



## SOLO BUT NOT ALONE: PRACTICING FAITH BEYOND THE PROGRAM

BY DON C. RICHTER

"I feel so useless! Folks come to see me every day, but I can't do anything for others." Tears streamed down Annabel's face and her shoulders heaved. "I just sit here all day in this wheelchair... can't even talk clearly."

True. Two months ago this sixty-six-year-old avid tennis player had been a tireless volunteer serving a dozen church committees and civic groups. Now she slumped in a metal chair, her left side drooping from stroke paralysis. Annabel was embarrassed by her physical condition, debilitation compounded by frustration. How could she persevere in her calling as deacon in the congregation where I served as associate pastor?

I was clueless as to what to say to Annabel to give her honest encouragement and hope. So I took her hands in mine and prayed for discernment (for both of us) and for strength and healing. We talked some more, and as I stood to leave I noticed on the kitchen table a half-written note. Penned on our new church stationery, the right-handed script was sharp and graceful.

"Annabel, I have a full box of stationery in the car. Would you mind writing a few thank-you notes to our Sunday School teachers? I've been planning to do that myself, but it would mean even more coming from a member

of the learning council." Behind her glasses, Annabel's eyes flickered and her mouth managed a half-smile. "I'll pick them up to mail when I visit you next week."

The following afternoon my office phone rang. "Just wanted you to know I finished those notes," a familiar voice said. "Let me know if you need me to write some more." The next week I took Annabel four boxes of stationery and a list of home-bound members. And the week after that, another delivery. Recipients told me how deeply touched they were by her words of inspiration and blessing. Annabel's ad hoc mail ministry continued for many months, Christ's power literally made legible through her weakness (II Cor. 12).

Annabel's story has many facets. It illustrates how prayer prods a fumbling rookie pastor into paying attention. It underscores the importance of focusing on *ability* rather than *disability*. (In my present congregation liturgists say "Let us rise in body or spirit," instead of "Will all who are able please stand.") Annabel's desire to serve reminds modern disciples that dignity is restored when one can give as well as receive assistance from others.

For our purposes here, Annabel's story subverts the conventional view that church

educators are first and foremost *program managers*, responsible for filling the calendar with tantalizing, action-packed events for every age group.<sup>1</sup> How so? By emphasizing the value of practicing solo.

The equation for *program-driven* Christian education is simple:

Programs = Events + Groups  
The program paradigm appeals to the desire to organize, schedule, compartmentalize, and offer a range of choices for consumption in the religious marketplace. For church workers, this paradigm is fueled by aversion to private religion<sup>2</sup> and by appeal to "bowling alone"<sup>3</sup> alternatives. Be a participant! Join in! (Subtext: "You'll feel guilty opting out of this exciting event I've spent many hours planning just for you!")

There's much good to be said for groups. A household can be an optimal setting for intergenerational learning, a team for skill coaching, a support group for mutual reinforcement of healthy habits. Indeed, groups provide fertile ground for cultivating *Christian practices*: "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental needs and conditions of humanity and all creation in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>



In our work we emphasize the *cooperative and communal nature* of Christian practice. We do so to reclaim a dimension of practice that often gets lost in the spiritual practices lexicon. We stress that “each practice must be learned from others and belongs to the community as a whole, even though individuals sometimes engage in the practice by themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

As basic as group programs are for cooperative learning, Christian educators also need to focus on *the individual practitioner*. Just as solitude is essential to sustaining healthy community, rehearsing and even performing by oneself—apart from a group—is essential to sustaining vital practices. Solo practice is as paradoxically communal as it is personal. In and through my practice, I find myself providentially linked to a vast web of fellow practitioners from many times and places. Even when practicing alone, I sense that “there are angels hovering ‘round” as the communion of saints become mystically and powerfully present.

Tom and his family moved across the country when he was a high school sophomore. The move was especially hard on Tom, who left behind all his childhood friends and struggled to find kindred spirits in his new home town. When I asked Tom what anchored him during this transition, he told me that every night he lit a candle in his bedroom, knelt on the floor, and prayed the entire prayer from the breastplate of St. Patrick: “I bind unto myself this day...” How in the world did a Southern Baptist

boy become acquainted with this archaic Irish-Catholic prayer?

Tom first heard the prayer on an episode of the short-lived television series *Nothing Sacred*. In the closing scene, the priest prays St. Patrick’s prayer for a Halloween gathering of characters “haunted” by tragedy and misfortune. The next day, Tom found a copy of the prayer and began his nightly ritual. “That prayer has been my lifeline,” he told me. “It kept me sane.”

Several years later, St. Patrick’s prayer anchored me during days of painful transition. From an ancient Celt...through a TV character...through Tom...to me... and then to a dear friend who has Alzheimer’s...we all became part of a vast web of fellow practitioners, even when practicing solo.

*An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, richly illustrates the solitary yet communal character of Christian practices. Hanging up laundry becomes an invitation to prayer. Digging potatoes a sober reminder that we, too, are earth-creatures who will one day return to the ground from whence we came. Mundane chores *can* have larger purpose and be woven into a way of life that has meaning and integrity.<sup>6</sup>

Here are ways Christian educators can encourage and support people in their daily solo practice:

❖ **Celebrate *not* doing.** Name the many ways one can be faithful by *not* doing something: *not* littering invites helps care for the earth; *not* checking e-mail

on Sunday invites Sabbath keeping; *not* impulse buying promotes good stewardship. Like de-cluttering a room, it’s liberating to realize that *not* taking on one more task can open the door to grace.

- ❖ **Resist the impulse to plan learning activities that *always* herd people into groups.** This will be a special challenge for youth ministry, so identified as “group” activity that a popular youth worker agency goes by this name. Robert Dykstra urges those who care for young people to appreciate their fundamental aloneness, their need for space and solitude. Dykstra overcame his own fear of public speaking and learned to preach during long, lonely car trips to and from college. He listened repeatedly to recordings of six sermons by a dynamic master preacher. Eventually Dykstra could preach all six sermons verbatim, “word for impassioned word and complete with a Scottish accent.” Practicing solo, Dykstra’s fears were calmed and his sense of calling confirmed.<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ **Provide resources that teach via *indirection*.** Set the stage for individual learners to encounter the gospel through the medium of a short story, a piece of music, a work of art. In Godly Play, for example, a guiding pedagogical conviction is that truth is often revealed parabolically, through indirect communication.

❖ **When planning group events, use a *ladder approach* to planning that offers multiple entry points of engagement.** One congregation sponsored a Lenten fast with weekly participant gatherings. The leader also hosted a Google Group and discovered that a number of young adult members were themselves fasting and reading daily posts even though they couldn't make the meetings. Instead of being judged for low commitment level to the group, these young adults found solidarity with others in the midst of their solo practice.<sup>8</sup>

❖ **Validate virtuosos and make space for them to offer their gifts for the life of the faith community.** In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell observes that highly talented persons don't come by it naturally. They work at it, typically spending 10,000 hours – including many hours by themselves – honing skills and mastering a discipline.<sup>9</sup> Gladwell's research prompts an important clarification about Christian practices: even when many hours are invested in a practice, the goal is never personal

mastery but rather faithfulness."<sup>10</sup>

So virtuosos in a congregation will likely look different than those in a sports arena or orchestra pit. They may feel more comfortable preaching in a car than a pulpit. They may prefer to light a candle and pray an archaic prayer in solitude. They may have dirt under their fingernails from digging, or ink smudges on their hands from writing thank-you notes. In the company of saints ancient and modern, they are practicing solo.

DON C. RICHTER, an ordained Presbyterian (PCUSA) minister, is associate director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith ([www.PracticingOurFaith.org](http://www.PracticingOurFaith.org)). Don is author of *Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World* (2008), coeditor of *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (2002), and coeditor of *Religious Education Ministry with Youth* (1982). A graduate of Davidson College (A.B.) and Princeton Seminary (M.Div., Ph.D.), Don served as Associate Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Louisville (KY); directed the Youth Theology Institute at Emory University; and taught Christian education at Candler School of Theology and Bethany Theological Seminary. Don's son Jonathan is a senior at Guilford College and his daughter Katherine is a seventh grader. Don lives in Decatur (GA) and worships at Central Presbyterian Church (Atlanta).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Foster, *Educating Congregations* (Abingdon, 1994), 29.

<sup>2</sup> In *Habits of the Heart* (University California Press, 1985), Robert Bellah and associates profile "Sheila Larsen" as a caring nurse who trusts herself and hears God through her own internal voice. Preachers and pundits have seized on Sheila as the epitome of a privatized religion ("Sheilism") that eschews corporate affiliation and worship. In *Caretakers of Our Common House* (Abingdon, 1997), Carol Lakey Hess presents a more sympathetic reading of Sheila, applauding her emerging self-authorship and urging church leaders to ponder why a caring woman of faith does not find religious institutions more life-giving (71-72, 83).

### *Notes, continued*

<sup>3</sup> In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), Robert Putnam chronicles the demise of mediating social institutions in this country over the past fifty years. While more Americans than ever are bowling, for example, they are bowling alone rather than in leagues. Putnam laments that declining civic engagement diminishes the social capital that funds a vital democracy.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, Revised Second Edition (Jossey-Bass, 2010), 204.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 205

<sup>6</sup> *An Altar in the World* (HarperOne, 2009), by Barbara Brown Taylor, is a constructive sequel to *Leaving Church* (HarperOne, 2007). Taylor did not formally leave the church or priesthood but rather left parish ministry (an altar in the sanctuary) to pursue her calling as contemplative, author, and teacher. The provocative memoir title, however, perpetuates the divide between institutional religion and individual spirituality, as though “church” cannot encompass life-giving practices that are both communal *and* personal.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dykstra, “Out of One’s Depth: Seeking Soul in Solitude” Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, 2003 -- see <http://www.ptsem.edu/iymllectures/2003/Dykstra-Seeking.pdf>. The Youth Ministry & Spirituality Project echoes Dykstra’s observations – see Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Sarah B. Drummond, “Attracting Younger Adults to Congregational Life: Three Tensions,” *Congregations Magazine* (December 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (Little, Brown & Company, 2008) 38-40.

<sup>10</sup> “In the end,” says Craig Dykstra, “these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God.” Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith* (WJK, 2005), 66.