



minister

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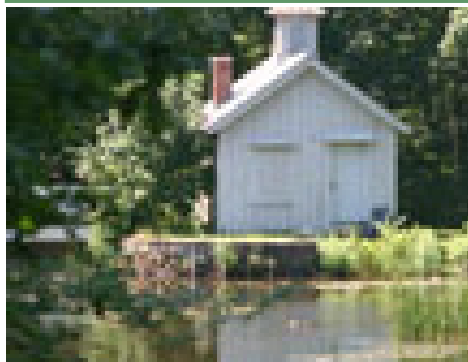
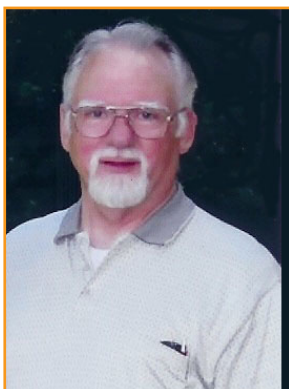


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

Self-care

In Demanding Times

George Nye



On August 6, 1986, a phone call came. Our son had been seriously injured up near Mt. Hood. He was heading into surgery. Would we be making the 275 mile trip up to the Portland area to be with him? Just to let us know: “He’s now a quadriplegic.” So began an eight month descent into numerous life and death decisions at three Portland area hospitals, with attempts at repair and rehabilitation, small victories and huge setbacks. At the same time I had to continue my full-time service as pastor down in Medford.

It should not be! A mother should not have to, every three hours, irrigate and re-pack a surgical wound in her son’s neck so deep she can see the outside of his esophagus. A father should not have to learn to irrigate a groshong tube into his son’s heart with the stern warning that one mistake could be fatal.

Amidst the anger and the tears, the struggles and the encouragements, our son Mike worked hard through his routines of occupational and physical therapies to reach his goal of coming home for Christmas. That was the goal that kept him going. Then, a week before the journey south, his infection flared up again. He’d not be home for Christmas. And so, on this sad evening, I was learning how to insert a catheter into my eighteen year old son, who by now was discouraged beyond words. Down the hall came the Christmas carolers: “Deck the halls with bows of holly... ‘tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la la la la....” “We wish you a merry Christmas....” I went over and closed the door against their joyous sounds, and returned to my dreary work. I couldn’t stand their singing.

After my task was completed and my son had disappeared somewhere into another world, I stood at the window of that dark room and stared out into the foggy night. The faint rays of the colored Christmas lights on the building across the street made their way through the gloom. Where was that Christmas joy that I usually celebrated? How could a heart so filled with fatigue and grief over a son’s broken body make sense of the happy Christmas tunes and the jingling bells? Even worse, how could I return to Medford in a couple of days and lead a celebrative Christmas Eve service?

Then, as quietly as the night mist, the Savior came to me and said, “They didn’t have any snowmen when I was born on that first Christmas. There were no festive lights decorating the walls in Jerusalem, and no wandering carolers in the streets of Bethlehem, singing about silver bells and mistletoe, when My mother lay down on the straw, wracked with pain, weariness and fear. Utterly alone save for her faithful husband, who knew nothing about being a midwife, she delivered Me to a dark and despairing world.”

What I learned on that darkest Christmas night was that wherever we are in life, Christmas begins in the shadows, sometimes in the spiritually coldest moments of our weary existence, and the Savior says, “There am I, born again in your midst to give you hope and healing, to hear your cries of frustration and despair, to give you the balm of peace, and refreshment for your soul.” We need to be reminded that that promise holds fast in every season of the year.

There is no doubt that I am an unregenerate type A personality. Into my seventh year of retirement, I have taken on a temporary job that, along with two other obligations, has me working close to sixty hours per week. The number of hours are partly of my own doing, since I insist on giving my best effort to every project I undertake. But, like the illustration I shared above, there have been occasions in my life when events coming at me have been beyond my control. I could not take time away for extended R & R until the crises were reduced to manageable problems.

I have always planned regular annual vacations that did not involve weekly guest preaching or developing year-long preaching plans and study guides. Nevertheless my experience has been that the most crucial times for finding refreshment and relaxation come in the midst of the battles, confrontations, and deadlines. I find refreshment in the celebrations of tasks accomplished well, projects completed that bring great satisfaction, and times of taking a break to check bases with the Lord on what's appropriate to address and what is not. Weariness especially washes over me when I have broken my connection with the Holy Presence.

A turn of phrase that has been helpful to me in times of greater demands is found in a poem by Walter Rauschenbusch. It reads in part,

In the castle of my soul is a little garden gate
Whereat, when I enter, I am in the presence of
God.

In a moment, in the turning of a thought,
I am where God is, this is a fact...

All life has a meaning without asking, I know;
My desires are even now fulfilled,
my fever is gone.

In the great quiet of God
My troubles are but pebbles on the road,
My joys are like the everlasting hills...

So it is when my soul steps through the postern
gate
Into the presence of God.
Big things become small and small things become
great.¹

A "postern gate" is the small gate next to the main gate of a fortress, designed to allow a person to flee to safety inside the walls when an enemy on horseback or in full battle regalia is in pursuit. The gate is big enough for the unprotected one being pursued to gain entrance, but too small for the armed pursuer to get through. (If you've been to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you know that you must stoop to gain entrance through a passage designed to keep out the warrior horsemen.)

We might suppose that Walter Rauschenbusch, the author of that poem, was a monkish recluse who enjoyed a spacious gated garden of tranquility and days of rest and meditative reflection. But we would be wrong. Rauschenbusch was an early 20th century Baptist social gospel advocate struggling against injustice in the Bowery in lower Manhattan, fighting for the rights of the disinherited. His frustrations, disillusionment and persecutions were nonstop. On the streets of that slum he had to find his "little postern gate" in the midst of constant misery and challenge. Rauschenbusch's spiritual refreshment and physical restoration had to come in the milieu of conflict and unrelenting challenges. He had no idyllic island paradise to which he could run. But when his soul stepped through the postern gate he found himself in the presence of God, where all things were put into perspective, he was reassured and redirected as needed, and he found again his joy in the "great quiet of God."

The twenty third Psalm speaks of two forms of refreshment. Both are legitimate. The first is the refreshment that comes through a place of physical retreat located in the midst of the green pastures and still waters, where the Good Shepherd refreshes and restores us. It's the place to which we all dream of escaping when busyness and demands and stress seem to rule our lives. The second form of restoration is found at the table set before us in "the presence of my enemies..." However much we yearn for those green pastures and still waters, they are often unavailable to us because ours is presently a place and an engagement which we cannot leave nor abandon. But the Good Shepherd is there, nevertheless, to replenish and anoint us for the challenges we face. Though the setting is dramatically different, the nourishing presence of our Comforter is no less effective. I find great solace in this latter promise of restoration and reinforcement.

I look forward to the times in the near future when I will once again occupy those pastures green for a season. But in the meantime, I am thankful beyond measure that Walter Rauschenbusch's "little postern gate" is nearby, through which I may step into the holy presence of the Most High to be refreshed, reassured, and equipped to enter the fray once more, just as I was one very dark night in foggy Portland town, on a dreary Advent evening.

Notes:

¹ Rauschenbusch, W., "The Little Gate of God." **Walter Rauschenbusch, Selected Writings**. Paulist Press, 1985.

George Nye has been an American Baptist pastor for 48 years. He retired from his position as Senior Pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Medford, Oregon in 2003; he was Interim Senior Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Medford, and currently serves as President, American Baptist Churches of Oregon.



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mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling



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