



TO RETREAT: A MISSING TRAIT OF RESILIENCE

And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to an isolated place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

— MARK 6:31 ESV

In *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*, Ann Masten, PhD, notes that it is only in recent times that resilience has come to be associated with an ability “to adapt” to difficult situations or “become strong,” “healthy” or “successful” again after something bad happens.¹ The notion of resilience originally emerged from structural engineering, where it means the capacity of materials to withstand stress testing.² In the context of persons, the American Psychological Association defines it as the capacity “to adapt well” to trauma, tragedy and sources of significant stress.³ Yet the etymology of resilience has its root definition in the Latin word *resilio*, which means to draw back, recoil, retreat or to regain original form or shape.⁴ This meaning has a rather different resonance than the popular use of resilience as adapting well or “bouncing back” to a better state of functioning, often positively associated with happiness.⁵



DIARMUID
ROONEY

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, along with many world religions, “to retreat” has a very specific meaning. Author, contemplative and retreat leader Trevor Miller writes “in its simplest form ‘Retreat’, means ‘to withdraw, to drawback.’” Throughout the ages, the Christian tradition has understood retreat to be an important part of spiritual de-

velopment and formation. This understanding is used to describe time consciously set aside for God, a change of focus, a deliberate act of stepping outside of normal routine by withdrawing (not running away) from the noise, pressures and the immediate and insistent claims of our social, domestic and workday responsibilities to be in a quiet place where all our senses are open and ready to listen. Writer and pacifist Evelyn Underhill spoke of this as “loitering with intent.”⁶ In the Christian-Catholic tradition, this emphasis is

rather countercultural when compared to a lot of current resilience theory and practices — where the outcomes for the person are “comprehensible (predictable), manageable (controllable) and explainable ‘competent functioning.’”⁸ The nature of retreat as part of the resilience movement has been largely ignored.

The Catholic Encyclopedia beautifully describes the tradition and importance of retreating: “in the fever and agitation of modern life, the need of meditation and spiritual repose impresses itself on Christian souls who desire to reflect on their eternal destiny and direct their life in this world towards God.”⁹ The remarkable lives of the women who founded our congregations — often in the face of resistance, obstacles and power struggles — bear witness to the graced time of withdrawal and recovery. While the methods of the Poor Clares, Daughters of Charity and Missionaries of Charity have varied considerably, what their foundresses held in common was a profound spiritual experience while on retreat, whether in the forests and caves surrounding Assisi, the countryside of the then-Long Island or at the shrine of the Black Madonna of Vitina-Letnice. This tradition, “to retreat,” is carried on to this day, and most people in religious life undertake an annual 10- to 14-day retreat. The women saints, mentioned above, were modeling seeking solitude to listen to God. In their case, Jesus was explicitly experienced as calling them to retreat, to spend time together, alone. He had profoundly modeled what it means to retreat when he would leave the crowds to be by himself to spend time in prayer, for example:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. — MARK 1:35

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. — LUKE 5:16

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God. — LUKE 6:12

Resilience in the context of spiritual and especially leadership formation is definitively the capacity to take time alone or to retreat, to enable one’s internal resources to be nourished by si-

lence through the Spirit. To be too busy, or on the go all the time, not only brings exhaustion without, but also a fragmentation within. This results in a potential disconnection (with self, others and God), leading to possible compartmentalization, resulting in “a vague discontent where our lives stagnate in a resigned acceptance,” preventing us from looking honestly at ourselves and taking the healing of space to be, to rest and be restored.¹⁰ To paraphrase priest and author Henri Nouwen, we “can be preoccupied with being occupied.”¹¹ As leaders in Catholic health care, we bear witness to our own spiritual practices in maintaining resilience and well-being, and in turn lead others in developing their own practices and building habits that will stand them in good stead in this crucial work. Executive and entrepreneurial leaders from Bill Gates to Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff to Oprah Winfrey promote the merits of

SCIENTIFIC BENEFITS OF CONTEMPLATION/MEDIATION

Helps people with:

- Building skills to manage your stress
- Enhancing self-awareness
- Focusing on the present
- Reducing negative emotions
- Increasing imagination and creativity
- Increasing patience and tolerance
- Gaining a new perspective on stressful situations

Helps people manage symptoms of:

- Anxiety
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Sleep problems
- Tension headaches

SOURCE: “Meditation: A Simple, Fast Way To Reduce Stress,” Mayo Clinic, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858>.

mindfulness, and Square CEO Jack Dorsey regularly attends meditation retreats. Salesforce has built “mindfulness zones” into their San Francisco headquarters. In fact, attending a meditation class is a popular way to begin the workday at many Silicon Valley companies, including Apple, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.¹²⁻¹³

Eminent Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg recently cowrote about the importance of health care workers building resilience through meditative techniques in the *Newsweek* article “Health Care Workers Risk Burn Out. How Will They Get the Care They Need?”¹⁴ She argues that research shows contemplative practices, the central focus of a retreat, are a core preventative to burn out and a builder for resilience that is necessary for self-care. The scientific evidence is fur-

ther demonstrated in *Healthline’s* review of “12 Science-Based Benefits of Meditation” and the Mayo Clinic’s “Meditation: A Simple, Fast Way to Reduce Stress” (see sidebar).¹⁵ Additionally, a substantive body of work demonstrates that meditation can increase attention and emotional regulation; enhance neural plasticity; modulate brain activity; optimize immune and inflammatory systems; improve psychosocial functioning; and positively modify gene expression.^{16,17} This is not going unnoticed by major organizations and leaders, and not just in Silicon Valley. Procter & Gamble, Nike, Target, Aetna and many more are implementing mindfulness programs and meditation spaces in the workplace (with apps for home use) and witnessing the benefits, including increased resilience.^{18,19} As noted in the *Forbes* article, “How Meditation and Mindful Leadership Retreats Could Help You Lead With Genuine Care,” it “truly is spectacular to see the relationships within your team strengthened by mindfully shifting your energy and actions. Studies show that mindfulness and meditation not only improve human connection. It can also reduce stress, boost empathy and keep the ego in check — skills desired by any positive leader.”²⁰ Leaders are recognizing the value of slowing down, introducing contemplative practices and retreats into corporate culture.²¹

“Contemplative practices prescribe what we now know to constitute the components of a physically and mentally healthy person embedded within a flourishing community. In a certain way, contemplative practices represent an important behavioral adaptation of the individual and the community to move toward resilience. Multiple interacting factors contribute to resilience at all levels.”²²

It is important to note that spiritual retreats have never been confined merely to an annual withdrawal but include periods of retreat each day to engage in contemplation, to restore, recover and return to the One who is the source of all. This is a potentially crucial addition to all practices of resilience.²³ It is worth pointing out that a retreat is not a vacation or “checking out.” In fact, according to a research study published in *Translational Psychiatry*, simple vacations only bring about short-term improvements in well-being;

BENEFITS OF A RETREAT

The benefits of a retreat are many and varied, depending upon the type of retreat chosen. In the main, they include:

- Life-changing experiences providing time to reconnect with your authentic self, to remember what brings you joy and to achieve the clarity to start creating the means to have it.
- Refreshing, rejuvenating, re-energizing and re-empowering, recharging batteries on many levels and bringing new insights for positive life change.
- Deep relaxation and peace of mind bringing physical, mental and emotional benefits and also disconnecting you from all the demands, pressures, etc. back home that pull you in so many directions. It is impossible to put a price on the profound benefit of being helped to connect with inner stillness and to find solace.
- The solitude of a retreat can provide a pause in the constant, unrelenting demands of daily life and a time to reflect, renew and restore. Relaxing the mind is the natural complement to relaxing the body and to dealing with 21st-century stressors.¹

SOURCE: Kay Zega, “Holistic Benefits of a Retreat,” *Positive Health*, no. 170 (May 2010): <http://www.positivehealth.com/article/retreats-and-travel/holistic-benefits-of-a-retreat>.

however, a week's meditation can improve metabolism and one's resilience for the long run.²⁴

Retreats offer the benefit of physical, emotional and psychological withdrawal from the stresses and strains of everyday life: a chance to escape from the toxic effects of noise, informa-

Retreats offer the benefit of physical, emotional and psychological withdrawal from the stresses and strains of everyday life.

tion overload, unrealistic demands and the frantic busyness of 21st-century living and to enjoy a safe haven in which to start to recover from trauma and to heal on all levels.²⁵ Miller quotes Catholic author Thomas Merton on the benefits of retreat, through which one discovers "where you are is where you belong, this is it" and that acknowledging this gives the only platform for real growth as it's not the fantasy of the "if only" nor the fiction of "what if" but instead the fact of "this is me, this is where I'm at, this is where I am offered the opportunity to be with and begin the rest of my life."²⁶ It is therefore in many ways a very strategic retreat, withdrawing in order to advance. As further explained, "The whole purpose of prayer, pilgrimage and perspective in retreat is to bring renewed hope for the everyday comings and goings of life as it is for us." Resilience, understood within its original meaning — to retreat — has the potential to bring a rejuvenated perception where true priorities are reordered, a sense of direction is renewed and a right kind of action is resolved. To retreat, fundamental to the meaning of resilience, has always been a part of the great wisdom traditions and adds a potentially game-changing trait to the resilience movement: a time to be, not to do.

"I think it is essential ... to go into retreat, to stop everything that you have been doing, to stop your beliefs and experiences completely and look at them anew, not keep on repeating like machines whether you believe or don't believe. You would let fresh air into your minds."

—JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI²⁷

DIARMUID ROONEY, MSPsych, MTS, DSocAdmin, is senior director, ministry formation, at the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

NOTES:

1. Ann S. Masten, *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (New York: Guilford Press, 2014).
2. Steven M. Southwick et al., "Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 1 (July 2014): <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>.
3. "Building Your Resilience," American Psychological Association, January 1, 2012, <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>.
4. "Resilio," Definify.com, <https://www.definify.com/word/resilio>.
5. Seph Fontane Pennock, "Resilience in Positive Psychology: Bouncing Back & Staying Strong," *Positive Psychology.com*, December 10, 2020, <https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-in-positive-psychology/>.
6. "What Is a Retreat?," Northumbria Community, <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/nether-springs/what-is-a-retreat/>.
7. Alan Carr, *Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness and Human Strengths* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 213.
8. Mona Hanna-Attisha, "I'm Sick of Asking Children to Be Resilient," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/opinion/sunday/flint-inequality-race-coronavirus.html>.
9. "Retreats," Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/retreats>.
10. "What Is a Retreat?," Northumbria Community.
11. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Essential Henri Nouwen* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2009), 153.
12. Christian Greiser, Jan-Philipp Martini, and Nicole Meissner, "Unleashing the Power of Mindfulness in Corporations," Boston Consulting Group, April 26, 2018, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/unleashing-power-of-mindfulness-in-corporations>.
13. Rob Dube, "How Meditation And Mindful Leadership Retreats Could Help You Lead With Genuine Care," *Forbes*, Aug. 18, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robdube/2021/08/18/how-meditation-and-mindful-leadership-retreats-could-help-you-lead-with-genuine-care/?sh=4c70f8b2385b>.
14. Diana Calthorpe Rose and Sharon Salzberg, "Health Care Workers Risk Burn Out. How Will They Get the Care They Need?," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/health-care-workers-risk->

burn-out-how-will-they-get-care-they-need-opinion-1568063.

15. "Meditation: A Simple, Fast Way To Reduce Stress," Mayo Clinic, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858>.

16. Simón Guendelman, Sebastián Medeiros, and Hagen Rampes, "Mindfulness and Emotion Regulation: Insights From Neurobiological, Psychological, and Clinical Studies," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (March 2017): <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00220>.

17. Sarah McKay, "The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation," *Chopra*, March 25, 2020, <https://chopra.com/articles/the-neuroscience-of-mindfulness-meditation>.

18. Tamara Lechner, "Corporate Meditation: How and Why Big Businesses Are Promoting Meditation," *Chopra*, June 20, 2016, <https://chopra.com/articles/corporate-meditation-how-and-why-big-businesses-are-promoting-meditation>.

19. Kimberly Schaufenbuel, "Why Google, Target, and General Mills Are Investing in Mindfulness," *Harvard Business Review*, December 28, 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/12/why-google-target-and-general-mills-are-investing-in-mindfulness>.

20. Dube, "How Meditation And Mindful Leadership Retreats Could Help You Lead."

21. Rob Dube, "Why Are Twenty Leaders Coming Together To Do Nothing?," *Forbes*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robdube/2018/04/24/why-are-twenty-leaders-coming-together-to-do-nothing/?sh=2592bc124d5d>.

22. Teresa I. Sivilli and Thaddeus W. W. Pace, "The Human Dimensions of Resilience," Garrison Institute, https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The_Human_Dimensions_of_Resilience.pdf.

23. Carley Hauck, "How People Learn to Increase Their Resilience," *Mindful*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.mindful.org/how-people-learn-to-increase-their-resilience/>.

24. E. S. Epel et al., "Meditation and Vacation Effects Have an Impact on Disease-Associated Molecular Phenotypes," *Translational Psychiatry* 6, no. 8 (August 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1038/tp.2016.164>.

25. Kay Zega, "Holistic Benefits of a Retreat," *Positive Health*, no. 170 (May 2010): <http://www.positivehealth.com/article/retreats-and-travel/holistic-benefits-of-a-retreat>.

26. "What Is a Retreat?," Northumbria Community.

27. "Have a Complete Break With the Past and See What Happens," J.Krishnamurti Online, <http://legacy.jkrishnamurti.org/krishnamurti-teachings/view-daily-quote/20100730.php?t=Retreat>.



Catholic Health USA
Catholic Health Association of the United States

Download Catholic Health USA, CHA's monthly podcast that brings together thought leaders from across Catholic health to discuss ministry-related topics.

We invite you to subscribe to the podcast on your device store or download/listen to it using the player below.

chausa.org/newsroom/podcast

Get it on
iTunes Store

GET IT ON
Google Play

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Winter 2022, Vol. 103, No. 1
Copyright © 2022 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
