

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Invitation

to

RETREAT

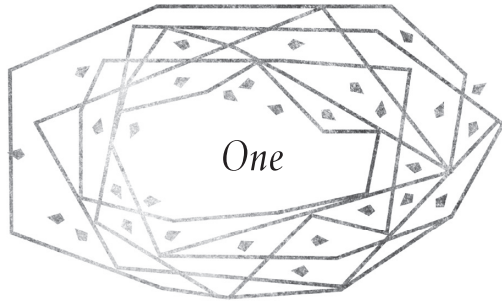
The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God

Taken from *Invitation to Retreat* by Ruth Haley Barton.

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STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL

I have lived too long where I am reachable.

RUMI



BRAD IS A PASTOR WHOSE CHURCH IS GOING WELL. Attendance at weekend services is growing steadily, and they have just completed a building project that is enabling them to grow and provide a variety of ministries to meet needs within their growing congregation and the community surrounding them. People respond well to his preaching, and his church is known around town as being a church that cares. Brad is growing in stature and reputation among local leaders—even becoming a respected voice regarding important issues facing the community—which means he is in demand and attends many meetings. He is increasingly aware that it takes a full-time schedule and more to keep all the plates spinning. His two young children could use much more attention than he able to give them, and his wife is exhausted from picking

up the slack from his busy schedule. When he looks in her eyes he sees a hollowness that mirrors the emptiness he feels in his own soul, but the demands of being a young pastor whose star is rising, the husband and father of growing family, and a soul that is longing for more seem mutually exclusive.

Jen is a stay-at-home mom with four kids. She loves being a mom and sees this as her highest priority, yet over the years she has had a niggling sense that there is something more she is supposed to do with herself and her gifts. Her husband travels regularly for work, which means the lion's share of care for home and family falls to her; she has little time to devote to getting in touch with her spiritual desires and her sense of calling. Most of the time she is able to put aside her questions and desires in order to make sure everyone else's needs are cared for, but lately they have been pressing in on her. She finds herself close to tears a lot, questioning her worth, questioning her motives, and wondering if she is doing enough for all the people who need her. She feels her sense of self slipping away and is alarmed by feelings of anger, unsettledness, and even depression.

Jeremy is a gifted entrepreneur who is just starting to achieve recognition for the work his creative company is offering. The phone is ringing with offers of more work than their company can handle, and they have even received a few awards for their work. At the same time, there are internal problems in the company—dissension in the ranks, stress fractures in the leadership, and temptations when he travels. Given the external accolades, he cannot understand why things feel so broken on the inside. He realizes that if he does not get some time away to reflect on what's really going on, to listen to God, and to get a handle on his motivations and behaviors, he may ruin everything he's worked so hard for due to bad decision making—decision making that is disconnected from discerning God's presence and activity in his life.

PULLING BACK FROM DANGER

When we hear the word *retreat* many of us think of the military use of the word, which refers to the tactic troops use when they are losing too much ground, when they are tired and ineffective, and when there have been too many casualties or the current strategy is not working. When any of these scenarios are in play, the commander might instruct the troops to pull back and put some distance between themselves and the battle line. We often see this as a negative thing; however, military retreat can also be a wise tactic—an opportunity to rest the troops and tend to their wounds, to stop the enemy’s momentum, or to step back to get a panoramic view of what’s going on and set new strategies. In fact, the military is now using a more positive term—*strategic withdrawal*—to describe retreat, and I like it!

Strategic withdrawal captures the more positive connotations of the word *retreat*, namely, that there are times when the better part of wisdom in combat *is* to withdraw for good reasons—which can apply to us as well. There are times when we too need to pull back from the battle line in our lives rather than continuing to fight the same battles in the same old ways. We need to pull back from our busyness, from life in our culture, from other people’s expectations and our own compulsions, from whatever is not working in our lives.

The other thing that is true for those of us who have been walking with God for a long time is that all of us have either sustained real wounds in the battle of life or we’re just plain tired. Many of us just soldier on, hoping time will heal all things. But experience tells us that while time does stop the bleeding and heals our wounds, scar tissue often remains. While on the surface it might seem like all is well, a hardening has taken place; ironically, those tight, hurting places are tender and can flare with pain when touched in the wrong way by some unsuspecting soul. And there might be numb places where we cannot feel anything at all.

At some point in our Christian life, many of us realize no one ever told us how to deal with our wounds that are still there—buried deeper than ever—but still there. Father Ronald Rolheiser aptly describes this dawning awareness:

Once the sheer impulse of life begins to be tempered by the weight of our commitments and the grind of the years, more of our sensitivities begin to break through, and we sense more and more how we have been wounded and how life has not been fair to us. New demons then emerge: bitterness, anger, jealousy, and a sense of how we have been cheated. Disappointment cools the fiery energies of our youth, and our enthusiasm begins to be tempered by bitterness and anger . . . where once we struggled to properly control our energies, we now struggle to access them.

The point is that the evil one is never done stirring up trouble up and instigating new skirmishes. No matter how far along we are in the spiritual life, there is no time when retreat—or strategic withdrawal—ceases

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to be an essential practice. The battle lines might be drawn in different places at different stages of our lives, but retreat is always a practice we can engage when we too are tired or wounded, lacking in wisdom, or seeking more effective approaches to engaging the fight. Retreat is a time when we are strengthened for battle, putting on the whole armor of God that Paul describes so specifically (Ephesians 6:10-17).

While it might seem strange to begin our reflections on such a gentle topic with such a harsh metaphor, the truth is there are times when the invitation to strategic withdrawal is exactly what we most need!

ON THE FRONT LINES OF A SPIRITUAL BATTLE

So much about the military tactic of retreat is applicable to Christians. If we are following Jesus—especially if we are trying to serve meaningfully in Christ’s kingdom or exercising any kind of spiritual leadership—there is no question we are on the front lines of a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:12, in particular, reminds us that we are engaged in a spiritual conflict with the evil one: “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” Paul says, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Paul describes the Christian life in rather dramatic terms as a battle in which the evil one attacks us with flaming arrows. Paul’s counsel in the face of this reality is that we must stand firm and confront these deadly forces by putting on the whole armor of God—which he then describes in detail.

While I am not one to see a demon behind every bush or spiritual warfare in every difficulty, the fact is that we are regularly engaged in the struggle against good and evil—whether we know it or not. And as we mature in our faith, the battles become more subtle and hard to detect: the good is often the enemy of the best and it is hard to know the difference. Of necessity, the weapons of our warfare must become more precise as well.

A point may come on the spiritual journey when persons who deeply love God must be aware of, understand, and reject certain attractions to *good and holy things* that, if undertaken, would distract them from the different good and holy things to which God is genuinely calling them. . . . They will need to discern between spiritual consolation that is authentically of the good spirit and deceptive spiritual consolation that is not of the good spirit, and that will lead, if followed, to spiritual harm.

I will say more about discernment later on, but for now it is enough to note that the military definition of *retreat* as “strategic withdrawal” fits this reality of the spiritual life quite well. There comes a time when the Christian who is awake and aware notices that the battle is different than it used to be, and the battle lines are drawn in different places. Satan’s tactics are even more devious and hard to recognize than they were earlier in our life, and the weapons of our warfare must be wielded differently. Such times can actually be quite confusing, and wisdom whispers deep in our souls that we must pull back in order to gain perspective and set new strategies.

WHERE AM I IN DANGER?

The first invitation contained in the more general invitation to retreat is to notice where our lives might be in danger—to identify where the spiritual battle is raging—and to pull back so we can rest, heal, and set new strategies before reengaging. When in the middle of a battle, retreating can feel like a radical and counterintuitive choice—like we are actually ensuring our own defeat.

Some of us are reticent to walk away from a battle that is still in progress, accustomed as we are to stand our ground, swinging, whether it’s doing any good or not! At such moments we may be convinced that the battle will be won or lost on the basis of our ability to keep fighting, when in truth, “the battle is the Lord’s” as the Scriptures tell us. Retreat is an opportunity to act like we really believe this!

Others of us are more accustomed to avoiding the battle by pretending there isn’t one! Perhaps we believe that if we don’t acknowledge it or engage it, maybe it will simply go away. If this is our tendency, retreat is an opportunity to act like we believe the truth of Ephesians 6—that there really is a battle, that it is a serious one, and that none of us can fight 24/7. There comes a time when soldiers who have been involved in a real battle need to take a break—to rest, to allow God to

tend our wounds, to get a perspective, and to review the battle from that perspective, inviting God to give us the wisdom we need.

Neither of those approaches—relying on ourselves to fight the good fight 24/7 or pretending there is no battle and avoiding it altogether—is an effective way to approach the rigors of the spiritual life. If we accept the military definition of *retreat* as an appropriate one for us as Christians, it might lead us to wonder, *Where am I in danger in my life right now?* Not only does this question orient us toward our need for retreat, it can also help us shape our retreat time in ways that correspond to the dangers we are experiencing currently. This question is always relevant, since the battle line is always shifting, and there are so many different ways we can be in danger—even in the relative safety in which most of us live.

ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER

In a recent article titled (disturbingly) “I Used to Be a Human Being,” Andrew Sullivan offers an insightful description of how he arrived at an extended retreat after finding himself in danger due to his constant engagement with technology. “A year before,” he says,

like many addicts, I had sensed a personal crash coming. For a decade and a half, I’d been a web obsessive, publishing blog posts multiple times a day, seven days a week, and ultimately corralling a team that curated the web every 20 minutes during peak hours. Each morning began with a full immersion in the stream of internet consciousness and news, jumping from site to site, tweet to tweet, breaking news story to hottest take, scanning countless images and videos, catching up with multiple memes. Throughout the day I’d cough up an insight or an argument or a joke about what had just occurred or what was happening right now. At times, I’d spend weeks manically grabbing every tiny scrap of a developing story in order to fuse them into a narrative in real

time. I was in an unending dialogue with readers who were caviling, praising, booing, correcting. My brain had never been so occupied so insistently by so many different subjects and in so public a way for so long.

Sullivan goes on to describe, with alarming precision, his realization that he had been engaging—like most addicts—in a form of denial about how his addiction to technology and the web was affecting his life.

I began to realize, as my health and happiness deteriorated, that this was not a both-and kind of situation. It was either-or. Every hour I spent online was not spent in the physical world. Every minute I was engrossed in a virtual interaction I was not involved in a human encounter. Every second absorbed in some sort of trivia was a second less for any form of reflection, or calm or spirituality. “Multitasking” was a mirage. This was a zero-sum question. I either lived as a voice online or I lived as a human being in the world that humans have lived in since the beginning of time. And so I decided, after 15 years, to live in reality.

And so he “quit the web,” throwing his life and his career up in the air.

DISTRACTED TO DEATH

Several months later, Sullivan arrived at a silent retreat, seeking the ultimate detox. Unplugging completely enabled him to identify more clearly what has been lost in our “always plugged in” culture and the severity of the dangers of living such a life.

Information now penetrates every waking moment of our lives as we are constantly being “guided to info-nuggets by myriad little interactions on social media, all cascading at us with individually tailored relevance and accuracy. No information technology ever had this depth of knowledge of its consumers—or greater capacity to tweak their synapses to keep them in engaged.” One of the results of

such overstimulation is reduced attention span, which is now well-documented by multiple sources. What's most disturbing is that I see myself in his description! I am alarmed by how often I—a lover of words and books, sustained thought and deep reflection, writing that emerges from being in touch with one's soul—give in to the constant tug and pull toward the ever-present stimulation provided by email, texting, Instagram, and the constant availability and intrusion of information from the web. I am saddened and concerned about the fact that whereas I used to be able to lose myself in reading, reflection, and writing, I now struggle to finish a longer journal article that has no pictures, attached videos, or clever sound-bites! This is not good!

As recently as ten years ago smartphones didn't even exist, but now, in less than a decade, these devices have gone from unknown to ubiquitous, unimaginable to indispensable. Wherever we look, people are "crouched over their phones as they walk the streets, or drive their cars, or walk their dogs, or play with their children. . . . We have gone from looking up and around to constantly looking down."

I'll never forget the first time I noticed this phenomenon for myself. On a stunningly beautiful spring day after a particularly brutal Chicago winter, I noticed several people walking their dogs. But the thing is, none of them were simply walking and taking in the beauty of the day, letting it restore their souls after the dark time we had just been through. *All* of them were on their cell phones! I felt something break inside me, like a valuable treasure had been lost and we might never get it back.

OUT OF TOUCH WITH OUR HUMAN EXISTENCE

On the third day of his retreat, Sullivan describes walking through the forest and being overcome by emotions regarding his painful childhood. Even though he was aware of the brokenness this had formed in him, which he had spent years trying to unravel and fix,

on retreat he was present to his life and his emotional depths in a new way. He says,

I had never felt it [the pain] so vividly since the very years it had first engulfed and defined me. It was as if, having slowly and progressively removed every distraction from my life, I was suddenly faced with what I had been distracting myself from. Resting for a moment against the trunk of a tree, I stopped and suddenly found myself bent over, convulsed with the newly present pain, sobbing.

While this might sound like being retraumatized, it was actually healing. A wise retreat guide reassured him: “Don’t worry. Be patient. It will resolve itself.” So he persevered in the quiet of being completely unplugged, and because he couldn’t distract himself by checking email, refreshing Instagram, or looking at text messages, over time a different kind of resolution emerged from what he had experienced previously.

Over the next day, the feelings began to ebb, my meditation practice began to improve, the sadness shifted into a kind of calm and rest. I felt other things from my childhood—the beauty of forests, the joy of friends, the support of my sister, the love of my maternal grandmother. Yes, I prayed, and prayed for relief. But this lifting felt like a normal process of revisiting and healing and recovering. It felt like an ancient long-buried gift.

One of the dangers of living in a constant state of distraction is that we never go to the bottom of our pain, our sadness, our emptiness, which means we never find that rock-bottom place of the peace that passes understanding and rest ourselves there. We never receive the comfort promised to those who mourn, so we are always on the prowl for more and better distractions. Not only are we distracted from the present, we are distracted from our very lives; we miss out on the comfort that is there for us when we are present to our own depths in God’s presence.

STRANGE ISOLATION

While on retreat, Sullivan was able to acknowledge that even though he “had been accompanied for so long by verbal and visual noise” and “an endless bombardment of words and images,” the truth is that he “felt curiously isolated.” This is the strange phenomenon Sherry Turkle has described as being “alone together”—families together but not really together because everyone is on their devices, friends or colleagues trying to share time together or to have a meeting while everyone has at least one eye or ear tuned to whatever else might prove to be more important, conversations that stay on the surface because the phones on the table remind us that we are not really giving or getting each other’s undivided attention.

Kara, in her fifties, offers this poignant observation about how life in her hometown of Portland, Maine, feels these days: “Sometimes I walk down the street, and I’m the only person not plugged in. . . . No one is where they are. They’re talking to someone miles away. I miss them.”

Recently a professor shared with me a college student’s reflections in response to my earlier writings on solitude and silence:

I was not born into a world relatively unaffected by technology like you were. Rather, I was thrust into a world that had already succumbed to its disastrous effects! I have heard it said that the Internet was going to make the world a smaller place, and indeed it has. It has reduced the world from seven billion to just one! Just you, hiding behind your screen, interacting with others hiding behind theirs. The days of legitimate human interaction have been forever tainted by social media. The schedules of our workdays have been compressed tighter by the interventions of e-mails and cellphones. Our lives have been faker and faker, busier and busier and we have yet to realize that within, we are broken, weary and longing for that genuine, restful interaction that we find with God in solitude.

WHERE WE PUT OUR FAITH

Sullivan does not claim any sort of religious affiliation in his article, but, interestingly enough, he refers to the loss of faith as one consequence of being constantly connected and plugged in to whatever technology is serving up. I think he's on to something! While we may continue to affirm a particular set of theological beliefs, our addiction to technology indicates that in some ways we are putting our faith *there*. A case could be made that by giving so much of our time, attention, and priority to what takes place in and through technology, we are saying, "This is what interests me. This is what I most value. This is where I am searching for answers. This is what makes me feel okay. This is what will save me."

Sullivan then offers this bit of advice to the church.


If the churches came to understand that the greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction, perhaps they might begin to appeal to a frazzled digital generation. Christian leaders seem to think that they need more distraction to counter the distraction. Their services have degenerated into emotional spasms, their spaces drowned with light and noise and locked shut throughout the day, when their darkness and silence might actually draw those whose minds and souls have grown web-weary. . . . This new epidemic of distraction is our civilization's specific weakness. And its threat is not so much to our minds, even as they shape-shift under pressure. The threat is to our souls. At this rate, if the noise does not relent, we might even forget we have any.

Sullivan is touching on a deep desire of serious spiritual seekers today. Many who are on an intentional spiritual journey—including myself—long for quiet spaces to connect with God and with their own souls as part of their church experience. We wonder, *Does our involvement with the church make us busier or better—the kind of better that comes from being open and receptive to God?* One of the reasons I am drawn to

worship in more liturgical settings is that silence is often built into the church service, not to mention quiet spaces in the building that are open for reflection and prayer throughout the day. But here's the thing: even in churches where silence is written into the service, it's almost perfunctory. Thirty seconds at most! Just as my soul is settling into its natural state of silent presence to God, somebody starts talking again. Could we, as a matter of course, be still a little bit longer in church and experience *together* that God is God? Could moments of retreating from noise, words, and activity be built into our times together as faith communities?

Now there's some food for thought!

Many who are on an intentional spiritual journey long for quiet spaces to connect with God and with their own souls.



AM I FIGHTING THE RIGHT BATTLE?

I will never forget one pastor's comment after taking some time to reflect on the military aspects of the invitation to retreat. After emerging from solitude he commented ruefully, "In the silence, I realized that I'm not even sure I'm fighting the right battle. I just want to know I'm fighting the right battle."

Many of us are wasting our life's energy fighting for things that aren't that important in the whole scheme of things. There are times when the quiet of retreat is the only way we will be able to discern well what battle we should be engaging and how. As it turns out, the invitation to pull back and put some distance between ourselves and the battle line is the first and, in some ways, most significant invitation contained within the general invitation to retreat. Why?

Because if you don't say yes to this one, none of the rest of the invitations will be possible.

Practicing RETREAT

Preparing for retreat. The first move in the practice of retreat is to get yourself there—make plans to actually pull back from the battle line—whatever that takes for you. Where is your life in danger right now, and what would it look like for you to pull back in order to regroup and set new strategy in God’s presence? You will need to know what to pull away *from* in order to be on retreat. Second, what kind of retreat environment will put the most distance between you and the battle line? See appendix one for more specific ideas on how to plan your retreat.

While on retreat. In the quiet of retreat time, ask yourself and do some journaling around these questions:

- ~ Where am I in danger these days? Say something honest to God about what you are noticing.
- ~ Am I engaged in the right battle(s)?

Your answers will deepen in honesty and insight as you quiet yourself in God’s presence and get in touch with your own soul.

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