

A Day in the Redwood Forest

Late this summer, my wife and I visited California for the first time. A highlight of our trip was a brief stop at a state park in the heart of a redwood forest. One of the most impressive aspects of this place, apart from the awesome trees themselves, is its silence—a palpable silence, thick as gravy.

Silence today is most notable for its rarity. It is virtually impossible to escape the hum of electronics or air conditioners; the sound of traffic, no matter how distant; the whirring—or banging—of household appliances; the inscrutable throbbing of music—so-called, devoid of any beauty, logic or redeeming qualities; the sounds of conversation or machinery; the *whoosh* of jets overhead.



Not only is it difficult to escape the sounds of everyday life, but on the rare occasions when one can do so, the experience can be disconcerting. Alone with one's heartbeat, one gets the sense that some unspeakable catastrophe has just occurred—or is about to. We're not used to life without sound of some kind. Noise is a comfort to us, a reassurance that life goes on and we're still part of it.

Silence for the spirit is equally rare. It is not only the physical silence we lack, but also the time it takes to be silent. Ministry has become so complex, our schedules so full, our responsibilities so pressing that we fail to grasp the importance of scheduled silence for

the spirit. William Penn, in the preface to his treatise, *Some Fruits of Solitude*, wrote,

“There is nothing of which we are apt to be so lavish as of Time, and about which we ought to be more solicitous; since without it we can do nothing in the World. Time is what we want most, but what, alas! we use worst; and for which God will certainly most strictly reckon with us, when Time shall be no more.”

While we cannot advocate Quaker theology nor swallow all of the fruits Penn's solitude produced, we ought to heed his warning about our use of time and make certain we include in our spirits' itineraries regular visits to the redwood forest.

The Very Idea

Several years ago, a guest speaker at one of our annual field conferences in Latin America told us how spiritual retreats had revolutionized both his own life and his church. Once every month, he and every member of his pastoral staff (there were six men in all) would schedule a day of spiritual retreat. This was not vacation time, and each man was accountable for how he used this day. The criteria were as follows:

1. Absolute solitude with as little noise and distraction as possible
2. A written agenda of activities (prayer, reading, study, writing, memorization, meditation, etc.) submitted to the pastor before the retreat
3. A verbal report to the rest of the pastoral staff at the first meeting after the retreat

This pastor had the use of a mountain cabin owned by a family in the church. On his retreat days, his family and staff knew where he was but also knew that he was not to be disturbed except in cases of extreme urgency.

Biting the Bullet

I have wanted to make a spiritual retreat part of my monthly schedule ever since that conference, but the months and years slipped away until, three years later, I still had not done so. I had the permission of our General Director to use “company time” for this purpose; but, as Penn observed, my perception of my priorities did not prompt me to take the time—a regrettable state of affairs.

Finally, in mid-September of this year, I bit the bullet. I called some new friends who have a wonderful apartment below their home that they use to serve people in ministry. My wife and I had spent a couple of delightful days there earlier this summer, and our friends had told me I was welcome to come over any day to be alone for this purpose.

The venue settled, I made my plans. I decided to fast, though for no other reason than that I wanted to clean out my system and didn’t want to take the time to prepare food. During my senior year of college I’d drunk only spring water every Thursday, and the physical and mental benefits far outweighed the tedium, foul breath and ferocious hunger. So I trundled off with my gallon of filtered water and the ridiculous notion that I could, by eating nothing, better understand the plight of so many millions of people around the world who would also go without food that day—ridiculous because I was sitting in a posh apartment drinking pure water from a clean glass whenever I wanted it.

I’d planned to spend time reading my Bible and catching up on missed pages in my *Life Journal*, the study guide I’m using in my personal devotions this year. (I can highly recommend this tool, which is available at www.eNewhope.org.) My frequent travel has prevented me—no, has served as an excuse—from being as regular in keeping my journal as I’d hoped. One of the ironies of this year has been that up until April I had not missed a single day of either reading or writing, usually spending my first waking hour with my Bible, my journal and a cup of coffee. What got me off schedule was a three-day trip to see, of all things, the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit in Mobile, Alabama, and I was never able to make up for the lost time. The blank spaces in my journal

scream, “Sluggard!” at me as I leaf through the book in search of the current day’s page.

With the time left over, I wanted to:

1. Finish a short book on missions
2. Re-order my prayer list
3. Pray for all the missionaries I serve
4. Work on an article I’m writing for a magazine
5. Spend time in my memorization of James, which has been erratic of late

All good intentions, but a sad delusion. Though I was able to avoid being distracted by the beauty on the other side of the patio door—a lovely English garden, complete with a fountain and frequented by scores of birds and butterflies, as well as a wooded area surrounding a small waterfall—I grossly overestimated the amount I could accomplish. (This is my perennial error, always followed by a self-inflicted brow-beating for being so unproductive. The classic vice of a textbook perfectionist.)

Bran Muffin for the Soul

I don’t know how long I prayed—quite a while—but I spent nearly the entire time in the Scriptures and in my journal. The passages I read and wrote about seemed to be hand-picked by the Holy Spirit for this very day of solitude.

I enjoy bran muffins, especially when they’re right out of the oven, crunchy on top, drenched with butter and honey and bursting with raisins. But we all know what bran muffins are really for, don’t we? Their sole purpose is to promote...well, to promote the well-being of the digestive machinery. I had intended this day to be a sort of bran muffin for my soul, a purgative with appeal, you might say.

If you’ll forgive the analogy, the bran muffin morphed into a colonoscopy. Just as there is a considerable disparity between high fiber and fiber optics, there was a huge difference between what I’d planned and what I experienced. Silence, solitude and Scripture

are not a good combination unless one is prepared to take a painful, terrifying look inside and see just how petty, self-absorbed, shallow and foolish one really is. God challenged and convicted me as I read passages of Scripture dealing with honesty with God, abominations (I was prompted to do a word study on “abomination,” which I will do on my next retreat, perhaps), prayer, and the body as God’s temple.

As I re-read Genesis 3 and contemplated the discipline of prayer, I asked myself, “Why don’t we pray as we should?” I wonder if it is because, as Adam and Eve, we feel estranged from God by the guilt of our sin and therefore prefer to avoid contact with Him. Then, as Adam, we blame other people or circumstances for our sin, as well as that perceived estrangement, while denying that we are actually avoiding the Lord.

As I read the Words of Christ in John 2, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” I made the connection for the first time that just as Jesus’ body was the temple of God, for that reason my body—in microcosm of the Body of Christ—is also His temple. Just as His body was raised, so my body will be raised. I wrote in my journal, “The Person of Christ—His physical, earthly life—beautifully illustrates the triunity of God, as God the Father was in Him (John 17.21,23,26) and the implication of Paul (1 Cor 6.18) and John is that the Holy Spirit was in Him, too. So John is not simply using Christ’s body as a metaphor of the temple, but stating that His body *was* the temple—the very residence of the triune God (Isa 6.1-3).”

“...Time Is What We Want Most...”

I was shocked to see that my day was over so shortly after it had begun. Most of the materials I had brought remained untouched—except the water, of which not a filtered drop remained. After a short time of prayer with my friend Dave, I went home in a sober mood, craving something to chew but looking forward to my spirit’s next visit to the redwood forest.

I write this between visits to Canada and Honduras, and I wonder when that next visit will be. I know I can’t afford to miss an

opportunity to spend a day of solitude with the Lord, and as painful as the experience was, I know I need to make this a regular part of my monthly schedule. And it wasn’t all pain—I spent time rejoicing about what the Lord has accomplished in my family, about victories on the fields I serve, and about His own goodness and mercy which He lavishes on me so bountifully. I was reminded that God’s grace is both unbounded and un-relenting, and He pursues the ones He loves until they have to stop and catch their breath, as it were, their spirits gasping and heaving like the chest of a spent runner leaning against a tree and sucking for air.

I highly recommend a spiritual retreat. Just do it, and don’t wait three years, as I did. Find a place where you can regularly be alone with God, and set aside a day for reading, prayer, meditation, writing or whatever you feel you need to do in this time. Plan your day ahead of time, and make yourself accountable to someone for what you accomplish. Though the temptation is to take the Walden Pond approach and spend the day in the woods, for me that would be a huge distraction. Though naturalism for a Christian is a form of worship (it is not fleshly distraction to be awed and enthralled by what our Creator has given us to enjoy), that was not my purpose, and I can sufficiently indulge my appetite for natural wonders when I’m hiking or fishing or canoeing.

Be sure to let your wife and staff know where you are, but ask them not to disturb you. Report to someone about what you learn, and teach someone else the lessons God teaches you. And take along some muffins.

Rob Heijermans, BMW Area Director