

Keeping Rhythm

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March 3, 2019

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As a teenager my nephew William developed into a competitive swimmer. Meet after meet he bettered his time in his events, making it to regionals, and in his junior year, to the state tournament in the medley relay. On the occasions I was able to see William swim I was awed by his stamina—100 fly, 500 free, 200 free, 200 IM, three different relay events. And I was bemused by his speed. You see, as a little boy William was slow. At play he'd tear around the house of yard with all the speed and energy of healthy three or four year old, but when walking for the sake of walking—around the block or on a nature trail, for example—he'd slow to a snail's pace. So slowly did he amble along that walks with him inevitably tried my patience to its limits, and often the last few blocks would find me carrying William in my arms or on my shoulders, not because he was too tired to walk but because I couldn't be denied my need for briskness one minute longer.

On one occasion I took William and his sister Claire on a walk through the corridors and tunnels of North Memorial Hospital, during one of my dad's stays in the inpatient hospice unit. Claire forged along ahead of us, eager to see what might come next. And William, hard as I tried to keep him in front of, or at least beside, me so I could keep an eye on him, managed again and again to drop behind me. We looked like a long, drawn out, three person game of follow-the-leader. William's pace had nothing to do with reluctance; indeed, when I said I was looking for a quiet child to go for a walk with me, he and his sister nearly knocked one another over in their eagerness to be my companion. William simply seemed to need to encounter things leisurely, as they come, rather than rush to meet them. I haven't gone for a walk with him in several years, but I suspect, despite his speed in the water, that characteristic hasn't changed much.

When we, like the poet William Stafford, let our feet find a cadence to carry us softly on, that cadence is unique to each one of us. Some slow, even, measured. Others swift and light. Still others bouncy, or erratic, or rhythmic as dance. Such moments are rare, in these hectic, multi-tasked, two career, grandchildren in eight sports and three choirs and two bands, post-retirement volunteer bonanza, fast track, lives of ours. Mostly we

find ourselves denied the pleasure of letting our feet find their own cadence, as we rush instead to meet the demand of job and family, or hurry up and wait according to the stop and go movement of bureaucracies of all kind, or—this winter—bow to the superior strength of winter and slow down or stay put against all natural inclination.

We change the natural rhythms of our lives in order to get along in a world full of people, each with their own natural rhythm. We do so out of curtesy, out of love, out of necessity, because we couldn't hold jobs or maintain vital, meaningful relationships very long if we always allowed our feet to their own cadence, and moved only at the pace we ourselves willed. Some amount of falling into line, and marching in step with the rest of the band smooths the rocky course of living complicated lives in a complex world. But such conformity, as you well know, carries with it the danger of losing our own beat, forgetting our own natural pace and pattern.

Year ago when my mom has some trouble with her computer I asked my cousin, a computer whiz, to take a look at it. The first thing Joel did was defragment the hard drive—as I understand it, a process of rearranging all that was stored there, so that all the bits of information were grouped together in one area, and all the free space was grouped together in another area. Though there were still problems yet to solve, the simple step of defragmenting alone noticeably increased the computer's speed and efficiency.

It occurs to me that one of the central tasks of the spiritual life is that of defragmentation. Except the goals of spiritual defragmentation aren't limited to or even necessarily touching on speed and efficiency, but rather primarily peace, order, clarity. Spiritual defragging helps us reclaim our inner cadence.

When I was growing up my grandparents had two pendulum clocks. A large one that bonged the hours and quarter hours in low tones. And a small, red, wooden one, that Grandma let us take turns winding carefully with a tiny key. That was before the digital age, though Grandma kept those clocks well into the 21st century. Now, even the era of the blinking red 12:00 (or blue 12:00) has mostly drawn to a close. I guess I still have to reset the clocks on the microwave and the stove after power outage or when Daylight Savings Time begins or ends (next Sunday, remember!). But my cellphone resets itself when I cross time zones, and many other clocks automatically sync themselves with the atomic clock whenever necessary. How far we've come from sundials and pendulum

clocks that must be wound! How far we've come *in the world of technology*, that is, where self-setting digital clocks and pace-makers keep time and hearts on track with little conscious attention, assistance or input from mere humans.

Our spiritual lives are a different matter. Here we must still keep track of the tiny key, and use it to keep our souls properly wound, and if on occasion we let ourselves wind down completely, or let the pendulums get out of balance, then we must find a spiritual clock by which we can reset ourselves before the re-winding can really take hold.

Here's the thing about inner cadences, and spiritual clocks, and the hard drives of our souls: there's no atomic clock ticking away in perfect time, no cosmic bass drumming out a rhythm to keep us all in step, no universal program for defragmenting our lives. The cycles of the seasons, the waxing and waning of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tide dance on in the background, evidencing in each moment that rhythm beats at the heart of creation—and some of us feel those beats more keenly than others. But mostly we must each keep track of our own tiny clock-winding key, each listen deeply for the sometimes elusive but enduring cadence of our own lives, each set about regular defragmentation of our souls, with whatever practice and time and care and hard work that calls for.

I'm not a runner, but I know the joy of letting my feet find a cadence to softly carry me on, or my hands, or my breath. I find the cadence to softly carry me on in walking, baking, swimming, reading, writing, weaving, and perhaps most of all, silence. Real, deep, prolonged silence that is more than the absence of sound. These call me back to my natural pace, keep my spiritual clocking ticking along in careful measure, restore order and clarity to my soul. These things are my key, my pacemakers, my drum beat. You have your own.

Twelve step meetings help to keep the rhythm of life beating loud and steady for millions of recovering addicts of all kinds. A daily scripture verse, or five pages filled in a journal each morning before breakfast reset the clock for others. Some people find that an annual silent retreat or regular music making or faithful attendance at church are the only means of effectively defragmenting their lives. Still others must dance or put their hands in the earth, or make a continual study of the answers great thinkers have given to the perennial question of life. And some can only hear the rhythm of their lives echoing

across still or rushing water, growing loud and clear as the night sky deepens and stars become visible, or whispering along the paths of a forest or across acres of prairie grass.

If regular, personal self-defragging is one of the central tasks of the religious life, then some of the church's most important roles are to call us back to that task again and again, and to help us find the clocking-winding key when we've lost it, and to welcome our cadence, whatever it may be, into the dance that is the life of this community. Hours spent in reflection, service, meditation, work for the common good, prayer and song, at their best, can function to rearrange, sort, and prioritize the bits and pieces of our fragmented lives. But any group of 20 or more people moves to the beat of at least 20 different rhythms. So even in this tiny congregation we have small groups. We have artists with attitude who find their cadence in creating beauty together, and blessing it with laughter and tears. We have adult discussion groups that come into being now and then, so that participants might reset the rhythms of their souls through rigorous study and generous conversation with trusted companions, bringing clarity and order to the whirlwind of activity, images, events and noise that are life in the year 2019. We have Lunch Bunch and Supper Club because the breaking of bread together is an ancient and eternal practice for the syncing the heartbeat that binds groups in loving purpose. And we have monthly potlucks for that same reason, and because combining the nourishment of good food with the company of loved ones and interesting friends helps set wound down bodies or spirits ticking away again.

We worry sometimes—or some of us do—that we're trying to do too much. That if fewer folks show up at this month's Lunch Bunch or next month's Supper Club it's a sign that we've spread ourselves too thin. We fuss that if we stay away from an event—out of weariness or disinterest or another commitment—we'll be letting down that rest of the congregation or the small group. But we're being too hard on ourselves in those thoughts. A congregation that is secure enough to fill the church calendar with more events than any one person could possibly take part in, and generous enough to offer a spectrum of programming too broad to match the taste of any one person, and loving and committed enough to yet gather as one body on Sunday mornings for the celebration of life, is a congregation that has grown deep and rich in the gifts of the spirit, and become more lively, more joyful, more just, more steadfast with each passing year. And one that is continuing to grow deep and rich, lively, joyful, just, steadfast even as it ages and looks to find its way in the changing religious landscape of the 21st

century. How blessed we are to take our part in the unending unfolding of such a religious community, here, now, for our time, learning to speak in all the voices of the rain, and finding a cadence along the way to carry softly through our lives.

Amen.