

Protagonist Corner

A Holy Exhaustion

Joe Phelps

Highland Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky

The invitation to write this column comes at a poignant time: After 42 years of preaching, I will soon hang up my pulpit robe. I took my first church job while barely old enough to buy a bottle of wine and have been serving the Church ever since, half of those years with a dynamic, liberating, “thinking, feeling, healing community of faith.” I cannot imagine a more full, meaningful life.

But in the last year, I began to notice that, like an aging cell phone, I was no longer able to hold a charge. My battery was depleted in a way that no vacation, retreat, spiritual direction, or sabbatical could recharge. Gone was that particular mix of energies necessary to pastor and preach and cast a vision as I had done for decades with great joy and confidence. I had anticipated serving a few more years until the culturally accepted age of 65. That age is arbitrary, of course, and wise friends assured me I’d know when it was time to quit.

They were right. When one’s battery no longer recharges, it is crystal clear. John O’Donohue nails the feeling in *To One Who Is Exhausted*:

Things you could take in your stride before now become increasingly laborious events of will. Weariness invades your spirit. Gravity begins falling inside you, dragging down every bone. The tide you never valued has gone out. And you are marooned on unsure ground.¹

It happens. The weekly output. The desire to help people see or feel or revere life and to frame a sermon in ways that speak to both youth and to PhD’s in a single sermon takes practice, dexterity, experimentation, imitation, concentration. It also takes courage to fail and to try again as we slowly, painstakingly find our preaching voices. Seth Godin says,

We become original through practice. We’ve seduced ourselves into believing that the this sort of breakthrough springs fully formed, as Athena did from Zeus’ head. Alas, that’s a myth. What always happens (as you can discover by looking at the early work of anyone you admire) is that she practiced her way into it.²

Over decades this practice, practice, practice becomes exhausting. Yes, God is with us, which gives us a base level of assurance and energy. But to stand behind the sacred desk week in and week out, in season and out, through congregational conflicts, 9-11, elections, Charlottesville, and personal crises, and to consistently proclaim a gospel of peace with conviction? To preach your heart out?

Only gradually am I able to accept this depletion as a kind of holy exhaustion. Even if part of the reason why we preachers put so much into our sermons is our fear of failure or to assuage our ego (and who among us could deny these realities), we

also preach our hearts out— our deepest convictions and intuitions and insights and experiences in walking with God—out of a desire to share God’s abundance.

Being exhausted after having done the sacred work that was ours to do, and in spite of our flaws and failures, is to enter the liberating joy of Sabbath. Sabbath invites gratitude—to God, yes, but also to God through God’s ambassadors within the community of this *Journal For Preachers* readership. Thank you, scholars and students of the craft of preaching. You remind local church pastors that we are not alone. You give us language and cadence to frame our preaching in ever helpful ways. May you continue to explore and experiment with the craft of preaching God’s gospel. Be brave and don’t let today’s forms of preaching limit how God leads you in your proclamation tomorrow.

Thank you, voracious collaters of culture and theology and history and everything else. As a pastor of an increasingly complex congregation, I couldn’t keep pace with your reading log, so I counted on you to mine journals like this one and all the others. Generalists of my ilk need you to notice and distill and nuance and highlight and connect what we differently-gifted preachers can’t or don’t or won’t take time to discover. Throughout my ministry I have relied on my preaching friends who read more deeply and saw more clearly and simply spent more time than I in books and journals. Blessed are you.

I trust that generalists like me complete the scholars’ service to God by turning their insights into words and acts of love at the most local level. In other words, deep readers, the body of Christ needs you. To borrow a popular greeting offered to those in uniform, “Thank you for your service.”

I am grateful to the many generalists who peruse the sermons in this journal, especially the ones from well-known preachers or based on an upcoming text or one with a catchy story. We silently vow to go back and read them. Our spirit is willing.

But an opinion piece titled “Protagonist’s Corner” sounds lighter, less theological, perhaps more entertaining than challenging. These are my people. We were the Boy Scouts who thumbed past the articles in *Boy’s Life* and went straight to the jokes on the last page (and we still recite some of them). We are the activists who try to peruse the dense articles in *Sojourners* but *always* read Ed Spivey’s *Hrmmp* on the last page. We play a role too; we keep it real.

I once aspired to be more serious and scholarly, more distinguished and reverent. It didn’t last long. I am who I am, by God’s grace. Which is true for each of you preachers. We have one of life’s consuming calls: to let God take who we are and to preach our hearts out.

Notes

1 John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 125.

2 Seth Godin’s Blog on marketing, tribes, and respect, November 29, 2017.