

# “Opening the Door to Wonder: The Enduring Gift of Sabbatical”

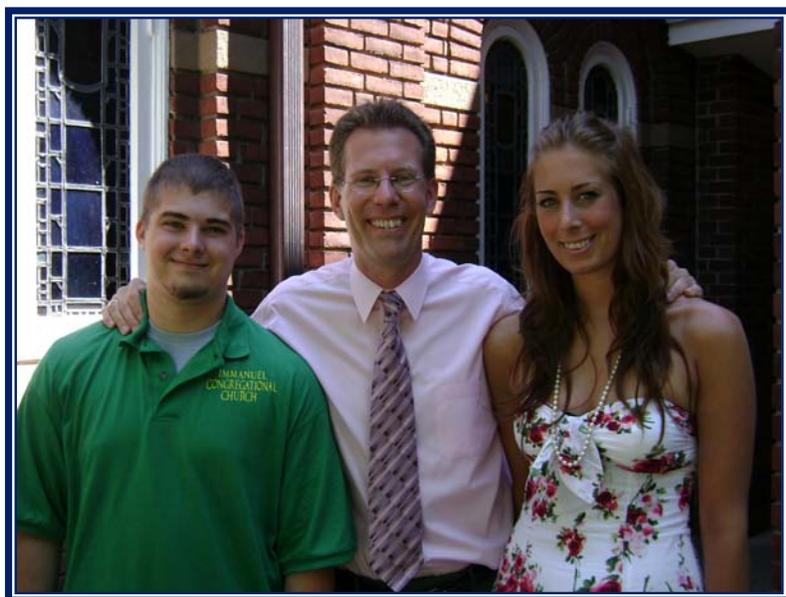
by

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*“As often happens on the spiritual journey, we have arrived at the heart of a paradox: each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closed, turn around—which puts the door behind us—and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls. The door that closed kept us from entering a room, but what now lies before us is the rest of reality.”*

Parker Palmer Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation



When I received the packet of materials informing me that I had received a Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Endowment, I wept. I wept for joy, because I felt like I could at last see on the horizon of my life an opportunity to rest, and that I would be nourished in ways that would make my spirit soar. But I also wept because some part of me was at last freed to grieve all that I had lost in the years immediately prior to applying for the grant.

Those losses included the deaths of loved ones, the death of a marriage, and in some sense even the loss of faith. The relentless demands of urban ministry over a ten year period of time, coupled with profound transitions in my personal life, made me wonder whether I could continue to function as an ordained

minister. Even more alarmingly, I had begun to question whether I might ever again feel the energy to live and love well.

Along with my overwhelming emotional response to the Clergy Renewal Grant, I felt within me the faint stirring of hope. Through my tears, I gave thanks. I was grateful to those in my congregation who had assisted with the grant application and who had encouraged me to dream of renewal at a time when I could not conjure that dream for myself. I gave thanks for those at the Lilly Endowment who had awarded the grant, and had made it possible for me to walk into a world of wonder. I gave thanks for the welcome experience of looking at the future as an invitation rather than a nearly unassailable mountain range. That experience of gratitude lives within me, even though it is nearly two years since I have returned from the sabbatical made possible by the Clergy Renewal Grant.

At the outset of my sabbatical I was dangerously close to an emotional, physical and spiritual impoverishment that was placing me at risk in many kinds of ways. The context of my ministry was a contributing factor to that diminishment of vitality. Halfway into the first decade of a new millennium, Hartford, Connecticut had been identified as the second poorest city in the country for cities its size, and Immanuel Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in that city. When I arrived in 1999 as the Senior Pastor of the congregation, we faced the kinds of challenges that confront many urban congregations: declining membership, overreliance on endowment to cover operating expenses, and deferred maintenance on historic buildings. When I asked a former professor from Union Theological Seminary to spend a few days with me and my congregation to evaluate some first steps for my ministry, she offered this concise observation and warning: “Immanuel is bursting with possibilities, and it is a haven for burnout.”

I would characterize the first ten years of my life at Immanuel Congregational Church as the struggle to perform an almost impossible balancing act. Alongside the challenges and blessings of raising a family, I became the primary caregiver and source of emotional support for my mother as she began a four year journey into dementia: when she died, it was clear to all of us who had accompanied her that “she had not gone gently into that good death.” During the same period of time my sister’s struggle with kidney disease eventually culminated in her death. These losses in my personal life took place in the larger context of the unceasing demands of urban ministry. So when I wept at the news that a Clergy Renewal Grant had been awarded to me, it gave me permission to express the deep inner pain with which I had been living for many years. It was as if someone had knocked on my door and said, “I understand that you might need to borrow a cup of hope.”

## **THE DREAM UNFOLDS**

*“We have places of fear inside of us, but we have other places as well—places with names like trust and hope and faith. We can choose to lead from one of those places, to stand on ground that is not riddled with the fault lines of fear, to move toward others from a place of promise instead of anxiety.”*

Parker Palmer Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation

When I initiated the application process for a Clergy Renewal Grant, I was encouraged to identify a dream of renewal that would make my heart sing. But my heart was broken, and I am not sure that I was ready to identify the songs it was trying to sing. What I could sense was a need for the liberation of my imagination. As I had become thoroughly engrossed in the details of supporting the lives of those around me, I had lost the sense of a wider horizon for life. My capacity to imagine possibilities for myself, my family and my congregation had become tragically underutilized. Yet I knew that the way out of the emotional and spiritual confinement of my life would have something to do with exercising my imagination. I remembered a wonderful line from Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved, in which a principal character, Baby Suggs, addresses a congregation of people who have been severely challenged in their lives. In one remarkable phrase, she tells them that “the only grace they can have is the grace they can imagine.”

My first instinct in planning a sabbatical was to stay close to that basic need in my life to awaken and feed the capacity for imagination: to develop an attraction for what Madeline L’Engle once called the glorious impossibles. Since I was not sure at the outset of the grant application process that I had the ability to dream dreams of renewal, I decided to borrow a cup of hope or two from the persons who had been most inspiring and sustaining for me in my life: my son and my daughter. My son, Kyle, provided the idea for a major trip that would eventually lead us through the Deep South to visit the major sites of the Civil Rights movement and to help us experience the kinds of music that appealed to both of us. My daughter, Catriona, inspired me to think of the sabbatical as a time to travel in ways that would bring us to unexplored landscapes, and make it possible for us to visit art museums in search of the replenishing power of beauty.

Through the wisdom of my family members, the core idea of the sabbatical was born: Liberating the Imagination for Wellness, Wonder and Wisdom. Through reading, travel, the creation of art, and long walks, I sought to reinvigorate that faculty once described by Abraham Joshua Heschel as the “capacity to be surprised.” I organized the sabbatical in the hope that it would be a time of gentle healing and gracious renewal. First, I planned to spend a month at St. Deiniol’s Library in northeastern Wales; the only residential library in the United Kingdom.

During that time I hoped to rest and read as parts of a significant first step in the direction of wellness. Because of St. Deiniol’s close proximity to Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester, I would also be able to visit museums in those cities and view extraordinary collections of art. I planned to use some of that experience to begin making sketches in preparation for creative work that I would complete later in the second movement of the sabbatical. That latter phase would take me to New York City, where I intended to enroll in classes at the Arts Student League in midtown Manhattan. Finally, the remainder of the sabbatical would involve travel with my son and daughter: through the Deep South with my son, to Amsterdam and Berlin with my daughter, and on a trip with both of them to Virginia as the last planned activity for the sabbatical.

I discovered that the process of planning for the Clergy Renewal Grant was itself an opportunity to awaken the inner life of the imagination. Over the years I had nourished dreams for family members and congregation, but I had not utilized this inner resource for the nurture of my own well-being. So the art of liberating the imagination had something to do with my willingness to risk that I, too, was worth the play and labor of dreams. Without the wise counsel of my son and daughter, I am not sure that I could have imagined my way into a new kind of life beyond the losses that I had suffered during the years prior to the sabbatical.

The other great blessing of the Clergy Renewal Grant was the opportunity it provided for my congregation and me to move along similar paths of discovery. Before embarking on the sabbatical, I utilized watercolors to create individualized bookmarks for each person in my congregation, on the back of which was a simple prayer asking God to liberate our collective imaginations for wellness, wonder and wisdom. Guest preachers focused on that theme during my absence; our Visual Arts Committee utilized this focus to hang a special exhibition of art in our Fellowship Hall to deepen awareness of the theme for members and newcomers; workshops on the importance of art and imagination in the spiritual life also took place during the sabbatical.

## **THE WAY OPENS**

*“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”*

Parker Palmer Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation

When I embarked upon my sabbatical, I could not possibly have anticipated how long it would take me to register the level of fatigue that I carried within my body. I went to Wales to read; I arrived in Wales and slept. For a while, my schedule became turned around, and I found myself being nourished by rest in the middle

of the day, and nurtured by long periods of reading in the evening. Night after night I sat and read and wrote at a well worn wooden desk in the library reading room as leafless branches scratched against the stained glass windows in that remarkable sanctuary for the mind. And night after night, with only the simple illumination of a desk lamp, I allowed my reading to range over a host of themes: the power of imagination, angels, biblical wisdom, and the lives of artists. Hours would pass in that remarkable space, and then I would join other guests in residence at St. Deiniol’s in front of a roaring fire in the lounge for late night conversations. As I began to sleep less during the day, I walked the hills of northeastern Wales, and discovered the joy of reading the landscape with my feet.

As my sabbatical unfolded, two things became immediately clear to me: I was in desperate need of sleep and the freedom to grieve. I had become proficient at encouraging others to care for themselves in ways that allowed space for healing and the expression of sorrow. But I had not created the space in my own life to allow for sufficient expression of these deep and powerful emotions. Unmet, they continued to demand attention. As the sabbatical evolved, I was astonished by the depth of my need for sleep and for the space to lament all that had been lost in my life. I would say that the sabbatical as a whole was in some ways only a beginning for this healing movement in my life. Whatever recovery I have experienced since the conclusion of the grant has taken place because of that momentous beginning.

### **THE MAKING OF CHANGE**

*“We are here not only to transform the world but also to be transformed.”*  
Parker Palmer [Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation](#)

During the Civil Rights movement, an elderly black man was asked, following a speech by Martin Luther King Jr., to describe how the movement had changed him personally. He replied in this way: “I’m not what I’m supposed to be, and I’m not yet what I’m going to be, but thank God I’m not what I used to be.”

These words suggest the way that I began to feel about myself as the sabbatical unfolded. I felt change taking place in my life in the sense that I was better rested, even more deeply connected with my children, more proficient at the making of art, and once again eager to embrace the challenging opportunities of urban ministry. Yet other changes that I sought for my life were just beginning to get underway.

I wanted to organize my life differently, to allow my life’s work to emerge from a place of soulfulness rather than imposed expectation. As I longed for transformation to occur in my congregation and the city around us, I longed for an

ongoing transformation in my habits and practices, in the hope that I might lead from a place of trust rather than fear, boldness rather than anxiety. So when I returned to my work at Immanuel Congregational Church, I did so with an altered sense of self, and with the knowledge that my coming of age would require a long time to expand and develop.

Furthermore, the challenges of urban ministry had certainly not disappeared in the four months of my absence. As soon as I returned, there were people who needed support from within my congregation and the wider community. Ongoing challenges related to finance and building maintenance had not diminished. In the first two years after my sabbatical, two of our beloved staff members, our church secretary and associate pastor, were diagnosed with cancer and ultimately died as a result of the onset of that disease. And I continued to be faithful to my role as a single parent, seeking to provide the essential experiences of love, support and encouragement to my son and daughter.

As my ministry at Immanuel continues to develop, I sometimes find myself asking these questions: What lingers from the sabbatical as I try to provide counsel and support for a grieving congregation? Do I feel that the rest that I experienced at that time has continued to sustain me? How has my practice of ministry changed because of that precious time away? I would like to describe the unfolding transformations in me in terms of certain fundamental shifts that have taken place in the way that I think about and practice ministry. In the following brief remarks I seek to describe some markings by which I try to chart my course as I embrace the glorious impossibles that God has entrusted to me and my congregation.

### **A FRESH ENCOUNTER WITH AN ANCIENT TEXT**

I am not sure that balance is the best word to describe what I seek from life these days. But I do know what it feels like to be wildly out of balance, and that is not a way of being that I am interested in maintaining for long periods of time. Being out of balance feels like I am constantly veering to the extremes of ministry: great enthusiasm for exciting projects or profound worry over fiscal woes. I am more interested in finding the radical middle, and I started to find my way there through a fresh encounter with an ancient text.

As I opened myself to life following the Clergy Renewal Grant, I discovered that a single verse of the New Testament tugged persistently at my imagination for attention. Known traditionally as the Great Commandment, this saying of Jesus compels us to “love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.” In this brief phrase he placed in conversation the calling to strengthen others with the calling to be strengthened for the full range of love and living. There is both invitation and grace in this passage; the

invitation to embrace others with all the richness and beauty that are implied in the little word love. There is also a clear and radical expectation that we are to embrace the vulnerability of being cherished. Attention must be paid: if we do not love ourselves well, and allow others to love us into wellness, wonder and wisdom, do we think we can really be an experience of tenderness and mercy for others? Bernard of Clairvaux, an abbot in the thirteenth century, spoke these words to the monks in his care as part of a sermon series on The Song of Songs: “I cannot see myself being enriched by your wasting of your powers. For if you are mean to yourself, to whom will you be good? Help me out of your abundance if you have it; if not, then spare yourself the trouble.”

Following my sabbatical I have a new appreciation for the Great Commandment. As I drive from meeting to meeting, or develop my schedule, I am now setting aside time and opportunity for the well-being of my soul. These appointments are as sacred as any others, and I know that I must take responsibility for their maintenance in my life. These days I make plans and dream dreams not only for my congregation, but for my life as a child of God.

To live the Great Commandment is to cultivate a level of self-awareness about what I do and the plans that I am making. There is now a much greater freedom in my life about creating the space to think about what I am doing, and I am open with others about needing this time. In fact, I have called upon leaders in my congregation to assist me with this process of prayerful planning about my life and ministry. Following the sabbatical, I created a schedule that includes regular meetings with two leaders in my congregation who reflect openly and honestly with me about my ministry. I have begun to receive massage on an occasional basis so that I can become better aware of what my body is telling me about the life that I am living. I agree with Parker Palmer’s claim that “inner work is as real as outer work and involves skills one can develop, skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation and prayer. We can teach our children something that their parents did not always know: if people skimp on their inner work, their outer work will suffer as well.”

### **WHAT WOULD MINISTRY LOOK LIKE IF I TRUSTED GOD?**

Another change has begun to take root in me as a result of the sabbatical. It concerns a stretching of my capacity for trust. My sense is that much of my ministry has exhibited itself as a form of functional atheism: “It’s all up to me.” This is not to say that I have been unwilling to place enormous trust in the people at Immanuel Church with whom I am privileged to live in a community of faith. Nor do I find myself acting in total disregard of the empowering accompaniment of God. But all too often, and perhaps most clearly in times of crisis or exceptional challenge, I let go of that trust. I seek only to control and direct. In doing so, I find myself moving from community to isolation, from a natural level

of concern to a disempowering form of fretfulness. In one of his poems, the Persian poet, Rumi, counsels his readers to “move within, but don’t move the way that fear makes you move.”

During those moments of the sabbatical when I had occasion to contemplate the energy of grace in my life, I would remember the story of a colleague who had taken a few days off to spend time in a retreat house run by Roman Catholic nuns. She had not really wanted to go, but yielded to the encouragement of her family and congregation. When she arrived at the retreat center, a nun looked disapprovingly at my friend, whose arms were full with the work that she had brought to do while she was on retreat from work! While my friend was settling into her room, someone knocked on the door. It turned out to be a nun, holding a silver platter on which rested bubble bath and a glass of wine. “What am I supposed to do with these?” asked the reluctant retreatant. The nun looked at her with a soft smile and said, “So it’s true: you Protestants really don’t believe in grace after all.”

One of the ‘teachers’ I have consulted for wisdom in the area of more trustful living in my post-sabbatical experience has been the game of tennis. I first learned this sport when I was twelve, and over the years it has been a lovely companion in many ways: offering exercise for both mind and body. I did not play much tennis while on the sabbatical, but this sport has become hugely influential in my life in the last two years. There is a constant experience of rhythm in the game, not only in terms of the physical motion required to strike the ball in satisfying ways, but in terms of how a point is played, and of how tennis players need to move back and forth between engagement and recovery. The rhythms of tennis have taught me something about the rhythms of ministry. There are times in tennis and ministry when the play is intense and demanding. And both tennis and ministry demand of their participants the experience of rest and reflection during the in-between times: times for recovery and re-centering. Trust on the tennis court grows from the faith that time devoted to practicing, preparing and imagining can create the conditions for an imaginative playfulness in the midst of competition. Trust in ministry feels like the cultivation of a friendship with God, which allows for a free and non-anxious striving for the kingdom of God. Trust in God, in concert with trust in the people of my congregation, has transformed my ministry into a light burden. It is like feeling the ‘good tired’ after a long point in a competitive tennis match. I am breathing hard, but there is no place in the world that I would rather be.

### THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

**“We are put on this earth for a little space, to bear the beams of love.”  
William Blake**

In my post-sabbatical life I have slowly begun to recover the beauty and nourishment of friendships that are enriching not only because they help me to navigate the professional and personal challenges that I face, but because they call forth energies from me that lead to joy and satisfaction in the depths of my life. While I still devote many hours to the practice of equipping the people of my congregation for ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, I am also asking whether I have created space in my life for the nurture of existing and new friendships. Deep and reviving rest is essential to human life, but so too is the gift of accompaniment. Sometimes rest is not in fact the way out of exhaustion. Fatigue may be a sign of isolation, and a crying out for the blessing of friendship. When the writer and teacher, Parker Palmer, was struggling through clinical depression, he received important but unobtrusive support from his friend, Bill: “he never tried to invade my awful inwardness with a false comfort or advice; he simply stood on its boundaries, modeling the respect for me and my journey—and the courage to let it be—that I myself needed if I were to endure.” The opportunity to sit with trusted friends or congregational leaders or clergy colleagues to listen our way through a particular problem, or to share our joys and sorrows, is a gift that is every bit as restoring as a good night’s rest. Through good conversations I feel the spirit of the sabbatical returning to me, and filling me with fresh insight and the gift of wisdom.

### THE STUDIO IN THE STUDY

Prior to my sabbatical my practice of art was sporadic at best. Following the sabbatical I have made an intentional decision to include creative exercise in my weekly schedule. This commitment involves taking classes on a regular basis, which makes me more accountable to my craft, and opens me to the work and friendship of fellow artists. If I am not able for some reason to create art during a given day, I open time in my schedule to look at and ponder the art of others and feel myself strengthened through the gift of their liberated imaginations. When I moved into a new apartment with my son following the sabbatical, I made sure to create art that could hang alongside the works of my mother and maternal grandfather, both of whom were artists. These creations connect us to an important and ongoing dimension in our family history: the longing to create even when the circumstances of our lives seem to conspire against such activity. In addition, I set up an easel in my study at the church, giving me the freedom to experience this space as both study and studio. The presence of that easel in that room has inspired curiosity by all who join me there, and has given me an opportunity to inquire obliquely about the way in which the creative force is exercised and practiced in the lives of others. Even on those days that are overfull with requests for counsel and support, I look to that easel, with some piece in progress mounted on its frame, and am reminded of the healing power of beauty.

## **DAYS OF GRACE**

**There is a sense of grace about my life and work following my sabbatical unlike anything that I experienced prior to my sabbatical. When I make my way homeward after the work of the day is complete, and the temptation arises in me to work some more once I get home, I detect a firm but faint voice within which says: “This is enough for today, Ed. Let yourself rest as you rested on the sabbatical.” When I am beginning to be consumed with worry about an issue in the life of one of my congregants, or a challenge facing us as a congregation, I remember that I was not called to solve problems alone. The wisdom of God awaits me; the companionship of friends supports me; the love of my family sustains me.**

**In the midst of any stress producing situation or person, I have the freedom to breathe deeply, as I breathed deeply on the sabbatical while I meditated in the middle of the day, or walked the Welsh countryside. The gift of breath is the gift of the resurrected Jesus to the community of his disciples who were locked up in fear in the wake of his death.**

**Part of the message of that story may simply be this: when we are locked in, breathe in, and breathe as if we are taking into our bodies the oxygen of resurrection. All of which is not to say that I have found myself completely and persistently at peace in my unfolding experience of ministry. But I know that I can call upon the gift of a liberated imagination at any time: to help me restore my sense of wonder, exercise creativity in the face of challenge, and embrace the glorious impossibles that are the gift of God for the people of God.**