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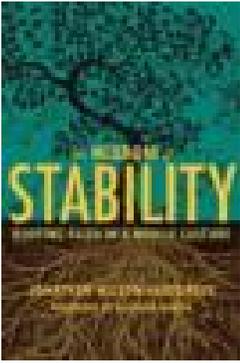
The practice of staying put

by Rich Heffern



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove: Stability is "a commitment to trust God not in an ideal world, but in the battered and bruised world we know."

Journey is a multipurpose term and almost a cliché in Catholic spirituality. Our "spiritual journey" takes us from one place to another and another, but maybe the single most important thing we can do if we want to grow spiritually is to stay in the place where we are, according to Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, author of *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Paraclete Press).



"We Christians get excited about experiences and go places looking for the next

spiritual high. We say God called us here, and then God calls us there. It's all focused on little "lessons" or "insights" that we're supposed to take with us to the next place."

Add this to a culture and to economic realities that encourage mobility, travel and constant moving from place to place, from job to job, and it's no wonder the "journey" language is so central to spirituality today.

"We idealize and aspire to a life on the move, spending what resources we have on acquiring skills that make us more "marketable," that is, more mobile," Wilson-Hartgrove says.

The result is a sort of rootlessness and dissatisfaction at the heart of our spirituality.

Wilson-Hartgrove is cofounder of the Rutba House community and an associate minister at the historically black St. John's Baptist Church, and is engaged in peacemaking and reconciliation efforts in the Walltown neighborhood of Durham, N.C. The Rutba House, where Jonathan lives with his wife, Leah, their son, JaiMichael, and 10 others, is a new evangelical monastic community that prays, eats and lives together, welcoming neighbors and the homeless.

"Stability seemed to make sense for our community, given the challenges we face in a racially mixed, impoverished area. It's a commitment to trust God not in an ideal world, but in the battered and bruised world we know."

Their community "stumbled into" stability, he said.

"In our hyper-mobile society, there are always external pressures to move on. During the downturn of 2008, one of our community members who worked in construction lost his job. He is married with two kids, and his first impulse was to go where the jobs are. We decided the call was to be here, so we pulled money from here and there and he was able to stay. In deciding that staying put was our priority, for us that was a real discovery."

There are pressures to move on that come from within us too, Wilson-Hartgrove said.

"Often the impulse to leave a place might be based on a fantasy that our gifts are needed elsewhere. We externalize that, forgetting it's a fantasy, and then that drives us to move."

He credits the Catholic Benedictine rule as a model and inspiration for his interest in and enthusiasm for stability as a spiritual practice.

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St. Benedict summarized the wisdom of the early Christian desert fathers and mothers in the rule he devised for his monastic order. Monks promise stability, fidelity to the monastic life, and obedience. It's striking to me that Benedict decided to put stability first in his list. If we're going to climb Jacob's ladder toward the humility of Jesus, Benedictine wisdom says that the first thing we need is a stable place to begin.

In his own time Benedict saw many spiritual vagabonds, roaming around enslaved to their own will. Putting stability first was a counter to that; you have to deal with your own demons in a particular place without running away.

In his own strongly biblical-based evangelical tradition, Wilson-Hartgrove says he learned that the Bible teaches conflicting things, saying both to stay put and to go teach all nations.

In the Gospels, it seems to me that Jesus says to the man with demons who had been driven in a multitude of directions by desires and impulses that he couldn't restrain: "Don't follow me. Don't flee to the promise of spiritual growth far away on another shore. The same power that healed you can sustain a life of faithfulness right where you are. Can you trust me enough to stay put?"

Discernment is what is at issue. My own sense is that a lot of us need a lot more staying than going.

Wilson-Hartgrove says stability will be crucial to our spirituality in the future, given the changes that will have to happen in the next 50 years. He thinks our supply of fossil fuels will peak soon, as finding new sources becomes more difficult and expensive.

That will mean our age of cheap mobility is probably over. The emphasis on walkable neighborhoods, smaller cars and eating local food are signs of the future. We need a spirituality that can guide us through these changes that are coming. The Benedictine tradition of stability has been doing it for more than a thousand years.

That tradition recognized early on that one of the biggest threats to stability is boredom.

A Benedictine friend once confessed to me that the real challenge of hospitality is opening the door again and again to the brothers he lives with. "We Benedictines are supposed to welcome everyone as Christ," he said, "but sometimes when a brother comes through the door I mumble, 'O Christ, it's you again.'"

I laughed at the joke because I know too well how spiritual boredom can lead to a quiet disdain for the people I share life with. Little habits wear on my nerves. Washing their dishes makes me weary. The thought of going on like this forever is overwhelming.

Wilson-Hartgrove said the antidote to being stuck in this quagmire of boredom can be found in the tradition of *ora et labora* -- prayer together with work.

A friend who was in grad school confessed that he was overwhelmed by sexual temptation. When he described the thoughts he had while reading in the library, it was clear his real problem was boredom. The leisure afforded him by scholarship was more than his young body could handle. He needed some work to do. So we invited him to weed our garden for an hour every evening. He reported that the temptations subsided, and we noticed our garden looked better than ever. Our lack of genuine community, rooted in boredom, may be cured by a prescription as simply physical as cooking, getting tables out, cleaning up and asking "Who's going to make sure this task happens?"

He said that a community of Benedictines he visits was encouraged by the significant increase in visitors coming for retreat in recent years. They had to build a larger guest house. But they were also aware of the danger that a weekend with the monks can become an experience that people purchase to satisfy a spiritual itch without having to seriously rethink how they live with the people in their family, on their block or in their parish.

?True stability can never be a product for individuals to consume. Rather, it is an invitation to shared life with particular people in a particular place.

?Nothing is more important than rooting ourselves in a place where God can happen.?

[Rich Heffern is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is rheffern@ncronline.org.]

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