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Lessons from a 'staycation' in Wisconsin

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

I've never met anyone who enjoys paying for gasoline or traveling on airplanes. It seems to be an inevitable incurred cost when taking a vacation from the grind of life that people who want to get out of town just have to deal with.

I had been planning a vacation to visit some long-lost friends and family on the East Coast. However, the cost of flying and renting a car in order to see everyone became prohibitive. Madison is a small enough place where there aren't a lot of options for flying inexpensively. My wife and I started looking into driving out east, with the prospect of quality time with each other when we weren't visiting with friends or relatives. We'd have all the flexibility needed to see Niagara Falls and do some camping on the way.

In the end, much to our dismay, we realized that we just couldn't afford to travel this year. So we broke off plans with our friends - the hardest part about canceling the trip - and started getting into the idea of a 'staycation' - a word that has become so common that it is now in Merriam-Webster's dictionary and on Wikipedia .

The idea of a staycation has slowly been growing on me. It goes against my idea that I need to get out of town in order to get away from the grind and rejuvenate mentally and spiritually. It also means that we're not spending time reconnecting with our friends and family, something very important to my wife and myself.

Of course, I saw the immediate benefits. It's fairly inexpensive - perhaps as cheap as the cost of groceries. We'll probably do a night or two of camping on the Wisconsin River, try a new restaurant, check out some of the museums that we've never been to. It's amazing how many sites we haven't been to in our own backyard. You don't have to go far in Madison to have a good time - at least in the summer!

Another aspect of the staycation that just hit me is that it's a way to contribute more tourism dollars to my

home community. No need to go forking over money to international oil companies or domestic airlines. No need to stay in a hotel chain. Our resources, albeit sparse, can at least go to support a neighbor's restaurant or a community museum.

On a deeper level, this is giving me a pause for reflection to think of how fortunate I have been for traveling in my lifetime. My dad is a pilot so I grew up visiting almost every state in the contiguous 48 because of the ease we had in getting around. I've been fortunate to travel internationally and study abroad.

The spiritual meaning of the staycation for me is two-fold:

1. Jesus was rejected in his hometown, but I am not. OK, so this is a complicated message from the rejection of Jesus in his return to his hometown of Nazareth (Mark 6, Matthew 13, and Luke 4). It may just be that I'm not as radical nor pushing as many boundaries in order to live out the richness of the Gospel message. I am okay with that. However, it does make me feel good that I am still doing things in my hometown that are important to me and living out values that I picked up from leaving my hometown, such as working on an affordable housing committee through the City government. I am in the infancy stages of voicing my concerns over how the city is dealing with racial and socioeconomic diversity, but at least I have not rejected my hometown yet. In fact, I'm pleased to be there with the roots of my childhood and a high quality-of-life.

2. A staycation allows me to connect with Biblical characters in a new way. Jesus, one of the primary characters that Christians are taught to follow and model behavior after in Scripture, traveled around all the time. However, there are many other notable characters who did not have the luxury to travel around but were still offered spiritual insights for me to learn from. These include the woman in the crowd who touched Jesus' cloak in order to heal, or the woman at the well in the Gospel of John. These seemingly ordinary people that interact with Jesus in ordinary settings teach me the important lesson that I don't need to take vacations to exotic lands in order to gain insights from people. I can merely spend some time close to home to get to know them better - including their immobility to travel.

One of the best (and worst?) parts of Catholic education right now is to lead students to foreign lands in order to discover new forms of spirituality that can come from spending time in unfamiliar surroundings. It has been beneficial to me to see how other people live. I've definitely lived it up in terms of being able to explore new lands and meet new people. One thing I haven't focused so much on is the spirituality that can grow out of connecting with the people and surroundings that make up my own life. Hopefully in a couple weeks I'll have some more concluding thoughts to share about how it goes.

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[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkley, Calif. He works at a statewide loan fund for nonprofits that serve low-income people in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com.]

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