

Acedia in the Workplace

BY ALVIN UNG

His desire to quit was so overwhelming that all he could do was to go to work, one day at a time, and pray for help. Unwittingly Alvin Ung was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, he was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace.

Naomi, a protagonist in the book of Ruth, was probably afflicted by *acedia*. The widow returned to Bethlehem after a sojourn in Moab that stripped her of family, fortune, and faith. “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty,” she told her neighbors (Ruth 1:21a). Call me Bitter, she said. *Acedia* has a way of turning delight into drudgery.

Acedia is the occupational hazard for people who have tasked themselves to do something important over the long haul. This includes the novelist, scientist, or homemaker. Any of us might hit a season in our life when we find ourselves stuck doing something stunningly unproductive – like gorging on potato chips and playing Angry Birds for hours on end while trying to complete a Ph.D dissertation. The next day we resolve to do better but we cannot stop berating ourselves for yesterday’s squandered hours. Our confidence gone, we loathe the prospect of facing that stalled paragraph, the failed experiment, or the unrelenting household duties. Days go by. Output crawls. Crushing guilt settles in. Describing a phenomenon that sociologist Hans Zetterberg calls “scientific *acedia*,” Ragnar Granit, the 1967 Nobel Prize winner in Physiology, has observed: “*Acedia* appears slowly and affects at first the [scientist’s] general state of well-being.... In time, all his work appears to have been deficient.”¹

Today, *acedia*, a spiritual condition first described and named by fourth-century contemplative monks and hermits, has coalesced into an unnamed ennui that plagues entrepreneurs, employees, and the unemployed. Low-grade *acedia* reveals itself in the form of perpetual dissatisfaction.

As an executive coach, I once met a Christian man who was excited to join a new company. But one month later he told me that he was “heartsick.” His peers were advancing; he was not. Despite his considerable skills and financial acumen, he was not given plum assignments that led to a promotion. So I was grateful when, one day, he told me he was going overseas to represent the country as a negotiator. “How did it go?” I asked him when he returned. Instead of talking about his work and contributions, he lamented about the woes of the winter wind and how homesick he felt. My client reminded me of those opening lines of the children’s classic *The Phantom Tollbooth* that describe Milo, a grade-school boy, as he mopes about in his bedroom:

There was once a boy named Milo who didn’t know what to do with himself – not just sometimes, but always.

When he was in school he longed to be out, and when he was out he longed to be in. On the way he thought about coming home, and coming home he thought about going. Wherever he was he wished he were somewhere else, and when he got there he wondered why he’d bothered. Nothing really interested him – least of all the things that should have.²

The paradox is that the busiest people and the most slothful people feel the same way as Milo: apathetic and restless. The slothful may be interested in doing something of great consequence but they do not do it, while the busiest do a great many things but these things hold no great consequence. So whether we are lazy or hardworking, our daily work begins to feel like the diabolical tasks Milo and his friends had to do in the *Phantom Tollbooth*: moving a huge pile of sand from one spot to another by using tweezers; digging a hole into a cliff by using a needle; or emptying a well by using an eye dropper. *Acedia* makes us hate our work. And we respond to that hatred by doing nothing to change the circumstances or ourselves.

In his introduction to early monasticism, William Harmless explores the “two-pronged attack” that *acedia* wages on the human self. He quotes the desert father Evagrius of Pontus, who describes it as

an entangled struggle of hate and desire. For the listless one hates whatever is in front of him and desires what is not there. And the more desire drags the monk down, the more hate chases him out of his cell.³

The classics of Christian spirituality, from Evagrius of Pontus to John Cassian to Teresa of Avila, agree on this: if we truly desire to grow in Christlikeness, we will encounter *acedia*. This also applies for any Christian who sees work as an arena for spiritual formation. Jesus worked; so do we. Jesus faced the temptations of the desert; so will we. So how do we face *acedia*? One clue can be found in that famous story from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, or sayings of the desert fathers: “In Scetis a brother went to Moses

to ask him for advice. He said to him, 'Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.'"⁴

When I first read this, I wondered to myself: what prompted Abba Moses, a man known for his hospitality and humility, to respond so tersely to a young man who had braved a dangerous desert trek to seek a word of wisdom? There was no warm welcome, no invitation to meditate on Scripture, not even a cup of cool water. But Abba Moses knew better. The old man saw through the young man's heart and discerned the only necessary thing: remain.

The young man, like other desert Christians in the fourth century, had discerned his primary goal in life: to seek union with God in all of life. The outward expression of that goal was to remain in his cell to pray and work. That, too, is a worthwhile calling for all of us. I believe that we are all called to discern an essential question of discipleship: what is my cell, and in what way is the Lord calling me to remain there, and for how long?

The cell is the place where we encounter God. It is a place of struggle, temptation, and joy. It is the place where Jacob wrestled with an angel in the cover of darkness. It is the high position where Daniel and Joseph were called to serve despotic rulers in oppressive regimes. It is the lowly field where Ruth gleaned for her mother-in-law, and where Boaz the entrepreneur showed compassion toward the widow. It is the place where, like Jacob, we discover God, are touched by him, and learn that we walk with a limp.

How long do we remain in our cell? It may be for a season, or it may be for a lifetime. The boundaries between a prayer cell and a prison cell are quite porous, just like work and worship, which share the same Hebrew word for service, "avodah."

There was a season during my theological studies at Regent College in Vancouver when I felt the longing to be a monk. Inspired by Kathleen Norris's book *Cloister Walk*, I visited a nearby Benedictine monastery whenever I could.⁵ Eventually I became convinced that my deeper longing—more than becoming a monk (a fruitless thought since I was happily married)—was to keep company with God through a rhythm of prayer and work. That was my aspiration; it became my cell.

Years later, back in Malaysia, I would be sorely tested. I took on a job for which I had few skills and little experience: I was tasked to implement the

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best leadership development practices in twenty large Asian companies – all at once. There was a day I felt so overwhelmed by anxiety that I sat at my table and blanked out. When I came to my senses, hours had passed by. Every day I was tempted to quit. *Acedia* set in. And yet, Abba Moses spoke to me from across the desert of Egypt to the tropics of Malaysia. His voice, God’s voice, was gentle but firm: remain.

My desire to quit was so overwhelming that all I could do was to go to work, one day at a time, and pray for help. Unwittingly I was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, I was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace. Each time I stepped through the glass doors of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, I had the uncanny feeling that I was stepping into a monk’s cell. I began to see that everyone I worked with, including my ornery boss, was made in the image of God. I forged allies. I found friends. Angels appeared. Three angels, a Malay man, an Australian woman, and a Chinese man, embedded themselves in my team and together we achieved things beyond belief. Our work ended up being chronicled in books and an MBA case study. All these lessons – of spirituality, resilience, friendship, and teamwork – would never have emerged if I had not remained. (There is a time for us to move on. I did quit that job later on. As a principle, a good time to move on is when we are free from the desperate urge to run away.)

While *acedia* is a spiritual malady, I have found wise counsel from psychologists, brain scientists, and leadership experts in managing low-grade *acedia*. The work done by Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly on “flow,” Angela Lee Duckworth on “grit,” Tony Schwartz on “energy,” and the Heath brothers, Daniel Pink, and my mentor George Kohlrieser offer tools and perspectives⁶ that can help us walk into our offices with the eyes of the Psalmist: “I am sure I shall see the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living” (Psalms 27:13).⁷

Because *acedia* distorts life and deadens our senses, it is only in the fullness of time that we realize our perspective is faulty. In the opening chapter of the book of Ruth, Naomi convinced herself that she went away full and came back empty. But in reality she went away empty, for there was a famine in the land, and she came back full, blessed with a courageous daughter-in-law whose marriage to Boaz resulted in the birth of a king and a Messiah in their family line. As Naomi shows us, when we remain in God in the midst of full-blown *acedia*, we are inexorably journeying to God from emptiness to fullness.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Hans L. Zetterberg, “Scientific *Acedia*,” *Sociological Focus* 1:1 (Autumn 1967), 34-44, here citing 30.

2 Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011 [Yearling, 1961]), 9.

3 William Harmless, S. J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 325.

4 Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christians Monks*, 2.9 (New York, Penguin Books, 2003), 10.

5 Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

6 See, for example, Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly, *Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003); Angela Duckworth's numerous professional articles on perseverance, and her "get your grit score" survey at www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/ (accessed August 12, 2013); Tony Schwartz's "The Energy Project" at www.theenergyproject.com (accessed August 12, 2013); Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Things Are Hard* (New York: Crown Business, 2010) and *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (New York: Crown Business, 2013); Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011); and George Kohlrieser, *Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006) and *Dare to Care: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

7 This translation is from The Taizé Community chant "I Am Sure I Shall See," copyright © 2006, Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France.



ALVIN UNG

is a facilitator, executive coach, and author in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.