

THE STUCK SYNDROME

ARTICLE 11: CALM OR FRENZY: THE ADDICTION TO ACTION

I will never forget the dark gloom in the room full of Protestant pastors as they listened to statistics coming from Fuller Seminary: One fourth of pastors suffer from burnout. This does not just mean that they are tired, it means that they are emotionally flat-lined, that they have minus joy, and their condition requires 2-3 years of recovery. Many will never recover—some burnout is irreversible. Besides this:

80% of pastors feel ministry has adversely affected their families.

50% feel like they are unable to meet the demands.

90% feel they are inadequately trained.

70% have no close friend.

Most pastors are not romantically in love with their spouse.

Pastors have one of the poorest scores in job satisfaction.

The number one motivator for pastors is guilt.

As many pastors faced their pain that day, they were overwhelmed. But this is not just a Protestant woe, I believe it's a tendency common in all churches.

I also could relate to some of those statistics. I used to take pride in self-abuse. I felt I had left everything for Christ—my homeland and language, my family and dog, a career that offered quite a bit more honor and money than the mission. And so it was easy to get caught up in the religious system in Japan. I gave up what remained, my hobbies and even my health for the cause of Christ. But something was not right, deep underneath, a bitterness betrayed that I was not enjoying life—I was caught in the system of self-abuse.

Today I am somewhat free from that deceitful addiction that C.S. Lewis seemed to play with in *The Screwtape Letters*. There, the older demon counseled the younger to get men to commit to Christ *and* something else. The reason being, that soon the “something else” would rule Christ. We often call the “something else” things like “ministry” or “evangelism” or “the Kingdom.”³⁵

But when we are sucked into the addiction to action, though we may exist, we cease to really live. Instead of being moved by the Spirit we are driven by adrenaline or caffeine or fear or ego. Though the Spirit brings things like love, joy, peace, and life, the end result of the other culprits is only fatigue and even death. Yet strangely, the Church often praises and promotes this addiction to action. Some ministries even require it. My wife and I joke about a ministry my she was part of in Nagoya many years ago—if she didn't

make her quota of 12 evangelistic presentations each week she had to make up for it on her day off!

But why would the Church promote such behavior? Quite simply, because this twisted interpretation of the cross, is productive. The frenzied addiction to action does produce. It makes ministries big, churches “successful,” and evangelists admired. It helps us prove to ourselves that we are worthwhile, that we are making an impact on eternity. It is also sick.

I find it interesting that many Christians in Japan shun alcohol and tobacco, but often flaunt an addiction that is likely much more dangerous. When we are addicted to action we live under constant stress. It also usually means we are cutting our sleep, avoiding refreshment, sacrificing precious relationships, and violating regular Sabbath. And when we are addicted, if we take time for important things, like getting 8-9 hours of sleep a night (the medically accepted norm), we feel guilty— we feel like we are wasting precious time. But when we live in addiction to action, we are cutting years off our lives. Hans Selye, the father of stress research wrote, “Among all my autopsies (and I have performed well over a thousand), I have never seen a person who died of old age...To die of old age would mean that all the organs of the body had worn out proportionally, merely by having been used too long. This is never the case. We invariably die because one vital part has worn out too early in proportion to the rest of the body...” An addiction to action is like constantly running a cars engine at high rpm, it will wear out much sooner. A stress-filled lifestyle is likely the leading cause of illness and death. Of course, everyone is aware of the danger of *karoshi*¹, but I believe there are levels of *karoshi*, some may be half dead, others even 99% dead, and hardly even realize it, because the addiction to action is slow and sly.

An addiction to action is not only physically damaging but also spiritually impoverishing. Long ago Kierkegaard described our problem today, “The present state of the world and the whole life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should reply: Create silence! Bring men to silence. The Word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of today.”

When we are addicted to action we tend to think that we are indispensable, that somehow, God desperately needs us. But as Eugene Peterson says, “Work is the greatest vehicle for idolatry.” By shunning Sabbath, we idolize ourselves. We have forgotten Who God Is. We have lost the tension of the paradox—we are eternally significant and

¹ Working oneself literally to death.

we are totally insignificant. We scurry about thinking the energy we expend is big, but in reality, God can do whatever, whenever, however He wants, regardless of us. If the energy from a single hurricane could be harnessed for a mere, one minute, it would supply all the electricity the country of Japan would need for more than a hundred years!

And so, in our frenzy we bloat our importance, and we become experts at avoiding God. But imagine, if we let go, we might hear His voice for He is almost always speaking. And if we heard even just one word, our entire world might be re-created. When Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee He spoke not just to the wind and water but the frenzied activity of the twelve disciples as well. The storm may be around us, but that is much less consequential than a storm within us.

Is action wrong? Of course not! No-action, would be wrong. But action is to come from an inner-calm and fullness of life. I am reminded of an experience riding a rush hour train in Tokyo. I had ridden the Seibu Ikebukuro line a thousand times, but that day a strange young man boarded. He was talking to himself and spastically jerked in a grotesque manner. For sure, everyone pretended not to notice him and keep some space, though that's impossible at rush hour. Suddenly, I had a clear sense that this poor fellow was demonized. It was then, I felt a leading to stand up, and deliver him, in the name of Jesus. My mind raced from excuse to excuse. "But this is a packed train. I have never done this before. What if nothing happens? What would people think of Jesus then?" In the end, I arrived at *my destination*, and got off the train, but with a sense that I had not really arrived at the *divinely intended destination*. Had this young man been delivered, what might have happened? At least I would have been changed, if not a portion of Tokyo that day. But I had no inner calm, and forfeited the moment.

I have come a long way in my recovery from addiction to action. People often give me the "ultimate compliment" in Japan, that is, "You're so busy." But I make it a habit to answer "No, I'm trying to be un-busy." (Of course, no one knows what to answer to that.) I am finally learning to "waste time" with God. After all, life is too short, too rich, too important, to be just busy. Mary knew that well, the question is: Did Martha ever get it?

The great psychologist Erik Erikson captured the balance of life so well. He is known to have said that man is to pursue play, and work, and love— in equal portions.

When we are free from the addiction to action, we really begin to live. We rediscover romance, friendship, refreshment, joy, power, and even Jesus. Strangely, we begin to discover that although we do less, we actually accomplish much more.

Perhaps there is only one way out of the addiction to action. We must stop. We must supernaturally enter the way of silence. To be still, and know who is God. Carlo Carretto, who followed the way of Charles de Foucauld, and made the transition from the bustling church life in Italy, to the simple life in the Sahara desert writes, “And this attitude of mind is not easy. This ‘waiting’, this ‘not making plans,’ this ‘searching the heavens,’ this ‘being silent’ is one of the most important things we have to learn. The moment will then follow when we are called, when we must speak out, when our hands will have grown tired from baptizing: the moment of the harvest.”