

Sabbatical Stories

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I went on sabbatical knowing three things 1) I was exhausted, 2) I didn't know how to stop, and 3) I wanted to see with new eyes. In preparation for my sabbatical I made a plan that I thought would please people, I would take two courses at the University of Cincinnati. That seemed to somewhat justify my sabbatical.

For my own sanity I chose to audit them. The last thing I need to be doing is writing graded papers on sabbatical. My job requires that I write three precise ten-paged double spaced papers with a thesis statement, footnotes, and coherent introductions and conclusions three times a month, and the receiving line is, sadly, its own form of grading. Although my classes and professors were excellent, "Introduction to Judaism" and "Arabic Women Novelists," the least valuable thing I did on sabbatical was taking classes.

The first thing I did on sabbatical was sleep. I slept so much I wondered if I had a problem, or maybe multiple problems. If I slept six hours at night, I took a three-hour nap the next day. If I slept ten hours a night, I took a three-hour nap the next day. Seven weeks into my sabbatical, this is what I was still doing. In my waking hours I thought, "I am sleeping my sabbatical away!" I mention this because I am convinced that most of us, particularly those of us working, or raising kids, or struggling with health problems, or caring for others, are a lot more tired than we know. For seven weeks I had no new thoughts, and if I did, I didn't recognize them. When you are tired you don't have anything. My pastoral advice, rest more, do everything else less. I should also mention that for the first seven weeks of my sabbatical my back hurt all the time. It seemed to dislocate on a bi-weekly basis.

Technically, my sabbatical began on March 1. Psychically it began on April 17. Remember how I didn't know how to stop? Well, at the beginning of my sabbatical I periodically came by the church. My parents came to visit; I showed my father the renovation. I needed a book for personal purposes, my library is here, so I came when no one was here and got it. On April 17 divine intervention conspired to assist me and end this pathology.

That day I came to get two books from my library. I needed them for personal reading. I didn't want to wait to get them from the library, they were right here. I came at a quiet time of day so no one knew. I went to my office door, and my key would not work. Not only my key wouldn't work, but also the office key, the janitor key, the spare key, would not work. There was no key that would open my office door. I most definitely took this as a sign, left, and did not come back for the remainder of my sabbatical.

Pastoral note, it is hard to stop working, not because we love the challenge, the time, and achievement, and the stress, but because most of us, including me, don't know

who we are when we are not working. Over time our work becomes our identity. Think about this. Your work as a teacher, nurse, parent, docent, this becomes how you organize your day, who you think you are, what makes you special and indispensable.

At times our work shields us from our problems “Sorry honey, I have to work late tonight. There is a special report that needs to go out tomorrow (and I don’t know what to talk about when we are together/I can’t talk to our daughter/I don’t want to take that call from my father).” Work is one important part of us, but it is not who we are and it is not how our worth is measured. It was very good for this minister to get away from the daily importance and commentary of my work so that I could ask “Who am I when I am not a minister, and am I special all on my own?” These are questions everyone could benefit from asking and honestly answering.

April 17th was a watershed. That weekend my family took a trip to the Smoky Mountains. Very slowly my back started to improve. Peter, Adam, and I were getting settled in our new house, and I started to take my sabbatical by the reins, meaning, I did what I wanted, when I wanted.

To appreciate this you must understand another one of my pathologies, I am pathologically scheduled and responsible, which stems from some old fears. During my undergraduate years I never skipped class, never went on a road trip, never went abroad, never bought a fake ID, never bought cigarettes, never hitchhiked, and never went to a frat party. Plus (so embarrassing) I always made the honor roll and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. I have improved over time, but I was about to turn 40 this summer, so more dramatic improvements were required.

Before I went on sabbatical some of you gave me the gift of music. Thank you. You opened a world to me. I read two books and saw two movies on my entire sabbatical, but I sampled a lot of music, rock music. I learned to buy and download music, and now I make CD’s for myself all the time (and for other people, whether they want them or not). I decided that everyone has a soundtrack to their lives and it changes regularly. Which leads me to the day in May I was skipping class again, smoking cigarettes in my car with a friend, and listening to Led Zeppelin II at extraordinary hearing loss volumes, thinking “I know they were not good men on tour, but this album completely rocks!” I spent a lot of my sabbatical with music, Led Zeppelin (thanks to my oldest sister), Placebo (thank you Winston Krause for this introduction), The Who, Garbage, the Clash, the Rolling Stones, Arctic Monkeys, Kanye West, and this continues. On a weekly basis I take new music out of the library. The less I know about it the better. I love it. It is a whole new world and there is so much music out there. Pastoral note, try something new. You are more stuck in a rut than you know.

Sometime in the spring I started to listen to stories. I didn’t have room for them in the first two months, but gradually they came on. I would find myself with no place in particular to go and someone to listen to, so I would stop and listen wherever I was. Some people can talk a dog off a meat truck, I can listen to almost anyone, regardless of age, color, class, language barrier (really) and I like it. Strangely, completely unplanned, this became the best, most transformative part of my sabbatical, listening to the stories of strangers.

It began with a young woman in my Arabic Women Novelists class who works the night shift at a hotel six nights a week, goes to class full time the next morning, sleeps for a few hours in the afternoon, and goes back to work the next evening. What a

superhero. Then there were the two women in my Judaic Studies class who were trying to figure out what to do with their lives. Plus there was a woman in that class who wore army boots, really short shorts that said “Lost Kitty” on the back and various camisoles. I never got to talk to her, but I figure she had one heck of a story, whether she knows it or not. Then there was the man who dropped off the dumpster. His wife’s dog bit his baby. He said his anti-anxiety meds weren’t working so well and I said, “You think?” Good thing we both laughed. He was pretty jumpy.

I should mention the dumpster was dropped off because we gutted and redesigned the kitchen in our new house. Or rather I redesigned it, Earl and Robert, of HGC construction, the same two gentlemen who spent six months here five days a week redoing our building, did my kitchen on the side. You have never seen two men work so hard or well. My kitchen countertop (via Home Depot) was a month late, I haven’t had a kitchen sink in three months, and the glass man hasn’t installed my new window in four months, but Earl and Robert were on time and on budget.

Doing construction though, brought me into a whole new genre of people via Home Depot. I spent half an hour talking to a teenager there about anger management. I explained to him that when he loses his temper, just lets it blow, he gives his power away. This stunned him as he saw the immediate truth of what I was saying. He was obviously a great kid who is still trying to overcome his wretched start on life. My hat is off to the couple, his cousins, already parents, who stepped forward to parent him. They are all doing great things, really moving, simple, hard, great things, by just learning about real love and sticking together.

Then there were my forays to the art museum with small children. It started when I went to an exhibit at the Taft Museum. When I went to pick up Adam from day care that day he asked me what I did and I told him I went to the art museum, then he wanted to go. So a week later, we went to the Art Museum in Eden Park.

I now love going to the art museum with small children. You go to a couple of rooms, spend less than 45 minutes, go out for chocolate at the end and in the middle you ask them “What do you see?” I tell them nothing about the art, what period we are in, or who did the painting. I let them pick the room and the art to look at and then I ask, “What do you see?” We wouldn’t need social or art critics if we just took children to the art museum and asked them what they see. They see everything, sometimes more directly. Sometime in June I took four people to the art museum, a three year old boy, two seven year old girls, and an older woman from Germany who spoke no English (and I speak no German). Same experience. We had a great time. Pastoral note, talk less and listen more. You’ll get closer to your One story that way.

By the springtime I had embraced spontaneity as the way of truth for my overly scheduled and responsible self. If a friend suggested we go to a restaurant, vintage clothing store, or concert, I said “Yes,” whether I wanted to go or not. I volunteered for the Flying Pig marathon just because I never see it (remember, I work on Sunday). And I stopped doing my routine. I gave up on the gym, on reading lists, on any list. And I was never bored, never.

Sometimes I measured my time in weekend opportunities, the things I don’t normally get to do because I work. Before I left Tom Kahle suggested I travel, and I took his advice. As a family we went to the Smokey Mountains, Boston, and Pittsburgh. My

son is at that glorious age when he thinks a picnic lunch at a rest stop is an adventure. What a gift!

On Mother's Day (a day I always work) I learned how to make Indian food. On the Saturday before Father's Day (when I am often writing a sermon) I was at a Reds game with Peter and Adam. I wondered who was cuter, Peter or Adam, both sitting there so expectantly with their gloves on. Adam's legs hung over the chair. Peter dreamt "I am going to catch that next home run," and I thought "God, I hope the next home run doesn't crush Adam on the head, his head is so small and his life so new."

While I was at the game I talked to a rabid White Sox fan wearing a shirt that read "I would rather my sister was a (something really bad I can't say in church) than a Cubs fan." Turns out this young, enormous, weight lifter is a very sensitive person. We bonded by talking about crying when our respective teams (Red Sox, White Sox) won the World Series after a shared eight-decade drought. Now I know more about the White Sox/Cubs rivalry – class, cross-town cultures, losing and winning. Pastoral note – get out of your routine; you are more stuck than you know.

This summer I also turned 40. Thank you for all of your cards. And I don't mind if you know my age. I love being 40. Much better than 20 or 30. I bought my shoes for turning 40 when I was 38 (really). I ate my way through this birthday, terrifying waiters and maitre d's in the best restaurants across town by asking them how old they thought I was. Really, for two weeks I did this. The waiters, all men, were terrified. I would say "Come on, be a real man. Don't lie. Tell me the truth. How old do you think I am?" I was terrible. They were all shocked by my age so I had to pull out my driver's license to prove it, multiple times. I had the time of my life.

It's just not over in this big world, no matter my age or your age. Pastoral advice, don't accept "over." Life is full of sacrifice. Make no mistake. I had many times to consider this intimate truth as I listened to stories during my sabbatical. Life is full of sacrifice and the Buddhists got it right with the First Noble Truth "Life is full of suffering." And life keeps going and there is another day, and there really isn't a beginning or an ending. As Rachel Naomi Remen writes

Until we stop ourselves or, more often, have been stopped, we hope to put certain of life's events "behind us" and get on with our living. After we stop we see that certain of life's issues will be with us for as long as we live. We will pass through them again and again, each time with a new story, each time with a greater understanding, until they become indistinguishable from our blessings and our wisdom. It's the way life teaches us how to live . . . Our true identity, who we are, why we are here, what sustains us, is in this story. The stories at every kitchen table are about the same things, stories of owning, having and losing, stories of sex, of power, of pain, of wounding, of courage, hope, and healing, of loneliness and the end of loneliness. Stories about God. In telling them, we are telling each other the human story.¹

Thanks to each and every one of you who sent me on sabbatical to listen to stories so that I could hear my own story in a new way with greater understanding, for letting me learn how to live again. I promise to share my education with you since few of us will

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal* (1996), xxvi-xxvii.

have the opportunity for a sabbatical. But if you do have the opportunity, take it. Really, take it. I had the time of my life. And I did just fine cut free from my ministerial identity, and yes there are ruts to overcome and new things to see and learn, many of them right next to (or inside of) you.

At the end of August I am going to California to see one of my good friends. She is younger than me, 37, successfully recovering from breast cancer, has three children, a husband, a career, and now a double mastectomy and breast implants that were put in upside down and have to be taken out and put back in right side up, and she laughs about this when she is not crying. It's one crazy world out there and it won't make one bit of sense if we don't take the time to listen to stories so we can get to the heart of the matter, your matter, my matter, what really matters. Don't settle for anything less. It's a great story.