

Dog Days: Spiritual Practice for Tired Times

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Imagine you're washing the dishes.
It's the end of the day, the end of the *night* in fact,
and you are tired, *dog-tired*.
You don't really want to wash the dishes, but they've got to be done.
You could always put them off until tomorrow,
but then they'd still be there in the morning,
all yucky, encrusted, and dirty.
You decide it's better to crank out this one last chore
and then you can go put up your feet and relax, o blessed be!
You scrub the plates and the forks
and the glasses
and the pots.
Your energy's fading,
but with one final burst of productivity
you scrub the crud off the last pot in the sink,
you rinse it off and put it in the drainer,
you wring out the sponge
and peel off the gloves
and sigh with satisfaction and release.
You turn to go into the living room, free at last.

That's when you see it.
Your heart sinks:
another dirty pot, still on the counter.

You know, that's the image I get
when I think of what this congregation is facing right now.
Here at church, summer's usually a low-key time.
From September to the beginning of June,

we're on task. We've got events happening, classes, programs,
and it's all good, but it gets tiring,
especially for all our volunteer leaders.
By the end of May, we are yearning for a break!
Summer comes, and it's time to rest,
lovely time to rest and recharge and relax.

Only this year, it's not so restful.
All of a sudden there's a pretty big pot in the sink,
demanding your attention.
Searching for a new minister isn't the end of the world,
and it's not the only challenge you're facing,
but it is a big deal.
And I just want to say,
if I were you, I would feel pretty tired right now!
This is a hard time to have to face the big questions that come up:
what's next? What will your future look like?
For our leaders, it's a hard time to have to *put in* the time
and do all the tasks
and get everything organized
and do what needs to be done.

This is your work to do.
No one can do it for you, and it has to be done,
not only for yourselves,
but for everyone in this congregation
and everyone who is not yet a part of it
and all the people who will be touched
by your ongoing ministry in this community.
You know this already.

But I hope you will find a way
to do what needs to be done
with some measure of grace and kindness toward yourself.
In fact, I hope you will find ways to make this time

a blessing for yourselves,
a time of deepened insight
into what you need,
what others need,
what the world needs.

Think of the story of Jacob,
wrestling a blessing out of the stranger who accosts him.¹
This was our Story for All Ages today.
You remember Jacob wasn't looking for a fight.
That night he was taking time out to be alone and quiet
and prepare for the day to come.
He gave himself time to rest and be still
and think and wait,
time for quiet, restorative spiritual practice.

But that's not what happens!
Here's Jacob minding his own business,
maybe meditating by the campfire.
And what happens? A strange guy shows up
and tackles him and wrestles with him all night long.
Not relaxing,
not restful.
Two guys trying to pound each other into the ground!
They wrestle all night.
When the sun comes up,
the stranger dislocates Jacob's hip, and you *know* that has to hurt.
It hurts like a bear.
But Jacob doesn't let go.
The stranger says, "Let me go!"
But Jacob says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."
*I will not let you go
unless you bless me.*

¹ Genesis 32:24–31.

And so, perhaps, with you.
In this moment, you've gotten tackled
with an unexpected, huge challenge.
You've got to wrestle with it.
There's no other way.
But can you wrestle a blessing from it?

In all those moments in our lives,
when our energy is fading
and our to-do list is long
and people are depending on us,
can we grab ourselves a blessing?
Can we do what we need to do
and seize the time we need to restore ourselves
so we can recommit to service in ways that are joyful?
This is not easy, but it can be done.
This is how I would do it.
You'll have your ways—we can learn from each other.
This is what works for me:
When you are worn out and tired,
as soon as you can possibly take a break,
do it. Take a break.
Find a quiet place. And in that moment,
sit quietly, look inside, and ask yourself,
what is at the heart of the exhaustion I'm feeling?
What is at the heart of this?

See what comes up for you.
Maybe it's just tiredness pure and simple.
Your body's tired, your mind's tired,
you've got that dry, twitchy feeling on your eyeballs
that means you just need to rest.
If that's the case, you just have to take a break and rest.
Unless there is a life-or-death situation in front of you,
you have to step off the treadmill and rest.

Even the busiest people among us need a break
from being responsible and productive,
no matter how much we love what we're doing.
We need time off to rest,
time to rest, daydream, read, watch TV,
sit in front of a fan and cool off.
We all need time where we are not in charge
and the weight of the world is not on our shoulders.
Today's reading says it:
"constant activity [destroys] our connection...
to 'the Divine mystery at the heart of all that is'..."²
We need rest.
We need fallow time.

Now, you might say, "I can't do that!
People depend on me. I can't take a break."
But could you maybe take a break if you got some help?
Remember, none of us is in this life alone, not here, anyway.
Figure out what kind of help would let you take a break.
Make a plan.
Then ask for help.
And tell the people depending on you what you're doing.
Reassure them you'll be back.
Do whatever you need to make it happen,
but make it happen. Give yourself time to rest.

One summer a friend of mine found herself
unexpectedly caring for a very sick relative.
When her father-in-law had a stroke,
he was temporarily disabled.
He couldn't be by himself right away.
But he was a widower.
He needed someone to help him with meals
and drive him to doctor's appointments

² Kay Lynn Northcutt, *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction* (Fortress Press, 2009), p. 104.

and just be there.

It made sense for my friend to be that person.

She works at home; her spouse doesn't have that luxury.

So her father-in-law came to stay with them.

Overnight she became a full-time caregiver.

And she was shocked at how exhausting it was.

It wasn't the amount of work so much

as the sudden and heavy weight of responsibility

for a vulnerable, fragile person

who was understandably freaked out and depressed

about what had happened to him.

She loved her father-in-law,

but after a week of being on call 24/7,

she was ready to cry or scream or punch something,

or all of the above!

She needed a break, desperately.

She sat down one night with her spouse

and said, I just can't do this on my own any more.

I need your help.

I can't do this alone.

Her partner got it.

That night they scheduled some blocks of time

when her partner could take over

and she could just relax and get back to all the regular stuff of life.

She said later, "In that moment I just felt the weight lift.

I could smile again.

I could reconnect with my love for my family.

It was still hard, but now I could breathe.

I knew it would be OK."

And it was.

If that story sounds familiar—

if you are truly exhausted, so tired you want to weep—

you need to help yourself.

Make a plan that will let you take a break.
Ask for help.
Communicate and communicate and communicate some more.
Reassure people you'll be back.
Here I'm thinking especially of our leaders here at church.
You all have been faced with important work you weren't expecting.
If you need to take a break, you need to find ways to do that.
Just communicate. Let everybody know what's going on.
Because they want to support you.
They know you are carrying a lot of responsibility right now.
With just a little care for their need to know
what's going on, what the plan is,
you can take care of yourselves too.
Because we all need time to rest.
We all need time for our spirit to be fed.

It's so ironic, but in this culture
we really have to seize our times of rest.
We have to wrestle and struggle to block out those times
of rest and peace and non-struggle.
We all have to grab that blessing in our lives.
And when you do, you can unclench and unwind
and get back in touch with why you said yes to your commitments
in the first place.
Reconnect with your love for your family, your friends,
your congregation, your working life.
And when you do that,
when you give yourself a chance to rest and reconnect,
other insights may have the chance to come out,
more elusive blessings and wisdom.
In that quiet space, ask yourself again,
what is at the heart of this feeling so tired?
What is at the heart of that?
You might discover you're exhausting *yourself*
and you can change things for the better.

That happens in a couple of different ways at least.

So often we exhaust ourselves
by trying to serve in a way that doesn't use our gifts.
Think back to a job you've had that you just hated.
Chances are, that job was forcing you
to do something you just didn't do so well.
That's not the worst thing in the world,
but it *is* exhausting.

I still remember one night years ago
when I worked at a fundraising telethon for a group I belonged to.
Two hours of calling strangers and asking them for money—
oh, it was awful. For me. I was so tired at the end of the night.
But a few months later,
when they asked me to design a poster for them,
that was such a joy! I loved it. That work gave me energy.
When we find ways to serve
that use *our* best gifts,
it's magic, for us and for the world.
When we're trapped in roles that call on skills we don't have,
we droop. We struggle. We exhaust ourselves.
Don't get stuck there if you can help it.
Find work that you do *well*, if you can.
Seize that blessing, for your own sake and the world's.

Another way we exhaust ourselves
is by bottling up our feelings and thoughts about what's going on.
Repressing something that needs to be said
takes an enormous amount of energy.

Remember that dreaded washing-the-dishes moment?
I confess, that was one of mine.
I couldn't believe how tired and discouraged I felt
when I turned around and saw that pot that still had to be washed.

But when I thought about it later,
I realized the real problem was,
I was bottling up something that needed to be said.
I wanted help from my partner, and I didn't know how to ask for it.
Growing up, mostly my mom did the dishes after dinner.
When my dad lent a hand, he often made a big production of it,
as if to say, *this isn't my job, it's yours,*
and I'm being magnanimous to help you with it.
Now, I love my parents, very much.
But what worked for them when I was little
doesn't always work for me.
Yet that early conditioning runs so deep!
Against all my radical feminist leanings,
it turns out I had absorbed that lesson:
doing the dishes is the woman's job.
It was incredibly hard for me to ask my partner for help with them.
But in the end I had to, because *not* asking
was making me feel bitterly resentful.
And bottling all that up was not only unfair to my partner,
who had no *idea* how I was feeling;
it was also simply exhausting to me.

I've found that when you're really frustrated about something
and you can't find a way to say it,
it is exhausting!
But if you give yourself some space to think
and ask yourself, how can I say what I need to say?
or talk about it with someone you trust—
maybe insight will come.
You'll find the words.
You'll find a way forward.
And with it comes renewed, liberating energy.

So don't give up.
That night in the desert,

Jacob wrestled all night long with the mysterious stranger.
He wouldn't let go,
because he was after a blessing.
I will not let you go, unless you bless me.

For his courage, he gets his blessing.
The strange maybe-angel man blesses him right there.
And Jacob says, in a voice filled with awe,
"I have seen the face of God, and I'm still here to tell the tale!"

In these dog days of summer,
you have been called to renew your energy to serve this community.
May you know both rest and joyful work,
and always, always,
great blessings in the struggle.

Amen.