

Staying Put to Get Somewhere

BY DENNIS OKHOLM

We believe the “grass is greener” in another marriage or church or vocation or place, but often it is the same hue. What is worse, we remain the same. Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run (which is precisely what the ancients associated with *acedia*—a cowardly running away).

The vice of *acedia* is paradoxical. What is commonly referred to as “sloth”¹ manifests itself as what we would expect—laziness. This is because *acedia* is properly characterized as a weariness of the soul, indifference, a listlessness, an inability to concentrate on the task at hand.² But because of these same characteristics *acedia* can also “mask itself in fervid but misdirected activity.”³ The soul sleeps while the body is in motion.

The fifth-century monastic, John Cassian, described this restless side of the vice that can disguise itself as virtuous activism with the example of a Martha-like monk who has become resentful of the community in which he finds himself:

...the same malady [*acedia*] suggests that he should dutifully pay his respects to the brothers and visit the sick, whether at a slight distance or *further away*. It also prescribes certain pious and religious tasks: Those relatives male and female should be looked after, and he should hasten to bring his greetings to them more often; it would be a great and pious work to make frequent visits to that religious woman who is vowed to God and who, in particular, is totally deprived of her relatives’ support, and a very holy thing to bring whatever might be necessary to one who was abandoned and disdained by her own relatives. On such things it behooves him to expend his pious efforts rather than to remain, barren and having made no progress, in his cell.⁴

The ancients realized, just as we do in the case of other deadly sins, that we can easily justify sloth's "pious" activity – not just with a full calendar on our iPhones, but, as Cassian documented, even with Scripture. After all, Jesus declared that his food was to *do* the will of the Father and finish his work (John 4:34), and then admonished his disciples to be the kind of people whom God approves, namely, those who *work* for the food that has eternal significance (John 6:27).⁵

Sadly, this rationalized behavior is not restricted to monks of the early church, but is repeated by contemporary pastors. One study found that while 65% of the pastors surveyed said they worked fifty or more hours a week, 52% indicated that they spent only one to six hours in prayer each week and 5% reported they spent no time at all in prayer.⁶ As one researcher put it, "These people tend to be driven by a sense of a duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7."⁷ As a result, one ordained minister, Peter Scazzero, advocates Sabbath-keeping and the rhythm of interrupting work with the daily office that he learned from Trappist monks: "But the insight I gained from the Trappists is that being too 'busy' is an impediment to one's relationship with God."⁸ The toll that *acedia's* commitment to tasks takes on a pastor's prayer life is devastating, not only for the pastor, but also for the congregation.

Perhaps pastors are simply caught up in the larger culture that finds it difficult to stay put. We seem to be always on the move, geographically, vocationally, and relationally. One out of nine of us move every year; the typical tenure with our current employer lasts about four years; and the average length of a first marriage is eight years.⁹

Like Cassian's monk who "makes a great deal of far-off and distant monasteries" that are surely more conducive to spiritual progress and occupied by brethren who are more pleasant and holy,¹⁰ we are much like a class of monks that Benedict describes in the first chapter of his *Rule* – *gyrovagues*. The word combines Latin for "circle" and Greek for "wander." In other words, these fellows were moving around in circles. They roamed from abbey to abbey, their tenure lasting three or four days, leaving before the demands of the newly joined community might benefit them in their conversion. Benedict's description of them sounds too familiar: "Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites."¹¹

We modern-day *gyrovagues* believe the "grass is greener" in *another* marriage or church or vocation or geographical location. The trouble is that it often turns out to be about the same hue. But it is not just that the hue remains the same; *we* remain the same. Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run (which is precisely what the ancients associated with *acedia* – a cowardly running away).

In fact, the oft-repeated monastic mantra to combat the restlessness of *acedia* is to "stay in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." As Gabriel Bunge interprets it, "The temptation of bodily vagabondage is the

tangible manifestation of that fundamental evil which undermines any spiritual life: the vagabondage of thoughts. The anchorite therefore settles his body in his cell and his thoughts in remembering God.”¹² Or, in terms of one of the three Benedictine vows, she is to practice “stability.”¹³

“Stability of place” is much like a marriage vow. Monks and couples promise to stay with the same people for the rest of their lives. They may not always be in the same geographical location for various reasons, but like a GPS “home” are always led back to the same community. Stability is premised on the conviction that God places us in *particular* constellations of people so that we can speak to and hear from each other what is needed for our mutual growth into Christlikeness.

But it means more than simply remaining in place. We can live and work with the same people for years without being fully invested in their lives—or our own. Stability requires attentiveness—paying attention to those with whom we share common space and time. It means persevering in listening (the first word in the *Rule of St. Benedict*).

I am often reminded of this when I see nearly every one of my students walking down the hallway after class preoccupied with a text or a tweet, missing the opportunity to continue practicing community with those who experienced the same class session for the past hour. We are captives of a technologically-enabled, consumer-driven, efficiency-minded, instant-results-oriented culture that even infects our church life with the need for high-decibel ratings and entertaining homilies, lest we become bored and move to the next church down the street.

And that is part of the problem. We *do* have options “down the street.” And the options are distracting and numbing. When I was in college we had one television on our floor that broadcast programs by major networks. If we wanted to watch a program we had to gather at the network-determined time and watch

together. Now college students (and everyone else) can watch what they want, when they want. We even have choices among the array of devices that enable us to have these choices! Perhaps more revealing of the options available to us is the fact that the average American supermarket carried 9000 product choices in 1976 but now carries nearly 49,000! A stroll down the cereal aisle provides empirical confirmation of this proliferation of choice.

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The significance of this for our concerns about *acedia* and its effects on our communally shaped spiritual lives can be discerned from a study of three Chicago area communities that evolved from few choices and deep community life in the 1950s to a plethora of choices and a paucity of community life in the 1980s. No longer were the inhabitants of these communities confined to shop at the local stationer, eat at the Main Street café, or walk to the parish church. Now they could drive miles away to an office supply store with cheaper prices and more selection, travel to a chain restaurant, and journey twenty miles each Sunday to the suburban mega-church. While there are advantages to having such choices, the author, Alan Ehrenhalt, lamented that now most of what we do on a daily basis resembles channel surfing, “marked by a numbing and seemingly endless progression from one option to the next, all without the benefit of a chart, logistical or moral, because there are simply too many choices and no one to help sort them out. We have nothing to insulate ourselves against the perpetual temptation to try one more choice, rather than to live with what is on the screen in front of us.”¹⁴

These kinds of diversions that distract us from our full participation in the context and community into which God has placed us leave us empty. As Michael Casey puts it, “There is no one at home in us except the flickering images we receive from outside.”¹⁵ Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony Bloom suggests an experiment by which we can become aware of this spiritual condition:

[S]ettle down in your room at a moment when you have nothing else to do. Say “I am now with myself,” and just sit with yourself. After an amazingly short time you will most likely feel bored. This teaches us one very useful thing. It gives us insight into the fact that if after ten minutes of being alone with ourselves we feel like that, it is no wonder that others should feel equally bored! Why is this so? It is so because we have so little to offer to our own selves as food for thought, for emotion and for life. If you watch your life carefully you will discover quite soon that we hardly ever live from within outwards; instead we respond to incitement, to excitement. In other words, we live by reflection, by reaction.... We are completely empty, we do not act from within ourselves but accept as our life a life which is actually fed in from outside; we are used to things happening which compel us to do other things. How seldom can we live simply by means of the depth and the richness we assume that there is within ourselves.¹⁶

We need to remain confined to one “cell” of a church or marriage or vocation long enough for the depth and richness Bloom speaks of to take root. And here then is the other paradoxical nature of *acedia*: the remedy for the listless soul is to stay put. Change *can* be good, but often it can leave us untethered, uncentered, disoriented, and confused. When it comes to *acedia*, to get somewhere we need to remain where God has put us.

In other words (that is, in the words of ancient monks), to combat sloth one must cultivate *hypomone*—perseverance. This is not grit-your-teeth determination, but patient endurance motivated by a charitable disposition. Cassian links this virtue to two others in the contest against sloth: *zeal* in serving the Lord and others, and *courage* that is developed through one's own labor (to counter the cowardice that causes us to run).¹⁷

It is the mundane routine of the daily office, fulfilling the quotidian tasks of everyday existence, following the "schedule," and returning day after day to the same place (such as a workplace) and community (such as workmates or spouse or family) that provides the specifics for *hypomone*.

Returning day after day to the same "cell" has a way of turning us (literally *converting* us) little by little into someone different. For instance, I have been placed into a community of people whom I might not have chosen if it had been up to me. Every semester I inhabit a classroom of students who enrolled in my class because it fit their schedules, but I remind them in my attendance policy that it is essential for them to be present and fully engaged because what they say or hear might have an impact on each one of our lives.

Living with these people changes me if I remain intentional and attentive in my relationships with them. This is because spiritual formation takes place in community (Ephesians 4:11-16). Left to my own, I am tempted by pride and self-delusion; but character traits such as obedience, charity, and humility can only be formed in the presence of other people. It is difficult—if not impossible—to obey someone, love others, and be humble when you are the only person around. That is one reason why Benedict called the *coenobium* (or monastic community) a "school for the Lord's service"—the place where one can learn the skill of living as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

It is difficult to do better than Michael Casey in describing how living in community functions as a change agent in our lives:

When God sets about purifying a human being, the process is accomplished in large measure by human agents. This is because the components of our being which block our receptivity to grace are the very blemishes which other people find ugly. The negative reactions of others serve as a mirror in which we can see reflected those deformations of character against which we need to struggle. The pain we experience in being rejected

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acts as a purge to motivate us to make ourselves more genuinely lovable. Any advance in this direction has the automatic effect of increasing our openness to the action of God.¹⁸

Maintaining *hypomone* in these contexts is difficult. We would like to run. But the problem with the *gyrovague* that Benedict detests is that he does not stay long enough in community for the vice-hiding mask to slip. It is only when we persevere in relationships that we can be known in such a way that we are confronted with the reality of our real selves and challenged to change. As Rowan Williams puts it, “the barriers of egoistic fantasy are broken by the sheer brute presence of other persons.”¹⁹

Ultimately, if we believe that by divine providence we have been placed in a community for the nurturing of our souls, then not to persevere but to flee that “cell” in a fit of restless *acedia* is also to flee God: “...one who refuses to acquiesce in the truth of others’ reactions becomes more deeply entrenched in the bitterness and recrimination and further away from love and God.”²⁰ Thomas Aquinas recognized this in the sorrow that is opposed to the “divine goodness in which love delights”: *acedia* is perhaps the purest expression of self-love, the obvious disposition behind Cassian’s description with which we began.²¹ And that is the problem with *acedia*: it is opposed to love, the queen of the virtues, which is life-altering friendship with God and those who are in communion with God. In the end, sloth is opposed to the joy of love. May we be found singing more often, not the line from the folk hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,” but anticipating the new creation when, in Charles Wesley’s words, we will be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

NOTES

1 Gabriel Bunge lists other English equivalents: repulsion, boredom, inertia, indolence, lassitude, dislike, dejection, and his preference – despondency. See Gabriel Bunge, *Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus*, translated by Anthony P. Gythiel (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 46.

2 *Ibid.*, 47.

3 Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 201.

4 *John Cassian: The Institutes*, translated by Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 10.2. My italics, given the point we will make below about fleeing. Cassian is not against work, but in this situation the resentment associated with the feverish pastoral activity he describes belies its true character, not as a manifestation of love, but as a manifestation of *acedia*.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.22. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), following Cassian’s lead, acknowledges that the laziness that *acedia* can exhibit is also justified in the minds of the slothful. See St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, translated by Henry Davis, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1950), 3.15.

6 Mark Kelly, “Lifeway Research Finds Pastors’ Long Work Hours Come at Expense of People, Ministry,” *LifeWay* (January 5, 2010), www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=LifeWay-Research-finds-pastors-long-work-hours-can-come-at-the-expense-of-people-ministry (accessed June 25, 2013).

7 Paul Vitello, “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work,” *The New York Times* (August 1,

2010), www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed June 25, 2013).

8 Quoted in Vitello, "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work."

9 See Carl Bialik, "Seven Careers in a Lifetime? Think Twice, Researchers Say," *The Wall Street Journal* (September 4, 2010), online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704206804575468162805877990.html; Rose M. Kreider and Renee Ellis, "Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2009," *Current Population Reports* (Washington, DC: U. S. Census Bureau, May 2011), www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-125.pdf; and "How Long Does the Average Marriage Last in the United States?" familylawdivorceonline.wordpress.com/2013/01/17/how-long-does-the-average-marriage-last-in-the-united-states/, (accessed on June 25, 2013).

10 Cassian, *Institutes*, 10.2.

11 *RB1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, edited by Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 1.11.

12 Bunge, *Despondency*, 68. We must be careful with our understanding of what is meant by "cell" in these contexts. Bunge points out that it is clear from the sayings of the Desert Christians and from Evagrius (a fourth-century monk who originally came up with the list of eight "thoughts" which included *acedia*) that they "visited one another gladly and frequently, above all to get advice from an older and more experienced monk" (p. 73). In fact, he points out that refusal to do this would be a sign of spiritual pride. And we would not have the stories or sayings of the Desert Christians if they had not been in some sort of community.

13 See *RB1980*, 4.78; cf. 58.9.

14 Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 272. In some ways this corresponds to the observation of Evagrius and others that *acedia* is associated with frustrated avarice or desire that can lead to anger and then despair. The deadly sins often confront us in pairs or worse.

15 Michael Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth: Saint Benedict's Teaching on Humility* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 2001 [1999]), 161.

16 Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1970), 68.

17 *John Cassian: The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 5.23, and *The Institutes*, 5:25.

18 Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth*, 207, n. 2.

19 Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St. John of the Cross* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 105.

20 Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth*, 207, n. 2.

21 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q 35, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948). Here Aquinas is interpreting *acedia* in terms of *tristitia* (sadness), two closely related vices that were originally separate entries on Evagrius's and Cassian's list of eight "thoughts," the forerunner of the list of seven capital vices or deadly sins.



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