



Practicing another way of being

One of the sacrifices my family made for me when I was a child was to get a piano. It was a huge old upright that took up nearly an entire wall of the dining room in our small house. “Will you practice if we spend the money on piano lessons?” Oh, yes! Because I thought “practice” meant “play the piano.” I didn’t know yet that ‘practice’ was an entirely different creature – scales and theory and drills and finger exercises – and that “playing” would be limited to nonsense ditties that contained no more than four notes.

I would open the hymnbook and gaze longingly at “Amazing Grace” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” determined to play real music, but all I accomplished was something more like real noise. The only way I mustered the discipline to sit on that bench each afternoon to plunk and plod my way through what didn’t sound like music was that I wasn’t fond of the alternative, which was to be in the barn feeding animals and milking the cows.

I did improve as a piano player, but I never became what I thought of as a pianist. I was quick to tell people I wasn’t good enough to play in a recital or to accompany them when they wanted to sing. They insisted I was being too humble, but what they didn’t know was that ego and pride were the real culprits. I only wanted to do what I was good at doing, and I wanted to be good from the very start. Fortunately I haven’t let that philosophy rule my entire life or I would be missing out on a lot of great experiences. I’m still surprised, though, by how often a sense of whether or not I’ll be “successful” at something determines whether or not I leap in. Even something I really want to do can fall prey to this inner judgment and caution.

On Tuesday, God willing, I will begin a six-week sabbatical. With the support of a community who makes it possible, I will head out – and in – to rest, and listen and practice another way of being. I am cautiously excited about standing apart for 40 days, but I wonder – will I be any good at it? Will I be able to relax into having no schedule, no goals, no preordained purpose? Will I be able to “sit down at the piano,” face the reality that I don’t really know what I’m doing, and just practice?

What exactly would “success” look like with something like this? I’m attracted to these words of Jesus, read yesterday in our noon chapel prayer time:

Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God... Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don’t fuss with their appearance – but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don’t you think God will attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God’s giving.... Steep yourself in God-reality.

(Luke 12, The Message)

That’s what I hope to practice – steeping myself in God-reality. I couldn’t ask for a better starting place for my next becoming.



Kayla McClurg
Inward/outward
The Church of the Savior
Washington, DC

This piece first appeared May 17, 2008, in Saturdays, part of the inward/outward Web site.