

Letting our Souls Catch Up with our Bodies
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There was once an American traveler who planned a safari to Africa. He was that typical Type-A American tourist, who many of us may be and who I admittedly am when I travel. We do our research about this travel destination and we have a timetable, maps, and a clear agenda of the things we need to see and do. Some local people had even been hired to carry some of the traveler's supplies as they trekked throughout the land—it was that level of planning.

On the first morning, they all woke up early and traveled fast and covered a great distance. The second morning was the same—woke up early, traveled fast, and traveled far. Third morning, same thing. But on the fourth morning, the local hired help refused to move. Instead, they sat by a tree in the shade well into the morning. The American traveler became incensed and irate and said to his translator, "This is a waste of valuable time. Can someone tell me what's going on here?" The translator looked at him and calmly answered, "They're waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies."^[1]

I love this because we all have weeks when it feels this way. We are on the go so much that it's hard to sit still and just be for a minute. Terry Hershey, who wrote a book called *Sacred Necessities* about some of the spiritual gifts essential for living a balanced and healthy life, and the person who told that story about the crazed American tourist, says it like this, "A nap is approved if I've worked hard enough to deserve it, or if I'm feeling under the weather. A day off is condoned if it is my due. A loll through the garden is acceptable only if I pull some weeds on the way through. A wasted afternoon is allowed so long as it doesn't happen too often, and I seem duly contrite."^[2] Hershey laments that in our 21st Century American society we can't seem to sit still sometimes and soak it all in. Wasting time is a sin, and we live our lives avoiding it at all costs.

But this lifestyle is taking its toll. The American Psychological Association did some research that came out in 2007 that found one-third of people in our country reported "experiencing extreme levels of stress."^[3] One out of five reported that they experienced high levels of stress 15 or more days in a month.^[4] These extreme levels of stress can be bad for your health—mentally, emotionally, and physically. And I think we too often brush it aside, or blame society, or the statistics and the consequences stress us out even more, so we don't really have time to think about them and change our lifestyles in any significant way.

Stress and being burdened with many responsibilities is not just a modern American phenomenon as we can see in today's passage from Mark. Did you notice the movement in this morning's passage and the way Jesus deals with stress? Yes, even he had to deal with extreme levels of stress in the First-Century.

In the story, Jesus goes to Simon and Andrew's house with the four disciples he has recruited to date. Simon's mother-in-law is sick, so Jesus takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and then she serves them after she seemingly becomes well again.

The same night, all the people in the surrounding area bring before Jesus "all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door."^[5] Jesus addresses the needs of all these people who literally show up at his doorstep. He probably was with them well into the night, doing the best he could to address their needs with compassion and love.

Then here's what Mark tells us, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." [6] Jesus healed well into the night as people came crowding around the house for his help and gets up early to go off on his own to pray. The disciples must have woken up a bit panicky not finding Jesus in the house anymore and they go hunting for him. The disciples find him safe and sound and Jesus seems to nonchalantly say, "Alright let's go to some neighboring towns so we can do it all over again today."

It seems that the way Jesus dealt with all the work he had to do and the demands placed upon him was to sometimes go off on his own to get centered again, to pray to God, and have a moment of peace. Henri Nouwen somewhere along the way commented that "only in silence and solitude can we learn the important lessons that being is more important than having, that our worth is more than our efforts and not the same as our usefulness." [7] Jesus spent time in solitude away from the crowds, and I often wonder what he thought about out there on his own.

It's like one of my favorite children's stories featuring Frog and Toad. Toad goes over to Frog's house only to discover a note on Frog's door, "Dear Toad, I am not at home. I went out. I want to be alone." Toad searches for Frog far and wide and he finally sees Frog sitting on a little island in the river all by himself.

Toad thinks that Frog must be sad and runs home to make sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea; he hitches a ride on the back of a turtle, and then goes to cheer Frog up and give him lunch. Frog ends up telling Toad, "I am very happy. This morning when I woke up I felt good because the sun was shining. I felt good because I was a frog. I felt good because I have you for a friend. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to think about how fine everything is." [8] And then Frog and Toad eat lunch together on the island, and all is well.

Basically, as the American Psychological Association rightly states, one of the best ways to deal with stress is to take care of yourself, "Ensure you have a healthy mind and body through activities like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. Take regular vacations or other breaks from work. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself." [9] I'm quite sure you've all heard this before, and you could probably add to this list with methods that work particularly well for you.

It's good to know your own coping mechanisms for stress, no matter what setting in which you find yourself. Tony Jones, coordinator of a national network of emerging Christian leaders, spoke about sitting in first class on a flight to New York next to a successful editor. He noticed that halfway through the flight she closed her laptop and tilted her seat back. Jones writes, "What happened next has stuck with me ever since. She took a rosary out of her pocket and spent the next hour surreptitiously praying with her eyes closed." He pegged her as an "enlightened, liberal member of the East Coast elite" and yet there she was with her eyes closed praying to the Virgin Mary. [10]

What this all indicates to me is that we need to take breaks to do some self-care, and I've tried to give you many examples of this--whether that's going out to a quiet place and thinking about life like Frog or praying the rosary on an airplane in first class like the editor, whether it's praying to God in a deserted place like Jesus or resting underneath a tree like the wise Africans. We can see this concept in many instances, and it's notable that even Jesus had to do this, or maybe that especially Jesus had to do this. This morning's passage is a great example of him taking a break from the strains of his ministry to just be.

It strikes me that this homily is perhaps not timed very well as right after church today is our Annual Meeting, when we will talk about the myriad of activities and programs offered, monies

spent, mission projects undertaken, and all the stuff in general we have done together over the year. And many of us have worked hard to write our Annual Reports and be prepared for this meeting today, not exactly a restful week full of prayer and contemplation.

Or maybe this is the perfect time to emphasize that we need to stop and let our souls catch up with our bodies. This is the day to examine where we've been together and some of the exciting places we may go in the future. This is the day to stop our long travels over long distances in such a short amount of time, to be ourselves in this moment together here and now. And I pray that we will go forth this day grounded in the love of God, remembering who we are and to whom we belong. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Terry Hershey, *Sacred Necessities: Gifts for Living with Passion, Purpose, and Grace*, 68-69.

[2] Hershey, *Sacred Necessities*, 70.

[3] <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2007/10/stress-tips.aspx>

[4] <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2007/10/stress-tips.aspx>

[5] Mark 1:32-33.

[6] Mark 1:35.

[7] Henri Nouwen, as paraphrased by John Westerhoff in *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*, 35.

[8] Arnold Lobel, *Adventures of Frog and Toad*, "Alone," 63.

[9] <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2007/10/stress-tips.aspx>

[10] Tony Jones, as quoted by Diana Butler Bass in *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, 177.