Awake

Focal Practice as a Path

Practice | Creation | Technology

What if life, real Life, was as close as the nearest patch of clover, or as tangible as hands in dough? Feeling the draining lure of technology, **Br. Keith Nelson** *advocates for the benefit of those focal practices that keep us grounded, embodied, and most full (gratefully) alive.*

Awake, awake to love and work!
The lark is in the sky;
The fields are wet with diamond dew;
The worlds awake to cry
Their blessings on the Lord of life,
As He goes meekly by.

Singing these verses in our monastic service of morning prayer – in an indoor chapel, from a printed page – evokes memory, imagination, and desire ("Not Here for High and Holy Things," words by George Anketel Studdert-Kennedy). I remember the many early morning walks I have taken; I imagine the worlds around me on every side full of crawling, flying, burrowing creatures, continually drawn into being by the breath of their Maker; I yearn for yet further, deeper relationship with God's world as its beings sing their million-throated witness to Life in its fullness.

But when the hem of my habit is drenched with the same diamond dew; when I have responded to the relentless song of the first robin by rousing myself out into the enfolding half-light of dawn; when my own ears have heard the blessings cawed and warbled into the clinging mist before the work of human worship has even begun; it is *then* that I know, by the Creator's grace, the heart of the hymn of creation. My boots flecked with grass, my beard slick with the fine spring rain, singing a hymn becomes more than an aid to memory, imagination, or desire. My mouth is full of praise that has become my own because it has also become the *world's praise* resounding through my voice, returning to its Source.

The Society of Saint John the Evangelist

Praying morning prayer daily; singing a familiar hymn with devotion; getting out of bed because that first enthusiastic robin is singing her heart out; lingering to witness the primeval moment the sun breaks the tree line and the world is, once more, gifted with light…

Even if our own list would differ substantially, we know intuitively that these activities share an underlying kinship.

Though small in themselves, they orient us toward the focal concerns of our lives: the things that matter most and give meaning and value to all else. Giving ourselves to their patterned observance, we give ourselves to God: the generous source and grateful recipient of our prayers, praise, attention, and wonder. They are, in the phrase of Albert Borgmann, *focal practices*.[1]

A focal practice is an engagement, a habit, an activity that we take up frequently – daily or at least weekly. It requires attention, effort, and skill honed over time. This combination of qualities means it may at times feel burdensome, a task that demands more of us than we can summon when our schedules demand convenience or our hungers urge us to instant gratification. But when, with patient fidelity and love, we take up the arduous task, it yields a deep satisfaction and fulfillment of purpose that is often hard to describe. Traditional spiritual disciplines such as scripture study, contemplative prayer, and liturgical worship clearly form a time-tested repertoire of focal practices. But many other activities fulfill the same purpose and can easily become prayer with the right inward orientation: playing an instrument; tending a fire; baking bread; learning the birds in our ecosystem by sight and sound. Indeed, these were the daily practices of premodern humanity, among whom the classic spiritual disciplines first blossomed. To live on this earth with a purpose that rendered the struggle and pain worthwhile meant ordering one's life around focal things. Focal practices safeguarded the centrality of those things.

Borgmann is a philosopher of technology and a Christian. His notion of focal practices is set within a larger project: advancing a vision of responsible engagement with technology in ways more closely aligned with matters of ultimate concern.

I have found the notion of focal practices helpful on many levels. The term accurately describes most of the activities embedded in the rhythms of monastic life. These include the Daily Office and Eucharist; monastic customs and spirituality around the labor of our hands; our practices of eating and table fellowship; our traditions of hospitality; our disciplines of learning and study; our cultivation of skills for ministry such as preaching and spiritual direction; and the vast treasury of practices that enrich our personal prayer. We have focal practices for almost every aspect of life!

But we – like everyone in contemporary North American society – are just as susceptible to what our Rule calls "the din of noise and the whirl of preoccupation" that come with a technology-saturated culture.

During a stretch of bleak, gray weather in February when the sun hasn't appeared for days; when I respond to the chapel bell with dogged obedience rather than light-footed joy; when the preaching of God's word tastes uninspired and flavorless in my mouth; when I feel lonely or unloved, threadbare or tested by the vows I professed with such ardor; then it is easy to find me checking my email for the fifteenth time in a single day; watching a third or fourth or eighth consecutive YouTube video about the absolute best

[1] Borgmann's classic text is *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*.

method to free-range chickens; wondering with needless anxiety why a friend hasn't texted me; or slogging away at a spreadsheet on the Sabbath. Irritable, listless, estranged from my body, the moment of awareness creeps upon me: *This is not Life*.

It is then that the creator Spirit – through my focal practices – drives me out into the wilderness, or just the nearest city park or stretch of riverbank, to rediscover my human creaturehood in a world of things. I stare down my own inertia and *acedia*; I muster patient fidelity and love. I ask for help. I take up the arduous but Life-bestowing task. By the Spirit's grace I engage again with Life. It's not a magic recipe. I don't always respond as swiftly or wholeheartedly as I ought. No matter – the God who gives Life far more than I desire it always stands at the ready with another opportunity to return.

Irritable, listless, estranged from my body, the moment of awareness creeps upon me: This is not Life.

Though I'm a monk, I am learning (like all of us) that if I am to be critically engaged with technology, I must hold its use in proportion alongside the focal practices by which God brings me back to Life. What I have found most enriching about Borgmann's work is the idea that critical engagement with technology, as Christians, compels us to take up *counterpractices*. These weave us back into right and balanced relationships with material things in their irreducible goodness. Devices are not the enemy. They are simply so powerful, and their means of operating upon us so advanced, that we require a highly intentional context of counterpractices to flourish if we are to pursue the good life, and the godly life, in their midst.

While all focal practices engage us intimately with a world of things, I want to share just one that has been particularly instrumental in my own life of loving relationship and reciprocity with creation. If creation is the "material expression of God's love," this has been a counterpractice safeguarding my love for creation as an ultimate concern, in a world that routinely reduces creation to inert matter or expendable resources.[2]

There is a stream that meanders its way through our western woods on the land surrounding Emery House. In one place not far from its union with the Merrimack, the water reliably tumbles over a series of rocks. For a season I made it my discipline to visit

[2] "The material expression of God's love" is theologian Norman Wirzba's concise definition of creation.

this place daily, and its presence drew from me a focal practice that blossomed into an astonishing, intimate relationship. I visited shortly after sunrise. I let the sound of the stream enter me, tumble over the rocks of my thoughts, saturate my intentions. It took time and patience, but I came to feel that the stream herself was teaching me what to do, how to be, in a relationship of mutual presence. When I felt the stream within me, I gently began to shake a rattle. For me this established a connection in the language of sound with the gurgling of the water, the song of the birds, and the rays of morning sunlight. The stream began to sing, or rather I began to hear her song, and this hearing gave me a song to sing in return. Through the harmony of these songs, my song and hers, it was as though I began to hear the eternal Song – the Word – sounding forth from that sacred niche of God's creation (John 1:1-4). The song of the Creator sings with the voice of every creature. That song is always unfolding – it was long before me, and will be long after me – the song by which the cosmos is sustained. In farewell, I would cross the stream, dip my hands in her waters, and cross myself, as I would with water from a baptismal font.

While going about my day at Emery House, I would often think of the stream, continually flowing out there in the western woods, no matter what I was up to. The stream flowing in the darkness while I slept and dreamt or lay awake sleepless. The stream flowing in the morning and at sunset while I chanted in chapel. The stream praying without ceasing, inspiring me to make my own attempt to do the same. It is a sacrament of the God who is "living water, gushing up to eternal life" and the "river of life" flowing out from the heart of God (John 4:14; Revelation 22:1-2). All this may sound like the work of a wistful, overactive imagination, or perhaps a metaphor run riot, overflowing the banks of reason. But I promise you it is real – at least as real as the words on this printed page or screen. I have come to believe that a stream, this stream, can desire my admiration, my song of love in response to its own sounding song. This reciprocity completes something in me. It is a part of how I am being saved, how I am being made whole. I believe this reciprocity completes something in the work of co-creation, to which Christ calls us to participate. Just as it is part of how I am being made whole, I believe it also is a small part of how creation is being made whole, gathered into the heart of God's mysterious purposes.

Our ancestors in Christ spontaneously and intuitively cultivated relationships of mutual presence with wild creatures. Countless stories of the saints show us a pattern. It unfolds in the places they called home: the deserts and caves of ancient Syria-Palestine; along the harsh, seaside cliffs of Ireland; and deep in the forests of Russia. In the tales left by their disciples, we encounter servants of Christ befriending lions and jackals, blackbirds and hares, bears and birch trees. Many were monastics, souls worn smooth as river rocks by the ebb and flow of what I would call their focal practices. But this pattern is also intrinsic to the worldview of the Biblical authors. The psalmist cries, "Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, the lands and those who dwell therein" and "Let the rivers clap their hands and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, when he comes to judge the earth" (Psalm 98: 8-9). Jesus urges us: Consider the birds of the air. Consider the flowers of the field. *Listen*, he urges the Pharisees: if my human followers were silent, the stones themselves would shout (Luke 12:24; Luke 12:27; Luke 19:40). This kind of consideration, this kind of listening, is the fruit of attention and devotion lovingly offered – moment by moment, day after day. Lifetime after lifetime, these have been the habits of the saints. In generous hands, they hold them out to us, their heirs in Christ's Body.

In other words: this stuff isn't just for monks wandering around in the woods, or for nuns in caves. It's for all of us. However distant or disconnected our lives may feel from the restorative power of God's creation, Life is as near to us as the closest patch of clover and its diamond dew under our bare feet. Life is as near to us as the flour, water, and yeast

that yields its supple heft to the pressure of our palms, longing to become bread. Life is as near to us as the sweat that spills from pores and the breath that heaves in lungs as we push through that final turn in the trail toward home.

When we commit to God as our ultimate concern, a deep satisfaction and fulfillment of purpose awaits us. A world of things becomes a cast of collaborators in God's breathtaking design. It takes practice. But through it, we come to know a foretaste of life that is Life indeed.

For Further Reflection

What are the focal concerns of your life: those things that matter most and give meaning and value to all else?

What pulls you from lethargy and calls you to engage Life? Where do you draw close to the restorative power of God's creation?

Spend at least 15 minutes outdoors, sitting still and simply observing your surroundings. Notice how this time shifts things in you. How does the environment speak to you, and how do you respond?

Discover SSJE:

Daily

Brother, Give Us A Word: a daily monastic practice.

Receive brief meditations from Brothers of SSJE, sent every morning via email. Sign up at **SSJE.org/word**.

Weekly

Sermons: Sunday messages based on the lectionary to inspire your prayer.

We hope to offer a still point in the midst of the chaos of contemporary life. Go to **SSJE.org/sermon**.

Regularly

Retreats & Spiritual Direction: for your renewal.

We offer retreats and workshops for individuals and groups throughout the year. Go to **SSJE.org/visit**.

Seasonally

Cowley Magazine: longform essays to deepen your faith.

Cowley is published seasonally in print and online. Read the latest at **SSJE.org/cowley**.