

Acedia

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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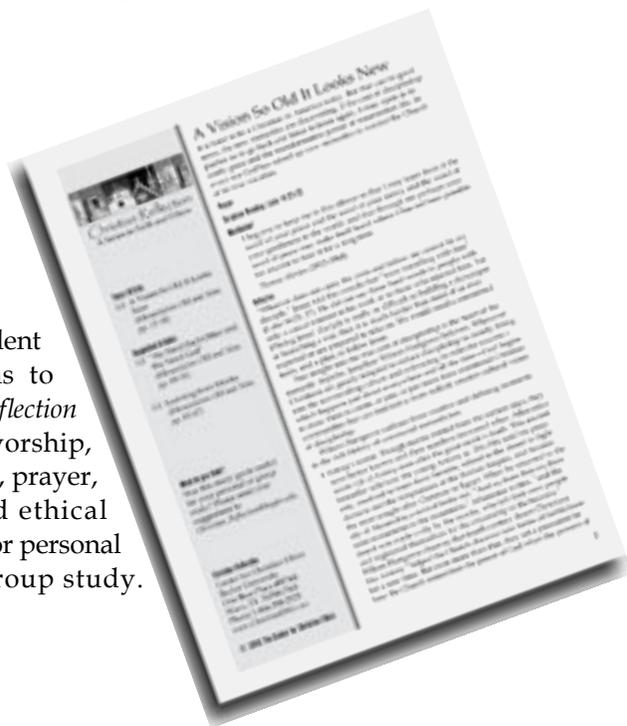
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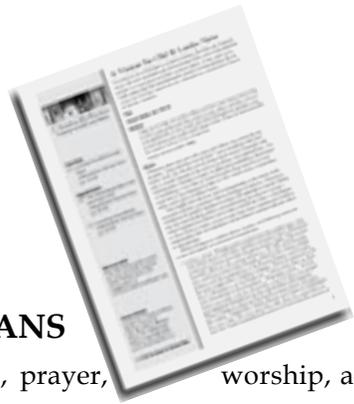
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DEPRESSION AND ACEDIA

Everyone faces *acedia* in their lives; some also face clinical depression, and it seems that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another. Depression, with the disruption it causes and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life.

STAYING PUT TO GET SOMEWHERE

We may believe the "grass is greener" in another marriage or church or vocation or place, but often it is the same hue. What is worse, when we are always seeking something new and better 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).

REMEDIES TO ACEDIA IN THE RHYTHM OF DAILY LIFE

The primary remedy for *acedia* is being faithful in the demands of daily life that God's love calls us to face. When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can rekindle the fire of God's love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.

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Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* is an engaging modern narrative of *acedia*. This saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback is enlightening not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage this vice causes, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.

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Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Despite its prevalence in our culture, *acedia* may be the least understood of the seven capital vices, or “deadly sins.” Our contributors trace its symptoms through daily life and commend remedies for it from the Christian tradition.

As Kathleen Norris has wryly observed, “*Acedia* is not a household word, unless your ‘house’ happens to be a monastery or a department of medieval literature.” Yet the spiritual carelessness that this vice connotes remains a potent, but hidden source of unhappiness in our lives. Perhaps “the word is no longer used not because the reality is obsolete but because we have stopped noticing it,” Christopher James has warned. In this issue our contributors explore the nature of this least-known capital vice (or “deadly sin”), trace its symptoms through daily life, and commend remedies for it from the Christian tradition.

“For the fourth-century Desert Christians and medieval theologians, *acedia* had a central place in the moral life and even rivaled pride as the vice with the deepest roots and most destructive power!” Rebecca DeYoung writes in *Resistance to the Demands of Love* (p. 11). But the characteristic symptoms of *acedia* that they identified—inactivity (which explains why a modern name for the vice is “sloth”) and self-distraction through bustling activity—seem like opposites. How can this be? “At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to God because of the transforming demands of his love,” DeYoung explains. “God wants to kick down the whole door to our hearts and flood us with his life; we want to keep the door partway shut so that a few lingering treasures remain untouched, hidden in the shadows.” We deploy two, dissimilar strategies to avoid the demands of love, whether human or divine: not doing what’s required of us, or pouring ourselves into something else.

The spiritual torpor that attends *acedia* (which means, literally, “lack of care”) has similarities to clinical depression, Andrew Michel notes in *In Pursuit of Sophia: On Pilgrimage with Depression and ACEDIA* (p. 26). Drawing on his clinical experience, Michel distinguishes the two conditions and weighs the resources in the Christian tradition and modern psychiatry for addressing them. “All persons will face *acedia* in their lives; some also face clinical depression, and it seems that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another,” he concludes. “Depression, with the disruption it causes and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one’s life.”

Because *acedia* so often tempts us to run away from love’s responsibilities, the tradition commends *stabilitas*, or staying put, as its primary remedy. “Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run,” Dennis Okholm points out in *Staying Put to Get Somewhere* (p. 19). *Stabilitas* “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.” Amy Freeman’s *Remedies to ACEDIA in the Rhythm of Daily Life* (p. 36) specifically explores the positive role of manual work in the remedy. She writes, “When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can enkindle the fire of God’s love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.”

Drawing on his personal experiences in the Second World War, the acclaimed novelist Evelyn Waugh plumbed the nature of *acedia* as both a personal vice and modern cultural phenomenon in *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*. What his protagonist, Guy Crouchback, “reveals about *acedia* are not just the lazy squalor or ineffective busyness that can be its symptoms, but its root in pride,” Heather Hughes observes in *An Unconditional Surrender: Evelyn Waugh on ACEDIA* (p. 45). She praises Waugh’s trilogy as “particularly enlightening—not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage that the vice can cause in people’s lives, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.”

The study of *acedia* sheds new light on some old problems. “In my pastoral experience, I have had a lot of folks tell me...they do not know if God exists, or they do not feel God’s presence, and on and on. But often the issue is not their doubt, it is their sloth,” Kyle Childress writes in *Sloth: Who Cares?* (p. 73). He has discovered that “living of the Christian life, the life of faith, is not so much about holding certain beliefs as it is actively responding to God and being willing to be formed and transformed by God’s work in us. It is about daily prayer and daily Scripture reading and every day forgiving someone and being forgiven.” *Acedia* is also a common threat in one’s career. When Alvin Ung was overwhelmed by work responsibilities, “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,” he reports in *ACEDIA in the*

Workplace (p. 77). “Unwittingly I was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, I was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace.”

While the theological dimensions of this vice may be neglected in recent art, Heidi Hornik explains in *Intimate Separation* (p. 56), the “all-too-common analogue of *acedia*: resistance to the demands of human love” is still the subject of paintings like Edward Hopper’s *Room in New York* (cover). In *A Wearied Explorer* (p. 58), she examines what is perhaps the most famous depiction of *acedia* in Hieronymus Bosch’s *A Tabletop with the Seven Deadly Sins and Last Four Things*.

The worship service (p. 62) by Burt Burleson calls us away from *acedia*, or self-imposed spiritual apathy, and into joyful praise of the God who invites us to rest in his presence. In a new hymn, “I Lift My Prayer to Thee” (p. 67), Burleson leads us to confess, “Forgive my noonday sin, / dreaming thy time away; / fill me with care to do thy will, / to love, to serve, to stay.”

In *The Capital Vices: ACEDIA’S ‘Deadly’ Cronies* (p. 82), John Spano reviews four books – Christopher Cook’s *The Philokalia and the Inner Life: On Passions and Prayer*, Christopher Jamison’s *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for Fulfilling Life*, Henry Fairlie’s *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung’s *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* – that draw on the rich tradition of reflection on the capital vices, which are known more colloquially as the seven deadly sins. That tradition, he notes, because it “has its origins in the ancient Christian practices of self-examination, confession to others, mutual correction, and penance...offers hope for healing and happiness grounded in the Christian message while avoiding the triteness of positive-thinking programs and emphasizing, *pace* most psychological scholarship, the necessity of God’s grace for well-being.”

The problem of *acedia* “is personal and communal, innate and institutional, as old as the desert and as new as the iPhone, hard to recognize in ourselves and yet impossible to miss in our culture as a whole,” Jonathan Sands Wise writes in *Diagnosing ACEDIA and Its Spiritual Neighbors* (p. 88), his review of three recent works that explore the vice and its remedies: Richard Winter’s *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion and Wonder*, Kathleen Norris’s *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life*, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*. “If we want to care again,” Sands Wise concludes, “we must somehow just keep going by staying still, striving to join in the fight for good and God’s kingdom by taking part in the mundane miracles of showering, doing dishes, and speaking in love to those right around us every day. If we can just do this, then by some amazing grace, we may find that staying still has finally allowed us to go with love, and that repetition has changed us into people who can do something truly new.” ❀

Resistance to the Demands of Love

BY REBECCA KONYNDYK DEYOUNG

At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to God because of the transforming demands of his love. God wants to kick down the whole door to our hearts and flood us with his life; we want to keep the door partway shut so that a few lingering treasures remain untouched, hidden in the shadows.

Picture a hairy long-toed sloth hanging from a branch, with a headset on, listening to “sloth motivational tapes”: “Relax, take your time, what’s the hurry? Life goes on whether you’re asleep or not.” That is how one of my favorite cartoons of sloth depicts this supposed vice. I say “supposed,” because on first glance, hardly anyone would think of sloth as one of the capital vices, or as they are popularly known, the seven deadly sins.

Why is this? It is mostly because, like the cartoonist, we typically think of sloth as laziness. Thus understood, should it rank with sins like envy and lust in its evil and destructive power? Since when was sitting on the couch watching reruns of *Friends* with a bag of Doritos a moral failure worthy of such severe condemnation?

There are several answers we might give. First, we could conclude that it does *not* in fact have a place; if putting it on the list of capital vices in the first place was not an outright mistake, keeping it there now is certainly outmoded. In this vein Evelyn Waugh writes,

The word “sloth” is seldom on modern lips. When used, it is a mildly facetious variant of “indolence,” and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the world’s most amiable of weaknesses. Most of the world’s troubles seem to come from people who are too

busy. If only politicians and scientists were lazier, how much happier we should all be. The lazy [person] is preserved from the commission of almost all the nastier crimes.¹

Second, we could accept the same description of sloth and conclude that it *does* deserve a place on the list. There is both a sacred and a secular version of this answer.

As for the sacred, one might think sloth strikes at the heart of the great Christian virtue of diligence—that powerful sense of responsibility, dedication to hard work, and conscientious completion of one’s duties. What is hard work and dedication at its best, after all, but the ultimate expression of love and devotion?² Communities that value diligence in this way point to recurring warnings to the “sluggard” in Proverbs and Paul’s admonition to do useful work with one’s hands. Especially if our work is a divinely appointed vocation, as the Reformed tradition of Christianity likes to think of it, sitting around is not just useless, it is thumbing your nose at God’s call.³

Even outside religious circles, however, the virtue of diligence is glorified, and “slacking off” is frowned upon. In the stirring words of Henry Ford, “Work is our sanity, our self-respect, our salvation. Through work and work alone may health, wealth, and happiness be secured.”⁴ Likewise, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* put “diligence” at the top of their list of the five top virtues necessary for success in graduate school.⁵ Diligence or “industry” now counts as a pragmatic virtue aimed at professional success. Thus, even if our careers replace our religion as a source of purpose, worth, and identity, laziness still carries significant weight. The upshot is, you had better get busy or you will be good for nothing.

But there is a third option, which I will explore in the next section. We might investigate whether our contemporary understanding of sloth has strayed from the original definition of sloth among those who developed the list of capital vices: the fourth-century Desert Christians and medieval theologians. For them, sloth—or *acedia*, as they called it—had a central place in the moral life, and even rivaled pride as the vice with the deepest roots and most destructive power!

To look ahead: we shall see that several features of their account often go missing today. What they meant by sloth does imply a *failure* of effort, but it is a certain *kind* of effort that our contemporary accounts miss. Furthermore, they thought of sloth as having an active side for which the person bears responsibility. Their favored name for the vice comes from the Greek compound “*a-kedia*,” which means “a lack of care.” This does not mean simple “carelessness,” but an intentional stance of “I could care less”—as in, “I am not invested in this, so do not expect me to make an effort. Just let me stay where I am comfortable, would you?” The person with the vice of sloth, or *acedia*, is not passively suffering depression or torpor, but is actively refusing to care, to be moved.



Thomas Aquinas's account of *acedia* in the thirteenth century stands at the crossroads between the ancient tradition of the Desert Christians and the modern conception of sloth in terms of a failure of effort in one's work, Christian or not. His definition, moreover, answers the question why *acedia* makes the traditional list of 'great' vices. It also needs some unpacking, for he begins with the cryptic idea that sloth is an aversion to the divine good in us.⁶

Let me start with a story. Take a typical situation between a husband and wife. In general, theirs is a relationship of love and friendship. But when they quarrel at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the evening, it is much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than it is to do the work of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires giving up their anger, their desire to have their own way, and their insistence on seeing the world only from each of their own perspectives. Saying "I am sorry" takes effort, but it is not *simply* the physical work of walking across the house and saying the words that each resists.

Do they want the relationship? Yes, they are in it and they are in deep. But do they want to do what it takes to be in relationship; do they want to honor its claims on them? Do they want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Maybe tomorrow. For now at least, each spouse wants the night off to wallow in his or her own selfish loneliness. Love takes effort.⁷

Why do marriage and human friendships make good pictures of what goes wrong in *acedia*? For all its joys, any intense friendship or marriage has aspects that can seem burdensome. There is not only an investment of time, but an investment of self that is required for the relationship to exist and, further, to flourish.

Even more difficult than the physical accommodations are the accommodations of identity: from the perspective of individual 'freedom,' to be in this relationship will change me and cost me; it will require me to restructure my priorities; it may compromise my plans; it will demand sacrifice; it will alter the pattern of my thoughts and desires and transform my vision of the world. It is not "my life" anymore – it is "ours." Thus it can seem as though stagnating and staying the same might be easier

For the fourth-century Desert Christians and medieval theologians, sloth—or *acedia*, as they called it—had a central place in the moral life, and even rivaled pride as the vice with the deepest roots and most destructive power!

and safer, even if ultimately unhappier, than risking openness to love's transforming power and answering its claims on us.

Think of your relationship to God like that, and we are on our way to grasping Aquinas's definition of *acedia*. His definition has two parts—*acedia's* aversion, which is opposed to joy, and the divine good in us that is the object of that aversion. Let's start with the thing over which we feel sorrow, the good that *acedia* experiences not as a gift but as a thorn in her side. "The divine good in us" refers to the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, the divine life of God that informs our lives as his children. The Apostle Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20, NIV).⁸ When God lives in us, our whole being is transformed: the old has gone, the new has come. We are "to be made new in the attitude of [our] minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:23-24, NIV). This grace, as Aquinas says, "is a beginning of glory in us."⁹ God's love alive in us, the gift of the Holy Spirit, our new identity in Christ—this is the target of *acedia's* sorrow.

The key here is that our new identity in Christ is both "now" and "not yet," a promise and a present reality. Aquinas captures this when he describes the difference between the desiring aspect of love and its fulfillment aspect, which he calls delight or joy. When we love someone, we *long to be with them*. This longing is what Aquinas calls "desire." When we love someone and *are fully 'one' with them*, Aquinas calls this "joy" or "delight." Our idea of "enjoyment" (in the sense of deep, grateful pleasure, not casual entertainment) probably comes closest to what he is getting at here. Joy is the condition of a heart united with the object of its love, which is present and possessed—it is full and fulfilled, and desire is at rest.

While we do have joy over God's presence in our hearts, our joy is not yet complete. Why not? Because God does not jump in and create a new self in us overnight. The project of transforming our nature requires a lifetime, and a lifetime of cooperation on our part: it is called sanctification.¹⁰ Being a Christian is like being married—a man and woman take their vows on their wedding day and thus are married, but *being* married, *living* out those vows and making them a living reality will take all of their efforts for the rest of their lives. Love has a 'now and not yet' character; it is both gift and life-transforming work. It is just this transformation by God's love in us that *acedia* resists; it resists the spiritual rest that comes with accepting his presence in our hearts.

This explains how *acedia* could be a really serious vice. After all, it resists our identity in Christ and chafes at his presence in our hearts. If that is not a description of a significant vice, it is hard to see what else could count. At the same time, this very explanation raises a hard question—how could we possibly feel aversion to God's presence in us? What could possibly make us *unhappy* about the greatest gift of love, a gift that is the secret to our own happiness, fulfillment, and perfection? Why would we ever resist this?

Aquinas goes so far as to describe *acedia* as “dislike, horror, and detestation,”¹¹ even though God is the greatest possible good that we can and do possess. How is this possible?

Aquinas answers by drawing on the Apostle Paul’s words in Galatians 5: *acedia*’s aversion is caused by the opposition of the spirit to the flesh.¹² It is tempting to draw the conclusion from his answer that *acedia* strikes us when the pursuit of our religious duties or spiritual good (things of “the spirit”) would take too much effort, sacrifice bodily comfort, or be physically difficult (thereby opposing the desire of “the flesh”). Is sloth laziness after all?

Aquinas emphatically denies that *acedia* is a vice focused on bodily goods like comfort and ease. Instead, we get to the heart of *acedia* by considering what the Apostle Paul usually means by contrasting the “flesh” and “spirit,” namely, the contrast between the old sinful nature and our new redeemed nature in Christ. The battle here is not between body and soul, between the physical and the spiritual, but between the “old self” and the “new self.” Spiritual battles take place on many fronts, but in the worst cases, *acedia* describes a heart loving and clinging to the wrong things, so that we are divided against ourselves.¹³

Essentially, then, *acedia* is resistance to the demands of God’s love. Why? Because a love relationship marks an identity change and a corresponding call to transformation. Think back to the marriage example with which we began. The claims of the other that require a thousand little deaths of our old individual selfish nature – this is the work that *acedia* objects to, not merely the bodily effort it may or may not involve. In fact, the person with *acedia* may pour significant bodily effort and emotional energy into the difficult task of constant distraction and denial of her condition, so the aversion cannot be directed toward effort itself. Yet in a sense, those with *acedia* do want the easy life, for they find detachment from the old selfish nature too painful and burdensome, and so they neglect acts of love that will maintain and deepen the relationship. *Acedia* wants the security of Christianity without the sacrifice and struggle to be made anew.

At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to God because of the transforming demands of his love. God wants to kick down the whole door to our hearts and flood us with his life; we want to keep the door partway shut so that a few lingering treasures remain untouched, hidden in the

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shadows.¹⁴ In one of her autobiographical novels, Anne Lamott recounts the words of a wise old woman at her church who told her, “the secret is that God loves us *exactly* the way we are *and* that he loves us too much to let us stay like this.”¹⁵ When we suffer from *acedia*, we object to not being able to stay the way we are. Something must die in order for the new self to be born, and it might be an old self to which we are very attached.

Here we can finally sort out our initial thoughts on sloth. We are right to think of *acedia* as resistance to effort – but not only, or even primarily, in the sense of being physically lazy or lazy about our work. Rather, it is resistance to any effort to change demanded by our new identity as God’s beloved. We like the comforting thought of being saved by love, of being God’s own, but not the discomfort of transformation and the work of discipline – even the death of the old sinful nature – that God’s love requires of us. We are like that married couple, who want the dream of being unconditionally loved, without having to condition their own selfish desires in return. We are like Augustine praying for the gift of chastity, but not wanting it quite yet because he is not ready to give up the pleasure of his old lustful ways. Contemplating conversion, his old desires whisper, “Do you really think you can live without us forever and ever?” We are like Lot’s wife, who accepts her rescue, but cannot quite turn away from the only home and life and friends she has ever known. How many of us have felt like we need two angels to drag us out of Sodom, while we look back over our shoulders, pining for the good old days? We are like the people of Israel, poised to enter their homeland and promised rest in Canaan after years of restless wandering, but who judge upon closer inspection that the drearily familiar desert might not be so bad after all.

Because it is about love – accepting God’s love for us and the cost of loving him back – *acedia* earns its place among the seven capital vices, or deadly sins. We are made for love. To resist it is to deny who we are. In their reluctance to die to the old self, those with *acedia* choose slow spiritual suffocation to the birth pains of new life. They cannot fully accept the only thing that would ultimately bring them joy. They refuse the thing they most desire, and they turn away from the only thing that can bring them life.



As a result of its resistance to love’s demands, *acedia* can take two opposing forms: despairing resignation or desperate escapism. If we cannot escape from the relationship we are resisting, then we sink down into oppressive hopelessness and despair. It is the listlessness of this manifestation of *acedia* that fosters the popular image of the vice as laziness. But on the other hand, if we think we can escape from the relationship, we may pour all our energy into any form of flight that shows promise, no matter how desperate. It is all about distraction. We lose ourselves in what Dorothy

Sayers calls “a whiffling activity of body” – which could be endless work, or games, or sports.¹⁶ Sad to say, this can even take ostensibly pious forms: we can spend our whole lives procrastinating about true discipleship, even if we faithfully engage in lots of religious activities.

Thus, *acedia* can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity. Somewhere in between the two is a holy Sabbath rest for the heart that has given itself utterly to God, a heart which can say with joy, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”¹⁷

It is not those who take up their crosses who find them an unbearable weight, but those who resist the demands of love – the ones with *acedia* – whom Jesus commands, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30, NIV).¹⁸

NOTES

1 Evelyn Waugh, *The Sunday Times* (London), 1962; reprinted in Ian Fleming, ed., *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Pleasantville, NY: Akadine Press, 2002 [1962]), 57.

2 The root of our word “diligence” is the Latin word *diligere*, which means “to love.” Sloth, even more than laziness, is apathy – comfortable indifference to and neglect of your duty and other human beings’ needs. If you will not work hard, you do not care enough. Sloth is really the lack of love that lies behind our laziness.

3 For the idea that sloth is opposed to basic benevolence, see Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205 ff. We may, however, also legitimately worry about glorifying work as a sacred ministry for which everything else can be sacrificed, including family, friendship, and Sabbath rest.

4 Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (1922), chapter 8, accessed July 21, 2013, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7213.

5 Thomas H. Benton [pen name for William Pannacker], “The 5 Virtues of Successful Graduate Students,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:2 (September 5, 2003), C3, accessed July 21, 2013, chronicle.com/article/The-5-Virtues-of-Successful/5060/.

6 See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 2. Cf. *De Malo*, Q 11, a 1, response.

7 Granted, it may be the case that their tiredness after a hard day of work makes them more prone to the initial argument, or more reluctant to attempt reconciliation, but in that way, *acedia* is no more carnal than gluttony, which may be more tempting when one is hungry, but is an affliction which persists both before and after hunger has been satiated.

8 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

9 *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 24, a 3, reply to objection 2.

10 We do not earn or merit salvation by our effort. But because salvation involves our deepening relationship with God, like a marriage or friendship it requires our active participation in and welcome of its life-transforming process. The New Testament expresses it this way: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and

godliness.... For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love." (2 Peter 1:3a, 5-7)

11 *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3.

12 Aquinas explains, "this divine good is saddening to us on account of the opposition of the spirit to the flesh, because as the Apostle says in Galatians 5:17, 'The flesh lusts against the spirit'; and...when love of the flesh is dominant in us we loathe spiritual good as if it were something contrary to ourselves" (*De Malo*, Q 11, a 2, my translation).

13 Thus, Augustine writes, "So also when the delight of eternity draws us upwards and the pleasure of temporal goods holds us down, the identical soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other. It is torn apart in a painful condition, as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of familiarity. Such was my sickness...." Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter 10, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1991]), 150. This is why Aquinas says that when we have *acedia* the divine good in us feels like "something contrary to ourselves."

14 This is the point of Paul's warning to the Colossian Christians: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..." (Colossians 3:1-2a).

15 Anne Lamont, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005 [1993]), 96, emphasis in original.

16 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins" (1941), in *Creed or Chaos? And Other Essays in Popular Theology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1949), 81.

17 Aquinas follows the earlier tradition in opposing *acedia* to the commandment to hallow the Sabbath day, which is a "moral precept commanding that the mind rest in God, to which the mind's sorrow over the divine good is contrary" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 2; see also *De Malo*, Q 11, a 3, reply to objection 2). "Rest" may be taken here to refer both to stopping 'activity' in order to engage in contemplation of God (the antidote to *acedia*'s frantic busyness) and to the joyful peace that characterizes that state of communion.

18 This article is adapted from my "Resistance to the Demands of Love," *The Calvin Spark* 51:1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Alumni Association, 2005) and is used by permission.



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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.

Stability is 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 paying attention to those with whom we share common space and time.

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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In Pursuit of Sophia: On Pilgrimage with Depression and *Acedia*

BY ANDREW A. MICHEL

All persons will face *acedia* in their lives; some also face clinical depression, and it seems that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another. Depression, with the disruption it causes life and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life.

She came to me not as a pilgrim in the desert but as a patient in the clinic. I was not her spiritual director but rather her psychiatrist. She was an undergraduate student whose studies had been interrupted by a suicide attempt late in the course of a semester. Life's cruel forces had knocked her down, and she lacked the inner resources to remain steady in the face of hardship. She did not see herself as being on a spiritual or moral quest, but simply wanted to feel good, or when that failed, to escape the pain she felt.

Sophia felt terrible about herself. Her life did not seem to her to be worth living.

Following her attempt to kill herself, Sophia spent two weeks in an inpatient psychiatric hospital where she was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and started on a medication to help with her low mood. As she completed her hospital course, she was discharged into ongoing care with me.¹ Her hospitalization had fallen at an inopportune time and resulted in her inability to complete her exams. She was placed on academic probation, though historically she had been a very capable student. In fact, Sophia had

been the valedictorian of her high school and received a full scholarship to a prestigious university in the Northeast. Her experience of depression had stolen from her, at least momentarily, a last glimmer of light and esteem.

Sophia's hopes for a life worth living would surface on her good days only to be drowned out by ensuing waves of despair on bad days, which remained numerous. On these dark days, she lacked the motivation to rise from slumber and seemed to be afflicted by some force which burdened her with the slow, torpid torture of ennui, like a great yawn that persisted through the day and threatened to carry her into the abyss of despair.

What was this force that left Sophia stranded on the edge of the abyss?

CLINICAL DEPRESSION CONSIDERED

By all accounts, we could diagnose Sophia with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) using modern psychiatric parlance. She met the five-out-of-nine criteria required for the diagnosis of MDD, including the two major features: severely low mood and anhedonia, which is the inability to enjoy things one otherwise would enjoy. Regarding other criteria, Sophia acknowledged oversleeping for up to ten to twelve hours in a day as a way of escaping reality. She had increased appetite and weight gain, which she acknowledged as an effort to comfort the pain that she felt. She experienced suicidal thinking (including attempt), ruminative anxiety, and profound guilt over her life and existence (for amorphous reasons).

On review of her history, I uncovered ample evidence that she had suffered with prior episodes of low mood lasting weeks to months since her late teenage years, which anticipated the acute hospitalization following suicide attempt. The earthquake in her life was less a first and only reactive event than an ever-present possibility occasioned by the stress of undergraduate studies. The clinical lens of psychiatry was at least one way of beginning to make sense of her experience.

The psychiatric frame offered Sophia several important benefits in her distress. The most critical may be that psychiatry would not judge or condemn her in her suffering and illness. Psychiatry has the capacity to separate the person from the disorder and within this opening suffering persons sometimes find the room to breathe and live.

But there was something more going on in Sophia's case, for even during long stretches where she acknowledged that her mood was improved, and even good, she struggled to engage with life. In Sophia's case, despite the best that psychiatry had to offer, including a non-judgmental, meaning-making stance and the best of psychotropic technologies with evidence for effectiveness in treating depression, Sophia was not flourishing.

Beyond psychiatry, there had been efforts by me and psychologists involved in the case to explore psychological facets, including Sophia's history of sexual trauma, which may have contributed to her depression. These efforts were ongoing in Sophia's case and may bear fruit in time.

Perhaps there was some unconscious force impeding her progression in healing and restoration to a life of flourishing that could be uncovered via psychotherapeutic efforts.

Could it be though, that those of us who engage in modern practices like psychology and psychiatry were missing something in Sophia's case (and perhaps other cases like hers)? What would it be like to see her from a completely different way of knowing?

IN PURSUIT OF SOPHIA

The occasion of this essay has led me to consider other observations I noted regarding Sophia's presentation. During my work with Sophia, an abiding habit for her was to spend much of her day absorbed with reality television shows, along with a ritualized review of gossip columns on the Internet. Sophia would sometimes reflect on these habits, describing them as a kind of shadow side of her underlying desire to feel alive and enjoy a deep intimacy with others. Gossip columns could feed a hunger in her in a way that required limited effort on her part. After imbibing, however, she would note an uneasy lack of satisfaction. Instead of having been filled up, she was left ever more empty.

Again, this habit (along with others like it) seemed to be a way to distract her from the incessant nothingness always crouching near the door of her heart. I am convinced that sometimes this behavior in Sophia was a response to clinical depression, a way of finding comfort in despair. At other times, however, even when depression lifted, this habit (and others like it) remained ingrained in Sophia's way of life, like a residue. Perhaps clinical depression had imprinted this pattern, but it also appeared to take on a life of its own.

On many occasions, Sophia would present to clinic visits not having followed through on simple tasks, like delivering a letter I had written on her behalf to advocate that she be permitted to resume school. Her parents, who were very concerned for her, could not understand what made it so difficult for their capable daughter to resume her studies. They wanted her to be happy and get back into life. Though she clearly suffered with clinical depression, it seemed that there was something more to Sophia's experience that held her back (and efforts to work through her traumatic past had not resolved this either.)

Casual observers might have said of Sophia that she was lazy or indolent. Indeed, there were repeated instances of her failure to show up for life. Once, when Sophia had finally returned to school after a long hiatus, she neglected to complete a required paper for a course. Though her mood was consistently good at clinic visits, she acknowledged a lack of concern to take the needed steps to complete her work. She ended up failing this course and was eventually dismissed from the university. Again this had occurred during a season of relative mental stability. Sophia was hard

pressed to give reasons for her disengagement. It was unclear if and how she would develop a rhythm of life that would allow her to flourish.

Could some other force beyond clinical depression have been at work in Sophia's life?

ACEDIA CONSIDERED

As I began to ponder the vice of *acedia*, I was initially concerned that such a notion might turn into a project in moralizing. Yet, to my delight, as I have explored the richness of *acedia*, I have paradoxically discovered that the concept is refreshing and illuminating. Rather than heaping judgment on a person, the recognition of *acedia* offers an invitation to abundant living. *Acedia*, as one doorway into the moral life, restores the possibility that a person might choose what is beautiful and good.

But we will need to understand *acedia* rightly in order to receive the idea as a gift instead of a curse. For that I am grateful to multiple scholars, chiefly Rebecca DeYoung. What becomes clear immediately is that *acedia* is not what we think it is; the concept needs some dusting off to be useful again. Tracing the history of the concept of *acedia*, DeYoung notes how the force of its seriousness has been diluted and diminished in the modern period.²

In our contemporary context, *acedia* (or sloth as it is typically translated today) is equated with laziness, especially of a physical sort. Sometimes sloth is even glorified: imagine the man sitting in his La-Z-Boy, a bag of Doritos to his right, a can of Dr. Pepper to his left, watching college football all day Saturday.³ It is sad enough that for some people this seems like the fulfillment of the American Dream.

But in the Christian tradition, *acedia* is a much more serious condition than this. *Acedia* is a spiritual vice in opposition to the primary theological virtue of charity – the love given by the Spirit which the Apostle Paul tells us is chief among gifts, without which “I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). Rather than simple laziness or the failure to make physical effort, as it has been popularly understood, *acedia* is, in DeYoung's phrase, a “resistance to the demands of love.”

Rather than heaping judgment on a person, the recognition of *acedia* offers an invitation to abundant living. *Acedia*, as one doorway into the moral life, restores the possibility that a person might choose what is beautiful and good.

As an absence of care, *acedia* can seem harmless enough since it is not an observable material offense. However, whenever there is an absence of care in the world, an absence of intentionality, then someone is left lacking – an elderly person unattended, a starving person unfed, a woman battered, a child

uneducated, a life's gifting uncelebrated. Therefore, *acedia* is difficult to notice because it is accounting for an absence. Perhaps this is the reason it has been associated with the Psalmist's noonday demon (Psalm 91:6), who seems to terrorize his prey in the light of day, not fearing being seen or noticed.

To be specific, *acedia* is a disdain for that life inside of one that would participate with God. DeYoung explains, "This means that we do not have an aversion to God himself in *acedia*, but rather to ourselves-as-sharing-in-God's-nature, united to him in the bond of friendship. Aquinas says, '*acedia* is not sadness about the presence of God himself, but sadness about some good pertaining to him which is divine by participation.'"⁴ *Acedia*, therefore, involves a failure to celebrate the image of God in one's human nature. "Rather than being lifted up by joy at its union with God, the person afflicted with *acedia* is oppressed or weighed down; as one's own, the divine good is seen, rather, as an unwelcome burden."⁵

Kathleen Norris affirms this reading of Aquinas regarding the specific nature of *acedia*: "The person afflicted with *acedia*, even if she knows what is spiritually good for her is tempted to deny that her inner beauty and spiritual strength are at her disposal, as gifts from God."⁶ This denial could be related to any effort to destroy one's physical life, as in the case of suicide. But, more generally, this denial of inner beauty has particular connotations for aspects of a human life that invite a participation in God's likeness, including vocational aspects, which we will now turn to in Sophia's case.

ON PILGRIMAGE WITH DEPRESSION AND ACEDIA

Sophia, assuming she suffers from both clinical depression and *acedia*, is in a particularly troubled condition. First, she finds herself assaulted by a mental condition that would make it hard to muster the resolve and energy to care about these internal goods in herself. Not only that, but depression drives her to attempt to destroy her very existence via suicide. Sophia also appears to be in a moral battle against *acedia*, which would oppose any fruit-bearing of these internal goods. Sophia, then, is under a double assault, and for that she will require special help on her pilgrimage toward life and healing.

Recall that Aquinas describes *acedia* as opposed to charity. Therefore Sophia's early efforts at charity would be to love God enough to simply receive God's imprint on her life—God's image in her. This might not be an easy task, but for most people it is not an onerous one. Yet I could hear Sophia saying, "You mean that you want me to allow myself to experience God's beauty in me—that is my work?" And to this question we can answer, in keeping with the tradition, a resounding, "Yes, this is your effort for now."

The invitation of God in the moral life is not to a stringent striving but to a gentle day-by-day decisiveness in being God's friend in a new way of living. Jesus invites those who would follow him:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;

for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 11: 28-30

Now, where we might have first felt that the burdens of the moral life would be heavy-laden, we have instead discovered that they are paradoxically welcoming and free, though not without effort. Regarding that effort, it bears saying that the effort is not always extreme but does involve simple, gentle steps as one is able – an easy yoke. To oppose *acedia* is not to be busied with work, as we might assume, but rather to find rest for our souls. In Sophia's case, it will require some effort (especially, in trusting) for her to suspend the negative thoughts she has of herself, letting go of the image she has maintained of herself as inherently bad.⁷

Sophia, if open to this invitation, might benefit from meeting with a guide experienced in the moral and spiritual life. She may even need to borrow on the conviction of a guide in the spiritual life to come to know how deeply she is loved over a long period and to notice how she bears the imprint of God's goodness and beauty. She would likely require sustained training in such a discipline, and we might imagine how ongoing psychotherapy could work simultaneously to dismantle deep notions of an absence of self-worth conveyed by her experience of sexual abuse.

We might imagine other concerns beginning to surface in this process, such as, "How it can be that God loves me if I was left unprotected in the face of sexual trauma?" In this movement, however, Sophia would have transitioned from the paralyzing nature of *acedia* into anger, and perhaps a justified anger, if directed appropriately. In this path, Sophia is no longer experiencing an absence of care (as in *acedia*) but rather passion, in this case anger, at the wrong events that have occurred in her life. Already she is on the way toward developing the virtue of justice, expressed here as righteous indignation.

Perhaps after a long season, Sophia would be readied for a second movement. Now this movement is different and more demanding than the first and has to do with our full reception of God's love. As DeYoung puts it, *acedia* tempts us to remain in the comfort of what is known to us: we

***Acedia* is a failure to celebrate the image of God in one's human nature. This could relate to an effort to destroy one's physical life, as in the case of suicide. But, more generally, this denial of inner beauty involves aspects of life that invite participation in God's likeness.**

desire to live in the familiarity of the old self and to not take up with the new. At some point in Sophia's pilgrimage toward healing, the challenge of God's love for her would need to be met. The invitation of God is not to remain static, safe, and spiritually dead, but rather to be made new. I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's description of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: "'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver; 'don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'"⁸ Being in friendship with God is not always comfortable, and it is certainly not convenient, but it is nevertheless deeply good.

DeYoung characterizes this second aspect in the work against *acedia* as follows:

Thus, the trouble with *acedia* is that when we have it, we refuse to be all that we are meant to be. This refusal—even when we think it constitutes an escape from a loathsome alternative—is itself a form of misery. But in refusing our *telos*, we resist our deepest desires for fulfillment. This is why Gregory describes *acedia* as 'a kind of sorrow.' In outlining the sins to which *acedia* typically gives rise, Aquinas likewise explains how they are all attempts either to escape sorrow or to live with inescapable sorrow. The oppressiveness of *acedia* comes from our own self-stifling choice.⁹

And so Sophia, if she is to deepen in a life of virtue, will have to let go of any attachment to sameness and safety. She will have to be open to the new, and this openness will likely occasion anxiety and discomfort. But this is what it means to be loved, for God is interested in directing us to be what we are most meant to be.

As I came to know Sophia, I had learned of her abiding interest in cultural studies. She aspired to pursue graduate studies in women's history and was especially attuned to the oppression of women. For Sophia, these were early hints about opportunities for her to participate in the divine nature. We might see these desires as concretizations of the divine life at work in Sophia. Friendship with God around these interests that currently smoldered in her, like dying embers, were a means by which she might find personal healing, while also giving herself in service to the world about her.

These internal delights and goods are precisely what the vice of *acedia* would be in opposition to. Since Aquinas defines *acedia* as "sorrow over... an internal and divine good [in us],"¹⁰ the invitation, in responding to *acedia*, is to turn toward the acceptance of friendship with God in uncovering and manifesting these goods.

Practically, for Sophia, early signs of movement in this direction involved concrete steps she took to move forward in the face of her vulnerability to depression and her failures. She resolved to start again by entering a local community college where the pressures were lower and she could take up with life again, without feeling overwhelmed. This

action was a practical move away from stagnation and toward finding herself with renewed confidence.

While *acedia* may say to one that enrolling in community college when you have enjoyed a promised future as the valedictorian of your high school is a worthless undertaking, charity (in concert with humility and courage) opposes *acedia* by reminding us that God can take whatever small gesture is possible and multiply it in abundance. Such an offering, however small, is an expression of desire and concern for life and the world. For Sophia, this was a step in the right direction and the first of many more that she would need to take as she responded to the invitations of the moral life.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

What I have tried to do in this essay is distinguish *acedia* from clinical depression via reference to a case history in which the sufferer occasioned battles with both conditions. Though the conditions of depression and *acedia* share commonalities and crossover in symptomatology and presentation, they *are* distinguishable. However, the conditions may be less distinguishable by their presentations than by the contexts out of which each discourse makes meaning of human experience. The two concepts, which are embedded in larger contexts, offer different conceptions of the human condition, and each has a power unto itself. Each offers different solutions and invites a distinct posture.

To oversimplify, the discourse around MDD invites a passive sufferer of a presumed brain condition to find her condition resolved by external forces (medical prowess). The psychiatric narrative is a newer and seemingly more exciting one, given recent advances in neuroscience. It demands less effort on the part of the suffering person. It may have some limited power to deliver on what it offers, but there will be cases where persons are left with an incomplete degree of healing when other avenues of apprehending their experience are not explored.

Many have been concerned that psychiatry and its attendant diagnostic systems and technologies have tended to over-medicalize the human condition. Psychiatry is accused of having turned normal human sadness and grief into a medical condition—a disorder to be studied and treated.

Clinical depression and *acedia* may be less distinguishable by their presentations than by the contexts out of which each discourse makes meaning of human experience. They offer different conceptions of the human condition, and each has a power unto itself.

Backed by powerful market forces, including pharmaceutical companies with stakes in the sale of psychiatric medications, psychiatry is thereby implicated by its critics in a systemic effort to extend its power and influence into ever widening spheres of human life, perhaps eclipsing the need for attention to a moral life at all.

From my perspective, this need not be so; but for psychiatry to find its proper place in the order of aids to human flourishing, it will have to be held there by internal and external pressures that are rightly ordered. The problem is not so much with psychiatry itself but with efforts from within and without to make it a primary arbiter over the human condition without input from other perspectives. Psychiatry, when misused, may eclipse the felt need of giving attention to the moral life.

Alternatively, the discourse around *acedia* is an invitation to take seriously the moral life. It is an ancient and misunderstood, if not forgotten, tradition. The tradition of the vices and virtues invites the pilgrim into a journey toward healing. The moral life will involve ongoing participation in suffering, to the end of character transformation. It is a seemingly slower process and involves more effort (though importantly, not inordinate effort) on the part of the person, who is seen as one agent (alongside many others) at work in her life.

In particular regard to *acedia*, the effort is toward becoming friends with God in restful, joyful activity rather than falling into either stagnation or frenzied work. The discourse around *acedia* is a powerful and rich narrative that offers to guide the pilgrim into flourishing. As much as it is able to keep this promise, it may be the best starting point for a life well-lived.

Therefore, the psychiatric and moral discourses arise out of different contexts, convey different meanings, and invite their respective patient and pilgrim to take different postures toward life. One is a secular discourse; the other has roots in a spiritual tradition. One is utilitarian, focused around finding pleasure and alleviating pain; the other is teleological, focused on reaching one's true end, which will entail both joy and sorrow.

All persons will face *acedia* in the course of their lives; some also face clinical depression, and it does seem that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another. The experience of depression, with the disruption it causes life and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life. The body's disposition toward depression might make such a person inordinately predisposed to this particular vice.

CONCLUSION

Returning to our case, we see that Sophia deserves the best of psychiatric and psychological help. She needs to continue to work through and process the trauma that she experienced growing up, perhaps finding release from any uncovered bitterness and pain. It is prudent that she remain on psychiatric medications for the treatment of what fits the prototypical diagnosis of MDD.

However, for Sophia to experience the full power of the healing she requires in order to flourish, she will need more than psychiatry and psychology. She will need to find herself as a participant in a moral life, aware of the invitation to deepen in charity and goodness, even in the face of depression and *acedia*. On this pilgrimage, she will likely require guides and spiritual friends to help her on her way, to uncover and embrace the divine nature at work in her.

Indeed, in the pursuit of *sophia*, or wisdom, if we are to discover her, we will require friendship with a God who is acquainted with every sorrow, including clinical depression. We will need a guide who is gentle and lowly in spirit, able to teach us how to contend with such a vice as *acedia*.

NOTES

1 While this case is loosely based on real life clinical situations, case information has been de-identified and is drawn from numerous experiences in a conglomeration of cases in order to protect the confidentiality of any particular person.

2 Rebecca DeYoung, "Acedia's Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of Sloth," *The Thomist* 68:2 (April 2004), 173-204.

3 My apologies to football fans at my alma mater, Baylor University, who may identify with this description (the giveaway here being Dr. Pepper as the sloth's choice of beverage).

4 DeYoung, "Acedia's Resistance to the Demands of Love," 9.

5 *Ibid.*, 9.

6 Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 21.

7 I would note that some psychotherapies that reframe negative cognitions (for instance, cognitive behavioral therapy) might be of great assistance in this moral effort.

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1950), 75.

9 DeYoung, "Acedia's Resistance to the Demands of Love," 11.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, Q 11, a 2, response.



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Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life

BY AMY FREEMAN

The primary remedy for *acedia* is being faithful in the demands of daily life that God's love calls us to face. When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can enkindle the fire of God's love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.

How can we possibly overcome a vice that is as spiritually deep-rooted as *acedia*? The twin symptoms of idleness and the restless activity through which this “noonday devil” often reveals itself are only the surface; *acedia* is essentially “resistance to the demands of God’s love.”¹ For this reason the primary remedy that spiritual directors have long recommended for *acedia* is *stabilitas*, which is “sticking to your post” or being faithful in the demands of daily life that God’s love calls us to face.

This advice goes back to the fourth-century desert Christians. For example, Evagrius of Pontus notes that *acedia* “instills in [the monk] a dislike for the place [i.e., his cell] and for his state of life itself” and tries to persuade him to flee.² He urges monks to resist these temptations by persevering in prayer, manual labor, and whatever other work their community life entails each day.

His protégé, John Cassian, offers similar advice, but focuses especially on the element of manual labor. This is because Cassian thinks *acedia*’s two opposing symptoms—sleep, inactivity, and surrender on the one hand, and instability, fecklessness, and agitated activity for activity’s sake on the other—generally occur in this order: not working is the root, and then restlessness and “acting as busybodies” spring from this root.³ He draws this analysis from his reading of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, where the Apostle Paul “castigated those who were sick [with *acedia*], lest they give in to idleness and spend themselves in disquietude and meddling.”⁴

Cassian's advice became the basis for St. Benedict of Nursia's prescription in the sixth century that his monks live out a rhythm of prayer and manual labor. This early stream of guidance—from Evagrius to Benedict—later lent itself to the famous motto that is now popularly used to describe Benedictine spirituality: *ora et labora*, "pray and work."

Like those early monastics, we are often tempted to flee the demands of God's love in daily life, in ways big and small. Evagrius, Cassian, and Benedict speak to us, too, when they counsel "stick to your post." Being faithful in our regular times of prayer, study, office tasks, cleaning the house, changing diapers, and other works that we may be called to do each day can seem dry and discouraging. Yet it is precisely in these quotidian tasks of life that a remedy for *acedia* is found. The discipline of reforming our outer activity can be a means, with God's grace, to inner transformation.

FAITHFULNESS IN ORDINARY WORKS OF DAILY LIFE

Cassian tells a memorable story about a monk named Abba Paul. During his days of solitude in the desert, Abba Paul lived near a garden that provided plenty of food to nourish him. Every day he collected leaves from a date palm and stored them in his cave as if he were going to sell them in some town's market to support himself, even though he lived too far from any people for this to be feasible. At the end of each year he burned all the leaves that he had collected and then he began the process again. Why would Abba Paul continue in this seemingly pointless task? Cassian explains that it was because the revered monk saw in daily labor a means of "purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving out *acedia*."⁵

For the same reasons that Abba Paul found collecting his soon-to-be-burnt palm leaves to be curative, Cassian and Benedict recommend manual labor for their monks. Not only can such work support the monastery and help feed the hungry, it is a preventative and remedy for *acedia*.⁶ For Benedict's monks "manual labor"—from Latin *manuus* (hand) and *labor* (work)—referred broadly to harvesting crops, caring for guests, performing various crafts, and doing whatever was needed to keep the monastery in good order.

This remedy for *acedia*, which is based on the close relationship between body and soul, addresses the two primary symptoms of the vice. On the one hand, physically working our bodies can help us break out of an idle spirit; furthermore, focusing our bodies in a coordinated effort can help us work out our psychological distractions. Have you noticed these twin benefits of manual work in your experience? After chopping vegetables for cooking, for instance, I seem to be less tempted by a spirit of apathy and less distracted when I need to sit down to do assigned reading.

Although Cassian and Benedict stress the importance of manual labor, all of the practical affairs and forms of service in our daily life can become a

remedy to *acedia* if we stick with them. Recall that *acedia's* first symptom is a tendency to idleness.⁷ This may take several forms. If our task seems boring, difficult, or useless, we may be tempted to waste time lazing around instead. When our task is tedious, we may be tempted to procrastinate. Sometimes we do not wholly abandon our task but intentionally give only a half-hearted or sloppy effort. In all of these situations, faithfully doing our work helps us to resist *acedia's* temptations.

Acedia's other symptom is welcoming needless distractions, engaging in restless activity, and being overly busy. These are not the necessary interruptions that are a part of everyday life, the needed breaks in the middle of our work, and especially not the regular times of relaxation and recreation that are part of flourishing as a human being. (Indeed, "people who work must take time to relax, to be with their families, to enjoy themselves, read, listen to music, play a sport," and so on.⁸) Rather, by needless distractions I am referring to things like playing videogames and browsing Facebook when one should be working, or aimlessly checking one's phone during free moments of the day. They can take more sinister forms, such as needlessly sharing the faults of our neighbors or mentally dwelling in rash judgments and comparisons. Sometimes distractions disguise themselves as times of productivity; for instance, I have often distracted myself from difficult points in paper writing by checking my email excessively. Attempting to multi-task is another problem. In my experience, it is not unusual for students to be working on a paper while viewing a link on Facebook, reading an email, sending a text message, and maybe even watching television. As much as we may resist admitting it, most of us do sloppy work when we try to multitask in this manner.⁹

Even if we could do acceptable work in the midst of restless activity, faithfulness requires us to give good attention to the work at hand since we do it all for the glory of God. As St. Francis de Sales writes in the seventeenth century, "Therefore, my daughter, be careful and diligent in all your affairs; God, who commits them to you, wills you to give them your best attention."¹⁰ The demands of daily work then become an opportunity to cultivate the mental focus and loving attention that *acedia* tries to dispel.

Faithfulness to our daily work also means that we avoid over-busyness. Evagrius comments that *acedia* leads a monk to desire other places where he can "pursue a trade that is easier and *more productive*" (italics added).¹¹ Even when we do not abandon the work we are called to do, we may constantly switch activities or willingly spread ourselves too thin in an attempt to "be more productive." We may be tempted to spend unnecessary hours at work, take on too large a course-load, or engage in excessive physical exercise. These temptations are heightened for us by "the competitiveness imposed by a consumer society"¹² and by the modern "cult of the body" in which people "sacrifice everything for [the body's] sake, idolizing physical perfection and success at sports."¹³

As Christians we can even become overly busy with Bible study groups and ministries. We can fall into the trap of thinking that the more activities we do for God's sake, the more we show that we love him. This is a "spiritualization of work" that forgets that we, through God's mercy, only participate in a small way in his saving work.¹⁴ Furthermore, spreading ourselves too thin comes with a cost to our work, health, relationships with family and friends, and spiritual life. Being faithful to our calling involves saying no to many things, sometimes even good things.

When we are consumed by a spirit of productivity, we become too focused on our own affairs and overemphasize their importance. We may even lose track of the ultimate purpose of all that we do, which is "to know [God], to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven."¹⁵ And when this happens, our daily work begins to look more and more like the empty busyness of *acedia*. Indeed, "all efforts in this world, whether for spiritual service or practical work, are empty unless fully subsumed in our love for [God]."¹⁶

FAITHFULNESS IN WORSHIP

When Aquinas turns to the question of whether *acedia* leads us to mortal sins—that is, to actions that sever our love for God—he considers someone's objection that *acedia* cannot be all that bad because it is never mentioned in (and therefore must not violate) any of God's commandments. Oh, but it does violate God's law, Aquinas replies: it "is contrary to the precept to keep holy the Sabbath, which as a moral precept commands repose of the mind in God."¹⁷ While the objector (like most people today) seems to think of *acedia* or sloth as innocently catching some rest, Aquinas sees it as our refusal to rest as we should—that is, in God, and especially through Sabbath keeping.

How can sloth be a refusal to rest? Aquinas's view is less paradoxical when we remember that he is using the concept of rest

as early Christian theologians did. "Resting," for them, did not mean total inactivity, but an immersive enjoyment in humanity's proper activity. We are resting in this sense when we are doing what we were created to do and so deeply want to do, when we are being who we were meant to be. Thus, Augustine opens his autobiographical *Confessions* with this prayer to God: "to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir

Faithfulness requires us to give good attention to the work at hand since we do it all for the glory of God. The demands of daily work become an opportunity to cultivate the mental focus and loving attention that *acedia* tries to dispel.

man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁸ Now *acedia* produces its spiritually deadly effect by resisting the Lord’s gracious efforts to draw us to that end, to lead us into this sort of rest. In his book on leisure Josef Pieper explains that a person overcome with *acedia* “does not want to be what God wants him to be, and that means that he does not want to be what

Sabbath rest, and the communal worship that constitutes its most important aspect, are not a departure from truly human activity, but the culmination of it. While everything we do should be a form of praise, “our relationship with God also *demand*s times of explicit prayer...”

he really, and in the ultimate sense, is.”¹⁹ We were created to be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (2 Peter 2:9, NIV).²⁰ How vigilant we should be, therefore, to give praise to God in the rhythm of daily life.

Sabbath rest, and the communal worship that constitutes its most important aspect, are not a departure from truly human activity, but the culmination of it.²¹ While everything we do should be a form of praise to God, Pope John Paul II notes that

[our] relationship with God also *demand*s times of explicit prayer, in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue, involving every dimension of the person. ‘The Lord’s Day’ is the day of this relationship *par excellence* when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation. This is precisely why it is also *the day of rest*.²²

Furthermore, he writes, “Through Sunday rest, daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspective.”²³ God calls us to prayer and praise, and issues the third commandment for our wellbeing; as Christ teaches, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

With various stratagems, *acedia* tries to cloud our thinking about regular Sunday worship. For instance, to persuade us that other activities would be fulfilling, it might whisper, “All things are sanctified by the Lord, and one could just as well worship on the golf course as in a sanctuary made by human hands.”²⁴ Or, *acedia* may suggest that we are too busy to make time for worship this week, because we are doing other good things. (It conveniently forgets that we can entrust our schedules to God, the maker of time.) When all else fails, *acedia* will call attention to how boring or spiritually dry the

sermons, prayers, and songs of worship have been of late. (It distracts us from the thought that through worship we are participating ever more fully in the life of the triune God, which are far more significant than what we might be feeling week by week in our weaknesses.)

While the most important part of the Lord's Day is when we gather together to celebrate Christ's resurrection, the "characteristic joy and necessary rest for spirit and body" of communal worship is meant to extend in through the whole day. Pope John Paul II explains,

In fact, the Lord's Day is lived well when marked from beginning to end by grateful and active remembrance of God's saving work. This commits each of Christ's disciples to shape the other moments of the day – those outside of the liturgical context: family life, social relationships, moments of relaxation – in such a way that the peace and joy of the Risen Lord will emerge in the ordinary events of life.²⁵

The joy of resting in God can spread through the week as we spend some time each day in prayer, even if our state of life allows only brief moments for it. Combining contemplation with active work or ministries in the world is an example of what Walter Hilton in the fourteenth century called the "mixed" life. In this vocation, a person "learns to make time in the whirl of everyday practical affairs for a true spiritual inwardness."²⁶ This time can be likened to a mini-Sabbath each day in which our souls are refreshed.

Of course, the vocation of the "mixed life" faces all of the opposing temptations of *acedia*. It is not easy to find time for prayer in the midst of a busy life. Additionally, we may become discouraged when faced with distractions or dryness in our prayer. Some of the external distractions, such as ringing cell phones, we can shut off. Other distractions, especially mental distractions, are beyond our control. In this case we should either address the distraction in prayer or calmly collect our thoughts as much as possible and carry on, resisting any kind of discouragement. We must resist all of these temptations to give up. Faithfulness to prayer involves "a disciplined determination to really look at Jesus, to 'contemplate' him," even as we were made to do.²⁷ It is during such times set aside for prayer and praise that God teaches us how to rest in him.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: WORK AND WORSHIP

Even if we remain faithful in our times set aside for prayer, we may be tempted to compartmentalize them from the ordinary work that we do each day. Ideally, however, our Sunday worship should "in a way [become] the soul of the other days"²⁸ and our times of prayer should overflow into all the other moments of the day. This would help us to maintain a proper perspective on our work, avoid the restless activity of *acedia*, and allow everything we do to draw us closer to the Lord.

Monks learn habits of praying during the ordinary works of daily life. St. Francis de Sales invites all believers to join them, advising laypersons that “when your ordinary work or business is not specially engrossing” – perhaps such as washing the dishes or doing yard work – “let your heart be fixed more on God than on it.”²⁹ Along these lines, a fourteenth century Yorkshire pastor gives the interesting counsel that if we discover that we cannot pray during our manual labor, then we need to slow down a bit.³⁰ We can pray while walking from place to place, he suggests, telling good stories to our walking companions, speaking of the Scriptures, reciting the Psalms, or simply lifting “up your heart unto the Lord and just pray to Him in your thoughts with a happy mind,” to give thanks for all that God has done.³¹ Since we cannot develop these kind of disciplines easily and quickly, we must be patient with ourselves and trust God to teach us to be people of prayer.

When our work demands our full mental attention, St. Francis de Sales suggests we occasionally pause from work to mentally place ourselves beneath the cross or to think on the Lord in some other way. Father Thomas Dubay commends what he calls “life-triggering prayer” in which “all sorts of diverse happenings can...ignite a short sentiment directed to God.”³² For instance, we might pray, “Lord, grant me patience” in a difficult situation, or praise God when we admire the beauty of a flower garden. Another good habit is to pray before and after each task that we do, however briefly. In this spirit, several professors have advised me to pray a prayer composed by Thomas Aquinas when I begin to study.

Whether or not we are able to pray (aloud or to ourselves) during our practical affairs, spiritual directors like Walter Hilton emphasize offering all of our work as a gift to the Lord in prayer. We do this by remembering that our part is only to do faithfully and as best we can the specific work God has given to us. We entrust the rest to him.

Hilton often employs a favorite image, drawn from the writings of Augustine, for the gift of God’s love in us: it is the fire of love in the soul. In one of his letters Hilton instructs a layman to fulfill his responsibilities and do good works, and then afterwards to “lift up your heart to God, and pray that in his goodness God will accept your works that you do to his pleasure.”³³ The man is to offer them humbly, realizing that they are nothing on their own, but they can be offered to God because of God’s mercy. When done with this sort of humility, all of the ordinary works of daily life can be as little sticks that enkindle the fire of love in our soul and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of *acedia*.³⁴

NOTES

1 I borrow this phrase from Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung’s writings on *acedia*. See, for example, the chapter on sloth in her *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

2 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, VI.12, in Robert E. Sinkewicz, trans., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99.

3 John Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.13, in Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian, The Institutes, Ancient Christian Writers Series*, 58 (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2000), 227.

4 Cassian, *The Institutes* 10.15, in Ramsey, 228.

5 Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.24, in Ramsey, 233.

6 On feeding the hungry, Cassian writes in *Institutes*, 10.22 (Ramsay, 232-233): "...the Fathers throughout Egypt in no way permit monks, and especially the young men, to be idle. They measure the state of their heart and their progress in patience and humility by their eagerness to work. Not only do they not allow them to accept any of their sustenance from anybody else, but from their own toil they also take care of brothers who are visiting and who are from afar, and they even collect an immense quantity of provisions and food to places in Libya that suffer from barrenness and hunger as well as to cities where people are languishing in squalid prisons, in the belief that they are presenting a spiritual and true sacrifice to the Lord, from the fruit of their hands, by way of this kind of offering."

7 The following are "symptoms" of *acedia* when they result from our willfully resisting the demands of love. They should be distinguished from similar behaviors that result instead from physiological causes, such as (physical or mental) fatigue or depression.

8 The quote is from Jorge Bergoglio (now Pope Francis) in Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2013), 19-20.

9 Of course, there will be exceptions. For example, classical music helps one of my friends to read, while for me it usually distracts.

10 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.10, www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life (accessed July 30, 2013).

11 *Praktikos*, VI.12, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 99.

12 Jorge Bergoglio, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio*, 20.

13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), § 2289.

14 I borrow the term "spiritualization of work" from Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's "The Vice of Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love," *theotherjournal.com: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* (November 15, 2007), theotherjournal.com/2007/11/15/the-vice-of-sloth-some-historical-reflections-on-laziness-effort-and-resistance-to-the-demands-of-love/ (accessed August 5, 2013).

15 *Baltimore Catechism* (1891), 1.1.6.

16 This is David Jeffrey's comment on the counsels of Walter Hilton in *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsels of Walter Hilton*, translated by David Lyle Jeffrey (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), xxii.

17 *De Malo*, Q 11, a 3, reply to objection 2, in Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 368. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 1.

18 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

19 Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, translated by Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998 [1948]), 28.

20 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

21 See Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, 28.

22 John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Dies Domini / On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy (July 5, 1998)*, § 15, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html (accessed August 5, 2013).

23 *Ibid.*, § 67.

24 R. R. Reno, *Fighting the Noonday Devil and Other Essays Personal and Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

25 John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, §§ 67 and 52.

26 David Lyle Jeffrey, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xxii.

27 *Ibid.*

28 John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, § 83. The Pope recalls with approval "the insight of Origen that the perfect Christian 'is always in the Lord's Day, and is always celebrating Sunday.'"

29 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.10.

30 Richard Rolle of Hampole, "Works of Doubtful Authenticity: Our Daily Work," from *English Prose Works of Richard Rolle: A Selection*, edited by Carl Horstman (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Digital Library Production Service, 2003), 142, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/rollewks> (accessed January 16, 2013).

31 Anonymous, in *English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif*, translated and edited by David Lyle Jeffrey (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 263.

32 Thomas Dubay, S. M., *Prayer Primer: Igniting a Fire Within* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ignatius Press, 2002), 53.

33 Walter Hilton, *Mixed Life*, edited from Lambeth Palace MS 472 by S. J. Ogilvie-Thompson (Saltzburg, Austria: Institute für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1986), 36. This translation into modern English is my own. For a translation of the entire work, see Jeffrey, ed., *Towards a Perfect Love*, 7-34.

34 *Ibid.*, 37.



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An Unconditional Surrender: Evelyn Waugh on *Acedia*

BY HEATHER HUGHES

Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* is an engaging modern narrative of *acedia*. This saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback is enlightening—not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage this vice causes, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.

Speaking abstractly about the vices is always difficult because they manifest in subtle ways particular to the individual. Early Christian writers often told stories to elucidate their meaning and significance, and I think stories are especially helpful when confronting the deceptively interior sin of *acedia*—a deep sadness and willful rejection of spiritual good that can be expressed through lazy inertia or busy distraction.

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) provides an engaging narrative of the causes, consequences, and remedies of *acedia* in his *Sword of Honour Trilogy: Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961).¹ Waugh wrote about the deadly sin of *acedia* on several occasions and commended other works of modern and contemporary fiction as illuminatingly representative of the vice, but his *Sword of Honour Trilogy*, tracking the experiences of the sloth-afflicted Englishman Guy Crouchback through the course of the Second World War, is particularly enlightening—not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage that the vice can cause in people's lives, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.

By 1939, in his own words, Guy Crouchback is not an “interesting case.” Thirty-five years old, the only surviving son of an old, aristocratic family now much diminished, he is divorced after marrying young and imprudently before a financial crisis that has left him destitute. He faces a lonely future

with an unfulfilled promise of family life. As a Catholic, he can never remarry while his nonreligious ex-wife Virginia flits from husband to husband, enjoying wealth and popularity. After selling the African farm where he lived with Virginia and moving alone to his family's villa in Italy, he took up occasional, consistently unsuccessful projects that came his way, but basically "time... stood still for him" for eight years (p. 17). Guy may be afflicted with particularly bad luck, but his reaction to misfortune involves more than situational depression. Indeed, with wry, British understatement Waugh portrays Guy's stunted life at the opening of the trilogy as a horror resulting from the inactive, 'lazy' form of *acedia*.

Disappointed in the expectations and hopes of his youth, Guy does not rage or rebel or seek sexual revenge against Virginia; he does something worse. He retreats not just from his former married life, but from life itself—from sacrificial communion with God, the Church, his community, friends, and family—into a powerfully isolating apathy.

...Guy had no wish to persuade or convince or to share his opinions with anyone. Even in his religion he felt no brotherhood.... Lately he had fallen into a habit of dry and negative chastity which even the priests felt to be unedifying. On the lowest, as on the highest plane, there was no sympathy between him and his fellow men. (p. 14)

He maintains his intellectual assent to Christian truth—"a few dry grains of faith" (p. 30)—but performs his religious duties with nothing but a desiccated integrity. His faith brings him no joy and he seeks none. Even Guy's chastity is suspect, since it is merely an absence of sex due to apathy rather than a decisive embodiment of his sexual identity as a married man separated from his wife. Because Christian morality is not a mere checklist of *thou shalt not's* but a positive love for God expressed through virtues that exhibit our true identities which God has authored, Guy does not have to violate clear moral constraints in order to sinfully fail in virtue and work against his own good.

In an essay on sloth, or *acedia*, Waugh calls attention to Thomas Aquinas's definition of this vice: *tristitia de bono spirituali*, sadness in the face of spiritual good. Waugh explains:

Man is made for joy in the love of God, a love which he expresses in service. If he deliberately turns away from that joy, he is denying the purpose of his existence. The malice of Sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty (though that that can be a symptom of it) but in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair.²

Here is why *acedia* is so difficult to identify: this vice does not attempt to replace our human *telos*, which is to love and serve God, with some secondary good like sex, possessions, or food. It does not inordinately prefer a particular good at all; rather, it says "no" to a difficult and demanding good. In Waugh's words, *acedia* "is the condition in which a man is fully aware of the proper

means of his salvation and refuses to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust.”³ The vice might manifest either in lethargically refusing to do what “the whole apparatus of salvation” requires of us, or in seeking distraction from the parts that happen to be irksome. Any distraction will do, even something good: the fourth-century desert Christians told stories about slothful monks who did works of mercy in order to distract themselves from some greater good of prayer or service which they had come to abhor. *Acedia*, therefore, cannot be diagnosed by what we happen to be seeking (either good or bad), but by what we are avoiding, and why.

In the thrall of *acedia*, Guy Crouchback can almost seem to fulfill the requirements of a healthy Christian spirituality – participating in the sacraments, respecting his neighbors. But even in the execution of his religious duties there is the subtle perversion of the vice:

Guy found it easy to confess in Italian. He spoke the language well but without nuances. There was no risk of going deeper than the denunciation of his few infractions of law, of his habitual weaknesses. Into that wasteland where his soul languished he need not, could not, enter. He had no words to describe it. There were no words in any language. There was nothing to describe, merely a void. His was not an ‘interesting case,’ he thought. No cosmic struggle raged in his stroke of paralysis; all his spiritual faculties were just perceptibly impaired. He was ‘handicapped’ There was nothing to say about it. (p. 12)

Guy may appear to be doing what he is supposed to do, but his distorted gestures towards effort actually prevent true healing. He is like a child who merely pretends to wash her hands before dinner or brush her teeth before bedtime – going through the motions, but stopping short of her mother’s instructions (in order to maintain a degenerate form of autonomy), and thereby compromising her own health and well-being in the process.

Acedia blinds Guy to the intensity, significance, and joy in life. What begins as instinctual recoil from the pain of his disappointment and divorce becomes a deep-rooted habit of isolation and rejection of his soul’s true fulfillment. He can acknowledge the practice of confession as a good and necessary “apparatus of salvation,” but when he participates in the sacrament he “need not, could not” engage in what it requires of him – that he recognize and give over to God that “wasteland where his soul languished” and that he seek joy in God’s forgiveness. Guy becomes so stunted by *acedia* that the state of his soul no longer alarms him, or even interests him very much. But a “cosmic struggle” is exactly what is happening in his uninteresting “stroke of paralysis” – a true matter of life or death in his fight with deadly sin.

Guy could be stuck in his vicious stasis forever, but he is shaken by the developments of the Second World War. One day he “opened his morning newspaper on the headlines announcing the Russian-German alliance. News that shook the politicians and young poets of a dozen capital cities

brought deep peace to one English heart. Eight years of shame and loneliness were ended." Guy had "...expected his country to go to war in a panic, for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all, with the wrong allies, in pitiful weakness. But now, splendidly, everything had become clear. The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in

"His whole uniform was a disguise, his whole new calling a masquerade." Guy has not found the key to his profound problem with *acedia*. He is still at odds with his true identity and *telos*; he has found bustling activity, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love.

that battle" (p. 10). For Guy, the news of impending global war does not inspire fear or sadness, but anticipation of something worthwhile to do. He seems to have found a clear task that fits neatly into his sense of honor and the teachings of his Church—a war that demands no compromise or ambiguity, in which the good and the bad are obviously and officially on opposing teams. After feeling stranded and hopelessly ineffectual for

eight long years, he has found a path to rejoin the world of men.

He returns swiftly and hopefully to an England scrambling for wartime employment, adjusting to a life of rations and blackouts. Because he has been gone for so long and maintained so few connections, he finds the war is more difficult to enter than he anticipated. So many men have joined the military, angling to spend their enlisted years with friends, that it seems impossible for an unconnected, over-thirty man to find a place anywhere. But after much discouraging trial and error, Guy visits his humble and holy, dispossessed father at the seaside hotel where he has lived since losing the family's estates (through no fault of his own). Guy finds the quiet hotel now bustling with wartime evacuees and travelers. He meets his father's friend who happens to be a major in the Royal Corps of Halberdiers, a quirky regiment of infantry with a long and respected history. Hearing Guy's predicament, the major easily sets him up with the Corps.

Guy is wholly seduced by this old, eccentric, and proud regiment with its history, habits, and rituals. His days of training to be an officer have the rigorous air of the schoolroom—and demonstrate Waugh's genius and dexterity as a writer. Comic episodes of pranks and delightfully ridiculous characters are underscored, or undermined, by notes of doom from the outside world, the very real timeline of the Second World War intruding on the story. Waugh expertly combines a sense of nostalgia for days-gone-by through Guy's second youth, full of revitalizing military discipline and

camaraderie, with humor, biting social and political satire, and theologically rich character development.

After months of training, Guy is thoroughly a Halberdier: enthusiastic, capable, and exacting. Most of the wartime recruits in officer training are much younger than Guy and have come to affectionately refer to him and the other older recruit as 'uncle.' He has acquired what he deems an imposing mustache and a monocle, to help his aim. This is a time filled with more satisfying exertion and passionate interest in his own place in the world than Guy has experienced perhaps since childhood. Yet, even now, when he is undeniably a man of action rather than inert sloth, Guy is not entirely whole.

While on leave, Guy sees Virginia for the second time in almost a decade (the first being just months before) and she is humorously appalled by his mustache and monocle. What the peculiar Halberdiers admired, Virginia recognizes as discordant. "After all, [Guy] reflected, his whole uniform was a disguise, his whole new calling a masquerade" (p. 116). He immediately goes to shave and, "When it was done, Guy studied himself once more in the glass and recognized an old acquaintance he could never cut, to whom he could never hope to give the slip for long, the uncongenial fellow traveler who would accompany him through life" (p. 117). For all of his activity and acceptance in the Halberdiers, Guy has not found the key to his profound problem with *acedia*. He is still at odds with his true identity and *telos*; he has found bustling activity, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love. There is much good in his intentional participation in what he considers the cause of justice. But for Guy, this new, vigorous military life is his only purpose. His passion for justice, patriotism, and loyalty to the Corps are all goods, but they are secondary goods that serve to distract from "his own deep wound, that unstaunched, internal draining away of life and love" (p. 10).

Guy has sought out Virginia in hopes of seducing her, not because he longs for their reunion but because he has convinced himself that she is the only woman he can guiltlessly seduce; and he would have been successful, if he had not revealed those rather loveless details. He returns to the Halberdiers deflated, but is soon given command of the group of men he will lead into battle; at which time,

Guy's shame left him and pride flowed back. He ceased for the time being to be the lonely and ineffective man – the man he so often thought he saw in himself, past his first youth, cuckold, wastrel, prig...he was one with his regiment, with all their historic feats of arms behind him, with great opportunities to come. (p. 128)

His identity in the Corps gives Guy a sense of purpose and meaning. For the time being, it gives him something to work and exert himself for.

Yet Guy's experience of military life exposes a corporate form of *acedia* that Waugh believes defines our age. The inefficient, inconsistent, and experientially arbitrary bureaucracy of the war machine wears on the Halberdiers: "Chaos

prevailed. The order was always to stand by for orders" (p. 179). Incompetent, disliked men are regularly promoted by their superiors, including Guy himself, just to get them out of the way. This undermines the soldiers' questionable devotion; most "had been found to entertain hazy ideas on the subject" of what they were even fighting for. Yet, "Guy believed he knew something of this matter that was hidden from the mighty" (p. 164). For, "[t]here were in morals two requisites for a lawful war, a just cause and the chance of victory," both of which were undeniably met. There was even "great virtue in unequal odds.... And the more victorious [the enemy] was the more he drew to himself the enmity of the world and the punishment of God" (p. 165).

Nevertheless, Guy's participation in the war does not begin so gallantly. His first mission, in the Dakar Expedition of September 1940, does not advance war efforts, but merely helps his commanding brigadier prove their Force Commander wrong about a beach being wired. Guy is forced to return to England with his brigadier for an inquiry into the incident because their escapade went against orders. The inquiry is dismissed, but Guy is stranded back in England, unable to rejoin his Halberdiers in West Africa.

Guy eventually joins a newly formed commando brigade where he becomes friends with a fellow wartime recruit, the fashionable Ivor Claire. In May 1941 the commando unit is sent to the evacuation of Crete, when the Allied defense has already broken. Their orders are to fight to the end, letting men who have been there longer evacuate, and then give themselves up as prisoners of war. Waugh's description of the turmoil and fatigue of this action is especially vivid; he fought in the evacuation of Crete himself, likely encountering there the acute corporate form of sloth about which he later wrote:

I have seen soldiers in defeat who could not be accused of laziness. They were making strenuous exertions to get away from the enemy. Nor were they impelled by fear. They had simply become bored by the mismanagement of the battle and indifferent to its outcome. There were ill-found camps and stations in the war where men refused to take the actions which would have alleviated their own condition, but instead luxuriated in apathy and resentment. There was a sense of abandonment there which, though it was not recognized as such, was theological in essence; instead it found expression in complaints, just or unjust, against the higher command and the politicians.⁴

Guy's commando unit accomplishes next to nothing, traveling on foot with the scattered retreat – men who have been swarming away from their command posts, abandoning weapons, losing their minds, and giving up all sense of honor. Ivor Claire deserts his men and escapes with the disembarkation; Guy risks drowning and starvation by jumping on a broken down, abandoned fishing boat with a few others, but they miraculously make it back to Egypt alive, with severe dehydration.

When finally recovered, Guy is visited by Mrs. Stitch, a socialite friend of Ivor Claire who has already managed to send Ivor to India to protect him from gossip and the risk of court-martial. When she realizes that Guy's sense of honor outweighs his affection after Claire's desertion, Mrs. Stitch uses her ample social connections to have Guy sent back to England on medical leave before he can cause trouble.

[Guy] had no old love for Ivor, no liking at all, for the man who had been his friend had proved to be an illusion. He had a sense, too, that all war consisted in causing trouble without much hope of advantage. Why was he here...why was the young soldier lying still unburied in the deserted village of Crete, if it was not for Justice?" (p. 467)

Before Guy is shipped home, he hears of the German invasion of Russia. His hopes in Justice are damaged irrevocably when the Nazis turn on their partners in transgression and England accepts as convenient ally a nation whose politics and principles have been criminal:

It was just such a sunny, breezy Mediterranean day two years before when he read of the Russo-German alliance, when a decade of shame seemed to be ending in light and reason, when the Enemy was in plain view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off; the modern age in arms.

Now the hallucination was dissolved...and he was back after less than two years' pilgrimage in a Holy Land of illusion in the old ambiguous world, where...gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour. (p. 468)

When he returns to England, Guy is no longer a man of passionate action. His foray into the world through just war has been as unsuccessful and disheartening as his foray into marriage. The satisfaction and distraction of army life is gone, leaving him alone with that "old acquaintance he could never cut" and his uninteresting paralysis of spiritual faculties.

Then, after another "two blank years" of now meaningless military service, Guy visits his father when Italy's surrender is announced in September 1943. Discussing this with Mr. Crouchback, Guy quips about what a mistake the Lateran Treaty (the 1929 agreement that established the territory of Vatican City and limited the political power of the Catholic Church) had been, and how smug the Pope could be now if he had just waited out the Italian state's threats against the Catholic Church in Rome. But "Mr. Crouchback regarded his son sadly," remarking, "That isn't at all what the Church is like. It isn't what she's *for*" (p. 489).

When Mr. Crouchback then qualifies that it is natural for Guy, as a soldier, to delight in his army's victory, Guy informs him,

"I don't think I'm interested in victory now."

"Then you've no business being a soldier."

“Oh, I want to stay in the war. I should like to do some fighting. But it doesn’t seem to matter now who wins....” (p. 489)

Later, in a follow-up letter to his son, Mr. Crouchback draws a distinction between how the people of Rome may feel towards war leaders like Mussolini and how the Church must relate to them – implying that Romans would probably regret the Lateran Treaty as Guy does, but

...that isn’t the Church. The Mystical Body doesn’t strike attitudes and stand on its dignity. It accepts suffering and injustice. It is ready to forgive at the first hint of compunction.

When you spoke of the Lateran Treaty did you consider how many souls may have been reconciled and have died at peace as a result of it? How many children may have been brought up in the faith who might have lived in ignorance? Quantitative judgements don’t apply. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any amount of loss of ‘face.’

I write like this because I am worried about you.... You seemed so much enlivened when you first joined the army....

It was not a good thing living alone and abroad....” (pp. 490-491)

This letter has a profound impact on Guy and very soon he is considering its words again at Mr. Crouchback’s funeral:

‘I’m worried about you,’ his father had written.... His father had been worried, not by anything connected with his worldly progress, but by his evident apathy....

...For many years now the direction..., ‘Put yourself in the presence of God,’ had for Guy come to mean a mere act of respect, like signing the Visitors’ Book at an Embassy or Government House. He reported for duty saying to God: ‘I don’t ask anything from you. I am here if you want me. I don’t suppose I can be any use, but if there is anything I can do, let me know,’ and left it at that.

‘I don’t ask anything from you’; that was the deadly core of his apathy; his father had tried to tell him, was now telling him. That emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity in the Halberdiers. Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*. (p. 540)

With his father’s death, Guy finally confronts what before he “need not, could not” face – the truth of his own *acedia*; that emptiness which had been with him through all of his torpid Italian days and his vigorous stint in the military. He recognizes with contrition the difference between his father’s humility and his own indifference (it is not humility that says “I don’t ask anything from you”). It is now clear how his passion for Justice and his faith in just war are radically misplaced – not because they are unimportant or

wrong, but because they are dependent on his own calculations of honor over God's love and mercy.

What Guy reveals here about *acedia* are not just the lazy squalor or ineffective busyness that can be its symptoms, but its root in pride. It is pride that stands on its dignity, thinks of its reputation before the saving of souls, and must determine the operation of its own fulfillment. Guy's *acedia*, stemmed from pride, takes failure upon itself, even in the face of an eternal, personal, perfect love and does not ask for anything more. His wife left him, his projects collapsed, his just war devolved into meaningless manslaughter, but instead of lamenting and praying and demanding from God to know *what am I supposed to do?* Guy grumbles: it seems you don't have any use for me. God had not brought joy, fulfillment, or success in the ways that Guy wanted and which seemed perfectly reasonable, and so he prefers not to pursue joy or fulfillment at all. He prefers not to ask.

In this we can see what it means for *acedia* to be a sin against charity. Guy's presumption that God does not need him is a sinfully false humility; it scorns the fact that God has conveniently given everything Guy could possibly contribute as a gift of grace. True humility begins with gratitude, but Guy approaches God like a bureaucrat whose visitors' book he can sign and then be on his way. Yet God is no detached dignitary, and seeking distance from him is no sign of respect. God "commanded all men to *ask*" not as a conceited tyrant, but as a father longing for a true relationship of understanding communion – as love personified.

With Mr. Crouchback's passing, Guy comes to see how truly dry a grain his faith actually is – not close to the rich theological virtue suffused with charity and hope – and he intuits the only real solution to his *acedia*:

In the recess of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came. They also served who only stood and waited. He saw himself as one of the labourers in the parable who sat in the market-place waiting to be hired and were not called into the vineyard until late in the day. They had their reward on an equality with the men who had toiled since dawn. One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created. Even he must have his function in the divine plan. He did not expect a heroic destiny. Quantitative judgments did not apply. All that mattered was to recognize the chance when it offered. Perhaps his father was at that moment clearing the way for him. 'Show me what to do and help me to do it,' he prayed. (p. 540)

In this scene we see how far Guy has moved from his initial, autonomous choice to advance God's project through the cause of Justice to his accepting his specific work of service – it is the difference between "I am here if you

want me” and “Show me what to do and help me to do it.” He embraces the remedy for *acedia* recommended by ancient Christians: a commitment and obedience to our individual vocations. He comprehends *acedia* does not just oppose work, but also refuses to welcome the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to accomplish our *telos* of loving and serving God. This is not a climactic realization for Guy, because he is well catechized; rather it is the surrender of his desire to avoid, escape, or control the *telos* that he has always acknowledged, even while failing to pursue.

When you think of the desert Christians’ remedy for *acedia* in their original context, this is what it boils down to. Traditionally there are two vocations through which human beings can accomplish our shared *telos* of loving and serving God – marriage or religious life, both of which require lifelong commitment. The desert Christians called *acedia* “the noonday devil” because the misery of noon in the desert was when they were most beguiled by thoughts and daydreams of family life, the comforts of home, professions in the outside world, and the freedoms of wealth. None of those thoughts are inherently evil, but for monastics committed to lifelong poverty, chastity, and stability, they can be a demonic temptation to shrink from, avoid, resent, or even abandon their vocation – their “function in the divine plan.” It was in the midday heat that they considered how much better it would be to settle on a lesser good, an easier satisfaction than the one they were seeking in the desert – which was ultimately God himself.

When advising prayer and stability in response to *acedia* (“stay in your cell”), they were just counseling monastics to live into their vocations. These are things they should be doing anyway; but they have to truly mean them, without apathy or distraction, if they want to defeat the noonday devil. Today many Christians use vocation to refer to the personal missions they are individually designed by God to accomplish – be it monastic life, marriage, artistic callings, specific works of mercy, or something else. Not all of the desert Christians’ instructions are applicable for the vocations of contemporary men and women, but their message to cease choosing nothing or even lesser goods in favor of the ultimate, terrifying good of God for one’s life certainly is. Whatever our vocation or mission, we are all called to love and serve God in openness to his will and willingness to do what he requires. Guy’s simple prayer – “Show me what to do and help me to do it” – provides an excellent model.

Guy finally abandons his presumption that he must approve the source and operation of his satisfaction in life and can refuse to participate if God does not work in ways he accepts. But this acknowledgement of vocation and his “small service which only he could perform” is not a magic word that solves all his problems – that is what he believed the war to be! He is still in the “ambiguous world,” where discernment and obedience are complicated and experience misleading. He is still plagued by failure and a melancholic disposition. The change in Guy does not make any of

these circumstances emotionally satisfying; instead, it makes him increasingly able to “recognize the chance when it offered.”

When possible summons come, it is not with a clear sign or promise of joyful fulfillment, but Guy, sensitive now to what the Church is *for*, recognizes “It was made my business by being offered” (p. 623). The trilogy ends with two significant occasions when through compassion Guy can sense, “that here again, in a world of hate and waste, he was being offered the chance of doing a single small act to redeem the times” (p. 663). Neither are glorious, and he is only successful in one – which utterly lacks dignity, “not the normal behaviour of an officer and a gentleman; something they’ll laugh about in [his club] Bellamy’s” (p. 663).

On the whole, Guy seems right to have anticipated no heroic destiny. Yet, what Waugh so masterfully shows through this, is that in our age of historic change it is not ultimately what Guy *does* that matters, it is who Guy *is*. Our actions are important and have significant consequences, but they only matter because we are astonishingly permitted by God to join in his work and become instruments of his will. *Acedia* would defame and distort and destroy this terrible gift, but as Guy finally learns, it is possible through love and obedience to embrace that ultimate *telos* we all share: to serve God in joy.

NOTES

1 Evelyn Waugh is one of the most acclaimed English novelists of the 20th Century. A famous literary convert to Catholicism, well known for his political conservatism, cultural critique, and exquisite writing style, he is also a celebrated biographer, travel author, and reviewer. *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* incorporates much of his own experience of World War II and is an excellent example of his skill and range as a writer. It combines the satiric comedy that first made him famous in early novels like *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934) with the poignancy and theological depth of his most famous novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Quotations from the *Sword of Honour Trilogy* come from the Everyman’s Library edition, which is paginated continuously, and will be cited in the text. Evelyn Waugh, *Sword of Honour* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

2 Evelyn Waugh, “Sloth,” *The Sunday Times* (London), 1962; reprinted in Ian Fleming, ed., *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1962), 58.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 61.



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Edward Hopper's Room in New York depicts an all-too-common analogue of *acedia*: resistance to the demands of human love.

Intimate Separation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The American Realist painter Edward Hopper enjoyed painting detailed, revealing scenes of life in New York City from the 1930s to 1950s. His images create an alternate reality from the isolation and loneliness of city life. They can provide constructive solitude and meditative reflection for its inhabitants.¹ His city streets, totally devoid of people, can elicit a calm that touches and soothes the soul.²

But in a number of paintings Hopper depicted apartment interiors peopled with figures who share an intimate space, but not their lives. For instance, in *Room in New York* we see a man and woman whose facial features have been blurred, allowing them to serve as types rather than specific individuals. Perhaps they are the typical husband and wife in their living room at nightfall. At first glance they appear to be enjoying downtime at the end of a busy day, but when we look closely, something is out of kilter with that interpretation. Notice the body position of the woman: she is playing the piano with one finger and seems distracted by thoughts of something other than her music. (Since the couple owns a piano and there is sheet music visible, she most likely knows how to play the piano, but that is not what she is doing right now.) Is there something she is tentative to discuss with her husband? Whatever the distraction, she turns to the piano and his thoughts are focused on the paper. Neither is concerned with or even acknowledges the other person at this moment. “They are out of synch,” the art critic Robert Hughes has noted, “and their distance from each other is figured in the simple act of a woman with a shadowed face sounding a note (or perhaps only thinking about sounding it) to which there will be no response.”³

NOTES

1 See my discussion of Hopper’s *New York Movie* (1939) and *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (1958) in “The Field of Sensation and Experience,” *Virtual Lives*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 38 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2011), 40-45.

2 See my discussion of Hopper’s *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) and *Nighthawks* (1942) in “An Ordered Neighborhood,” *Cities and Towns*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 20 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006), 56-60.

3 Robert Hughes, “Art: Under the Crack of Reality,” *Time*, 143:3 (July 17, 1995), 54.

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Hieronymus Bosch depicts the seven capital vices, or “deadly sins,” in scenes from everyday life that are filled with elaborate detail and symbolism.

A Wearied Explorer

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

W e know very little about the early life and training of the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. He married a wealthy woman before 1481, but they had no children. The *Tabletop with the Seven Deadly Sins and Last Four Things*, because it is one of several works located in the Prado in Madrid, may support the theory that the artist traveled to Spain. Bosch's subject matter is transitional, drawing both from the religious moralizing of the Middle Ages and the humanism of the Renaissance.¹

The *Tabletop* can be dated stylistically to the artist's first period (1480-1485). The composition features five circular forms that resemble the convex, bull's eye mirrors (or *specula*) of the day; perhaps this is because the mirror was used in medieval moral literature as a symbol for a comprehensive overview, as in titles such as *Speculum humanae salvationis* (*Mirror of Human Salvation*). The smaller circles in the corners of the composition depict the Four Last Things (Death, Judgment, Hell, and Glory). Around the larger circle in the middle are depictions of the seven capital vices (or "deadly sins" as they were popularly known) in scenes from everyday life.²

Bosch's selection of the seven deadly sins for this comprehensive view of human immorality is not surprising. They had become popular in art to illustrate humanity's tendencies towards sin. They were used as a rubric in the practice of confession, and were taught widely with a mnemonic, SALIGIA, based on the first letters of their names in Latin – *superbia* (pride), *avaritia* (greed), *luxuria* (lust), *invidia* (envy), *gula* (gluttony), *ira* (anger), and *acedia* (sloth).³ The list ordering of the sins, however, varied from this among authors.

At the very center of the composition, representing the eye of God, is the figure of Christ emerging from his tomb; the Latin inscription here is *Cave cave d[omin]us videt* (Beware, Beware, God Sees). The brilliant colors and beams radiating outward suggest an association between Christ and the sun. The sins of the world, it would seem, are under constant scrutiny and could assure a final verdict of damnation for sinful humanity.⁴ Placed above and below the central circle are cautionary biblical verses. In translation, these are respectively:

They are a nation void of sense;
there is no understanding in them.

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Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), ACEDIA, from TABLETOP WITH THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AND LAST FOUR THINGS (1485). Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo: Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library. Used by permission.

If they were wise, they would understand this;
they would discern what the end would be.

Deuteronomy 32:28-29

I will hide my face from them,
I will see what their end will be.

Deuteronomy 32:20a

Fascinated with the horrors of sin and eternal punishment, Bosch depicted them with elaborate detail and symbolism. The scenes of the seven deadly sins in the *Tabletop* are complex, but they are very true to life. They do not feature the elements of the fantastic and sexual licentiousness that characterize his later and more famous work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In the *Tabletop* Bosch reserves such elements for the outer circles in which he imagines the eschatological consequences of sin.

Acedia is represented by a man lounging around: he is sitting in a large chair before a fire with a pillow propped behind his head. His dog is sleeping at his feet. Behind him a nun holds a prayer book and offers a rosary to him, suggesting that he should pray. Instead the man holds a complex instrument, which may be associated with the sextant and vase filled with rolled documents (perhaps these are maps?) displayed on the shelf. Beside the man is a folio of documents secured with ribbon and leather cover. Taken together, the instruments of navigation and papers may indicate that the sitter is a sort of explorer who has been distracted from his religious duties by wandering thoughts and is now wearied.

"Acedia can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity," Rebecca DeYoung notes. "Somewhere in between the two is a holy Sabbath rest for the heart that has given itself utterly to God."⁵ This man represents both the couch potato and the distracted explorer. He is being offered the middle ground by the nun: to receive the rosary and prayer book would put him on a path of return to God through prayer and holy Sabbath rest.

NOTES

1 "Bosch, Hieronymus, Jeroen or Jérôme," *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00023609 (accessed September 7, 2013).

2 Larry Silver, "God in the Details: Bosch and Judgment(s)," *The Art Bulletin*, 83:4 (December, 2001), 626-650, here citing 628.

3 Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Loyola's Acts: The Rhetoric of the Self* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 120, publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft2t1nb1rw;brand=ucpress (accessed September 8, 2013).

4 Silver, "God in the Details," 628.

5 Rebecca DeYoung, "Resistance to the Demands of Love," *Acedia*, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 49 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), 17.



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Worship Service

B Y B U R T L . B U R L E S O N

Chiming of the Hour

*Call to Worship: Psalm 100 (NIV)*¹

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the LORD is God.

**It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.**

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

**For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

Silent Meditation

Acedia is a soul-sickness, a loss of any connection with spiritual things. Practices mean nothing. Boredom is too weak a word. Perhaps aversion or repulsion regarding the spiritual dimensions of life and living better describe the effects of *acedia*.

The chief benefit of facing *acedia* can be to purify my motivation. It can cause me for the first time to start doing spiritual exercises for the right reasons rather than for subtle self-gain.

*Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B.*²

Hymn of Gathering

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of thy redeeming love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer;
hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;
he, to rescue me from danger,
interposed his precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above.

Robert Robinson (1758), alt.

Tune: NETTLETON

Morning Prayer of Gratitude

O God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
we gather to worship you.

You are the source of every good and perfect gift.

We thank you for this Sabbath time designed for us
to enjoy the goodness of your creation,
to honor and praise you,
and to rest in your presence.

We pray that we will be present to one another and to you
as you are present with us.

When our hearts are overflowing with joy,
the others here amplify our song;

When our hearts are too heavy for song,
they sing for us.

Thank you for bringing us together in this place
and drawing us into your life and light.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
we pray and worship. Amen.

Hymn of Confession

“I Lift My Prayer to Thee”

Lord, in this darkened place
I lift my prayer to thee,
in hope that I, by healing grace,
may ever awakened be.

Lead me beyond despair,
where clouded souls all sleep,
to sacred purpose, holy life,
where deeper truth calls to deep.

Forgive my noonday sin,
dreaming thy time away;
fill me with care to do thy will,
to love, to serve, to stay.

Guide me that I may be
faithful in every way,
to see, to hold, and then to share
the blessings of every day.

Lord, in this darkened place,
joyfully I will sing
of life, of gift, of time, of faith,
of every sacred thing.

Burt L. Burlison (2013)

Tune: TRENTHAM

Silent Prayers for Healing

Pray first for those you know
who are sad, depressed, and without purpose,
who have lost passion,
who need a new vision.

(Members offer silent petitions.)

For these we pray:
Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

Pray now for your own need
for healing of spirit,
for renewal of calling,
for strength to be faithful.

(Members offer silent confessions.)

For ourselves we pray:

Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

Hear now these words of assurance:

“You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.’

“Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.” **Amen.**

Psalm 91:1-2, 14-15

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 30:1-3 (NIV)

I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.

New Testament Reading: Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord,
not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance
from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Gospel Reading: John 16:33 (NIV)

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this
world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

The Word of the Lord for God’s People.

Thanks be to God.

Offering

Song of Preparation

“Break Thou the Bread of Life” (v. 3)

Oh, send thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
that he may touch my eyes and make me see:
show me the truth concealed within thy Word,
and in thy Book revealed I see the Lord.

Alexander Groves (1913)

Tune: BREAD OF LIFE (Sherwin)

Sermon

Benediction (based on *Ephesians 3:20-21*)

And now to God
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine,
to God be the glory
in Christ Jesus
and in his Church
and in each one of us
forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

2 Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B., *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 107 and 99.



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I Lift My Prayer to Thee

BURT L. BURLESON

Lord, in this darkened place
I lift my prayer to thee,
in hope that I, by healing grace,
may ever awakened be.

Lead me beyond despair,
where clouded souls all sleep,
to sacred purpose, holy life,
where deeper truth calls to deep.

Forgive my noontday sin,
dreaming thy time away;
fill me with care to do thy will,
to love, to serve, to stay.

Guide me that I may be
faithful in every way,
to see, to hold, and then to share
the blessings of every day.

Lord, in this darkened place,
joyfully I will sing
of life, of gift, of time, of faith,
of every sacred thing.

I Lift My Prayer to Thee

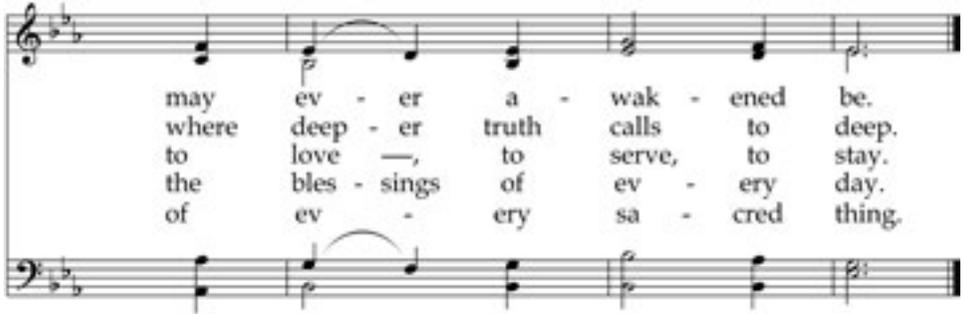
BURT L. BURLESON

ROBERT JACKSON (1878)

Lord, in this dark - ened place
Lead me be - yond des - pair,
For - give my noon - day sin,
Guide me that I may be
Lord, in this dark - ened place,

I lift my prayer to thee,
where cloud - ed souls all sleep,
dream - ing thy time a - way;
faith - ful in ev - ery way,
joy - ful - ly I will sing

in hope that I, by heal - ing grace,
to sa - cred pur - pose, ho - ly life,
fill me with care - to, do thy will,
to see, to hold, and then to share
of life, of gift, of time, of faith,



may ev - er a - wak - ened be.
where deep - er truth calls to deep.
to love —, to serve, to stay.
the bles - sings of ev - ery day.
of ev - ery sa - cred thing.

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Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: TRENTHAM
6.6.8.6.

❖ Other Voices ❖

[*Acedia*, or] spiritual carelessness seems to me to underlie much contemporary unhappiness in Western culture. The word is no longer used not because the reality is obsolete but because we have stopped noticing it. We are too busy to be spiritually self-aware and our children grow up in a culture that suffers from collective *acedia*. *Acedia* has established itself so well that it is now part of modernity.

CHRISTOPHER JAMISON, *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life (2008)*

Acedia is a soul-sickness, a loss of any connection with spiritual things. Practices mean nothing. Boredom is too weak a word. Perhaps aversion or repulsion regarding the spiritual dimensions of life and living better describe the effects of *acedia*.

MARY MARGARET FUNK, O.S.B., *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life (1998)*

The eye of the person afflicted with *acedia* stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. The door creaks and he jumps up; he hears a sound, and he leans out the window and does not leave it until he gets stiff from sitting there. When he reads, the one afflicted with *acedia* yawns a lot and readily drifts off to sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for awhile; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep, but not a very deep sleep, for hunger then rouses his soul and has him show concern for his needs.

EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS (345 - 399), *Eight Thoughts 6.14-15*

There is grief that is useful, and there is grief that is destructive. The first sort consists in weeping over one's own faults and weeping over the weakness of one's neighbors, in order not to destroy one's purpose, and attach oneself to the perfect good. But there is also a grief that comes from the enemy, full of mockery, which some call *accidie*. This spirit must be cast out, mainly by prayer and psalmody.

SYNCLERICA 27 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (1975) translated by Benedicta Ward*

Aquinas describes [*acedia*] as our rational consent “in the dislike, horror and detestation of the divine good, on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit.” When sensible goods (the pleasures of this world) come to seem better than spiritual goods (friendship with God), the result is that we become “sorry to have to do something for God’s sake.” Rather than taking joy in the relationship with God that charity enables, we turn away from such a relationship. As Aquinas shows, if our participation in God’s goodness is only for this life, then our relationship with God...would be stunted from the outset. Why would God only love us and care for us for such a short time, and then assent to our utter annihilation? How could a friend or lover do that, and how could our love be nourished within such a context? With Paul, Aquinas answers that it could not: we would succumb to [*acedia*], toward which we often tend anyway.

MATTHEW LEVERING, *The Betrayal of Charity: The Sins that Sabotage Divine Love* (2011)

The sixth Deadly Sin is named by the Church *Acedia* or Sloth. In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. We have known it far too well for many years. The only thing perhaps that we have not known about it is that it is mortal sin.

...[I]t is one of the favorite tricks of this Sin to dissemble itself under cover of a whiffling activity of body. We think that if we are busily rushing about and doing things, we cannot be suffering from Sloth. And besides, violent activity seems to offer an escape from the horrors of Sloth. So the other sins hasten to provide a cloak for Sloth.... But these are all disguises for the empty heart and the empty brain and the empty soul of *Acedia*.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS (1893 - 1957), *“The Other Six Deadly Sins”* (1941)

Not only can *acedia* and ordinary diligence exist very well together; it is even true that the senselessly exaggerated workaholicism of our age is directly traceable to *acedia*, which is a basic characteristic of the spiritual countenance of precisely this age in which we live.

JOSEF PIEPER (1904 - 1997), *Faith, Hope, Love* (1997)

When we settle down to work it’s easy to be unsettled. Consistent work is not distracting. Consistent work, our own work, is quiet, and it requires a quietness of spirit to accomplish. The desert fathers moved into the wilderness and lived simplified lives not in order to remove themselves from temptation, but to confront the twists and turns in their spirits that only became apparent when they refused to be distracted.

There's no easy way to be rid of the noonday demon [of *acedia*]. He is on the road with us, and with every decision to turn off the blaring distractions of our modern age and settle down to think and to work, to have an attentive conversation or to clean the bathroom, he will be there, asking, "Shouldn't you check Facebook or read your email?" It takes the work of the Spirit, and it also takes practice, to get into the habit of ignoring him, and get on with the business of doing the simple, monotonous, often unobserved, difficult, profoundly good work of living.

JANELLE AIJIAN, *"On the Road with the Noonday Demon," Scriptorium Daily blog (2013)*

One afflicted with this spiritual sorrow [*acedia*] is encouraged to persevere in prayer and meditation, precisely because "the more we think about spiritual goods, the more pleasing they become to us." Since the divine good is infinitely pleasing in itself, it offers the best hope of a cure for this disorder. Besieged by boredom and distraction, the mind should hold fast to the object of its contemplation, its loving gaze sustained by a confidence that joy and peace must eventually be restored.

MICHAEL L. RAPOSA, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination (1999)*

Once when Anthony was living in the desert his soul was troubled by *acedia* and irritation. He said to God, "Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?" After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Anthony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, "Do this and you will be cured." When he heard it he was very glad and recovered his confidence. He did what the angel had done, and found the salvation he was seeking.

A P O T H E G M 7 . 1 *in The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks (2003)*
translated by Benedicta Ward

When I detect *acedia* beginning in myself, I do well to muster my resistance, even if it is only to let John Cassian remind me where I am headed if I do not. "From *acedia*," he writes, "[are born] idleness, somnolence, rudeness, restlessness, wandering about, instability of mind and body, chattering, [and] inquisitiveness." If I allow myself to reach this stage I will be a distracted tourist rather than a pilgrim, and am likely to turn away from the very things that might bring me to my senses.

KATHLEEN NORRIS, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life (2008)*

Sloth: Who Cares?

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

As we refuse to be involved with hurting people or with God, our refusing eventually becomes habitual. It is a joyful thing to find true rest from having gotten what our hearts desire. But there is also a sad, tired rest of sloth that comes when desire dies.

The tradition of the capital vices, or seven deadly sins, grew out of the mundane life of medieval monasteries where monks lived together in close quarters. Pride, envy, anger, sloth [*acedia*], avarice, gluttony, and lust came to be seen as deadly because through trial and error, the monks learned that these sins could not only kill your soul but they would certainly kill the monastery. Deadly sins destroy community and relationships. Thus, one of the primary reasons they still bear looking at today is that in small congregations where members take seriously living near and loving one another, these sins can kill close-knit community. Here I will look at one of the most deadly of sins—sloth.

You may remember the dead-pan comedian Pat Paulsen (1927-1997) who ran bogus campaigns for the presidency of the United States over three decades. In one of his televised campaign appearances in the 1960s he called for “a great, national groundswell of apathy” that would allow this nation to fall softly backwards into “peace, prosperity, and goodwill.” As he came to the big climax of his speech, he said, “I don’t really care whether any of you do this or not.”¹ Apathy is a symptom of sloth.

In his wonderful, whimsical article in *The New York Times Book Review* titled “Sloth: Nearer, My Couch, to Thee,” the novelist Thomas Pynchon observes how overlooked the vice of sloth is today: we have no symposia on sloth, no sloth task forces, and no government hearings on sloth, so we easily conclude that sloth is no big deal.²

The Church, however, has known for a long, long time that sloth is serious business: it is a deadly sin that separates us from God. Our modern world

has totally secularized and reduced its meaning, however, to casual laziness; we think sloth is a personal flaw — on the order of sitting around in lukewarm bathwater rather than getting our work done. But the vice is more serious than that. It is also easy to get sloth confused with what we call depression today. They are not the same thing; the first is a sin to be resisted and the second is a medical malady to be treated. Yet, there is most likely a great deal of overlap between sloth and depression. On the outside they look a lot like one another.

The Greek name for the vice of sloth is *acedia*, which means “not caring.” In Dante’s famous *Divine Comedy*, the vice is a perversion and twisting of God’s gift of love. If greed is loving things too much and gluttony is loving food and drink too much, and pride is loving self too much — sloth is deficient love.³

The fourth-century Christians in the deserts of Egypt referred to this vice as the “noonday demon.” Around midday when the sun was hot, their cells were stifling, and their stomachs were rumbling even though it was still two hours before meal time, the work of prayer and repeating the Psalms became really difficult and their minds turned to other things. That is when the vice made its tempting entrance into their lives. John Cassian captures the moment:

Finally one gazes anxiously here and there, and sighs that no brother of any description is to be seen approaching: one is for ever in and out of one’s cell, gazing at the sun as though it were tarrying to its setting: one’s mind is in an irrational confusion, like the earth befogged in a mist, one is slothful and vacant in every spiritual activity, and no remedy it seems can be found for this state of siege than a visit from some brother, or the solace of sleep. Finally our malady suggests that in common courtesy one should salute the brethren, and visit the sick, near and far. It dictates such offices of duty and piety as to seek out this relative or that, and make haste to visit them; or there is that religious and devout lady, destitute of any support from her family, whom it is a pious act to visit now and then and supply in holy wise with necessary comforts, neglected and despised as she is by her own relations: far better to bestow one’s pious labour upon these than sit without benefit or profit in one’s cell....⁴

As I read this, all of a sudden I begin to understand the vice. John Cassian is talking about me! Instead of doing the hard and often tedious work of prayer, I am always ready to visit someone, have a conversation, stand around and talk. And not one of those things is bad. But there are times when I must do the hard work of prayer. Prayer takes discipline, commitment, and patience. It is not easy. And I would rather talk to someone on the phone or do email. The Church calls it sloth!

Sloth is the refusal to get involved because we do not care enough to be involved. It is faintheartedness in matters which are important, but difficult.

The temptation of sloth is always to take shortcuts. The passive technologies of television and Internet that replace real relationship just

pave its way. It is a student sitting in class with a vacant stare, wanting the teacher to spoon feed the lesson, but not willing to do the hard work of reading, going to the library, and doing research to get to know the material and its sources personally. This is sloth.

Or it is a member coming to me and saying, "My marriage is falling apart and I don't know what to do. I want to save my marriage." I respond, "Every day I want you to do three things with your spouse as if you were really in love. Here they are. Do these things whether you feel it or not." And the response is, "I don't know if I can work that hard." This too is sloth.

Congregations are full of members who are seeking spiritual shortcuts. They want to come to worship and be inspired and feel good. They want sweet experiences and easy answers and are not interested in doing the hard work of thinking, confessing their sin, coming to Bible study, and having their lives challenged by the gospel. This, again, is sloth.

In my pastoral experience, I have had a lot of folks tell me of their spiritual doubts. They do not know if God exists, or they do not feel God's presence, and on and on. But often the issue is not their doubt, it is their sloth. The living of the Christian life, the life of faith, is not so much about holding certain beliefs as it is actively responding to God and being willing to be formed and transformed by God's work in us. It is about daily prayer and daily Scripture reading and every day forgiving someone and being forgiven. Being a Christian is being involved with God and it is being involved with people. That means work. And it takes time.

Noting that Mary Magdalene was the only disciple who remained at the tomb on Easter morning and who saw the resurrected Jesus, Gregory the Great explained that "she persevered in seeking, and so it happened that she found him."⁵ Maybe we do not know God because we do not persevere.

Sloth is the preeminent sin of omission; its deadly defect is in what we don't do. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke

10:29-37), the Priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side." Perhaps they passed by on the other side because of fear, but I think they passed by because they did not want to get involved with beaten traveler. They suspected that to tend to the man who was bleeding in the ditch would require quite a bit of time, effort, and care to take him to a place of recovery. Out of a laziness of the spirit they passed by on the other side.

Sloth is the refusal to get involved because we do not care enough to be involved. It is faintheartedness in matters which are important, but difficult. The temptation of sloth is always to take shortcuts.

Over time as we refuse to become involved with hurting people or with God, our refusing eventually becomes habitual. It is a joyful thing to find true rest from having gotten what our hearts desire. But there is also a sad, tired rest that comes when desire dies. That is what happens with sloth. Our desires die. Our refusal to be involved and engaged and participate in God, in people, and in this world becomes so habit forming that we die inside.

But sloth is also a deadly sin because God calls us – and, in the economy of God, the people in this world need us – to be involved. Without the life-giving, suffering-servanthood involvement of God’s people, this good creation begins to die: children die of hunger and sickness and famine, innocent civilians die in war, and people’s desire for all that is just and true and beautiful dies.

Toward the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Albus Dumbledore, the Hogwarts School headmaster, warns Harry that the time is rapidly coming when people will have to choose between doing what is right and doing what is easy.⁶ Sloth is the easy way.

Jesus Christ calls us to follow him. It is the right way.

May it be so with us. Amen.

NOTES

1 Will Willimon tells this story in *Sinning like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 76-77.

2 Thomas Pynchon, “The Deadly Sins/Sloth: Nearer My Couch to Thee,” *The New York Times Book Review* (June 6, 1993), www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-sloth.html (accessed August 13, 2013). Older churchgoers will notice the deep irony of Pynchon’s subtitle, which is a take-off on Sarah Flower Adams’s famous hymn “Nearer, My God, to Thee” (1841). Adams prays to come nearer to God “e’en though it be a cross that raiseth me,” but no sentiment could be further from the spiritual apathy that characterizes sloth.

3 Precisely as the Pilgrim [the character Dante] reaches the ledge of sloth in Purgatory, his strength quickly fades. Virgil, his guide, takes advantage of this delay to explain the relationship of the seven capital vices to love. See Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Book 2, Canto 17, lines 91-139.

4 This famous passage from Cassian’s *Institutes* 10.2.3 is translated by Helen Waddell in *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998 [University of Michigan Press, 1957]), 164-165.

5 Gregory the Great, Homily 25 “Mary Stood outside the Sepulcher,” in *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, translated by David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 187-199, here citing 188.

6 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York, Scholastic, Inc., 2000), 724.



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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

The busiest and the most slothful people feel the same way: apathetic and restless. The slothful may be interested in doing something of great consequence but they do not do it, while the busiest do many things but these hold no great consequence.

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 40.

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.



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The Capital Vices: *Acedia's* 'Deadly' Cronies

BY JOHN SPANO

The capital vice tradition—with its origins in the ancient Christian practices of self-examination, confession, mutual correction, and penance—identifies *acedia* and its cronies as barriers to love. The books reviewed here introduce the tradition and offer hope for healing through God's grace.

One can find a proliferation of books offering some insight into the causes of emotional difficulties, providing methods for coping with them, and promising eventual happiness if readers follow the recommended remedies. While many of these books are self-help aids filled with vacuous aphorisms, some are thoughtful studies based upon current research in clinical psychology.

Joining this broad genre are several works that take a different approach to the human predicament by examining the capital vices, which are known more colloquially as the seven deadly sins. The capital vice tradition has its origins in the ancient Christian practices of self-examination, confession to others, mutual correction, and penance. It offers hope for healing and happiness grounded in the Christian message while avoiding the triteness of positive-thinking programs and emphasizing, *pace* most psychological scholarship, the necessity of God's grace for well-being.

The four books reviewed here—Christopher Cook's *The Philokalia and the Inner Life: On Passions and Prayer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012, 402 pp., \$44.00), Christopher Jamison's *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for Fulfilling Life* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009, 182 pp., \$19.95), Henry Fairlie's *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, 224 pp., \$20.00), and Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung's *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009, 208 pp., \$16.99) – provide good introductions to the capital vice tradition and thoughtful reflection on the individual vices.



In *The Philokalia and the Inner Life*, Christopher C. H. Cook – a psychiatrist who directs the Project for Spirituality, Theology, and Health at Durham University in the UK – explores the capital vice tradition via the *Philokalia*, an important anthology of Eastern Orthodox spiritual writings. Those collected works (from thirty-eight figures who lived across a millennium) present a common focus on the watchfulness and stillness needed to reach deification, God's gracious gift of participation in the Triune life.

In the first chapter Cook presents a history of the *Philokalia*. In the next three chapters he examines the eight detrimental "thoughts" – the forerunners to the capital vice tradition in western Christianity – and the means of overcoming them as a step toward deification. Each chapter has a similar flow: after an overview of the classical account of the subject under discussion (e.g., what a "passion" is), Cook moves to the development of the theme in the writings of the desert fathers, highlights the synthesizing work of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), and concludes with a review of the *Philokalia* writers' account of the matter. Cook rightly emphasizes the importance of Evagrius who presented the first systematic account of the eight "thoughts" – gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. Cook is to be commended for presenting a charitable reading of the Eastern fathers who at times appear to condemn all "passions," not just the wrongly directed ones, as well as for his clear exposition of the difficult issue of deification. In the final two chapters, Cook engages contemporary psychotherapy with the teachings of the *Philokalia*, emphasizing their similarities (e.g., both offer helpful means for promoting mental well-being) and differences (particularly concerning the role that God plays in human well-being).

Cook is meticulous in his presentation of the ideas related to passions, contemplation, and deification, a meticulousness that can be distracting in two ways. First, the cataloguing nature of his presentation makes it difficult to find the central thread connecting various parts of a given chapter, especially in the fourth chapter on the relationship among the themes of deification, purification, *hesychia* (a state of inner stillness), and blessedness. Second (and this is less a fault of Cook than of his ancient sources), his fastidiousness reveals the vague ways that the writers in the *Philokalia* often use important terms; especially annoying is the ambiguity surrounding the important concept of "passion" and whether the passions are necessarily

evil or can be directed rightly. Cook's work will be of most interest to those seeking to understand the Evagrian roots of the capital vice tradition and those drawn to the contemplative emphasis of Eastern Orthodoxy.



In *Finding Happiness*, Christopher Jamison, O.S.B., the former abbot of Worth Abbey, a monastery in the south of England, explores the eight Evagrian "thoughts" through the lens of the Benedictine tradition. He offers "stepping-stones" that "can help to steady our stride, giving us the confidence to keep traveling" across the "torrent of modern living" (p. 2).

Jamison frames his work with an analysis of the word "happiness," contrasting the term's feel-good connotation in contemporary western society with the virtue-based account of *eudaimonia* found in ancient and medieval writers. To avoid confusion, he elects to follow St. Benedict's use of "joy" and "delight" instead of "happiness" as a description of the life that all persons desire. This change of words allows Jamison to direct attention away from subjective feelings (which have become the focus of happiness for many people today) and toward the realities that cause joy and delight—namely, contemplation and virtue. The author acknowledges that some readers will find it peculiar to associate delight and joy with the hard discipline required to acquire virtue. To bridge the gap, he offers an account of "freedom" that is quite different from the common notion of doing whatever happens to please one at the moment. Jamison observes how little real freedom many of us have; our inordinate love for food, money, and fame bind us to destructive patterns of behavior that keep us from true joy and delight. Real freedom requires being bound to the virtues and avoiding the vices—especially the ones identified in the capital vice tradition.

Though he presents this as the Benedictine means to happiness, Jamison acknowledges the earlier monastic John Cassian (c. 360-435) as the link between the Eastern and Western Christian traditions on the vices. Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences*, which were major influences on St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543), present in Latin the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers who mostly spoke Greek and Coptic. These two works serve as the basis for the chapters in the second part that are devoted to the eight vices.

Jamison does a nice job of presenting each vice, its characteristic symptoms in the individual, the ways that society engenders it, and some remedies for countering it. For instance, *acedia*, the "loss of enthusiasm for the spiritual life" (p. 48), can make us discontent with our surroundings under the pretense of spiritual dissatisfaction with others, and this makes us desire to escape our current situation. The underlying problem of *acedia*, which Jamison thinks is plaguing most people in contemporary western society, is a lack of spiritual self-awareness, a deficiency encouraged by a tendency to focus upon outward productivity instead of inward transformation.

Jamison's work is a much easier read than Cook's and is obviously directed to a popular audience. Furthermore, Jamison brings a pastoral background to his discussion of the vices and offers rich insights into how these vicious thoughts distort our vision of ourselves and others. *Finding Happiness* could serve as devotional reading for individuals or as a book study for discipleship groups.



While Cook and Jamison examine the vices from an intentionally Christian perspective and write for a Christian audience, Henry Fairlie's *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* is written for "a secular age by someone who may best describe himself as a reluctant unbeliever" (p. 6). However, because the capital vice tradition was formed and developed by Christian thinkers, Fairlie draws deeply from a variety of Christian sources, ancient and contemporary. It is worth noting his particular affinity for St. Augustine as the "great theologian on this subject" (p. 215). He constructs the book along lines similar to Jamison's: an introduction to the topic followed by chapters devoted to the individual vices. Here we see the list reduced from eight to seven, following the shortened list used by medieval writers under the influence of Pope Gregory the Great. The seven, in the order of Fairlie's treatment, are pride, envy, anger, sloth [*acedia*], avarice, gluttony, and lust.

A particular strength of Fairlie's commentary is his emphasis upon the social constructions that encourage and give expression to these vicious dispositions. Though it is as "individuals that we sin" (p. 29), our environment can certainly lead us away from virtue. Concerning the *vice* (rather than just the emotion) of anger, for example, Fairlie begins with the assumption that it is an inordinate desire for revenge in response to perceived injustice – a penchant,

Jamison observes how little real freedom we have; our inordinate love for food, money, and fame bind us to destructive patterns of behavior that keep us from true joy. Freedom requires being bound to the virtues and avoiding the vices.

perhaps, to wrongly believe one has suffered an injustice, or to overreact to real injustice. The western emphasis upon individual rights can be a fertile environment for wrongheaded anger. As our perceived rights expand, perceived injustices naturally increase and we become prickly and suspicious of one another, which explains the culture of anger found in the various groups

fighting for rights. In his chapter on sloth he observes how the rampant individualism of western society, which encourages finding self-fulfillment in whatever activity the individual deems significant, leads to complacency due to the ease of accomplishment. Self-help books that rely on this dynamic may help induce sloth in individuals. Fairlie astutely observes a contemporary expression of sloth can also be in “the whiffling activity of the body,” an idea that he borrows from Dorothy Sayers (p. 120). Motivated by an avoidance of the morally important, the slothful person replaces virtuous activities with outdoor sports, confusing the physical strain with moral strenuousness.

Fairlie’s book is a fun read and is attractive to undergraduates. (I know two professors, one at a private institution and one at a public university, who assign this book in introductory courses.) His approach is reminiscent of Iris Murdoch. Both writers were acclaimed agnostics yet both refused to ignore the moral depth of religious tradition. Both emphasized the need for love of something outside of oneself as the antidote for the moral malaise of contemporary western society. And both fall prey to some inconsistency in holding onto the moral notions of sin, love, and transcendence without any notion of God.



The best introductory work on the vices comes from Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung, a philosophy professor at Calvin College. Her *Glittering Vices* is philosophically sophisticated and historically attentive both to the origins and development of the vice tradition as well as to its contemporary applications. This does not mean that her book is a tough read: it is clearly written and DeYoung’s intellectual rigor never overshadows her warm personal style. The introduction and first chapter are particularly helpful; they elucidate the nature of vices and virtues as dispositions acquired through practice and sketch the development of the capital vice tradition. Her title, *Glittering Vices*, is meant to indicate why these erroneous ways of life are so common and attractive to us: the vices “glitter” because they deceptively promise a true human good.

The rest of the book follows the pattern of the books already examined, with a chapter dedicated to each vice. Like Fairlie, DeYoung draws openly from cultural expressions of the vices—movies, songs, even diet fads—as well as from a variety of philosophers and theologians. However, distinctive to her book is the centrality of Thomas Aquinas’s analyses of the seven capital vices. The influence of his moral psychology on her work is evident from the beginning—in her accounts of virtue and vice, the distinction between vices and mortal sins, and why these seven are the “capital” vices. In the later chapters dedicated to each vice, Aquinas’s voice remains a steady and insightful guide. This is particularly the case in her chapter on sloth, or *acedia*, the vice that Aquinas defines as “an aversion to the divine

good in us" (p. 85). Among the benefits that arise from her use of the medieval theologian's work are her description of sloth's essential nature, the explanation for its contrasting symptoms of laziness and hyper-activity, and her synthesis of the voices from the fourth-century desert Christians and the later western tradition.

Her insightful appropriation of Aquinas's moral philosophy makes DeYoung's book an excellent resource for an introductory ethics course. Her clear style, ample illustrations, and cultural critiques make it equally valuable for a church group study. If I have a criticism, it is that students may be too content with DeYoung's perceptive and winsome account to dig into Aquinas, Augustine, and Cassian on their own. Such a critique reflects the thoughtfulness of, not a deficiency in, her work.

The capital vice tradition is an excellent resource for those looking for happiness because it excels precisely where most of the self-help books and clinical studies fail: it places the meaning of happiness within the larger human and divine narrative. When we recognize these seven vices as serious faults, or sins (as Fairlie's title reminds us), we are confronted with the truth about ourselves and can then begin to steer our individual lives and social institutions toward what is good. Studying these seven vices, as DeYoung points out, can "offer us a framework for explaining and evaluating common cultural practices" and "yield spiritual rewards" (pp. 19-20). However, the tradition is not content with self-awareness nor does it suppose that individuals can overcome the vices without supernatural help. It places the vices within the larger Christian narrative that tells of a God who became a human being, who died and rose again, and thereby makes possible eventual freedom from these deformations of our humanity.



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Diagnosing *Acedia* and Its Spiritual Neighbors

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

We have a problem of *acedia*, these three authors agree. It is personal and communal, innate and institutional, as old as the desert and as new as the iPhone, hard to recognize in ourselves and yet impossible to miss in our culture as a whole. And most of all, it is deadly to our spiritual lives.

It is almost as hard to define the vice of *acedia* as it is to know how to pronounce it. (I have heard “uh-KED-ee-uh,” “uh-KAY-dee-uh,” and “uh-SEE-dee-uh,” among other pronunciations. No wonder people just say “sloth” or “boredom.”) These three books—Richard Winter’s *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion and Wonder* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002, 160 pp., \$16.00), Kathleen Norris’s *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008, 334 pp., \$16.00), and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, 163 pp., \$14.99)—are remarkable for their similarities, despite their very different purposes and emphases, but even so the very slipperiness of the concept and the breadth of experiences characteristic of *acedia* makes each book distinct.



Richard Winter’s *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment* is a call to a life of Christian service, motivated by his diagnosis that only a life of meaningful, passionate pursuit of the good and beautiful will ultimately cure us of our plague of boredom. While Winters discusses a bit of everything, from the entertainment industry to the science of yawning, and

from the history to the consequences of boredom, his purpose is never primarily sociological, historical, or philosophical, but pastoral; and this shows in the brevity of his discussion of such significant themes. Still, he always provides enough details, studies, quotes, and illustrations to keep moving his interesting and important argument along: we are bored, boredom is destructive individually and culturally, and the only way out is through something like religion (especially Christianity).

As a professional psychiatrist, Winters is most comfortable when he is discussing the research literature related to boredom, and it shows in the clarity of these parts of the work. In some of the most interesting chapters he discusses studies showing that boredom is caused not only by understimulation (as in a boring lecture or in repetitious and seemingly meaningless work), but also, and more surprisingly, by the overstimulation that is characteristic of a leisure culture. We are bombarded with images by the entertainment and advertising industries that amplify the culture's emphasis on our subjective feelings and entitlement to happiness. This form of boredom is destructive, Winters argues, leading to pornography and sexual addiction, aggression and pointless violence, and we cannot get out of boredom by *trying* to escape it. Instead, happiness must be a byproduct of the passionate pursuit of meaningful and fully-engaging activities. In the final two chapters Winters leads us to the conclusion of his argument: for these activities to be truly meaningful, they must be part of a broader, more objective, outward-looking understanding of the world like the one provided by Christianity.

Winters briefly differentiates an ephemeral sort of boredom, such as any of us might experience while standing in a long line or listening to an intensely boring presentation, from boredom as a longer-term phenomenon involving "an existential perception of life's futility, a deep sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness" (p. 28). While much of his remaining discussion seems to apply to both forms of boredom, it is clearly only the latter sort that has some affinity with *acedia* as the desert fathers and mothers described it, though even it is not precisely the same. As Winters himself notes in his chapter on the medieval concept of *acedia*, while there are some clear similarities between boredom and the various meanings of *acedia* and sadness, they are not the same thing. Despite this admission, Winters seems to suggest that much of what used to be called *acedia* would now be seen as depression and should be treated accordingly (pp. 77-79).



In *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, Kathleen Norris spends a fair amount of time wondering and even worrying over whether it is true that *acedia* and depression amount to the same thing, for the very good reason that she has been guilty of *acedia* for much of her life, while her

husband suffered greatly from clinical depression. Unlike Winters, Norris clearly believes that these are two different phenomena with very different cures: while depression, like anxiety and overwhelming grief, requires the help of a psychiatrist and perhaps appropriate medication, *acedia* is a spiritual and moral ill and requires a very different sort of cure. Through the course of this lengthy work, Norris provides lots of hints as to how she would differentiate the two, as well as her thoughts on their proper treatment. For example, while depression and *acedia* feel the same most of the time (which may be why Winters, who focuses almost solely on the *feel* of boredom, fails to fully differentiate the two), depression is a horribly painful state that its sufferers want, more than anything, to get out of, though they may find it impossible to take any positive steps on their own. *Acedia*, on the other hand, is the inability to care about much of anything, and persons in this state do not really care that they do not care, and so they do not desire to be cured (pp. 17, 24, and 150). Even more telling, depression typically has some sort of definable cause and is externally directed in a way that makes it impossible to miss that something is very wrong. "*Acedia* is more subtle," Norris says, "and when it wells up in me, only the venerable practice of spiritual discernment is of much use" (p. 147).

Unlike Winters, who is writing to convince us that we are bored and need God to escape our boredom, Norris's work, like some of her earlier best sellers, is a sort of spiritual memoir. If you want to know what the book is about, look again at the subtitle, which is definitely truth in advertising. This book is two parts a memoir about her own experiences of *acedia* throughout her life, two parts a memoir about her wonderful but often very difficult marriage to a man who suffered both from depression and from an unbelievable litany of physical ailments that almost killed him many times before they finally did in his fifties, and one part spiritual musing on *acedia*, writing, depression, and the wisdom of monasticism. This beautifully written, amazingly thoughtful, often rambling, but never pointless book somehow adds up to a rich exploration of why we need to regain an understanding of *acedia* in our current time. Norris is at her most gripping and hard to put down when she tells the story of her own life, marriage, and rediscovery of faith through Benedictine monasteries, but she has also marshaled an amazingly broad array of resources to help her understand and express the symptoms of *acedia*, and the "Commonplace Book" at the end includes a broad selection of quotes from those resources. *Acedia and Me* is, in fact, something of a large, narrative-driven commonplace book: full of thoughts and reflections, it is never systematic, but always suggestive, and despite her protestations to the contrary, very careful in its use of terms.

As a central theme of Norris's work is the importance of monastic practices for understanding *acedia*, it should not be surprising that many of her suggestions for treatment come from that tradition as well. Being bored

might require finding a meaningful life project and worshipping God, as Winters says, but these are precisely what the person with *acedia* no longer wants or finds it possible to do. Instead of pursuing a grand quest for meaning in life, the monastic tradition teaches, we need to force ourselves to go against our desire for solitude by being with other people and caring for them (p. 29), and to simply do the humble, quotidian, physical tasks of everyday life, such as washing the dishes, with care (pp. 100, 145). The *feeling* of boredom may be caused by repetition, but Norris found that in her life the wisdom of the desert tradition held true: it is careful, constant repetition, even deliberately meaningless repetition, that allows one to slowly work through the vice of *acedia*. When we cannot make ourselves care about the good, or God, or love, or our vows, simply staying put and forcing ourselves to keep saying the right things and doing the right things, whatever we may feel, is often the way to begin caring again:

As for the words that I am dutifully saying – “Love you” or “Dear God” – I might as well be speaking in tongues, and maybe I am. And maybe that does not matter, for it is all working toward the good... every day and every night, whether I “get it” or not, these “meaningless” words and actions signify more than I know. Repetition...knows us better than we know ourselves. (p. 188)



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wants to help us understand the same counter-cultural point in *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*.

His book is similar to Norris’s in many ways (as the foreword by Norris suggests), but its emphasis is slightly different. Where Norris wants to focus on *acedia* as a personal vice, though one exacerbated by current cultural trends in industry, media, and advertising, Wilson-Hartgrove gives us a broader if breezier cultural critique so that he can focus on the solution that he has found most powerful: a life of chosen simplicity and poverty in a stable community.

Another similarity between Norris and Wilson-Hartgrove is their dependence on interesting stories, both of their own lives and of others, and on quotes from others to drive their works. While Norris tells stories

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of her own life and marriage in Hawaii, New York, and North Dakota, Wilson-Hartgrove relies more on retellings of Scripture and on stories of his New Monastic community called Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. The point, though told differently and in a much shorter work, and though focused on the cultural problems and solutions rather than an individual vice, is much the same. “We are desperately habituated in an unstable way of life” Wilson-Hartgrove explains (p. 11), but “stability’s wisdom insists that spiritual growth depends on human beings rooting ourselves in a place on earth with other creatures” (p. 4). While we need stability to fight our rootless wandering, both spiritually and physically, every attempt to *make ourselves* stable simply commodifies it, turning it into a perfect home or community that we can buy our way into. Stability, Wilson-Hartgrove wisely insists, can only come as a gift from God (p. 16).

Winters argues that aggression and sexual addiction are consequences of boredom, and Norris notes in passing that *acedia*, as a capital vice (capital here means “head” and indicates that it is the head of an army of vices, hence its destructive power), tends to lead to other vices as well, including boredom, sloth, and aggression. Wilson-Hartgrove includes a nice discussion of three particular vices that tend to follow in the train of *acedia* and are particularly problematic when you try to live in community, as he does in Rutba House: ambition, boredom, and vainglory. Stability often means repetitive work, cleaning up after others, and sublimating your own desires to the will of the group. In such a situation, it is easy to hear the whisper of ambition that you could do more and better work elsewhere; easy, too, to simply feel bored, as Winters described it, dissatisfied with your surroundings and your tasks in life. Vainglory is perhaps the hardest of all to cure, for it comes precisely when you begin to make spiritual progress, to really settle into an uplifting rhythm of work that transforms time from the enemy into a friend: vainglory suggests that *now* others will notice and I will become like a desert monk, sought out by everyone for my wisdom. The only solution to these is to stay: to keep working even when you do not want to do so, to keep praying even when you do not feel like it, to keep acting in love even when you cannot care.



We have a problem. It is personal and communal, innate and institutional, as old as the desert and as new as the iPhone, hard to define and easy to confuse with other related problems, hard to recognize in ourselves and yet impossible to miss in our culture as a whole, and most of all, it is deadly to our spiritual lives. But when we are in the throes of *acedia*, we just do not care. If we want to care again, all three authors agree, we must somehow just keep going by staying still, striving to join in the fight

for good and God's kingdom by taking part in the mundane miracles of showering, doing dishes, and speaking in love to those around us every day. If we can just do this, then by some amazing grace, we may find that staying still has finally allowed us to go with love, and that repetition has changed us into people who can do something truly new.



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