

Notes from the Wayside, May 2024



*Wayside Shrine in Hesse, Germany*

My husband, Matt, is a “go-go-go” type of guy. His German heritage has instilled in him a tireless work ethic, and he is eternally a busy bee: always puttingter around the house, working on little projects, fixing things, and just generally getting stuff done. It is a Herculean task to get the man to sit down. As a couple we are a true example of the adage that “opposites attract” because my family, (all Italian), are *experts* in the art of lounging. I am constantly urging Matt to take it easy, rest a little, and leave things till later, but alas, relaxation is not in his repertoire.

Recently a nasty virus swept through our house (we called it “The Ick”) and Matt, who tends to be asthmatic, got hit the hardest. He was so sick that his body *forced* him to stop, so that try as he might to get up and be productive (and believe me, he tried), he eventually had to yield to the fact that for a week or so he’d be doing nothing but lying in bed and resting. To me, relaxing in bed for a week sounds like Heaven; for Matt, it sounds like torture.

In a way, this is not surprising. So much of our cultural ideal of success, what we think it means to be a successful human being, is centered around the idea of *doing*: the more you can accomplish, the more you produce, the more you *do*, the better you are. But resting is *not-doing*; so when we are driven into a period of convalescence against our will it can challenge something right at the very heart of our identity, making us feel awkward and uncomfortable.

And indeed, the first few days of his illness, Matt struggled. He squirmed when I brought him tea and toast even though he insisted he could “do it himself”. He talked about going to work despite the fact that he sounded like a frog and kept hocking up strange, alien life forms. He was irritable and restless and just generally miserable.

But after a couple of days, Matt actually tried *relaxing* a little bit. He read books on St. Benedict and Lectio Divina in bed (books he’d meant to read for ages but never found the time to open), and he began to enjoy the tea and extra-buttery toast brought to him by his adoring wife. One evening as we sat together, he said, “you know something funny? I feel so *spiritual* when I’m sick. I feel so connected to God.”

I think my Matty is onto something important here. His words reminded me of the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, who was a promising young knight from a wealthy family when an injury in battle confined him to his bed for many months. It was during this time of convalescence that St. Ignatius experienced a dramatic conversion, a spiritual awakening that changed the course of his life completely.

How interesting that it was not St. Ignatius’ *achievements* that drew him closer to God, but rather, his vulnerability; something opened in St. Ignatius when he was forced into resting, forced into not-doing, that actually made him *more available* to what God sought to accomplish in him. When Matt was waylaid by “The Ick”, he went through the same sort of slowing down process that St. Ignatius experienced, and, because he is married to a Spiritual Director, he recognized that God was able to gain access to him in a deeper-than-usual way.

I do not mean to suggest that God *made* Matt sick in order to slow him down—just as God surely did not aim a cannonball at St. Ignatius’ legs—but only that, when we *do* go through periods of requisite convalescence, it can be a reminder to us in our ever-busy culture that rest has an essential role to play in our ability to become more spiritually awake and alive. Consider these words of Thomas Merton, who is renowned for his capacity for stillness and contemplation:

We do not live merely in order to “do something” no matter what. We do not live more fully merely by doing more... on the contrary, some of us need to discover that we will not begin to live more fully until we have the courage to do and see and taste and experience much less. (Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*.)

It is so contradictory to us, in America, to believe that doing *less* could possibly develop our interior lives *more*. But perhaps resting is meant to be a time when we stop “doing something” so that *God* can do something instead.

In our house, with two adults, three children, two cats, and a corgi, there will always be something to do. The work will never be done. But I am hoping that, after his recent illness, Matt will be a bit more open to the idea of putting down his screwdriver, plopping down in a chair, and doing nothing at all but giving himself to God, to see where the adventure of “nothing” might lead him.