Ministry is indeed a “long obedience in the same direction.” In our instant gratification culture, it is fundamentally counter-cultural and is inherently a long-term deal. We don't see all the results of our work right away. God can grow a mushroom overnight, but a sequoia takes a little longer. So, how can we nurture our souls, maintain our joy, and sustain our ministry over this long obedience?

In spite of the way some younger preachers in our conference refer to my clergy group as “The Jedi Council,” I still can't believe that I'm an old guy handing out this kind of advice. But after forty years in ministry, here are a few things I'm learning about how to sustain ministry through the long obedience.

Stay healthy. Do whatever it takes to maintain physical and emotional health.

I knew I had recovered from a serious heart condition when a ruthlessly honest lay leader said, “You've lost that cadaverous look.” It is, unfortunately, a look that is all too familiar in far too many congregations. The sad statistics reveal the poor health habits of too many United Methodist preachers. For our own sake, for our congregations' sake, and for God's sake, we need to maintain healthy disciplines of exercise, diet, and Sabbath. They demonstrate our belief that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and are the only way to find the stamina to make it over the long haul.

We need to maintain our psychological and emotional well-being, too. The therapist who helped me through a mid-life crisis is still on call to keep me psychologically healthy along the way. We never outgrow our need for someone to help us deal with our brokenness.

Stay connected. Build healthy and hopeful friendships.

The Wesleyan “connection” should be more focused on relationships than on institutional maintenance. “Connectionalism” without relationships is a valley of dry bones. The beauty of the “connection” is that no United Methodist clergyperson needs to be lonely. The tragedy is that too many are.

Most of the brothers and sisters I've seen crash and burn along the way have tried to make it on their own. Most of the pastors I've seen retire with joy are ones who have shared the journey with others.

I've been a member of the same clergy retreat group for 26 years. We've been through all the ups and downs, joys and sorrows, victories and defeats that ministry can bring...and then some! Some of us would not be in ministry today had it not been for this circle of friends. We intend to stay connected until we are sitting in rocking chairs and telling old stories in Heaven.

The Beatles got it right when they sang, "I get by with a little help from my friends." Charles Wesley described it beautifully in his hymn, "If Death My Friend and Me Divide" (UMH, p. 656). God never intended for us to make this journey alone.

Keep growing. A mature mind is a terrible thing to waste.

Some of the most intellectually alive people I know are also some of the oldest people in my congregation. They've never stopped learning, growing, stretching, and digging deeper. They keep growing spiritually as they live more deeply into the words of scripture and a life of prayer. They keep challenging me to go deeper with them. I want to be just like them if I ever grow up!

Live lightly. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Because I am afflicted with a genetic Germanic seriousness, a part of my own sanctification has been learning what G. K. Chesterton meant when he said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly."

Ministry is a serious business. The tasks are enormously important. The demands and expectations can be exhausting. The trick is to take ministry seriously, but to take ourselves very lightly, to develop a healthy sense of humor, and to find joy and laughter everywhere we can. People who take themselves too seriously can kill both themselves and the church they serve. "A joyful heart is life itself, and rejoicing lengthens one's life span." (Ecclesiasticus 30:22)

Think eschatologically. Live what you believe about the future.

If we really believe that one day "the kingdoms of this earth will become the

kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ," and if we believe that our lives can have a part in its coming, we can live with hope and confidence that never stop pulling us toward the future. Wherever we are along the journey, God has some new work to do in and through our lives.

Admiral Joe Fowler ran the San Francisco ship yard during WWII. In 1954, a young dreamer named Walt Disney asked him to lead the construction of Disneyland in California. After ten years as General Manager of Disneyland, Fowler came to Florida to supervise the construction of Walt Disney World. His favorite words were, "Can do. Can do." Always looking toward the future, he was in his nineties when I asked him the secret of his long, productive life. With his strong voice and exuberant smile, he replied, "I wake up every morning asking what I can do for my fellow man today."

That was the spirit in which he lived and worked. It was the spirit in which he died just shy of his 100th birthday. It's the spirit in which Robert Browning wrote:

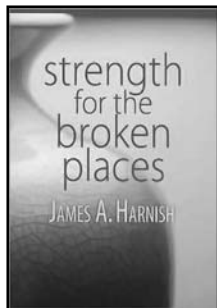
Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last for which the first was made.
Our times are in his hand who saith,
"A whole I planned, youth shows but half;
Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!"

That's what it looks like for ministry to be a long obedience in the same direction.

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