

PROVIDE SACRED PLACES APART

PROVIDE SACRED PLACES APART

Amid towering Ponderosa pines blanketing the volcanic mountain ranges of Central Oregon, Suttle Lake Camp and Retreat Center beckons people to pause from the journey of their lives - to find renewal in an embrace with God. Beautifully, simply - the hosts there capture one of the core tenets of Christian camp and retreat ministry in their tagline, "Suttle Lake Camp: a place apart to be together." The seeming contradiction of temporary separation as a spiritual path toward greater connection rests at the heart of the unparalleled power of these experiences.

This invitation to a place apart includes some often unexpected rhythms and understandings. All of us in United Methodist Camp and Retreat ministries encourage guests and participants to receive through letting go, to move closer by being still, to hear the Divine Word in silence, to advance through retreat, to act on God's behalf by resting, to learn community from solitude and strangers, and to discover ways to be more present at home by taking time away. Jesus' teaching invites people to let go of grasping to their customary patterns to find deeper dimensions of life. This is part of the meaning of his promise - "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The camp and retreat leader must grow comfortable with such dichotomies or he or she will be too restless and too anxious to guide others.

Sabbath Rest

Faith-based leadership relies on truly trusting the Spirit of God to be present and to transform. It seems important to recognize that the patterns within vibrant camp and retreat practices will likely seem a bit unusual, at first, for many participants, guests and even we who are accustomed to the harried life of over producing and over consuming. If we fail to cherish the unique gifts of our ministry and spiritual heritage, we can easily lapse into becoming activity directors thinking our job is to keep people busy and entertained as consumers rather than "being" with God and "being" God's people on retreat and in the wider world.

There is a holy ebb and flow that calls for surging forwarding then receding for rest and thanksgiving for the miracles all around us when we pause to perceive them. Jesus came that we might have "abundant life". Life in its fullness embraces both doing and renewing. If we duplicate or mimic the constant motion, activity and striving, which are readily available elsewhere, then we become redundant. A special path for the common good of all is lost to those in our congregations, to guests who come, and to the world at large. Periods of reflection, renewal, silence and solitude have long been characteristic of faith-based camps and retreats with very good reason.

Many travelers on retreat arrive heavily burdened with worries and a host of responsibilities. Jesus promises rest for their souls. (Matthew 11:28-29) Rest, inspiration, and play are precious pathways we provide, especially for these

individuals. Play and recreation, if focused on cooperation and fun rather than heavy competition, can immerse children, youth and adults in occasions where they are free to soak in camaraderie, to laugh, and to let go of their struggles for a while in order to find new perspective by enjoying the goodness of life.

If we align ourselves with Christ's promise to offer respites, we become an avenue for Christ to ease their burdens. The places and times apart we offer become the opportunity to learn how to allow God to nurture their souls. Ultimately, coming away encourages people to return with new outlooks and practices to incorporate within their weekly and daily rhythms. For in the end, Augustine reminds us in his well-known maxim,

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." ⁱ

Welcome to leading people into a Spiritual frontier that offers a broader understanding about the meaning of existence. In the words of Robert Frost, you will be engaging participants in a "road less traveled" that "has made all the difference" for millions who are seekers of God. This is not to dismiss the benefits of effort, labor and doing good works. As James says:

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

A more balanced life, however, calls us to value the varied dimensions of the Christian way. Faith, undoubtedly, produces good works, however faith is not defined as unceasing doing and accomplishments. Faith is, at its core, trust in and love for God. Great acts of faithfulness call us, also, to respites, renewal, solitude and silence as an expression of that love and trust. Our lives can quickly lose their equilibrium and joy without this. We are not God, and rest is one way of recognizing our need for God. We demonstrate our gratitude toward God by ceasing from producing to enjoy and be thankful for the beauty of the moment and to be more fully present in the now.

Silence and Solitude

An, often, unexpressed fear of leaders who want to offer times of solitude and silence is that it will be terribly boring when groups and individuals are not constantly entertained by highly active pursuits while at camp or on retreat.

Without screens to look at; without constant sound, motion and conversation; without cell phone availability; and without the type of commercial activities that by repetition give definition to how people see themselves, who will they be and what will they do during these periods of Sabbath, solitude, prayer and silence? All this can be intimidating. For some participants it will be a welcomed reprieve, but others will hesitate.

The enthusiasm and confidence of the retreat leader does much to allay these concerns. You will need to be a teacher of new patterns as well as an advocate for them. These practices, also, require sensitivity to age level abilities and characteristics, if we want to assist people to have meaningful experiences in tune with their development. Experiences and places apart can be shaped in ways that that maintain supervision, guidance, and interest among children and youth. As we expand our repertoire of offerings that draw persons into silence and solitude, we can choose the options best suited to the specific needs of those we serve both by age level and their stage in Christian formation.

The importance of silence and its power to help persons develop a greater sensitivity to God's presence are echoed in the teachings of some of the great mentors of the Christian tradition who are resonating with creative and passionate Christian mentors of our own time.

14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, "Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence."

In her book, *No Greater Love*, Mother Teresa of Calcutta emphasizes a similar emphasis on silence and silence of the heart as a Spiritual pathway to deeper connections with God.

Nature, trees, flowers, and grass grow in silence. The stars, the sun and the moon move in silence. What is essential is not what we say but what God tells us...In silence God speaks to our souls.

*Silence of our eyes.
Silence of our ears.
Silence of our mouths.
Silence of our minds.
...in the silence of the heart
God will speak.*

Silence of the heart is necessary so you can hear God everywhere – in the closing of the door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing...ⁱⁱ

---Mother Teresa

. Like silence, solitude invites people to expectant waiting, observation, and attentiveness to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Solitude, then, is not simply

being alone. It is being alone with God. We refrain for an interlude from human talk and interaction to enter a communication beyond words. We make ourselves available to God, expecting nothing in particular but being open to the plethora of ways that God may speak to us both internally and through the environment. At first, it may seem like a waste of time because we are not completing any “work”, but the tradition of solitude within Christianity has lasted centuries because it is consistently transforming for those who enter it with an open heart. Solitude strips away our need to control and the tendency to try to fill our sense of longing for God with busyness and distraction, which never satisfies our yearning for a deeper connection with the Source of Life.

Prayer

Sabbath, silence and solitude are pathways of prayer. Prayer is, “practicing the presence of God” as taught by Brother Lawrence, a 17th century Carmelite layman. Communicating with God is natural part of recognizing and keeping ever at the forefront that God is present at all times. We bring ourselves to the One Who Loves Us, in order to expand our relationship with God and to reflect honestly about our own lives and the world around us while opening ourselves to God’s desire and love for all. This attentiveness to the Divine shapes our intentions, our identity and our interactions.

Prayer has many facets that reflect the myriad of experiences and emotions inherent in life. We see this in the life of Jesus who regularly sought places apart to pray in many circumstances: following his baptism as he discerned who he would be and what priorities would guide him, before choosing his closest disciple, in the garden of Gethsemane when he agonized over the path before him, etc.

Following the example of Jesus, we can be teachers of prayer. We ought not to assume that those we host are fully practiced in prayer, and we can enrich those who are practitioners of prayer by teaching new ways to pray. There are seasons to prayer and having a wider exposure to many forms of prayer enables persons to select those modes that resonate best and that enhance the vibrancy of their relationship and connection with God.

It is amazing how a simple invitation to prayer can have a profound impact. The invitation to prayer does not need to be complex. Julian of Norwich, for example, gives the following insight. “The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God, knowing that goodness can reach down to our lowest depths of need.” Prayer has a wide variety of forms that can take place in solitude and silence or that can be done as a community together. For some, the unity of praying with others will enhance their time away as well. Be creative in providing opportunities for corporate prayer for those who seek it. Praying together whether it be silent or aloud can draw people together as they are drawn to God.

Maintaining our Focus

Margaret Silf sheds light on why stepping away is so important in her book, *Going on Retreat*. A retreat is not a retreat from real life, but rather a retreat toward real life.

...I remain convinced that when we go deep into the heart of ourselves, we also come closer to the heart of each other – therefore a retreat is not a retreat from others but a retreat to what is at the heart of all life...to make a retreat is not to escape from the real world, but to be in touch with aspects of reality that are often covered up by distractions and busyness...Things are the other way around: we are often escaping from reality (what is truly important and life giving) when we are so busy doing..., and we are facing and encountering a deeper reality when we take time to be still and to listen to the movements of our hearts. ⁱⁱⁱ

Shortly before his tragic death in an auto accident, Mike Yaconelli, the co-founder of Youth Specialties (a highly regarded provider of training and resources for adult workers with youth), expressed his alarm regarding the direction that many Christian camp and retreat ministries seem to be drifting. One of the last insights Mike passed on to colleagues appears as an article in the **Journal of Christian Camping** entitled, “Is this Christian Camping (and Christian Retreating)?” Here are some poignant excerpts.

I spoke recently at a family conference held at a resort-like retreat center on a lake. The setting was beautiful: a pristine lake, lofty pine trees, hundreds of trails, sandy beaches, flowers and views too numerous to mention. Talk about a camp and retreat center where you could get away from the hectic pace ...Talk about opportunities to be alone with God. Not a chance...I was shocked by the schedule. Beginning at 6:30 in the morning and ending at midnight; the schedule was crammed with every activity imaginable...The first evening, I noticed the fatigue on the faces of the adults and youth...These people made a decision to retreat...the opposite happened. Here's the sad part; the people at the conference loved it... (This was not a retreat)... It was an extension of the way of life they were already leading back home. ^{iv}

Those we serve are thirsting. Will we give them opportunities to pause to be with God and to have their souls refreshed or will we simply urge them on in ceaseless doing and contribute to their spiritual dehydration? This is an important question, especially if we consider camps and retreats as a spiritual practice not an isolated one time experience.

Scriptural and Theological Exploration for Retreat Leaders

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, we find a stimulating stream of passages that highlight the beauty and benefits of Sabbath, Solitude and Silence. Read carefully, for these messages form a well of blessing which retreat leaders and participants have drawn upon for generations to guide them.

A: Provide Opportunities for Participants to Quench Their Thirst for God

Psalm 42:1-2: As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

Jeremiah 29:12-13: For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.

Spiritual retreats tap into a universal human desire. Sometimes it is hard for people to articulate, but we all long to connect more deeply with God. Retreats tap into a widespread search in modern society that some cannot fully articulate, but which has sparked their interest in spirituality. Retreats serve as an oasis for the soul where people can drink of the “living water”. Retreats are about removing the barriers that keep people from noticing and relating with the ever-present Love, Who is with us and for us. The unabashed aim of faith-based retreats is helping persons seek God with their whole heart.

B. Stimulate Sacred Sabbath Time:

Exodus 20:8-11 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Matthew 11: 28-29: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

It is fascinating how much of an emphasis the scriptures place on Sabbath time, unequivocally declaring it holy. The sacred circle includes ceasing from creating, abstaining from advancing, and braving a break, in order to enjoy the present. Our lives can pass us by while we are striving for the future. It is not about “doing nothing”. Rather, laying aside the rigors of routine represents a proactive passage toward God. Renewal and enjoyment of life are a natural outcome, but thanksgiving is the main current. This high habit of Sabbath not only derives from Divine instruction, it is linked to the launching of life itself. (Genesis 1:31-2:3)

Reality resounds in these teachings. The fullness of life never proceeds from packing it completely with unending goals and tasks. Emptying ourselves and our schedules on a regular basis expands our existence rather than diminishing it. This ebb and flow that alternates accomplishment with harkening our hearts to God is vital to our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Perhaps Jewish leaders best explain this tradition, because they have been practicing it for centuries. It is from Jewish roots that this weekly faith holiday became a Christian spiritual practice as well. Sabbath is about the fitting culmination of effort and blessing – enjoyment and thanksgiving. *How Firm a Foundation: A Gift of Jewish Wisdom for Christians and Jews* written by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein offers insights that help us avoid misinterpretation of Sabbath. Here are three quotes to ponder:

Of all the holidays in the Jewish year, the weekly Sabbath is the most cherished and beloved...It's depth might be summed up in the words of the Psalmist "O to taste and see that the Lord is good" v

While the Shabbat has been universally acclaimed, it has also, unfortunately, often been grossly misunderstood. It is commonly believed that the Shabbat is observed in order to replenish our physical strength and to enable us to work energetically and productively during the coming week...(Keep in mind, however, that) it is not the beginning of the week, but the culmination of the week and zenith of living not simply a preparation for living...The Jew's entire week is lived in anticipation of the Shabbat. Everything points to it; everything leads to it. And while it is certainly true that the Shabbat rejuvenates, replenishes and revitalizes so that we are able to face another work week, the deeper meaning of the Shabbat is that it is observed not for the sake of the rest of the week, but that the rest of the week is the prologue for the arrival of Shabbat. vi

True freedom is freedom from servitude to human goals in order to know and serve God...For this reason the Torah states, "Thou shalt not do any work – you, your sons, daughters, slaves, animals and strangers in your midst" Exodus 20:10. Everyone and everything is to be free on this day, in order that they might embrace something more ultimate in their lives....Humanity can become his/her own taskmaster when enslaving oneself to non-ultimates that bring no tranquility to mind, body and soul...Moses expressed this same concept of freedom when he pleaded with Pharaoh in the name of God to "let my people go so they may worship me" Exodus 8:20) vii

(Three quotes above - Used by permission of Paraclete Press)

Taking repeated hiatus to appreciate the present, triggers thankfulness. Noticing the blessings begins with gifts so simple and central as consciousness of the breaths we breathe, which supply and sustain us thousands of times per

day. What better way to say thanks than to have enough faith to let go and just be – to glorify God rather than piling on the pressure to be God?

Self-care and renewal recognizes the preciousness of the Spirit with and within us. Part of the Sabbath tradition lifts up freedom from slavery that is a vital theme within the story of the people of God. God freed us from slavery, and we are not to return to the slavery of never ending labor even if it is self-imposed. Rest is righteous, too. It is a way to serve God and honor God. Abraham Heschel, expresses it this way. “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy”^{viii}

What a difference it makes in our families, our communities and our planet, when we habitually pause from producing and consuming in order to truly experience the daily miracles that exist all around us. Perhaps this was part of what Jesus was trying to say to Martha when he refused to affirm Martha’s request for her sister, Mary, to trade time with Christ in favor of labor. (Luke 10:38-42)

C. Introduce Silence and Stillness as Sources for Sensing God.

1 Kings 19:11-13

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Psalm 46:10:

"Be still, and know that I am God!"

There is so much static, noise and commotion in the modern milieu. Silence and stillness are like precious jewels, because of their rarity. These pathways can be remarkably powerful modes to getting in touch with the Holy Spirit and what is truly important in life. Teach people to welcome silence and stillness as a proactive step to greater awareness, rather than simply a lull in the action.

D. Engage Persons in Jesus’ Practice of Prayer and Solitude.

Mark 1:35: In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Mark 6:30: The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

Solitude has an amazing way of promoting presence, even though it might appear contrary to the undiscerning eye. Jesus, despite how hectic his ministry could sometimes be, purposefully sought out solitude to renew his relationship

with God and to strengthen his soul. Solitude is not loneliness or being alone, as much as it is about being with God and seeking discernment. These encounters often enable persons to better embrace others, also, when they return.

We should not underrate the infusion of seclusion for spiritual growth. These occasions often bring one face to face with the big questions of life. This includes reflection about our direction and purpose. Jesus' own life has numerous illustrations. He followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit into the wilderness right after his baptism and affirmation from God. There he wrestled with what priorities would guide him (Matthew 3:16- 4:11). He ventured alone to the mountains to pray, then returned ready to recruit his disciples and launch the next phase of his ministry. (Luke 6:12-13) Jesus journeyed to Garden of Gethsemane, and a short distance from his followers met alone with God contemplating the most crucial and painful period he would face. (Luke 22:39-33) Seeking solitude was a holy habit for Jesus.

ⁱ *The Confessions of St. Augustine Bishop of Hippo* translated by Dr. E.B. Pusey (E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc: New York, 1950), pg1

ⁱⁱ *No Greater Love* by Mother Teresa (New World Library: Novato, California , 2001), p 10 ISBN: 1577310063

ⁱⁱⁱ *Going on Retreat* by Margaret Silf (Loyola Press: Chicago, 2002), p 19 ISBN 0829419942

^{iv} "Is this Christian Camping" by Mike Yaconelli (Christian Camp and Conference Journal: Christian Camp and Conference Association: Colorado Springs, CO, July/August 2003), pp 11-12

^v *How Firm a Foundation* by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (Paraclete Press: Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997), p 62 ISBN 1557251894

^{vi} *How Firm a Foundation* by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (Paraclete Press: Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997), pp 63-64 ISBN 1557251894

^{vii} *How Firm a Foundation* by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (Paraclete Press: Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997), p 69 ISBN 1557251894

^{viii} *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* by Abraham Joshua Heschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1996), p 264 ISBN 0374199809