

The View from Blackwater Bluff — Charles LaFond

“Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don’t know it, are asleep. They’re born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they raise children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the love-ness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence.” — Anthony de Mello

Listening to and awakening to our souls is hard work. The stewardship of our inner lives is seldom seen on stewardship committee agendas. We are too quick to lunge toward money, time and talent programs.

Of all the topics dealt with in stewardship efforts, the care of our inner life is the most important and the least discussed. We sideline it because it frightens us. We are intimidated by spending long amounts of time with God, so we anesthetize ourselves with our busy-ness. Perhaps the unconscious thought is: “If I keep busy — set a fast pace and keep it fueled with appointments and commitments then I will not have to hear God, and I will not have to hear myself.”

The little village of Webster where I live has just one police car. There are not many roads and the roads are twisty and turny. The week before last, I was stopped twice for speeding. This is not like me. I usually follow the speed limit. I was embarrassed the first time the officer pulled me over — those blue flashing lights flashing. He saw my collar and smiled a gentle warning to keep my speed down. Then he mentioned that my house was looking good now that it was painted. He knew where I lived. It’s a small town. The second time he stopped me I was not embarrassed. I was mortified. I was also fined \$75 — a whole month’s budget for movie and restaurant spending-money gone in a flash!

These two experiences of flashing blue lights in my rear-view mirror occurred just days before my annual retreat. Clergy often go on an annual retreat as part of their own spiritual self-care. Of course, you don’t have to be clergy to make a retreat. The monastery where I lived before coming to New



Hampshire saw 5,000 people each year come to us for periods of retreat. In the church tradition we “make” a retreat rather than “take” a retreat. The word “make” implies that it is work and when it is done well, it truly is just that. Some would say that “making a retreat” sounds self-indulgent, but they are mistaken. A retreat is a time to stop for a period of time long enough to quiet the motors that drive our schedules and our neuroses so we can see some of the hard things we need to see in our lives, our relationships and our inner life with God. A retreat is the spiritual version of a romantic holiday with a spouse — no children, no schedules — just lots of time to be together and make needed adjustments to the life being lived together.

It was not lost on me that these two speeding incidents were a wake-up call. The question behind the question was pregnant with potential for my upcoming retreat: What is causing this frantic speed in your life? What are you running from? Why are you disregarding safety — mine and that of others? What are you missing along the road by speeding past it all so fast?

So when I entered my week of retreat, my spiritual director suggested that the books I was planning to read and the writing I was planning to accomplish were just more “speed.” She reminded me that the inner life I have with myself and with God and with my closest friends is to be cared for as an act of stewardship. In fact she shocked and

annoyed me by saying “I want you to put your holy books away for this retreat and just sit and listen with yourself for seven days.” The idea terrified me.

She then made a much more encouraging suggestion for the retreat, saying, “Why not replace the dead saints you were planning to read with living saints!” She suggested a series of dinners at Blackwater Bluff: simple meals with close friends, spending the days thinking and praying and re-collecting my life, and then spending the evenings with long, slow dinners of laughter, conversation and perhaps a little too much wine.

These days were sometimes hard. Our God is very, very shy. I prayed and thought and sometimes it was healing, but mostly it was a bit dull. We Americans are addicted to “experience” and so these periods of silent reflection were usually disappointing. But they showed me some painful things in my life which I needed to wake up to and see fully. The time for reflection showed me that some adjustments need to be made to my life. And the six dinners were life-giving! Friends I love came to dinner and we spent long evenings over stew and bread and wine — laughing and crying and wondering at life. I drank from these friendships as a thirsty soul drinks from a fountain.

Times of retreat are essential for the wellness of the spiritual life and indeed any balanced life. Times of reflection on our lives are not for our life-making as much as they are for our life-seeing. They allow us to see what needs to be seen so that we do not lose our way on the path we call Christian life. Periods of reflection help us to see — actually SEE the good, the bad and the ugly.

The ancients say that once upon a time a disciple asked the elder, ‘Holy One, is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?’ And the Holy One answered, ‘As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.’ ‘Then of what use,’ the surprised disciple asked, ‘are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?’ ‘To make sure,’ the elder said, ‘that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.’