

THE BEST MAY COME IN FALLOW TIME

It is no secret that many persons in Catholic health care leadership have type A personalities. Energetic achievers, we set goals, work toward effecting them, and with satisfaction tick off the appropriate box to denote completion. Unfortunately, leadership formation programs are often no exception to this rule. Christology? Check off that box. Ecclesiology? Completed. Ethics? Two checks for that one. Catholic Social Teaching? Absolutely. Yet the best curriculum, the most reflective setting, the most qualified teachers don't necessarily guarantee a successful formation process or product. While these active elements are essential, they are not alone sufficient. There is an often-overlooked, passive element to formation that needs to be understood, acknowledged, explored and developed.



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Late last fall, while driving through a particularly beautiful part of southeastern Missouri, I beheld something I had not seen since the late 1960s. I almost stopped the car as I witnessed a farmer carefully walking his field behind a horse and a farm implement. Even though I am not a product of rural upbringing, I knew the sight I observed was unusual.

Thankfully, my traveling companion did grow up on a farm. She explained to me that the implement was a cultivator, used for weed control, especially by farmers who eschew herbicides. This particular farm was definitely not a sharecropper's property. I had just passed a large barn with a shiny John Deere tractor on display. So why was the farmer using a horse to pull the cultivator when he had a brand-new tractor?

The summer of 2012 was unusually hot and dry in Missouri, with numerous days over 100 degrees. The earth was visibly parched and vulnerable. My friend explained that the horse would be less damaging to the soil than the much heavier tractor. The farmer was carefully helping nurture the ground in anticipation of winter snow and rain so that next year's crop would be plentiful.

The farmer, after cultivating the soil, would now have to wait and hope for soft rains. Farming, like much of life, involves waiting. Indeed, Scripture is replete with images of waiting.¹ In Hosea 12:6, the prophet tells us to "wait for God continually." Romans 8:25 tells us, "if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance," while James 5:7 uses an agricultural image: "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains."

As a former formation director, long experience tells me that the deepest formation takes place not merely from transfer of information or knowledge, but from silent reflection and the touching of the human heart. As Psalm 46:11 urges

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us: "... Cease striving and know that I am God!" It is in moments of quiet contemplation and pondering that the Spirit moves an individual to a deeper sense of self-knowledge, of insight, of spiritual wisdom.

All who read or listen to Scripture recognize

the parable of the sower and the seed, Matthew 13:1-23. Jesus' story conveys the truth that the seed that falls on good soil really speaks of the person who hears the word of God and understands it, making it his or her own. In the course of time, it is these people who bear fruit, yielding in Jesus' words "a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold." The person must be able to lie fallow to receive and then internalize the Word of God to produce fruit.

Similarly, the importance of lying fallow is recognized in psychoanalysis. "Lying fallow is a transitional state of experience, a mode of being that is alerted quietude and receptive wakeful lambent consciousness," points out British psychoanalyst M. Masud R. Khan.² Khan is not here subscribing to laziness, nor is he proposing retreat from the world or from ordinary life. He observes that although lying fallow may be private and personal, it requires companionship or community in order to be sustained and held.³ Interaction with a loved one, a trusted co-worker or friend often helps to put in focus a thought or perception that has been lying dormant in one's consciousness. Khan likewise warns the reader not to fall prey to trying to fill these inevitable silent moments with activity or "white noise." This tendency, so evident in an age addicted to instant and 24/7 communication, fails to "understand the role and function of the need to lie fallow in the human psyche and personality."⁴

To integrate spirituality into one's daily life requires patience, quiet and waiting. None of these are characteristic of the American culture, much less health care culture. We are an instant, often-noisy, results-oriented lot. We demand answers, numbers and measurements. We are often cynical and have to be led to moments of insight.

Formation can and does lead one. Formation programs demand that we confront the silence within, walk into the dark spaces of our lives and wait for ... something. Theologian and writer extraordinary Frederick Buechner addresses this challenge particularly well in an essay in which he explores the story (John 1:45-51) of the apostle

Philip bringing his friend, Nathaniel, to meet Jesus.⁵

Buechner describes Nathaniel approaching Jesus and moving from darkness into light. Nathaniel follows his friend because he wants to verify for himself whether what Philip says about Jesus is really true. In the moment of their meeting, Jesus beholds Nathaniel, recognizing him for who he truly is, for whom he will become, "an Israelite in whom there is no guile." (John 1:47). Jesus calls him by name. Buechner urges his readers to be attentive as Nathaniel was attentive. "Listen to your lives for the sound of him," he exhorts. "Search

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even in the dark for the light and the love and the life because they are there also, and we are known each one by name."⁶

"All right," I can hear the skeptics say, "Look at my Outlook calendar. You tell me where I find the time to do this quiet listening." I get it. No one working in health care today can afford to be a full-time contemplative, not if they are to get the work done. But can we not be willing to be quiet, to desire moments of tranquility? Can we not face the white noise in our lives? Can we not turn off — radio, iPod, TV, MP3 — to hear the symphonies within and without? Can we not open our eyes to see sunsets, flowers and the faces all around us? Can we not seize the contemplative moments that come to us unbidden, in car, train, plane, even while waiting in lines? Can we not pause during our busy work days to stop and attentively listen?

The farmer I beheld cultivating his field late last fall could not be sure that winter and spring rains would soak through to help yield a bountiful 2013 harvest. Rather, he prepared the soil in the

hope of reward. He was willing to watch and wait. So, too, health care leaders entering into formation programs prepare the soil of their daily lives by learning, reading, reflection and dialogue.

The wise person entering into formation recognizes that this process is risky. It entails a passive as well as an active element. Parts of it are beyond one's control. And yet, it is what we need if we are to insure that the next generation of health care leaders are ready for the challenge they face. In his poem, "The Wild Geese," farmer and writer Wendell Berry reminds us of the necessity and wisdom of waiting, noting:

*... And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.⁷*

Indeed, what Catholic health care needs is here. Let us seek it.

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NOTES

1. All Scripture quotes are from the *New American Standard Bible*.
2. M. Masud R. Khan. "On Lying Fallow: An Aspect of Leisure," *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 6 (1977): 397. This oft-quoted article is brief, clear and worth reading by anyone teaching or participating in leadership formation.
3. "On Lying Fallow," 399.
4. "On Lying Fallow," 401.
5. Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992): 127-137.
6. *A Room Called Remember*, 136.
7. Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 1998): 90.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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