

Know Limits

Limitations | Self-knowing | Growth

*Encountering limitations can shock, frustrate, and sober us. But what if our limitations are actually an invitation: something we are invited to know and embrace as part of what makes us uniquely who we are. **Br. Lain Wilson** takes us from a blistering stretch of pavement on the back to a bicycle to the wisdom of the cloister in this relatable and important meditation on the power and benefit of knowing our limits.*

Heat radiated off the pavement as I cycled past tree-dotted lawns. The temperature had already reached ninety degrees, and it was still climbing. My breathing was labored, tunnel vision had set in, and my thoughts were focused on just getting around one more bend in the road. One hundred more feet. One more rotation of the pedals.

This was just outside of Belmont, in northeast Mississippi, during a heat wave in August 2021. I was three days into a bike trip south on the Natchez Trace Parkway when I hit my limit.

I mean this in a very literal way. I could not make myself move forward. You may not have had a physical experience like this, but I imagine that you will have experienced something similar in another part of your life. Commitments piling up with not enough hours in the day to address them, no matter how hard you work. The red numbers staring at you on your budget sheet, with no possible way to close the financial gap. Demands on your time and attention from family or friends that you emotionally cannot meet. Your story is your own, but I would bet that something like this is, or has been, a part of it.

For myself, I'm not sure that I had felt something like this before. I had run races and rowed competitively for years, and I had always *felt* that I was putting myself out there fully, emptying the tank in the final stretch. I had always *thought* that I had nothing more to give, nothing more to offer. That day in Belmont showed how wrong I was. That day stripped away the false pride of accomplishment and self-sufficiency. It uncovered my underlying fear of failure, of weakness, of admitting defeat. Who was I, if I had to ask for

help, if I knocked on the door for a glass of water, if I called for a ride to our rest stop?
Who was I, if I couldn't do what I set out to do?

We all face and experience limitations in different ways. They can be temporary walls to be overcome or fixed boundaries, narrowing and constraining the possible. They can be imposed upon us unwillingly or chosen by us as part of our discipline or vocation. In each case, though, our limitations challenge us to discover and to explore the world that they define. Although they may cloud our vision of the boundless horizon, our limitations open new opportunities for setting our sights before us. They invite us, in the words of poet Waldo Williams, to inhabit "a broad hall found between narrow walls."

¹ From his poem "Pa Beth yw Dyn?" (What is man?), translated by Rowan Williams in his collection *The Other Mountain* (Carcenet, 2014).

Our limitations challenge us to discover and to explore the world that they define.

Two of my favorite stories about what opportunities limits afford come from the Hebrew Bible, back-to-back in the book of Exodus (Exodus 17:8-13 and 18:13-27). First we read how Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt. They have crossed through the Red Sea, into the lands of a neighboring tribe called Amalek, which has attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Exodus tells us that when Moses holds up the staff of God in his hand during the battle, the Israelites prevail; when his arms lower, Amalek prevails. During the fighting, Moses' arms grow tired. Hitting his limit, he requires the help of others, Aaron and Hur, who hold his hands steady through the rest of the day.

Yet even with this support - and this victory - Moses' struggles are far from over. The Israelites don't just encounter hostility from outside but quarrel among themselves as well. Immediately following the victory at Rephidim, Moses' father-in-law Jethro visits the camp and sees Moses's unceasing labors as judge over his people. "Why do you sit alone," Jethro asks, "while all the people stand around you from morning until evening? . . . What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out. . . . For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."

In each of these stories, we witness Moses coming up against his own limits - physical for sure, and probably also emotional and rational. He has always had God with him - speaking and working through him. But in the face of his own frail humanity - the weight of his arms, the feeling of responsibility, the need for rest - he must learn to trust in the strength of others, on the small, quarrelsome people for whom he has risked his life.

This lesson is a constant struggle for me. Being upheld and supported by others can feel, in an incredibly irrational way, like cheating. I can tend to feel that I've gotten to where I am through my own efforts, by the sweat of my brow, and that what I am given to do

is mine to do. I am responsible for this task, and I'll do it. In the name of responsibility, I perpetuate the sins of pride and self-sufficiency - but this self-sufficiency ends up meaning that I've isolated myself. When I imagine the two stories with Moses, I wonder whether I would've accepted help, or if my own sense of pride would have led my arms to fall and my army to be defeated. I wonder whether I would've run myself ragged trying to mediate disputes, sure that this was my job to do.

I'm sure you have a version of this that is your own, that accounts for your own values and personality and circumstances. Maybe pride isn't your problem, but fear, despair, anger, resentment, helplessness, overwhelm . . . the list goes on. Just as each of us faces a story of limitations that is uniquely ours, so too is our response.

What emotions do you notice when you reflect on your own limitations? How do you find yourself responding?

What emotions do you notice when you reflect on your own limitations? How do you find yourself responding?

Being made aware of our limitations can invite an awareness of the darker sides of our nature. My pride and fear urge me to avoid or to paper over my limitations. But once I realize these limitations will always be with me - and that, like Moses, my failure to acknowledge them doesn't just affect me, but also those around me - I can begin to understand my limited life in a new way.

Take the vows that constrain the monastic way of life. Choosing - even embracing - limitation in the form of vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience is, for me, about reckoning with those darker urges that press me to hide away my weakness and vulnerability. The vows challenge me to bring all this into the light and, in doing so, reflect that light back onto other areas of my life. They dare me to embrace the freedom of a limited life.

Religious vows are one radical way of embracing this freedom. You may have a different way, but each path is about living our lives intentionally with the committed belief that what limits us can become a source of hope and joy. That we are able to live more *deeply*, more *richly*, more *mindfully* when we shut down some of the infinite array of options and choose to live a more limited life; when we live in a "broad hall found between narrow walls."

Not all of us, of course, get to choose our limitations. Not all of us get to establish our own boundaries. Many of us face clouded horizons and narrowed pathways due to forces beyond our control: race, class, poverty, ability. It can be difficult, even insulting, to

be told to embrace that limitation. I get it. But is it possible, even there, to find freedom?

Is it possible, even there, to find freedom?

I trust it is, because, ultimately, God is with us there. We can recognize and name and own up to our limits, but it is God who meets us there and who abides with us in our vulnerabilities. When Moses asks who he is to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, this is God's answer: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). This same God comes to us in Jesus, who not only aligned himself with the low, the outcast, the marginal, but was these things: he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7, 8). And even now, in our own marginalized and disempowered state, Jesus promises to remain with us: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). And all this, not despite our limitations, but *because* of them: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). It may not make our limitations more bearable, but the truth is that God meets us there because God embraced those same limitations. In Christ, these very limitations become the instrument of our transformation.

This is the reality I am trying to live into, here and now, in the Monastery: an embrace of my limitations, both those I was born with and those I have chosen. But even more than that, this life means recognizing that I have been invited, all along, to know and name and embrace all the ways in which both my abilities *and* my limits have made me uniquely me.

I felt failure and frustration and shame and bruised pride when I couldn't go around one more bend in the road that sweltering day in Belmont, when I couldn't go one hundred more feet, when I couldn't complete one more rotation of the pedals. I felt my limitation in a new, gut-wrenching way. And in doing so, I came to know something new, and something *true*, about myself: a unique, finite person, loved unconditionally and free to live richly, deeply, and mindfully in my own broad hall between narrow walls.

For Further Reflection

When have you hit the red line of your own limits - and how did you respond? What pulls you from lethargy and calls you to engage Life?

What limits have given life to you, which you did not choose? Have you made peace with them?

What emotions do you notice when you reflect on your own limitations? How do you find yourself responding?

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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://ssje.org/cowley).