



Habits to Save Your Soul Self-Care in Demanding Times *A Travel Free Learning Article*

By
Gary Straub

Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership
Voice: 502.320.4336 Email: GStraub@TheColumbiaPartnership.org
Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org
Subscribe to the Travel Free Learning Articles: Text "TCP" to 22828

Ministry can be as rewarding as it is stressful; never more so than in those critical kairos moments of congregational transition and transformation.

When crunch time comes, how do we as leaders of congregational transformation continue to be transformed? This concern is particularly poignant when transformation wracks our church family system with anxiety and leaves our core leader's equilibrium unsettled. Transformation reads well in textbook form, but when we actually hit that stretch of the journey when the tectonic plates are shifting beneath the pews it is not uncommon for primordial fears of reactionary chaos to shake our own inner peace. "Steady On" is superb navigational advice; but no easy course to steer the good gospel ship when it is your watch at the helm.

Self-Care and Spiritual Practice

How do we stay centered, effective and on target as leaders when things around us are catawampus? How do we care for ourselves without obsessive self-absorption, slipping into the slew of sloth, the pond of despond, or using the stress as an excuse for indulgence?

Fred Craddock says "Standing in the ER at 2:00 a.m. is not the optimal time to decide what you believe about advanced directives." Some things should be settled and in place well in advance of the emergency. I find it similarly true with our souls in seasons of intense transformational stress. We fall back on our healthy heart habits to sustain us when our circumstances seem impenetrable and our own perceptions slightly off kilter. Jesus prayed before emergencies and after victories. We often reverse this and pray before victories to secure them and after emergencies for deliverance.

This may seem as elementary as to hardly bear a mention, but in assisting with the postmortems of transformational process gone awry, I find that failing to faithfully engage in spiritual practices is quite often a significant contributing factor. I am not suggesting that prayer and Scripture reading are the lucky lotto factor in church transformation, but it is interesting to note that many of the tried and trusty transformational processes available do intentionally include a strong prayer component. For example, The Columbia Partnership's own *Strategic Spiritual Journey* incorporates 100 days of prayer in triplets into the process. Martha Grace Reese's *Unbinding the Gospel* also identifies small group prayer work as the fulcrum for critical energy that drives transformation.

Many of the transformational services offered by denominational units insist on careful attention to prayer and practicing our practices. The *New Beginnings* model, offered by Disciples Hope Partnership, structures a strong season of prayer to empower a congregation in writing their future story. While no one can satisfactorily elucidate all the reasons why prayer is critical to congregational transformation, we simply know that when we stop praying, coincidences stop happening.

Healthy Heart Habits

In enumerating a few of the core spiritual practices, let's start with the basics. What are those healthy heart habits that keep us in touch with our loving relationship to Christ? While many find devotional literature is their way to touch into the presence, others find that quieting the mind and beholding Christ mentally is their favorite way to begin this conversation we call prayer. The accent here is less on technique and more on simple awareness. The old adage is: "Christ is no where" or "Christ is now here." Same letters, different spacing. Maybe we need to rearrange the spaces in our lives to prayerfully perceive something different.

I have often wondered if this same need for fresh perspective might be behind the explosion of Scripture versions now available. Many of us who were raised on KJV or memorized in passages in the NIV or NRSV may enjoy some fresh air of Eugene Peterson's *The Message* or the new Contemporary version. For many of us who are such N.T. dwellers, may I recommend a daily excursion into the Psalms, which Bonhoeffer called the prayer book of the Bible? The Navigators offer a simple method to read through the Psalms each month. Read the Psalm corresponding to the calendar date. Then add 30 to that Psalm number and you will read 5 psalms a day. For instance, on August 10th read Psalm 10, then Psalm 40, 70, 100 and 130. Moving the metaphors of Scripture from the mind's imagination into the heart's devotion is a lost art, and one we need to rejuvenate.

Beyond the basic soul work of immersing head and heart in Scripture and prayer, blessed is the leader who has a trustworthy, discrete and utterly challenging prayer partner. Better yet, get a posse of prayer partners. These folks will suffer our foolishness and spare us from ourselves too. A next step might be to consider engaging a spiritual director, a coach, or both. We stress that transformational work is a collaborative partnership, but leaders who insist on flying solo risk a spiritual isolation that opens the door to temptations best left unanswered. In this regard, perhaps a word about our vulnerabilities as leaders is in order.

If we have any unfinished emotional business that we aren't owning up to and intentionally working on, the stress of transformational process will bring it out. This can get ugly because we are dealing with what Carl Jung called our shadow side. Because we live in a culture where anyone who leads these days is open to the accusation of physician, heal thyself, it behooves us to acknowledge our own shadow side, and frankly pray God's protective mercy, that we may be saved from ourselves. The Lord's great power to redeem (Ps 130:7) must be met with our power to recognize the necessity.

In addition to these rather spiritual habits of self-care under the stress of transformational process, I still recall Methodist leadership guru Lyle Schaller exhorting a room full of pastors and congregational leaders to get a hobby, become a fan of a sport of some sort, and push away from the table to get some exercise.

Principles to Follow

Finally, let me mention two principles that have guided my own stressful situations. The first is a line from an old Oswald Chambers devotional from my days in *Young Life*: "Others may, you cannot." People who are called to lead congregational transformation have a calling that demands a discipline that doesn't leave a lot of room for distractions. Thus, we face the daily necessity of discerning our distractions from the delights that lighten our life. I am not recommending hair-shirt asceticism so much as owning God's claim on us and the gifts and graces that bless amidst stress.

The second principle is a concomitant of the first: whatever you are trusting to get you by that is not God, hand it over. And whatever else you are trusting that is not God, hand it over too. And over, and over. In other words, countering the glitz and glam of our addictions and indulgences with the necessity of utter surrender. It is most humbling to already be humbled by the stress and strain of transformation and yet again be humbled further to own up and offer up our glittering illusions. Without this surrender, we are not doing the work of transformation, its baptized organizational development.

I suppose this whole conversation about handling the stress of transformation is largely about getting ourselves out of the way so the Spirit's work in transforming our congregations may continue to be outpoured among us.

Important Things to Know



Gary Straub is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is a Church Leadership Coach and Church Transformation Consultant as a member of the Transforming Congregations Team. He is available for speaking, consultation and coaching with church leaders and congregations.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a sharing knowledge emphasis of TCP. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.

Subscribe to the Travel Free Learning Articles: Text "TCP" to 22828