

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF RETREAT

This month the Rest Stops will focus on the spiritual discipline of retreat. Many Christians throughout the ages have taken time away from the daily grind to find God. They “retreat” to a new location, preferably to a place with few distractions. They commit themselves to silence, prayer, fasting and/or other disciplines. The purpose of the retreat is not to isolate oneself from the world forever, but to take a short-term break from the world in order to find the enrichment and strength one needs to re-enter the world.

The first two Rest Stops are written devotionals reflecting on a silent retreat that happened in September. The third Rest Stop is a template plan for a spiritual retreat, and the fourth Rest Stop focuses on prayer stations one might use at a retreat.

REST STOP #1: Meeting God at the Arkansas River, Part 1

Several weeks ago I spent the weekend at a rustic camp with 30 college students for a silent retreat—at the Arkansas River (pronounced Ar-kan-sas). We had a wonderful experience, being alone and yet with other people, being in nature and being right next to one of the most scenic river-ways in the Midwest.

There were only two problems. I was the leader and it was too hot.

As the leader of the retreat, I felt obligated to have a spiritual experience, to somehow go deeper with God, because, well, I was the leader. Even though I knew better and even though we all reminded ourselves that we can’t twist God’s arm for the sake of the experience—still—I knew we’d be sharing at the end of the retreat, and I knew how awkward I would feel if I had nothing big to share.

And it was so stinking hot.

So, like many other participants, I took to the river. I had my Bible, in case something came to me, and a pen and paper, in case I needed to write that something down. And, since one could not wade in the shallow water with flip-flops on, I carried my sandals as well.

Five steps into the water I was in trouble. The water was deliciously cool, but I could barely manage to stay upright between juggling my things and negotiating the sandy bottom. So lesson one was—chuck the things.

I found a sand bar to place my perishables and prayed the Kansas wind wouldn’t fly off with them. That done, I sighed with the anticipation of cold water on my feet and sheer relaxation for my soul (and of course the word of the Lord so I’d have something to share!)

The water was great. So cool and refreshing. But the wading itself was . . .less than perfect. It was hard work sloshing through sand that sank your ankles deep into granular muck every time you took a step.

I was in a true dilemma. If I wanted to avoid the difficult walk in the river, I had to walk on the sand bar (and basically was stranded). There the sand was hot and I had to step delicately among fish skeletons and greenish foam. Walking in the river was much cooler—and harder, all at the same time.

I stepped into the middle of the stream, sank past my ankles, thought briefly of quicksand and said a little prayer. “God, this stinks.”

“Yes,” said God, “sometimes it does. Sometimes the cool water comes with the—what was the word you called it?”

"Muck."

"Muck."

"I want the water, Lord."

"It comes with the sand."

"But I can't take the difficult walk."

"Then stop walking for now."

Oh. Okay.

So I stopped. Empty-handed. A ways from the sand bar.

And the water felt great.

Rest Stop #2: Meeting God at the Arkansas River, Part 2

One of my goals for the silent retreat by the river was to have prayer stations for the participants. I wanted to provide a means of interactive prayer with God in eight different stations, stations that would surprise my students as they happened upon them on the wooded paths.

One of my prayer stations was called "Letting Go." It involved a pile of stones, instructions for the person praying and the Arkansas River. At this station, a participants would take a rock, or two or three, and throw that rock into the river as a prayer of letting go. The rock symbolized a worry or anxiety.

Molly, one of the other leaders for the retreat, volunteered to set up this prayer station. The plan was to simply collect rocks from the water's edge and put them in a pile next to the orange-colored folder with instructions tucked inside.

"There's a problem," Molly said. "The Arkansas has no rocks."

"What?" I said. "See for yourself."

Sure enough. The shoreline produced nothing harder than wood and bone. I threw a stick into the stream. Anxieties that could float just didn't seem to cut it, especially when they got tangled up with other sticks/anxieties and formed a small beaver dam.

OK, I said, so metaphors don't always work.

Not one to give up, I suggested sand. Maybe, I said, our anxieties and worries are too general to be named. We have an overall feeling of stress and so we could throw in a handful of sand to symbolize the—stress.

Molly looked at me for a moment like I had just landed on earth from Mars and said, "Let's go walk in the woods."

I didn't want to walk in the woods. I had seven more prayer stations to set up and 30 students to keep track of and a screen door that wouldn't work and besides it was hot and humid and once you get off the beaten path, this place was snake heaven.

But we went, of course. We were looking for rocks.

An hour and five spider webs later, we took a bucket of 47 rocks to the river's edge.

"Sometimes," said Molly, "you have to work a little to identify your worries. You have to dig around a little bit in your soul."

I picked up a rock and heaved it as far as I could into the river. I looked at Molly and smiled. She was right, of course.

"But sometimes," she continued, "there aren't any rocks in your soul. Then you should just feel free to relax and enjoy your freedom."

"Why didn't you tell me that an hour ago?"

"You had some rocks, Michele. Some big ones."

Sometimes you just have to dig a little.

Rest Stop #3: Planning a spiritual retreat

Purpose of the retreat: to separate oneself from the world in order to focus more fully on God and thus gain new strength and insight to re-engage in ministry with the world.

GOALS FOR THE RETREAT:

- to commune with God via spiritual disciplines and
- commune with one's inner self via the disciplines and
- interact with one's faith story and the faith stories of others

FAITH FOCUS:

The Bible is full of stories of retreat, stories of persons going off the beaten paths of their lives to listen to God in a more intentional way. Perhaps the clearest example is Christ himself. Before calling the Twelve to be in his close circle of friends, he spent the night in prayer. After feeding the 5000, Jesus went off to a mountain by himself to be alone with God. And in the most grueling retreat of all, Jesus went into the desert for 40 days before his ministry, to do the tough work of trying to figure out what kind of Messiah he would be. If Jesus needed that time and intentional focus, don't we as well?

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCED PREP:

- 1 leader for every 4-5 participants
- a place with few distractions and lots of opportunities to be out in nature
- a schedule that is at least 24 hours long and provides at least two meals
- a "What to Bring" list for participants (see sample below)
- a bell or other means of gathering the participants
- one pipe cleaner for each participant
- all props for prayer stations—see Rest Stop #4
- wood, matches and tinder for a campfire
- first-aid supplies
- food for two meals and people to help prepare and serve the food
- 3 people willing to share their faith story.

DETAILED SCHEDULE (FOR LEADERS ONLY):

This is a sample schedule from the silent retreat I helped lead this last September. It is crucial that participants don't see the schedule. One way to facilitate the listening (to God) process is to help people unhook from their need to control and gain security from that control. Knowing the schedule is one way of controlling your environment (as is talking). So only your leaders should know the schedule.

Tentative Schedule for the Faith and Discipleship Retreat, Fall 04

Saturday, September 18

11:20 am	Drivers arrive at Hesston College to start helping students load.
11:40 am	Everyone leaves from the designated parking lot.
12:10 pm	Arrival at Family Camp. Instructions for where to unload.
12:40 pm	Meet in central lodge for orientation and pipe cleaner activity. At the end of the pipe cleaner activity, take watches away from participants.
2:00 pm	Go into silence.
5:30 pm	Cooks prepare supper.
6 pm	Ring a bell that calls people to supper. We eat in silence while one of the leaders tells his/her story. I remind students not to go to bed until after the next bell and that activity.
8:30 pm	Leaders build fire at campfire site.
9 pm	Ring bell that gathers group which goes as a group to the campfire. Leaders need flashlights. At campfire, a leader tells her/his story and I tell people they can go to the lodge for late night snacks and then to bed—in silence.
8 am	Wake up bell, and cooks work on breakfast.
8:30 am	Breakfast. Leader tells story. After the story, students are told that they have only 15 minutes more of silence. They are to use this as a transition time. They are to think about what they might want to say in a small group setting.
9:30 am	Ring bell that brings group together. Break silence. Go into groups of 4-5 people for half-hour to 45 minutes.
10:15 am	Ring bell for whole group. Meet in central lodge and do the pipe cleaner activity again.
11:30 am	Clean up of lodge and cabins.
12:00 noon	Depart for school.

SPECIAL RECOMMENDED FEATURES OF RETREAT:

The Pipe Cleaner Activity

Most people come to a retreat with “baggage.” There are reasons, valid reasons, why they don’t want to be there. Others may not have negative feelings about being there, but may have expectations that are unrealistic or even scary for them. So a good beginning activity involves letting people share their “stuff.”

Direct the group to sit in a circle around a table that has a candle and tablecloth on it. Welcome them officially to the retreat and explain to them that each one of them probably brings some emotions or attitudes to this retreat. Have them think about the true feelings they bring to this retreat. Give examples of this “baggage,” such as

- I have too much homework to be here all weekend.
- This had better be good because I’m missing a lot of things (people) back home.
- What if everyone else has a wonderful experience with God and I don’t?
- I’m scared because I don’t know what to expect.

- I'm so stressed out and just don't want to be here.

Give every person one or two pipe cleaners. Instruct the group to shape their pipe cleaners into a symbol of their feelings, whatever they bring to the retreat. Let them work in silence. When everyone is finished, ask people to take turns sharing what their symbol means and then place that symbol on the table. Here are some important tips for facilitating this time of sharing:

- Be non-anxious about the amount of sharing and participation. Before this retreat, be in prayer about your own agenda, which probably includes wanting everyone to share and experience God deeply, so that you look good as a leader. Make sure that you can face worst-case scenarios for any part of this retreat, including this pipe cleaner activity. If nobody shares, will that truly be okay with you? It needs to be.
- Don't be the first one to share, nor should the other leaders be the first ones to share. You and the other leaders may start taking your turns at sharing after about half of the other participants have shared.
- Don't ask people to share in any certain order; don't go around the circle.
- Be comfortable with up to 5-7 minutes of silence. Practice being comfortable with long periods of silence. Don't rescue people by your own talking.
- Don't stare at people when they share, but give them a look of encouragement after they have shared, if appropriate.
- Don't be shocked by anything.

When most or all have shared, gather the group around the table. Hold up some of the pipe cleaners and pray that God would accept the baggage that the group brings. Send the group into silence.

Repeat the pipe cleaner experience at the end of the retreat. After reflecting on their experience with God, the participants reshape their pipe cleaners into a new symbol. Everyone has a chance to share what the symbol means and how he or she experienced God. End in a closing prayer.

JOB DESCRIPTION FOR LEADERS:

Retreat leaders are caring adults who spend much of the retreat time just "being there." They provide a model for being non-anxious about the silence (or other disciplines you are practicing) and they are good listeners if a person needs to break silence because of a spiritual crisis. Their specific jobs include

- hanging out in silence with the youth
- being available if something needs to be done
- telling their faith story (3 of them)
- facilitating a small group

SMALL GROUP LEADER SUGGESTIONS:

- There are no hard and fast rules here. Be intuitive, listening to the Spirit. Even if the group doesn't talk much, very good things are still probably happening. The number one thing for us is to be okay ourselves with silence. We need to look in the face of our own need to look like a good leader and take care of that fear before we start.

- That being said, at the beginning of the meeting, tell them this is a time to debrief the retreat so far and tell a part of their own faith story if they want to. Remind them that what is said in this group is confidential and it is always okay to pass (or not share anything).
- It might be good just to ask what they have been experiencing throughout the retreat. Let them debrief and ask questions about whatever experience they have had. One good beginning question might be, "If you could use one word to describe the last 19 hours of silence, what would that word be?"
- Are there stories from one of the leaders that they would like to talk about and relate to their own story? A sample question would be, "Which of the stories did you relate the most to? Why? Which did you relate the least to and why?"
- The heart of your time together now takes place. This is the time they can share (if they want) about a part of their faith story. It doesn't have to be a positive experience. It doesn't have to be dramatic. "Is there a part of your faith story that you would like to share? Where have you seen God at work in your life? If you did not yet get a chance to tell your faith story, share a part of it now."
- Remember that it's important to let whatever needs to happen, happen. If you are okay and non-anxious about silence, that will open doors for them to feel more free to talk.

SAMPLE LETTER OF INVITATION FOR LEADERS:

Dear Friends,

It's that time of year—time for the Faith and Discipleship Spiritual Retreat. I'm writing to ask if you would be interested in helping lead the retreat this fall. The dates are September 18 and 19 (a Saturday after lunch until late morning on Sunday). We spend the night at the Presbyterian Family Camp (on Ridge Road—30 minutes away).

Some of you participated last year and some of you have never done this retreat, so let me give a brief explanation. The participants are students in my Faith and Discipleship class. They will be in the middle of studying different spiritual disciplines. One important spiritual discipline is silence. We will practice silence during this weekend. For most of the time, your job is just to be there—available if students need someone to talk to (if they crash and burn). Toward the end, we talk about our experiences in a small group format. Each of you would be a small group leader. Three stories are also shared over the meal times and at campfire. You may share your story at one of these times while the rest sit in silence.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS:

- 19 hours of silence (some of that is sleeping)
- beautiful nature
- wonderful quiet
- a cross in the middle of the woods for you to nail your stuff to
- sacred stories

Last year I had too many planned activities. They were good things to do, but if you provide too many planned activities, the youth will avoid the "silence." Even good things can keep us

from listening to God.

I would like each of you to be a leader. Please feel free to say no if you have other things going or just can't. But also please feel very welcomed to join us.

SAMPLE EVALUATION FORM FOR RETREAT:

**Spiritual Retreat Evaluation Form
Fall 2004**

Our goals for this retreat were to:

- commune with God and
- commune with our inner selves and
- interact with our faith story and the faith stories of others

How did the following activities help you accomplish the above goals? 1 is not helpful at all and 10 is very helpful.

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. Pipe cleaner activity in the beginning
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 2. 19 hours of silence
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 3. Faith stories told during the silence
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 4. Given permission to nap
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. Having access to nature
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Prayer stations on the path
Comments? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 7. Small group time on Sunday | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |

Comments?

8. Closing pipe cleaner activity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments?

9. Other? _____ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments?

1. The best thing about this retreat was

2. If I could change one thing about the retreat, it would be

SAMPLE "WHAT TO BRING" LIST FOR PARTICIPANETS

**Spiritual Retreat Evaluation Form
Fall 2004**

Place: Presbyterian Family Camp, Phone: 316-263-0248

Dates: Saturday and Sunday, September 18-19

Departure: 11:35 am, Saturday from Bontrager parking lot. You are to eat brunch at the cafeteria (boarding students only) at 11:00 am. We will return Sunday in time for lunch at 12:30 PM.

Leaders:

- Name all the leaders

Participants:

- Name all the participants

What to wear:

- Casual clothes—blue jeans, anything that is comfortable outdoors and in the woods
- shoes to walk in
- Sweatshirt or sweater for being outside at night

What to bring:

- Clothes, toothbrushes, and the stuff you need for hygiene (showers are available)
- Sleeping bag and pillow (sleeping on mattresses on the floor or in bunk beds)
- Bible
- Notebook or journal
- Your spiritual pilgrimage (outline of your faith story)

What not to bring:

- homework
- Walkman
- Radio, etc

Transportation:

Give transportation details

So, in some ways, it's a little hard to appreciate the metaphor of God as a rock. Oh, I know that you can also think of a rock as big and immobile and something that could become a strong fortress for us in times of trouble. And yes, I do want to experience God as a fortress in times of trouble. Of course. I want that mighty boulder that shields me from the wind and the flooding, that massive rock that keeps me high above my enemies.

Yes. Yes I do.

But does God fit the metaphor of a pebble in my shoe? Can God be found in the small, inconsequential parts of my day, the little routines and conversations that are like so many stones along the path? While not taking away from the wonderful imagery of God as a mighty mountain of stone, I wonder if it would help my relationship with God, if God might also be—a small gray stone. Something I might overlook if I'm not careful. Something that at the time might seem completely unimportant. Something ordinary and gray.

Something I might stub my toe on.

REST STOP #4: Prayer Stations

The following suggestions may be used for your own prayer time with God or as an interactive prayer activity for a spiritual retreat.

Prayer stations are interactive prayer rituals. Participants follow instructions found in folder. Since no leader is needed, the prayer stations can be done at any time. For retreats, prayer stations should be encouraged, but left as optional activities.

These prayer stations work well at a retreat setting.

- 1 *"Letting Go."* Participants are encouraged to name their worries and anxieties. They throw a rock into a tub of water (or a natural body of water) as a way to give these worries over to God. I use a poem found on page 91 from the book *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church*, Jonny Baker and Doug Gay, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.

- 2 *"Hurts."* Participants write or draw on paper hurts that have been part of their lives. This includes both hurts committed against them and hurts they have inflicted on others. They throw these hurts into a wastebasket. I use the poem from prayer station 4 from *The Prayer Path: A Christ-Centered Labyrinth Experience*, Jonny Baker, Steve Collins and Kevin Draper, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2000. Note that I don't use the stations as part of a labyrinth per se, but take the various stations and do my own thing with them.
 - 3 *"Others."* Participants light candle as they pray for people in their lives. I use the poem from prayer station 10 from *The Prayer Path*.
 - 4 *"Plant a Seed."* Participants read and reflect on the environment and God's care for all creation. They plan a seed, as a reminder of their role in caring for the earth and co-creating with God. I use the poem from prayer station 9 from *The Prayer Path*.
 - 5 *"Identity."* Participants read about false identities and finding our true identities in God. They sift through sand to find a biblical promise from God that concerns who they are in God. I use the poem on page 75-76 in *Alternative Worship*.
 - 6 *"Impressions."* participants place their feet in sand as they contemplate the difference they have made in the world. What influence do they have? What impressions will they leave behind? I use the poem on pages 71-72 in *Alternative Worship*.
 - 7 *"Distractions."* Participants discover how magnets can "fool" a compass by giving it a false north. Then they reflect on the "false norths" in their lives that keep them from focusing on God, the "true north." I use the poem from station 5 in *The Prayer Path*.
- "The Cross."** Participants reflect on Jesus and the cross, They write their sins on pieces of paper and nail them to the cross. I use this poem as the instructions for this station.

THE CROSS

Before you stands a cross.

Not The Cross—not necessarily old and rugged either.

But you know what these two pieces of wood, nailed together, mean.

They speak of another nailing,

a nailing of two hands and two feet.

The boards and hammer speak of great anguish.

Great love.

As you come to the cross today,

What do you need to do?

Are there things you could write down ...

then nail down ...
to this old, rugged cross?

What sins of yours helped drive the nails in?
Those same sins can be forgiven—and nailed
to their death.

WORKS CITED:

Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church, Jonny Baker and Doug Gay, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.

The Prayer Path: A Christ-Centered Labyrinth Experience, Jonny Baker, Steve Collins and Kevin Draper, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2000.