

The Sabbatical Experience

We structure sabbaticals around REST, RECALIBRATION, and RE-ENTRY.

REST, the first component of sabbatical, often comes through retreat. Retreat means pulling back from the fray and demands of work, from the usual responsibilities associated with a person's job description. Retreat means the normal contact with colleagues discussing work matters is deferred. Usually, relational connection is limited to immediate family, a few close friends, and a spiritual coach for helping guide you during the sabbatical time. This means work related emailing, texting, blogging, twittering, and regular phone contact is suspended. Retreat is most often best accomplished if part (if not all) of the time is in a different geographic region from where one is engaged in normal work activities. Geographic separation facilitates the experience of retreating and being apart.

Our experience shows it is often difficult for persons to enter into rest especially at the onset of a sabbatical. Because for many people our jobs are so demanding our minds become addicted to being "busy-brained." Leaders are use to constantly thinking, planning, connecting, strategizing, and anticipating what should be done. When these activities are suspended in terms of the work environment and the focus is turned to the state of one's soul, the early days of a sabbatical are often experienced as frustrating and anxiety-filled. Many find they cannot slow down their busy mind. They are cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually addicted. Sometimes there are medical issues involved that make rest difficult.

To enter into true rest a person must be patient in the first several weeks. Quieting the soul takes time if one has not been in the habit of doing so. A sabbatical guide will help calm the anxiety and frustration of the leader. It is crucial to do so because soul rest is not possible (or at least severely limited) if the "busy-brained syndrome" is not acknowledged and surrendered to the Spirit so that His recalibrating work can begin. So it is critically important to be firm with your soul to stay disengaged. This will feel odd and different; and it is for many. But if, under the help of a guide, one stays with it the soul will begin to relax. The agitation, frustration, even anger which some experience will subside even as one might feel restless in the beginning.

A quieter, slower, more deliberate pace of living is necessary for physical, emotional, and spiritual rest. The rest one enters is formed by the conviction that God is resting and we now can enter His rest. This rest intentionally seeks to cultivate the capacity to be attentive, to be present to what is. God is resting and is present here and now with us. We don't have to engage in herculean spiritual effort to ascend to God. We are to be still and know that God is God and that God is now present to us and for us.

The cultivation of being attentive and present is nurtured by simply taking time to notice, really notice things. Look for beauty in the simple aspects of life that are around you. Pay more attention to the taste and texture of the food you eat. Be aware of the warmth of the air, or the simple beauty of nature. Be present to your family. Observe their way of walking, talking, and, if children are nearby, their way of playing. Be attentive to your own body. Allow yourself to feel your body. Remember we are embodied souls. Our souls are not separate from our bodies; we are integrated beings. Be attentive to the weariness you might feel. If you are tired and can sleep then do so. The rest we enter is not merely mental or emotional rest, but most importantly it is physical rest.

The first several weeks if not months of the sabbatical may involve longer periods of sleep, or more frequent times for naps. Allow your body to relax. A simple exercise is called the body scan relaxation. Lie down and intentionally relax your body focusing on the tips of your toes and progressively moving to the top of your head. Another simple relaxation exercise that fosters attentiveness is paying attention to your breathing. Simply focus on your inhaling and exhaling. Notice the gentle rhythm of your breathing. Follow each breath into your lungs as well as when you exhale. This is the breath of life breathed into you by the Holy Spirit.

Rest of body, mind, and emotions occurs as we give our souls space, slowing down the pace of our daily living. When engaged in activities don't be in a hurry. Give yourself more time for coming and going to various places or planned activities. Take more time for eating, and for leisure conversation after meals. Slow down! Resting doesn't just happen! It is the result of the intentional surrender of quieting the soul.

When one is more rested the RECALIBRATION of the soul begins to take shape (this is the second component of sabbatical). With a rested mind, heart, and body one is able to reflect on one's life in a deeper, more life-giving manner under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Times in Scripture is more extended and entered without the pressures of life. In an attentive, rested soul the Scripture penetrates to the deepest aspects of what is happening. Prayer takes on a different texture as one spends more time listening to God rather than talking to God. One stops the incessant talking and begins to hear the Spirit in a new way.

Time of reflection includes the spiritual discipline of examen, a time to reflect honestly and clearly on how one is living one's life. It is a time of drilling down deep before God. It is a time of reflecting on the quality of one's relationship with the Lord. Simple questions like, "Where am I?" and "What am I doing?" and "Where am I going?" "How do I want to live?" will open the door more widely to the Spirit's recalibrating work. In the time of quiet reflection core issues of the soul become renewed and redeemed by Christ. One sees more clearly the condition of one's relationship with God. One sees the deceptive sins of the flesh. One sees again the redeeming work of Christ. All of this leads to the recalibration of one's soul before God. Being still before God and attending to God's Word in quiet submission renews the soul more and more into the likeness of Christ. One cannot rush this process or make it happen through our volition. One can only be open and available to the sovereign God who works all things to His glory and our good.

As the time of reflection moves along and one enters the latter stages of the sabbatical it is time to notice how the Spirit has been at work to recalibrate the soul. We encourage leaders to think in terms of what they have heard from God about their soul. We encourage them to think in terms of God's invitation for the journey of transformation. Is there an invitation to change? What aspect of your soul is exaggerated? What is diminished? How do you want to live the next decade of your life? What will really matter to you in this time? One's spiritual coach helps process these kinds of questions. A coach helps show where the exaggerations and diminishments caused by sin need to be changed. A coach helps clarify God's invitation and what will you have to relinquish and surrender to be more free and centered in the will of God.

The key of recalibration centers on how one enters and engages relationally with God, others, and one's own soul. Loving God with all one's heart and one's neighbor means being more free from the compulsions that so often drive one's soul. All of us must be set free by Scripture and Spirit to live freely the abundant life that Jesus promised. At the end of the sabbatical the critical question is, "What did this time mean for my relationships?"

As the sabbatical comes to an end one must give attention to how to RE-ENTER (the third component of sabbatical). Some forget to remember they have been away and others have most likely had additional responsibilities while they were away. Re-enter with an attentive attitude. Listen before making any changes to what has been decided in your absence. If you are a strategic leader, be committed to affirm, encourage, and thank those who have made your sabbatical possible. The discussions of re-entry also involve noting, in a specific way, how one's recalibrated soul will engage work in the future. This often includes dealing with issues of control, trust, self-worth, and delegation.

Once having re-entered continue to engage with your spiritual coach on a monthly basis to attend to what you are experiencing as you re-enter. Be patient with the transition. Avoid simply going back to old patterns. Notice the source of primary temptations. Continue to be attentive, to listen, to reflect. Give yourself permission to recalibrate some of the decisions you made while on sabbatical. Make your walk with the Lord realistic, holistic, and practical.