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(Thirty years of NewesLetters this month!!!)

We have had rain the past couple of weeks here in Colorado. The fires are finally getting under control. The warnings now are about road closures due to floods. If it's not one thing, it's another! In spite of floods, however, I am very grateful for the rain. It has been way too dry.

This past few months has been a season of ranching, conversation, and writing. We completed our usual round of spring fencing to prepare for the cattle to arrive on June 1. Then winds blew a number of trees down over the fences and we had to mend those breaks. Now we are doing ongoing maintenance: pole fences getting old, broken cedar posts, springs flowing poorly, and so on. I like the work. Good hard physical labor and lovely contemplative setting all at the same time.

I also spend a bit of time in conversation. Informal consulting seems to be a part of my work these days. I do not have many ongoing "spiritual direction" relationships, but I do get periodic requests from people who want to tell me about their communities, their ministries, or their lives as leaders and ask what I think. Some are local, but most live elsewhere around the world. This ministry of listening-responding seems to be a way I can nurture God's work in a few people with similar interests and calling to my own.



When I am not ranching or in conversation, I am doing research and writing. I have evaluated a few manuscripts and written a few endorsements – again, I'm happy to encourage other kindred spirits in their good work. And the Holy Spirit has something for me in each

manuscript I read. I am currently using one of these as-yet-unpublished manuscripts for my own personal devotions.

Mostly I have been working on three different journal articles. The first I mentioned in the last *NewesLetter* (“Delcaring the Radical Yes,” for *Spiritus* journal), which is now submitted and edited. In this article I explored why it is that some Christians of all types choose to live unmarried, in community, with few possessions, or different than others. I concluded by praising “musicians” as I discussed in the previous *NewesLetter*.

The second article is about “Soul Sisters,” American nuns and sisters and what they have to teach Protestants experimenting with new forms of ministry. I did some of my reading for this article during a visit to the Grand Canyon! These women are a little-known force: having started the schools, hospitals, and social service centers that served the country for more than one hundred years; and having re-invented themselves in light of catastrophic changes in church and culture since 1965. I placed American nuns and sisters last on my “monastic-ish groups through history to study” list, and now, after fifteen years, I have worked my way from the desert elders to American sisters. You have read *NewesLetter* reflections on many of these groups! I was so inspired as I read these sisters’ stories that I wanted to find a formal avenue to publish about their life and ministry, and then an opportunity suddenly appeared. The first draft is complete and I await feedback before making my final submission.



The third article is a repackaging of my discernment retreat, incorporating some of the “What does God do for a living?” material presented in previous *NewesLetters*. Like the “Soul Sisters” article, I have completed a first draft and am waiting on feedback before final submission.

Which brings me to my next point. I am experimenting, these days, with a new way of communicating. I realized that I have at least three articles I have written that are waiting to be printed. One has taken over two years and still sits. Another piece I wrote took two years to make it into print. And even when printed,

some of these articles are buried behind paywalls (as is my *Christianity Today* article), are unavailable without a subscription to the journal (my *Spiritus* and *Teleios* articles), or will be published in books that cost over one-hundred US dollars to purchase (my chapter in the *Routledge Handbook for the Sociology of Monasticism*, for example).

Most of my writings these days are directly related to my project of developing an ecumenical theology of consecrated life (whatever that is!). Not exactly the sexiest topic for podcasts, blogs, or social media. The most important “audience” for my work is simply a handful of friends who have a similar interest in intentional community, new monasticism, or whatever we want to call it.

Consequently, I have decided that the best way forward is simply to send folks e-copies of my work in draft form, prior to sending them in for publishing. This way they become easily available and I have the opportunity to receive feedback and revise the document. Then, when in print, I can let folks know, if they want, where to find the final draft. Win – win! If you are interested in receiving pre-publication copies of my work let me know.

My reflections in this NewesLetter are about what to do when you can't get to sleep.

Reflections: From Worry to Wonderful

I don't sleep as consistently as I used to. For a while I was awake an hour or more every night. I'd get up, visit the restroom, and then lay back down hoping to fall back to sleep. No such luck. I said "for a while" above, but I should be more specific. This was when things were extremely demanding at The Shepherd's Hand. The lives of unhoused friends, struggling volunteers, complicated staff and board members, and pending city legislation all visited me anew each night. Like a good Christian, I would recall the situation, offer a prayer, and then get back to my efforts at sleeping. Ha! No such luck.



God and I made a bit of a game of this. I called it "casting my cares," based on 1 Peter 5:7, which in the King James Version reads "casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you." I would lay there in bed, and sooner or later something would come to mind: for example, some event that day regarding a volunteer. I would notice what was there ("I'm remembering how this volunteer treated some of our guests"), identify it as a "care" ("I'm concerned about both the volunteer and the guests, because . . ."), and then I would "cast" it upon God ("I know that You love them more than I do . . . , so I hand this situation over to You . . ."). Then I would get back to my efforts at sleeping. Sometimes this worked just fine. Sometimes – no such luck. Ten minutes later I would be casting the same care back on God,

and again, and again. Mind you, there is nothing wrong with this. I think God likes for us to offer our cares, even repeatedly. But with some of these situations, I learned that there was more going on.

At times, I found myself stuck in a mental loop, replaying events from the past or imagining conversations in the future. I found myself obsessed with trying to figure it all out, unable to release the “why” questions fueling my thoughts. I could not even seem to be able to cast it on the Lord, and let it go. Of course, I knew that in the counseling world this was called “rumination” and was not healthy. Rumination “raises anxiety levels” and “disturbs sleep.” Great. So now I not only have the cares of this situation on my mind, but also the “cares” of my own poor thinking habits and immature spirituality to face.

But as I got to watching a little closer—what else did I have to do?—I began to see another side of things. Sure, there were those periods of depressive rumination that brought me down. Yet there were also times when I would replay a past scene in my imagination and it was not about anger, fear, or shame. I was, rather, “studying” the situation. True, there were the “why” questions, but it was almost as if God’s presence was with me, helping me to see bits and pieces of things. I would realize factors that influenced larger power dynamics in the town. I would notice a mistake in my leadership and God and I would talk about it. I would grieve someone’s hurt and sense that God was grieving, too. All of this was going on while I re-visited some event in my bed, again and again.

On the surface it appeared similar to unhealthy rumination, but as I began to take note of the differences, I realized that what looked like rumination could become what the classics of Christian spirituality call “self-examination.” Self-examination is a practice whereby we review, in the prayerful presence of God, the events of a day, a week, or more. The idea is to replay the video of our day asking God to reveal what we might need to know—a moment of God’s grace, or of our positive act or something else. Some writings specifically mention “staying with” a single event when needed, examining the beginning, middle, and end of the situation with an eye toward God’s caring heart and mentoring wisdom. When I learned to distinguish the different tones, I found myself able, when appropriate, to shift my focus from unhealthy rumination toward healthy self-examination.



I found that something similar went on when I got stuck thinking about the future. I can be a compulsive strategist, and there is no time like when I'm wide awake in the middle of the night to indulge my tendency to rehearse a potential conversation again, and again. Of course, all that strategy can be fueled by fear or pride or envy or whatever. But, as with my reflecting on the past, I discovered that there were also times when God and I would examine possibilities for the future together. I would look at one way of handling things and then there would be this sense of "No, not quite. How about changing *that* a little bit?" And I would imagine it again. A prayerful spiritual self-examination not of past events but potential future events.

As it ended up, those hours awake laying in bed became my most precious devotional times during that season. I really felt carried by the Spirit through some tough stuff. Yes, there were still ordinary distractions I had to ignore. There were times when I needed just to cast the cares and let them go. Yes, there were also those times of unhealthy rumination I had to notice and reject. But in time (I was up a lot!) I was able to pay attention, and more and more my "worry" turned to "wonderful."

When I told this story to a few people, a couple thought it might be helpful for others. I hope it might be helpful for you. I know I'm not the only one up at 3AM.

May you be kept in God's love,
Evan B. Howard