

Reflections On The Journey: Much to Do, Little Time

I have a large parish meeting to prepare for on Sunday and an emergency meeting with the furniture makers on Monday. I am awaiting results of architect interviews, have new slides to label and then a dedication liturgy to help plan. In the meantime, a completely different job also demands my time and attention.

The projects and possibilities for this ministry excite me, but how does one find the time for the more reflective work, to look at the bigger picture? When can I do some basic reading, learning, and studying? How can I find time to become more knowledgeable about the documents, national trends, and important issues in our field? How can I reflect on my role as facilitator and guide, watchful not to mislead or become too doctrinaire? How can I find time to nourish me?

It's so easy to fall into the micro, forgetting the macro.

Is this just my dilemma or do you feel this way too? I may be betraying my professionalism by confessing all this, but I recognize my tendency to look at the urgent and sometimes forget about the important.

Actually, I suspect this is true of many professions. I remember what I heard once in a time-management workshop, "There are so many things that are urgent, and so many things that are important to do. There are also things that are not urgent and things that are not important." I sort it out this way:

Urgent and Important – tonight's meeting, tomorrow's deadline—must be done.

Urgent and Not Important – the telephone, e-mail, most interruptions—this can almost always wait.

Not Urgent and Not Important – everything I do to procrastinate—reading junk mail, calling a friend.

Not Urgent yet Important—the reading and reflection I sometimes set aside.

I'm pretty good at the first three categories. I believe that it is useful, in fact, to do some unimportant things in the midst of deadlines. It clears my head and gives a chance for ideas to simply germinate. Then I can come back refreshed. However finding time for the "Not Urgent yet Important" category is a discipline I sometimes lack.

I don't have any answers. Maybe you can offer something? I am aware of my tendencies and try to find ways to carve out the time I need for growth and renewal.

As I write, it is Lent. Perhaps the disciplines of the season can assist me and can help me focus on that which is most important.

Gale Francione

A Response

Periodically, I learn anew the importance of paying attention to the "Not Urgent, yet Important." For me at the top of my list of Not Urgent, yet Important list is caring for my soul.

We all experience our own "symptoms" of a life led not paying attention to this important task. Medical consequences are at the top of my "symptoms" list. It is usually my body that tells me to slow down and to literally take time to not only smell the flowers, but to plant the seeds, cultivate and fertilize new life beneath the soil, watch the stems and leaves grow, buds appear and blossom into flowers, which later fade, wither, die, and return to the earth. The flowers alone are a reminder, but not usually a lasting one. Flowers alone don't provide the real inner transformation my soul needs. It is by reflecting on the whole process: birth, life and death that my soul is brought back to the reality of life's meaning: God is God and I am God's creation. My every breath depends on my creator God.

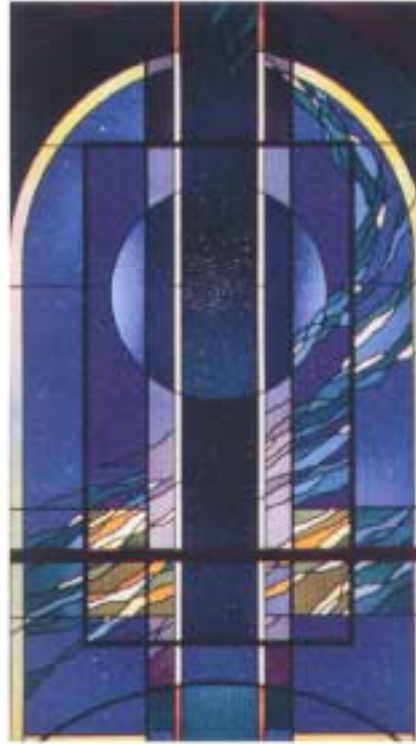
More often than not I go through my day under the illusion that I am more in control and God is less in control. You probably don't do this, but if you did

you'd know it usually leads to frantic living and taking oneself and work overly serious. After all God is the creator of the 24 hour day. I don't believe God wants anyone to constantly live frantically on the edge of our physical, mental, or spiritually capacities. Whatever *needs* to be done in each 24 hour period must be *able* to be done. So at the end of a frantic day I must ask myself: Whose agenda was I working on – mine or God's?

Sacred distractions help bring my mind, body and soul back to a holy reality. On the popular TV series "West Wing," characters often say, "I serve at the pleasure of the President." I like to rephrase that and remind myself that, "I live and breath at the pleasure of my God."

Sacred distractions are another way of saying spiritual disciplines. Like spiritual disciplines, sacred distractions help me to live a reality based on an awareness of the presence of God in every breath I take in. (Breath in deeply and exhale slowly as you read on.) Sacred distractions can be anything that helps you become more aware of the presence and action of God in your life and in the world.

One effective sacred distraction for me is meditating on that which brings me closer to God. Often this is scripture, or a walk through woods or on the beach. In recent months I have found myself meditating on two distinct artistic expressions. The first is a work of stained glass by liturgical artist Claire M. Wing. Located in the Interdenominational Chapel at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, this work speaks to me on many levels. Descriptive words and phrases are inadequate to capture the experience of meditation but some that come to mind are: starry, starry night of light, God/Word breathed creation, holy movement, oneness, wholeness, soul calming blue, and harmony. This array of colored glass nourishes my soul's need for beauty, harmony and a relationship with the divine.



Stained glass window. Interdenominational Chapel at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. By liturgical artist by Claire M. Wing, Wing Glass Works, Dallas, Texas Used with permission.

Another recent focus of meditation comes from a challenging statement by Margaret Visser in her book *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (2000. New York: North Point Press). In this gem of a book Visser explores the multivalent meanings of sacred space in ways that both resonate within me and challenge my outward perspective.

Early on Visser writes: "But why have churches at all? The very idea of having such a thing as a church building must be questioned, given Christianity's founding story. For a Christian to not ask this question, or even to feel comfortable about his or her answer, is to deny something that lies at the heart of Christianity. God, or the truth, is not confined to the Church, let alone by church buildings. Every Christian should remain deeply suspicious of church – both as buildings and as institutions; it is part of following Christ.

The paradox is there from the beginning. For example, when Jesus hounded the money-changers out of the temple, he wanted people to respect God's temple – even as he proposed to replace it. Churches can be confining and deadening – and churches remain - but they remain in order to keep alive a message that is all about movement, and about hope and change. In short, a Christian church seems to be – and quite consciously is – a contradiction in terms."

I hope I am not violating any copyright laws by quoting so much, but I needed to get it all in. You see, I think Visser is right to question, "Why have churches at all?" I agree with her conclusion: "a Christian church seems to be – and quite consciously is – a contradiction in terms." Reflecting on this idea helps to put my work as a liturgical consultant and architect in perspective. If churches are a contradiction in terms, then so are liturgical consultants and so are church architects. That isn't to say either is unnecessary, rather it raises two questions: "As a design professional, what is my necessary role?" and "Whose liturgy am I helping to form?" This is always a healthy reality check.

Ellen Schippert