



minister

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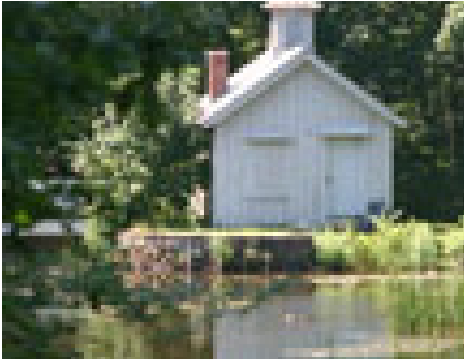


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

Self-care

Taking Turns

Ken Whitt



Growing up in a family of 5 boys, I had to learn to take turns. We were a game playing family—I especially loved “Monopoly” and was a vicious world conquerer in “Risk.” I was so competitive at “Scrabble” that by age 10 my mom would no longer play with me. But no matter how competitive I was, I always had to respect the necessity of taking turns. My dad was generous and kind, almost to a fault. He

insisted, as my little league baseball coach, that I learn to give other team members a turn at pitching, even though we almost never won if I was not on the mound. I was forced to learn, against my will, that some things mattered more than winning, and one of them was taking turns.

The benefits of taking turns became so ingrained in me that when I found myself having to solve one of the most difficult life problems I, without a conscious thought, adopted taking turns as the solution. I still solve this critical dilemma the same way and I still do it automatically. I expect I would have continued to handle this extreme challenge to a good life without reflection, except that I was asked to write this article. And writing will require consciousness.

So first let me list as many of the ways as I can think of that I bring wholeness to my life. Abundant living requires, for me, all of the following: Strong friendships. Romance. Life affirming work. Joyful parenting and grandparenting. Attention to diet. Spiritual direction. Photography. Creative woodworking. Prayer. Reading. Spiritual retreats. Stunning vacations. Clergy support. Earning a living. Daily exercise. Playing family games. Cooking spicy food. Coaching soccer. Playing the guitar. Learning new creative skills, like, right now, making picture frames. Changing the world. Creative writing. Playing pool. Graphic design. Camping and hiking. Preventive medical care.

How in the world can I possibly accomplish and experience and be committed to all of these ways of taking care of myself? The only possible answer is, “Taking turns.” Last week, devoted to learning the new skill of making picture frames and intending to give some of those frames as wedding presents soon, I spent a lot of time in my woodworking shop. There have been months and even years when I have completely neglected this joyful aspect of my life. But as I approached the end of last week I became aware of other ways I balance my life that I had been neglecting; most notably exercise and prayer. So today began with a deep and lengthy experience of prayer—and the remembrance that without a close bond to Jesus everything else loses its vibrancy in my life. I also spent 45 minutes on the treadmill, walking at 3 miles per hour. Tonight, for the first time in months, I am going to cook one of our favorite Indian foods, a kind of chicken curry, for Kathy, my wife. Oh, and I am taking time to write this article. One value to me personally of such writing is that as I write I remember that God’s presence and inspiration are always available.

Last night I did some planning related to a family vacation this summer in the Adirondack Mountains. It is difficult to find the words to describe how excited I am about this trip. On Friday I am taking my wife camping for the first time in her life. This adventure will celebrate—I hope it doesn’t rain—our second wedding anniversary. In April I took my

first mission trip in ten years. I went to El Salvador. What an amazing and life-changing and congregation-shaking venture. But a few months before this trip I resigned from my position as coach of a boys select soccer team. It just seemed to come down to taking turns. I had to let go of one way I experience joy to take hold of another. And Kathy and I have a gorgeous pool table. She said last night, “We haven’t played a game of pool in months.” Good grief! Before the table had been covered for months with all of the stuff we were taking to El Salvador and now it’s covered with all the photographs from the trip. Unfortunately, it’s necessary to take turns.

There’s a sermon I want to write for this Sunday. During my prayer time today, I felt compelled to write and preach this message. However, it’s an extremely difficult theme and will require careful research and meticulous writing in order to avoid coming across as judgmental or self-serving. Over the years I have written many carefully crafted sermons, most recently one on abortion that was extremely well received by the church. Sometimes the preacher just has to do the hard and long work of exceptional ethical writing. But, can I do it this week? Not only do I have to take into account what I know about competing personal and ministerial demands, I also have to be aware of the element of surprise. If I decide that this week it is the turn of a disciplined ethical sermon it will not be the turn for something else, and I may not be able to give what happens to come along my best effort.

Over the long haul, how does this practice of taking turns work out? When our third child, Micah, was born, my wife and I immediately noticed the intense additional demands upon our lives. BM (before Micah) we had worked out a pretty good system for taking turns with each other, our two girls and our vocations. But a third child blew all of that away. For me, in particular, holding all of this in prayer quickly convinced me that I could not and must not continue pursuing my Doctor of Ministry program. I let it go with no regrets. It was no longer my turn. The circle of life goes around, however, and about 10 years later it was my turn for another try. Then the Doctor of Ministry program became a critical and healthy part of my life, and within the next two years I completed it.

In taking turns you have to be extremely careful, exercising the same care a father extends when deciding which child to spend time with on a particular evening after work. A couple of these children are demanding and a couple of them are soft spoken. One is definitely more needy, and another shows a great deal of promise if given sufficient encouragement. You have to keep all of this in mind. Above all, you have to keep all of these children and their various needs before God. Which brings me to an extremely important conclusion.

Review my list above. Then ask the question: “Does Ken take turns with all of the items on this list?” My personal answer is, “Absolutely yes.” All of them get a turn and all of them are sometimes in the background for awhile. That is the way it is in my life. But, is that OK? Not quite. The reason it is not OK to take turns with prayer is that this priority is required—absolutely required—in order to make good choices with all the other priorities.

Go back through this article and note—as I did while writing it—how often I needed to pray for the wisdom required by this process of taking turns. In ministry, as in all aspects of life-like relationships and physical health, prayer is indispensable when you are trying to balance the many parts that are required for wholeness. I feel deep loss when I take no time for woodworking or photography for weeks at a time. My life becomes more shallow when I don’t invite friends over for dinner, and when I dodge exercise I begin feeling lethargic. But when I postpone prayer day-after-day I begin to lose the capacity to live well and wisely. It is always God’s turn.

Ken Whitt is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Springfield, Ohio. During his 35 years as an American Baptist Pastor, Ken has served churches in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Ohio. He was a member of the General Board and the Board of International Ministries for 6 years and now represents the Professional Church Leaders of Ohio on the Ministers Council Senate.

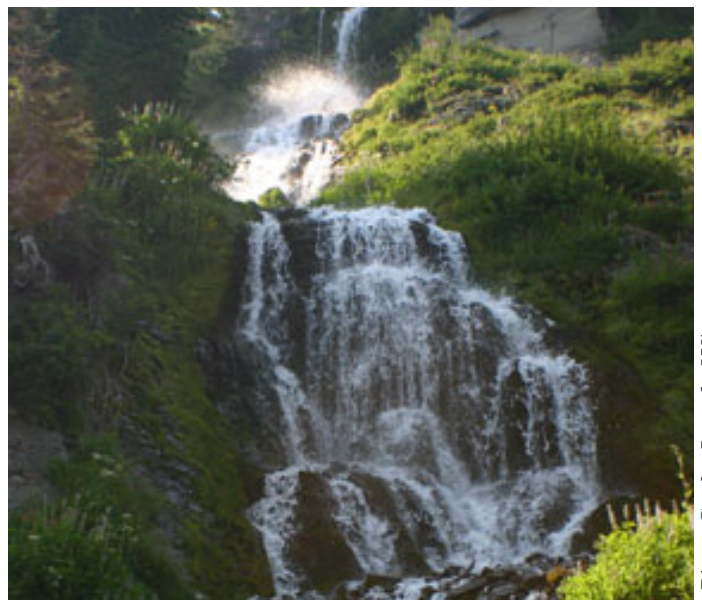


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mission

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- 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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