

## **Sabbatical: Continuing Growth and Development**

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October 30 – three weeks from now – will be the last service I will be leading here until next April. November 1 the sabbatical officially begins, and I will return to my work with you on April 1. In a few minutes I'll get to some specific description of my plans for my five months away from you. But first I'd like to make some general remarks about the reason for sabbaticals; what purpose they serve and what benefits they are expected to provide.

Ministry is one of the most rewarding jobs I can imagine. Indeed, I wouldn't be in it if I didn't get something from it. But at the same time ministry can be draining – because of the intensity of its joys and sorrows, its intellectual and emotional demands, and its hours, which at times are hard to control. The draining effect creeps up slowly over the years.

Sometimes I attribute the fatigue and the difficulty in staying “up” to the fact that I'm getting older. And I suppose that is part of it. But as the sermons get harder to write, as the prospect of more meetings brings on a sense of dread, as the alarm clock seems to ring earlier each morning – I can't help thinking that some serious recharging time is in order. A time for some real rest.

And real rest requires really letting go. Some people are better at letting go than others. I sometimes think I'm pretty good at letting go and leaving the job behind when I go home, or go about my other business. But with ministry, as with parenting, there's really no going home from work. Even when we go home with nothing to do, we carry in our hearts a lot of what has been going on. There's always something or someone to think about. That's why ministry is never boring, but it's also why it's hard to ever really let go.

With that in mind, let me tell you how I plan to spend the first several days of my sabbatical – letting go and really resting. As I began planning, I arranged a bunch of trips out of town for various short courses and conferences. And all the time, I had in the back of my mind this idea that I would start and end my sabbatical with several days of personal, private retreat. This would provide an opportunity to decompress – to get away from all the normal stimulation of everyday life. To make a clean break and transition to a different set of routines.

I had literature from a couple of different facilities that offered such opportunities. But as the time was getting near, for some reason I had still not made any arrangements. And then, about a week and a half ago, seemingly out of the blue, I got a call from a member of this congregation. He asked if I would have any use for a cabin on a mountainside during my sabbatical. I took this as a sign, and immediately said “Yes, tell me more.”

As he described it, it sounded ideal. And so last weekend I visited the cabin, and it looked ideal as well. A good solid cabin, with no electricity or running water, but with a fireplace and a wood-burning cook stove, and a spring-fed creek running nearby, and 90 acres of land to explore. So that will be the site of my transition to and from a life quite different than I have led for the past five years.

But let me assure you that rest, relaxation, and outdoor adventure will be only one small piece of my time away. I intend to pursue adventures of the mind, heart and spirit as well, as I seek to continue my growth and development, both as a person and as a minister. As my plans have taken shape, they have settled into two major themes. The biggest piece of my work, in between trips, will focus on spiritual memoirs. That will mean both reading and writing. I will start by reading a number of spiritual memoirs by others, as well as some works on the creative process of writing.

Then I will write some of my own spiritual memoirs, attempting to capture some of the life lessons that I've accumulated along the way. And I also hope to build on my experience leading classes in writing spiritual autobiography, to develop a somewhat different process for leading others through the experience of reflecting on significant life events and extracting some sense and meaning from them.

As I started recalling incidents in my life that had had a significant impact on me, I noticed that most of them had something to do with either water or fire. As I let my mind wander, there was a moment when I thought: "Hmm, water and fire; I wonder where earth and air might fit in. My initial reaction to that thought was that they probably didn't fit in at all. But then as I continued to reflect, other incidents began coming back to me that did indeed relate to air and earth. And so I came up with the idea of using the four elements: earth, water, fire, air – not so much as a theme for my memoirs as an organizing principle. A framework upon which to hang them. And so I will play with that. And I will try to develop some exercises to help others identify some theme or organizing principle for *their* significant life experiences, which I hope will help them dredge up even more material than they thought they had to work with. I hope some of you will be my guinea pigs if I manage to pull it off.

So spiritual memoir writing will be one major theme for my sabbatical. The other will be a continuing exploration of the relationship and interaction between spirituality on the one hand, and politics or social activism on the other. This has always been an area of interest for me. And you may remember that when I arrived here five years ago, one of the four goals we set for ourselves during my ministerial start-up weekend was to work on the integration of spirituality and social action.

Three of my short forays out into the world will address this theme directly. First, in January, is a three-day conference in Washington, DC called “Politics and Spirituality: Seeking a Public Integrity,” sponsored by *Sojourners* magazine and the Center for Action and Contemplation. Part of its description says: “We sense that the country is hungry to replace a politics of blame and fear with a politics of solutions and hope. To that end, we want to explore, in the heart of our nation’s capital, the vital connection between spirituality and politics.”

Then in February, I will attend a conference on Spiritual Activism, again in Washington, DC, sponsored by a newly emerging Network of Spiritual Progressives. Let me read a part of their self-description:

We are creating an interfaith, grass-roots Network of Spiritual Progressives. The Network will:

1. Challenge the misuse of God and religion by the Religious Right – and champion a progressive spiritual politics
2. Challenge the anti-spiritual and religio-phobic tendencies in some sections of liberal and progressive culture
3. Challenge the American ethos of selfishness and materialism by championing a New Bottom Line for American society – so that institutions get judged efficient, rational or productive not only to the extent that they maximize money and power, but also to the extent that they maximize love, caring, kindness, generosity, ethical/ecological sensitivity and awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe.

We will defend separation of Church and State, but will insist on a role for spiritual values like love and caring in the public sphere. We will defend gays and lesbians, choice, and contraception. . .

We will explore areas of potential cooperation between science and spirit. . .

We seek to forge a spiritual politics . . . recognizing the importance of diversity and acknowledging that there is no one correct path to spiritual truth.

Sounds like my kind of people. In fact, both of these conferences are a part of what I see as a vital and growing movement to forge a religious left to counter

the religious right. These efforts also fit well with the ideas I spoke about a couple weeks ago regarding moral values for a pluralistic society.

In between those two conferences, I will be taking a course at Pendle Hill, a Quaker Study and Retreat center near Philadelphia, that will bring a more personal focus to this topic. It's called "Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Malcolm X: The Quest for Personal and Social Transformation." The course will explore the link that those three prominent activists saw between personal and social transformation, and will test the hypothesis that our capacity to bring about social change is tied to our ability to change ourselves.

In addition to those experiences, I'll be attending two other short courses at Pendle Hill: "Cultivating the Great Action of Generosity," which is designed to deepen understanding and practice of generosity through various spiritual practices of mindfulness; and "Restoration," a self-care experience that will focus on good ways to rest the body and to avoid future exhaustion and despair. I'm ready for that one right now.

I'm excited about all of these opportunities. I don't know exactly what I will come away with, but I do expect there to be much food for thought and reflection, and I look forward to sharing new learning, insights, and inspiration with you when I return.

And so that you won't forget about me, I promise to write an occasional note for the newsletter, chronicling some bits of my adventures. I also promise that, despite my physical absence from you, you will never be too far from my consciousness. I will miss you, and I will send positive thoughts your way on a regular basis.

And one final thought I want to express is my deep gratitude for this chance to shift gears and explore some things in more depth than there seems to be time for amidst the usual responsibilities of ministry. Thank you, thank you, thank you.