

An Inside Look at Sabbatical

A Very Personal Account of What Happened in My Time Away in 2009

By Tony Stoltzfus



Stranded in the Atlanta airport at 10 pm, waiting for a three hour flight followed by a 90 minute car ride to my hotel is a brutal way to come back to reality after a four month sabbatical. While I'm typing, I notice another 45 minutes has been tacked on to the flight delay. It gives me a good chance to practice one of the things I learned on my sabbatical. "God, you are my peace," I breathe.

The Inner Journey

The first stage of a sabbatical is about letting go and coming to the place of rest. As I gradually wound down back in April (it took six weeks to get completely out of work mode), I began to get in touch with some things that were going on in me just below the surface. These strange little behaviors started to bubble up beyond habit into my conscious thinking. I

avoided going to bed, because I felt like I'd be missing out on something. I looked forward to my devotions the next morning, then when tomorrow came I'd put it off for hours while I piddled around the house. I could feel myself tensing up if I had one coaching session or task on the next day's schedule, even if the whole rest of the day was free. I thought of trying to call one of my friends every day for a few weeks, but dropped the idea like a hot potato because as soon as I thought about committing to it I felt boxed in.

As I pondered my quirks one morning while staring at the water, one insight tore open a window into my soul. I really noticed for the first time how often in life I yearned for inner peace. My "peace image" was to be able to just sit outside on beautiful days, watching the clouds, letting the wind blow through my hair and being ministered to by creation. To do that every day would surely be a good life!

But even though I was off work for the whole summer, I still found myself still rooted inside on a chair, burrowing into books or TV or the internet to avoid one of the things I thought I most looked forward to in life. I saw that this deep, unmet yearning to be at peace with myself, my life and my God stretched through decades of my life. Yet somehow when I was in that moment the peace I was after often eluded me. So I was drawn to feel the wind in

my hair and repelled at the same time: drawn to my deep longing, repelled by the fear that I would be disappointed yet again.

The thing that is so relentless about a sabbatical is that day after day after day you have time to tune into what is really going on the inside. That's what the middle third of a sabbatical is all about. Your inner world comes into focus precisely because you've removed all the activities and responsibilities that normally fill the space between your ears to overflowing. And when a new thought comes to mind, there is nothing to distract you—you might as well deal with it.

So in late May and June I began making my usual request when I am stuck: "God, I don't understand what's going on here or how to change it. So do in me here the things I can't do for myself." For me, it's an effective way to get God involved in what I am grappling with.

Another road I go down when I am stuck is to examine what I believe about the situation. "What do I believe about inner peace that causes me to respond in this way?" When I start paying attention to how I am responding, that new data often leads me to unearth a belief or blind spot I have never seen.

One belief I noticed was, "If I have enough down time I can be at peace." My sense of peace was connected to having an open schedule. That's why I tensed up over anything in my schedule, and avoided calling friends. And I connected peace with being in a certain physical place instead of being in a certain place with God. Both these beliefs needed to be renounced so I could enter into a new place with God. I began to ask God how He could be my peace instead of these temporal images I'd attached my heart to.

The Fruit of Sabbatical

Which leads me to one of the best outcomes from my sabbatical—I made a significant reconnection with God as an intimate friend, confidant, and someone I enjoyed being with. One of the things I disciplined myself NOT to do on sabbatical was think about the future. So instead of talking with God about plans and decisions, our whole conversation changed. I started asking things like, "How did you feel when Peter started sinking in the Sea of Gallilee?" or "How did you handle the stress of your mission and the people you had to work with?" We started talking more about who we were and less about what we were going to do. That was really life-giving.

Reading *Dialogue with God* by Mark Virkler really helped me out of some of my devotional ruts. He was a rational person like me, learning how to hear God's voice in the spirit instead of just in his mind. I got a lot out of it. It was great to have long devotional times, to journal regularly again, to just talk.

I also took two week-long personal retreats at the start and about mid-way through my sabbatical season. There was a time a few years back when I stopped taking retreats altogether—there was so much pain in my life that I was scared to be alone myself. Whenever the routines and responsibilities of daily life came to an end, the pain would just take over. It was great to be alone with God for a long time again and be able to really enjoy it.

New Hobbies

Sabbatical wasn't just about being spiritual, though. I took up leaded glass and made five complete pieces, using several techniques. I used to design Frank Lloyd Wright windows when I was a furniture designer, and it was wonderful fun to actually make some. One day on my second retreat I was working on a glass piece when out of the blue I felt the Lord say, "I like it when you make things." That was a highlight.

I did a research project on my hometown, built a patio in our backyard, gave my daughter driving lessons and went to the botanical gardens and hung out with my wife (one of her favorite things). I spent a lot of time in the backyard watching the water and the leaves and the sunsets, too.

Coming Back

For most people, the final third of a sabbatical is about reentry—the time when they start planning a new life after their time away. However, since I didn't go into this time in burnout or with a bunch of unhealthy work patterns, I didn't have a lot of adjustments to make. That allowed me to extend the "just being" segment of the sabbatical almost until the end. The last week was rough, though—I grieved for a week that my time was coming to an end!

It's been two weeks now since that day in the airport, and I am still adjusting to being back full time. I'm glad I didn't have a huge pile on my desk when I came back. That has allowed me to ease back in to work instead of getting overwhelmed.

One of the big questions that came up on sabbatical was, "Why am I working so hard?" Is this really what the lord requires, or am I just guiltting myself to do it? Being quiet seems like more of a priority than it used to. I think one way I will implement this is to take six weeks off every year as a mini-sabbatical. It is worth it for the sake of my relationship with God.

I hope that sharing about what I did will inspire you to do the same someday. I've coached many leaders on sabbatical, and God just seems to make a way for it to happen—maybe he'll do the same for you!

