

## **Breathing Deeply: Surprises Encountered on Sabbatical**

Jane Wilson, Westmont College

### **Abstract**

After seven years of college teaching, many tenured-track professors are granted a sabbatical for their professional enrichment to increase their scholarship and instructional quality. Though expectations vary among institutions, the first time a professor embarks on a sabbatical can be both exhilarating and unsettling. This essay describes one professor's personal story with surprises encountered during a first sabbatical.

After years of drought, the rain finally came. Though weather forecasters predicted the rainfall, it still felt surprising to hear, feel, and smell the refreshing rain. And after a few rains, plants perked up and flourished. Just like the rain's impact, my first sabbatical brought surprise, refreshment, and a chance to flourish. I am writing this essay in the final week of my first sabbatical, reflecting upon the surprises I encountered, hoping that my thoughts may encourage those who embark on their first sabbatical.

Two words sum up my sabbatical: "Breathing Deeply." Certainly I already knew how to breathe, but my sabbatical nudged me to breathe more deeply – in my mind, spirit, and body. Brother David Stendl-Rast, an interfaith scholar, guided my thinking to breathe in fuller ways, "Wake up. Be alert. Be open to surprise. Give thanks and praise. And then you will know the fullness of life or rather the gratefulness of life" (as cited in Emmons, 2007, p. 119). My time on sabbatical awoke new dimensions within me of how to breathe deeply. And yes, my gratefulness of life has grown.

Certainly, being grateful for a sabbatical—essentially a paid leave—is a natural response. Originating from the word "Sabbath," which means a day of rest and worship that occurs on the seventh day of a week, a sabbatical is often awarded to tenured faculty in their seventh year for the purpose of providing time for professional enrichment. Our college hopes this investment increases scholarly output and instructional

quality of each faculty member. And in addition to scholarly endeavors, most faculty use this time to rest and rejuvenate their spirits. For those of you beginning your first sabbatical—or embarking on a second, third, or fourth sabbatical—my hope is that these reflections will inspire you to wake up and be alert so you can breathe deeply and gratefully throughout all aspects of your sabbatical journey.

### **Breathing Deeply Through a Rocky Start**

As you begin to shape your questions and goals for sabbatical, keep in mind the charge to breathe deeply. While a sabbatical is a wonderful gift, you may find, as I did, that facing my first sabbatical presents its own set of challenges. My rocky start began with the proposal, which needed to be submitted over one year prior to the sabbatical. Though my general area of scholarly hopes felt clear—to explore the impact of practicing gratitude on learning—I struggled to craft a proposal with specific details. As the beginning of my sabbatical drew near, some details in the written proposal were not falling into place. For example, I had hoped to collaborate with a professor from another institution to write a book about gratitude for teachers, but someone beat us to the punch.

When I realized that I would need to adjust details, I met with an expert in the field of gratitude hoping for inspiration and guidance. We met one on one to discuss my ideas, but I did not receive much insight. I also attended two lectures and felt discouraged that these presentations felt confusing and uninspiring. A close colleague breathed life into me when she exclaimed, "You can explain his research better than he can." This pivotal moment reminded me that God has gifted us in unique ways. While this expert has done extraordinary research and writing in the area of gratitude, perhaps my strengths and abilities of orally articulating the research could be my unique contribution to the scholarly endeavor.

Another challenge related to leaving my students and the classes for a semester. Honestly, I love teaching and building relationships, so letting go of these important components of my life felt daunting. Perhaps I had security in these roles, and felt somewhat insecure stepping into the unknown sabbatical space.

In both the shifting details of my proposal and the shifting roles in my life, I learned to breathe deeply and remain calm, trusting that God was working out His plan. As you begin your first sabbatical, listen well to the people God brings in your life as they may just breathe fresh air into your thinking.

### **Breathing Deeply in Gratitude**

When you take time to breathe deeply, consider what God has placed on your heart to explore, and how you can contribute in unique ways. During my doctoral program, my advisor encouraged us to find a topic that produced “fire in your belly.” Throughout my academic career, I have followed this wisdom and focused my attention and efforts on issues that align with my intellectual passions. For sabbatical, I felt drawn to extend the scholarly knowledge of how gratitude can impact learning in the K-12 environment. And to align with my area of giftedness, I decided to offer professional development training for K-12 educators in both public and private schools. I set a goal: to give fifteen presentations during the semester. God had bigger plans for me.

I emailed local principals, briefly explaining the current research on gratitude and my availability to give professional development training to their teachers. Each presentation included an overview of the research describing how, as Dr. Robert Emmons, professor at University of California at Davis, explained at the Gratitude Summit (2014), “gratitude has the power to heal, energize, and transform lives.” I described the general benefits of practicing gratitude, highlighted two research studies that focused on the cognitive benefits of practicing gratitude in the classroom, and then offered three practical ways that educators could engage in gratitude practices. After each presentation, I wrote a thank you email to the principal with encouragement to tell fellow principals that I was offering this training.

My presentations on gratitude were well received and word got out. Though my initial goal was to give

fifteen presentations, as my sabbatical semester draws to a close I just finished giving my forty-second presentation. I was also pleased that there was a healthy balance across educational environments: 24 public schools and 18 private schools; 26 elementary schools and 16 secondary schools.

One of the gratitude practices that I described to the teachers is called, “Breathe and Focus.” This practice encourages the teachers to take time at the beginning of the school day to intentionally use one minute to take some deep breaths, examine their attitude and choose to enter the school day with a grateful heart. Part of this practice is to remind themselves of why they chose to become a teacher and to be grateful for the opportunity to make a positive impact on young people. I also encouraged them to consider using a “Breathe and Focus” exercise with their students to begin the school day or class period. The teacher can ring a chime that reminds students to take three deep breaths and contemplate three things they are grateful for about the chance to learn. After about 30 seconds of “Breathe and Focus” the teacher rings the chime and says, “Let’s make it a good day.” This gratitude practice helps the both teacher and students to calm the amygdala and free up space in their prefrontal cortex to think more clearly. Dr. Kerry Howells (2013), professor at University of Tasmania, expresses this clearly, “When people thank when they think, they think in more engaged ways.”

Every time I drove away from giving a presentation, I sensed joy and satisfaction in my heart. I tried to breathe deeply and appreciate that I was given time to share this uplifting research with teachers. I breathed deeply, knowing that I was flourishing in this role. Though I was fortunate that my topic naturally helped me to strengthen my own gratitude muscles, I would encourage you to take time daily to contemplate three good things about what you are learning and doing during your sabbatical. You might even write these three good things in a gratitude journal. As you write down these blessings, take time to breathe deeply and savor these blessings in your life.

### **Breathing Deeply in Intellectual Pursuits**

With no classes to teach or meetings to attend, you will undoubtedly experience extra space to engage in intellectual pursuits. Likely your college, like ours, desires for you to contribute to the scholarly endeavor

with published articles in respected publications. With fewer commitments, I found extra brain space and valuable time to reach this goal. I put final touches on two articles that had been accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals and I published three more informal pieces for magazines. As you contemplate which journals and magazines to submit your work, focus on the audience that will most value and appreciate your insights.

One of my colleagues who completed a sabbatical the previous year shared about a wide variety of reading that she accomplished during her break. This inspired me, so I read voraciously. I got caught up on recent articles published about gratitude, and read a few books to enrich my instructional expertise. As you will see in the next section, I read a variety of books on Centering Prayer. And I also enjoyed extra time to read quality literature. Every book I read enriched me either professionally or personally, and afforded me a chance to breathe deeply of the writings of great thinkers and authors. In addition to publishing some academic work, perhaps you will find extra time to enjoy literature in new ways on your sabbatical.

### **Breathing Deeply in God's Presence**

Intellectual endeavors—while important to a sabbatical—should be coupled with intentional time to rest and breathe deeply of God's presence. Since the origin of the word sabbatical comes from Sabbath I wanted to take time to rest and worship God. To explore this area more fully, I studied and practiced Centering Prayer. I began by deepening my understanding of this contemplative practice by reading *Finding Grace at the Center: The Beginning of Centering Prayer* (Pennington & Keating, 2016), *The Loving Search for God: Contemplative Prayer and the Cloud of the Unknowing* (Meninger, 1998), and *Open Mind Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Keating, 2002).

As I came to understand it, centering prayer is sitting silently, seeking to experience God's presence within me. For me, this time begins by finding a comfortable sitting position, then breathing deeply and inviting God to be present. During this time, I chose a sacred word or phrase to repeat which helped me as my mind wandered. I concluded my centering prayer by slowly saying *The Lord's Prayer*. The contemplative writers suggest that this prayerful discipline lasts about twenty

minutes, but I began with just a few minutes until I strengthened my ability to sit quietly in God's presence.

Different than other kinds of prayers that include petitions and requests for guidance, the discipline of centering prayer challenged me to rest with God and enjoy His presence. I was surprised how difficult it felt to sit quietly for 20 minutes and how quickly my mind wandered. I read two other books that helped me to adapt this practice: *Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer* (Thibodeaux, 2001) and *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Lawrence, 1895). I modified the silent sitting of centering prayer to going on what I called "Centering Walks" – walking for at least 20 minutes seeking to experience God's presence. Listening to instrumental hymns while on these walks helped my mind to stay focused on God.

I share my journey and adaption of Centering Prayer to illustrate how I grew spiritually during my sabbatical by learning to breathe deeply of God's presence. As you embark on your sabbatical, consider ways that you could more fully rest in God and strengthen your spiritual walk.

### **Breathing Deeply in Exercise**

God cares about our entire well-being, so think beyond intellectual and spiritual pursuits, and explore how a sabbatical could enrich your physical life. The theme of breathing deeply found its way to all aspects of my life, even enriching my exercise. The centering prayer walks took breathing deeply to new levels as I intentionally took deep breaths to soak in God's presence and took deep breaths along these walks to soak in the beauty of my surroundings. Over the years, walking with friends has brought me joy, so I wrote a list of a few dozen friends to connect with while walking. Each week I reviewed my list and reached out to a few new friends to set up walks. Not only did I need to breathe deeply on these vigorous walks, I learned to breathe deeply and savor each friendship.

In addition to walking, I began riding a bike. Not just any bike, but a power-assist bike. The boost in power was just what I needed to open up the possibility of bike-riding adventures with my husband. I share this to encourage you to consider how your time on sabbatical might open up possibilities for exercise to rejuvenate your spirits. The walking and biking certainly

renewed my spirits.

### **Breathing Deeply in the Ups and Downs of Life**

Likely you will experience ups and downs throughout your sabbatical journey. I did. I began this essay by explaining how I learned to breathe deeply with a rocky start to sabbatical. As it happened, this rocky road continued throughout the semester with four unexpected deaths in my extended family, a visit to the emergency room, and a broken water heater—just to name a few. Throughout these stressful experiences, I grew in my capacity to remain calm and breathe deeply, trusting that God would be present in these trials and grant me the strength and wisdom needed.

Though the path felt rocky at times, I come to the end of my sabbatical with an enormous sense of gratitude to our college for generously granting me the space, time, and encouragement to engage in professional enrichment. In truth, this time enriched my whole self: mind, spirit, and body. And my hope is that this personal renewal will help me to be more effective in my role of professor and researcher. May you find that your whole self—your mind, spirit, and body—feels invigorating as you come to the close of your sabbatical.

### **Breathing Deeply of an Extraordinary Gift**

When your sabbatical arrives, be alert and awake... ready to be surprised. Like rain following a drought, let your sabbatical surprise and refresh you, helping you to flourish. Let God guide your path and stretch you to grow both professionally and personally. Of course your path will be different than mine, but take time to notice and savor blessings each day, so that you can experience the fullness of your sabbatical, and deepen gratefulness for the extraordinary gift of a sabbatical.

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