

# Caring for your soul in times of change

Some thoughts from Rick James

Organisational change is highly stressful - especially if we are at the centre - as leaders or change agents. Our normal busy lives become even more (over) loaded. We find ourselves having to work longer hours. And perhaps even more costly, we have to deal with a lot of stress and insecurities of those around us. It can be an emotionally desolate place.

In times of change, the future is uncertain. This makes most people deeply uncomfortable and tense. As people become more stressed, they can often become more defensive, seeking to protect the little they feel they can control. Conflicts erupt. And as leaders or change agents, we feel responsible. It can be a lonely time, where Jesus' words about his yoke being easy and his burden light seem a long way from our reality. We should not under-estimate the toll that change places on us.

In the midst of organisational change we desperately need to draw on our spiritual resources. How easily we do this may depend on our spiritual habits – our rhythms of life. How deep have we dug our spiritual wells?

Even at normal times, most of us apparently are too busy for God. In a recent survey of 20,000 Christians worldwide, '65% rushed from task to task in a way that interferes with their relationship with God' (Barton, 2008, page 118). For many of us today, being busy is a badge of honour. It is often the answer of choice when someone asks us how we are. We feel if we are not busy then something must be wrong with us. But as Barton points out: 'A busy person is not so much active as lost'. When things looked as if they were becoming too demanding for Jesus he took himself away and made time to spend with God. Luke's gospel says, 'The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.'<sup>1</sup> When did you last go on some form of spiritual retreat? Is it part of your regular work life?

As leaders and change agents, we need time in solitude with God. This allows us to recalibrate – to restore a true perspective on God's activity and our work. We need moments in our lives when we let the chaos settle a bit and invite God to show us evidence of his presence at work. We begin to notice those things that we would otherwise miss in the pace and complexity of our lives, as Ruth Haley Barton writes:

'The spiritual law of gravity ensures that the chaos of the human soul will settle if it sits still long enough... We are less and less mesmerised by human voices, less and less manipulated by the expectations of others and our inner compulsions... In solitude we are rescued from relentless human striving to solve the challenges of ministry through intellectual achievements and hard work... In silence we give up control and allow God to be God in our life rather than being a thought in our head.' (Barton, 2008, page 47)

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 5:15-16

Time alone with God preserves our souls and protects us from pride. In solitude we stop believing our own press. We refocus our identity on being a child of God. It gives us time to rest.

In these times of solitude, there are a wide range of spiritual practices we can use: fellowship in small groups; worship; Bible studies; *lectio divina*; confession; journaling; retreats; spiritual direction; fasting. Personally, I have found the ‘examen’ process recommended by St Ignatius very helpful<sup>2</sup>. This is a spiritual exercise intended to refine our capacity to see and respond to God in our everyday lives. It helps me to align myself with what God is doing. In this examen, I take time to look back on my day, my week, my month or my year and notice what has stirred my emotions:

- When have I felt God’s presence most strongly in my leadership? Where has there been a sense of life-giving connection with God? (St Ignatius called these ‘consolations’.)
- When have I felt God’s absence most keenly? When have I moved away? (St Ignatius called these ‘desolations’.)

The ‘spiritual’ element is a vital part of caring for our souls. But as integrated human beings we cannot separate our spiritual lives from our emotional and our physical lives. When Elijah was absolutely exhausted after his miracles on Mount Carmel, God sent his angels to look after Elijah’s physical needs: his sleep, his eating and his drinking. ‘All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.’ (1 Kings 19:6).

We need to look after our bodies, to exercise, eat, drink and sleep well. We know from sport that recovery and rest time are an integral part of sustained performance. All human beings need time to renew and develop energy reserves. There is an energy that comes from being rested that is different from the energy that comes from being driven. We also need to look after our emotional health. Where do we get our energy? Who makes us laugh? Who lifts our spirits? We need to invest in good relationships with friends and with family.

If we are to bring our best selves into the crucible and heat of organisational change situations, we need to care for ourselves. Parker Palmer puts it well:

‘Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on the earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to our true selves and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.’

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<sup>2</sup> See for example <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com>