



## Leadership Letter

*Enjoying safe places & still times?*

At the leadership centre, we are just about to run a 5-day retreat called “pathways to God”. There is so much to explore in our relationship with God and so many ways to relate with him. The following letter contains a couple of simple principles taken from Gordon Macdonald’s book “restoring your spiritual passion.”

**Safe places:** *"There is a contemplative in all of us, almost strangled but still alive, who craves quiet enjoyment of the Now and longs to touch the seamless garment of silence which makes us whole." Alan P. Torrey*

A safe place is somewhere that is special for you. Somewhere you can relax and be calm, free from fear, distractions and stress. It can be a place especially set aside for friends. It’s where you talk, think about future adventures, debrief on your recent escapades and enjoy an intimacy together.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king, and therefore living on the edge of danger daily, not knowing if tomorrow’s taste of wine would be his last. I imagine him walking the walls of the king’s palace at night thanking God that he made it through another day. Perhaps it was a safe place for him where he interceded and enjoyed God’s presence in the midst of the pagan kingdom that had become his home. One day he received the terrible news that the city of Jerusalem was desolate, the walls broken down and the people scattered. I can imagine him going to his safe place on the wall and praying. The next morning the king, seeing his sadness, asked Nehemiah what was wrong. We know how the story unfolds and soon Nehemiah was on his way to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Before bringing the vision to the people in Jerusalem he went out alone at night and surveyed the walls. He’d probably walked the walls of the palace so many times and now as he travels the circumference of these broken down walls, God is there, speaking and giving a strategy to him.

I grew up very close to Epping forest, just outside London and spent many hours there with my dog and a few close friends. We knew that forest so well and established a number of dens where we could hide away. We spent hours in those safe places and enjoyed the cosiness, peace and secrecy of them. Now, 45 years later, I still need a safe place in which to hide away. In fact I think God delights to see us create those places with him. Blaise Pascal said, *"The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room"*

There are a number of safe places that I have discovered over the years and each new change of location or move, offers the opportunity of creating new ones. Walking my dog on the beach has been a safe place for the last 12 years. I’ve cried, laughed, seen visions, interceded and worshipped on those beaches. It’s like I enter a room filled with God’s presence and find that prayer, meditation and worship seem to flow very easily.

I travel a lot, and as I board planes and find my seats, they immediately become another safe place for me. I pull out my journal and bible, put on my belt and without distractions, enjoy listening to God, being inspired and writing down my thoughts. Even though the hostesses are busy, people are talking and there's a general buzz of activity, I am in my safe place where I have a special connection to God.

Other safe places include the terrace outside my bedroom, the swing chair by the pool and a seat in the prayer garden. I make the most of all of these safe places and visit them regularly. Establishing these kind of places doesn't happen overnight but once the atmosphere is created and memories of God's presence are experienced, you enter in more quickly and with greater expectation. You create a "thin place" in the heavens where you can commune with Jesus, receive the father's blessing and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

The older we get the more time we want to spend in our safe places because we recognise our life depends on what happens there. That's where we gain perspective, where we capture God's heart, and hear his words of comfort, encouragement, protection and inspiration. That's where we unload and give away our anxieties and weights and exchange our weariness for his rest.

**Time for action:** Take a few moments right now and identify safe places for yourself. Places become safe when you have visited them regularly and have met with God on numerous occasions.

**Still times:** *"The one who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles: those of hearing, speech and sight. Then that person will have but one battle to fight - the battle of the heart." Anthony of Egypt*

So here you are in your safe place. There are no outward distractions, no phones, people or schedules shouting at you to get up from your comfy chair and do something! However, before we can enjoy a still time, we have to deal with the voices and the noise of our inner life. It can take some time for us to quiet our minds from buzzing with decisions, problems and plans and to still our spirits and *know that He is God!*

Elijah the prophet enjoyed a safe place and a still time at Kerith Ravine. It was here that he experienced the miracle of being fed by ravens and drinking from the brook at a time of drought in Israel. When the brook dried up, God provided another safe place and still time with the widow of Zarephath. Then followed the confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel where he witnessed another miracle take place and God came down and consumed the offering that was soaked in water with fire. The people turned to God but when Jezebel sent a threatening letter to Elijah, he didn't go to his safe place and definitely didn't enjoy a still time! When God got Elijah's attention, it wasn't through the earthquake or fire but only as he listened to the still small voice.

Still times come in a variety of packages. For instance, you can have a few minutes of still time in a hectic schedule of a day as you sit quietly at your desk, take a deep breath and pray for wisdom for the next meeting. Still times can be that day off that you have been looking forward to where there are no emails, meetings, phone calls or talk about ministry. Still times are down time, where you relax and laugh, eat and do mundane things. Then there's holidays or Christmas breaks that should be still times but sometimes actually are more stressful than our scheduled days of work. We lose our normal rhythm, and if we don't create that safe place and take time to develop stillness of spirit, we end up relating with friends, watching films, getting up late, going to bed late and then looking back after the holiday you realise that somehow you've lost some ground with God. Still times are to build up our spirit, soul and body.

Our lives need a regular rhythm of still times – minutes during the day, hours through the week, days during the month, and weeks during the year. What does your rhythm look like? For the last couple of months I have been using Ignatius' examen questions at the end of every day. It only takes 5-10 minutes but it's a still time that is helping me to be more observant of the way I am living. Rite and I whenever we are home on a Sunday morning walk up to the café at our local golf course and enjoy an hour or so of stillness, debriefing the week and looking forward to the new week. Every month, we try to get away for the day and explore a new village, have meaningful conversation and give our bodies a breather from the busyness of the retreat centre. Still times are for allowing our spirits to breathe, distressing our souls, relaxing our bodies and giving space for God to speak. They give us opportunity to evaluate our lifestyle, spiritual disciplines, fruit coming from our lives and relationships with family and friends. Let's initiate still times to bring about change in our lives and not wait until through sickness or difficult circumstances we find ourselves flat on our back with a forced still time!

*"In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding. Scaffolding is all the stuff we use to keep ourselves propped up, to convince ourselves that we are important or okay. In solitude we have no friends to talk with, no phone calls or meetings, no television sets, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract the mind. Each of us would be, in the words of the old hymn, "just as I am". Neither accomplishments nor resumes nor possessions nor networks would define me--just me and my sinfulness, my desire or lack of desire for God." Henri Nouwen*

**Time for action:** If you have been running fast and hard without a break, then its time to sit, rest and enjoy a still time. In order to become still you may need to go through this exercise: Take a notebook and go to one of your safe places. List all of the things that are cluttering your mind – stresses, burdens, responsibilities, conflicts, decisions, etc. Go through the list and give them to the Lord one by one. Pray God's presence and peace over your life. Read some scripture and meditate for a few minutes. Allow a stillness of spirit and the presence of God to flow over you. Listen for God's whisper.

Until next month  
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