

Thriving in a time of coronavirus and beyond

By Paul Swann

Introduction

Some of us have now been in lock down for weeks. A relapse of my own battle with ME/chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) means that I have now been in lockdown for several months.

I know that it is not easy and sometimes my frustrations win out. But I have also needed to reflect on how to create an environment of thriving, not merely surviving, through the extraordinary circumstances in which we are now living.

So, drawing from my current experience and looking back to my book [Sustaining Leadership: You are more important than your ministry](#), here are some things I have learned:

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T – Take time to check out how you are

Taking time to check out how you are before you pile into the day's task need not be self-indulgent or time consuming, but it is important. Why? Because how we respond to each person we encounter and how we cope with each task that comes before us will flow from how we are, whether or not we know it. [Richard Rohr's neat phrase](#) for this is 'Whatever is not transformed will be transferred.'

That person with whom you are impatient may indeed be irritating, but your reaction to them will be impacted by how you are. That task may be complex, but whether it appears beyond you will, at least in part, be a reflection of how you are. This applies even, and perhaps especially, if you don't know the answer to the question, 'How are you?'

So, consider your underlying anxieties or the cause of that nagging feeling of stress. Dare to notice where it is that you run for comfort. Listen to the voices in your head – if only to dismiss them later. Checking in with yourself as the day begins will cultivate within you that great gift of self-awareness, which is a sign of real maturity. You will find yourself responding to people and situations in a different and more constructive way: 'The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out' (Proverbs 20:5).

Action

Here's a really simple way to check in with yourself, so simple that I do it, as a bare minimum, while I am brushing my teeth in the morning. During that two-minute necessary task, instead of pacing the room or sorting my clothes, I stand before the mirror and ask myself three questions:

- **Who are you?** At the surface level, ground yourself with who you are – a real person with a name before you have any role or responsibilities loaded upon you.
- **How are you?** No one else may ask you that today. Take time to listen to what your body (your inbuilt early warning system), your mind and your spirit are saying.
- **Whose are you?** To know that we are God's beloved and chosen children before we have achieved anything for the day is the best of starts.

There may be other prayerful and contemplative times in the day, but even this short practice of stillness and self-awareness 'makes space for our souls to hear that we are indelibly loved' (K.J. Ramsey, [This Too Shall Last: Finding grace when suffering lingers](#)).

For additional material, see [Sustaining Leadership](#), pp. 74–82.

H – Hurry is your enemy

The only words I can remember from my grandfather were ‘More haste, less speed.’ I was a child when he died, and I had no idea how doing something faster could end up taking more time. But the saying is wise.

Hurry is your enemy, not only because it persuades us to skip the first point above, but also because there is very little that we do which is improved by hurry. On the other hand, there is plenty that we do which is made worse.

Dallas Willard’s mantra was that the way to deepen spiritual life was to eliminate hurry. Tasks always cry louder than this imperative to go deeper, but the things we do and say flow out of the people we are, and a hurrying people will necessarily operate more from the surface than from the heart.

The discomfort of a time of upheaval, such as this one we have been living through, can make us more inclined to hurry. Busyness is a distraction tool and not simply a function of the number of tasks on our to-do list, like the bereaved person who declares that they are coping with their loss by ‘keeping busy’. Sometimes that is a necessary coping mechanism, but ultimately each of us needs to look reality in the face, and slowing down is a way to do that. One of my things to hear when I am listening through spiritual direction is a person saying, ‘I am doing less but God is doing more.’

In the online journal *Leadership*, [Garrett Kell](#) wrote:

I needed to adjust my pace as I entered this new pandemic terrain. I realized that not leaving the house made me always ‘on’ in a way I wasn’t used to before. My rhythms were erased and all of a sudden, I was husbanding, parenting, and pastoring all at the same time – in the same place... I needed to re-evaluate my expectations for what work was going to be like.

Action

Here’s a really simple way to slow down.

Take a slow walk, deliberately moving more slowly than you would do normally. What do you see or hear that you might not have done otherwise? You could smell that rose you have now noticed. You could scan the tress for that bird you can hear. You might sense your heart rate slowing rather than going faster. You may go less far but experience so much more.

For additional material, see [Sustaining Leadership](#), pp. 98–101, 124–28.

R – Rest more than you would normally do

There are reasons why this season is more tiring than you think. We are experiencing the first global pandemic in a century, which is triggering an unprecedented global recession, all while experiencing a volatile global response to 400 years of failure to confront racial injustice. Self-care was already essential but never more so than now. Here are some examples of why this is so.

A minister shares that although funerals are shorter now, she needs more rest time afterwards than she did previously. There's a whole different emotional dynamic going on. It may have been convenient to hold all those meetings from home, but video conferencing is draining in different ways. Gianpiero Petriglieri, a management professor, [tweeted](#):

I finally understood why everyone's so exhausted after the video calls. It's the plausible deniability of each other's absence. Our mind's tricked into the idea of being together when our bodies feel we're not. Dissonance is exhausting.

I am operating on very limited energy at the moment and have sadly had to decline even social video calls because my brain simply cannot process multiple people speaking out of the screen. But I am not alone in this. [Here's another comment on the same Twitter thread](#):

Now that all of this has moved online, back to back, relentless, I notice the absence of walking from one meeting to another, stopping to get a coffee, some time at my desk, commute time. Of seeing different places and faces incidentally rather than for the next meeting.

Further responses reflect on how human speech exchanges rely on milliseconds between each passing back and forth of each person. The constant break in the chain caused by video lag requires a reset of the clock each time. Then there are frequent stops and starts as everyone starts to speak at once if there's a gap or forgets to unmute or loses their internet connection mid-sentence. As work has moved online so has our social life. But that can make social gatherings feel more like work than relaxation; the technology is the same, after all.

Further fatigue derives from the corporate grief with which we have been living for some time. The loss of ways of living and working, family and friends, those we know and those we do not know who have died or are dangerously ill. The combination is a perfect storm.

Many have had to learn new skills, both IT and otherwise, conduct pastoral ministry by phone rather than face-to-face, produce online services and, more recently, navigate the labyrinthine rules for cleaning and social distancing as church buildings reopen. Psychologist Charlotte Armitage [adds that](#):

The highly destabilising nature of the current situation is likely to have created an emotional instability in most of us... The additional processing that our brains are required to do to adjust to these new ways of living, new thought patterns and unstable emotions that we encounter during the day is incredibly tiring.

One effective way to counter this is through the re-establishment of margins in your work schedules. Margins are like those edges of fields left unharvested according to ancient agricultural practices, including in the Old Testament book of Ruth, which allowed the poor to glean some nourishment. K. J. Ramsey writes in her new book [This Too Shall Last](#): 'Boundaries are the borders of flourishing. Rather than the edges of everything we can't have or can't do or everywhere we can't go, boundaries can be the fenced plot of the garden where we will grow.'



Action

We tend to fill our diaries to the brim with back-to-back appointments. Check through your diary, look at where you could schedule downtime. Block out some time periods just to catch your breath. And through all of this, learn that hardest of personal skills – to be as kind to yourself as you would be to an exhausted colleague.

For additional material, see [Sustaining Leadership](#), pp. 111–21.

I – Inspire

Try this: breathe out, and keep breathing out for as long as you are able. What happens? Eventually you reach a point where your body's reflexes take over and you just have to breathe in again. The idea of breath and breathing is pertinent at this time of virus, because it has affected the breathing of those who have caught the virus. The death of George Floyd under the knee of police in Minneapolis has added extra significance to the phrase 'I can't breathe.'

My point is that you cannot consistently breathe out without also breathing in. The word 'inspire' means to breathe in. All ministry is akin to breathing out, as we give ourselves in time, energy, emotion and gifts to those around us. This takes from us. Even Jesus was aware of power going from him when a woman touched his cloak for healing (Luke 8:46).

Even the most exhilarating of ministries carries this cost – even if that is hidden from us by the adrenaline rush. Carry on regardless, and you will grind to a halt probably sooner rather than later.

We also need to discover which areas of ministry are the ones that drain us more than others and which are the ones that, in spite of our giving out, make us feel as if we have received, even after the adrenaline subsides.

What for you is like taking a breath of fresh air? What literally inspires you?

Some of us do not know the answer to that question. How long would it take you to consider a response to the 'snow day' question: if all your planned activities for tomorrow were cancelled, what would you do with your free time? I'm not talking about distraction activity here, but about that which genuinely inspires and restores you. Could you take this opportunity to inspire yourself to continue with ministry the next day, week, month, year?

Action

Get to know yourself well enough to know what inspires you.

It may be to do with creation and nature. With reading or listening to music. It may be to do with playing games, spending time with friends or family or getting away by yourself. What about picking up a musical instrument or trying some home karaoke?

Only you know what works for you, so here's your task: identify three things that truly inspire you, then schedule time to fit all three in within the next ten days and do one of them within the next 24 hours. And breathe...

For additional material, see [Sustaining Leadership](#), pp. 96–98, 101–105.

V – Validation: a tough but critical question for us all

That's always a good question to ask oneself, but in times when everything is turned upside down the question is forced to the surface. If this is uncomfortable to us, we may ignore its challenge, but that would be unhelpful in the long run. If our validation comes through what we do, we are on a dangerous path. If it comes through who we are, we will find that liberating. This is about our core identity – [that question we asked ourselves first thing while brushing our teeth](#).

As we get stuck into the day's tasks, however, it is so easy to slip back into measuring ourselves by performance as well as depending upon the response of others to what we do. How many likes did our online service get? Did I fluff my lines? How far down my to-do list did I get? Why am I getting less done than before? Did I say the right thing to that bereaved family?

And what about what others think of us? [Henri Nouwen confesses](#):

Against my own best intentions, I find... when I give advice, I want to know whether it is being followed; when I offer help, I want to be thanked; when I give money, I want it to be used my way; when I do something good, I want to be remembered.

Listen to the voices inside your head to keep watch for the sources of your validation. Recently, as I was walking slowly upstairs (as a result of my ill health), rather than bounding up as I used to, I heard myself think, 'This is not me!' But, of course, while I am stuck with my low-energy levels, they do not define who I am. My inner voice suggested I was previously defined by words like 'energetic' and 'capable' – which I did not resist because they were acceptable to me. But when I could do that no longer and became defined by slow and incapable, I instinctively resisted.

The experience of weakness allowed me to discover an unhelpful validation in my life. This is a good discovery because once noticed we can take action to return to our core identity as loved children of God. In this time when you experience more fatigue, when you find yourself struggling with new ways, when you have days when you do not get very far down your to-do list, do not beat yourself up. Instead allow the discomfort of that to point you back to who you really are. The identity from which you can set out each day to serve God and neighbour.

The 15th-century mystic Margery Kempe, an extraordinary character who was the first woman to write an autobiography in English, was anxious for years about whether she had done enough to merit God's favour. Once, as she prayed, she heard God say to her: 'More pleasing to me than all your prayers, works and penances is that you would believe that I love you.'

Action

Read Matthew 3:13–17. Then:

- Sit comfortably somewhere quiet, hold out your hands and look down at them.
- Consciously let go of all the worthy things you could bring to God as the work of your hands. Instead, focus on your empty, wounded and scarred hands.
- Experience the grace of staying in that place empty-handed before the God who loves you, is pleased with you and calls you his beloved child.

For additional material, see [Sustaining Leadership](#), pp. 82–88.



E – Evaluate: what works best to bring out the best in us

Finally, as we take stock of how we are, eliminate hurry, prioritise rest, learn what inspires and check out our sources of validation, we can be evaluating what works best to bring out the best in us.

Life is very different at present, and not only will some of the enforced changes be around for a very long time, but there will also be those new ways, discoveries, habits that we will not want to let go of as other things return to 'normal'. This is an opportunity to make a fresh start where that would be helpful – to prioritise a new way of living and serving which is sustainable and life-giving in the long run.

This re-boot is very difficult to achieve when going at full pace, as you probably were at the start of this year. But change has been forced upon us. The pace has been changed. Now is a good time to eliminate those work practices and lifestyle choices that you know do not enable flourishing. And it is great time to put into place new ways that will enable you to sustain your leadership and ministry in the long run.

Action

In the style of an Ignatian Examen of consciousness, take a look through what you have noted from the action points in this article. Under the Holy spirit's guidance, cast your mind back over the past three months and ask yourself:

- What has brought me closer to God and enabled my flourishing?
- What has taken me away from God and inhibited my flourishing?

Draw up a list of those things you want to leave behind in the 'old normal' and those things you would like to carry with you or even initiate in the 'new normal'.

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