

REST FOR THE WEARY

Renewal for Women through Mini-Sabbatical Events

DENELE IVINS *(used with permission)*



My hands gripped the steering wheel as my mini-van cut through the ranch-strewn countryside of eastern Oregon. I was escaping to a retreat center for missionaries, in desperate need of rest and restoration. It had been nine months since we packed up our lives in East Asia and returned to the U.S. After 18 years of Asian life, our move back to the States was not a return “home,” but was a painful uprooting of what God had planted deeply in the land where we raised our children and made disciples.

As I drove, rest and restoration seemed unlikely. All I could think of was what I’d left behind—my undone to-do list and loose ends for my family in my absence. My mind raced with doubts and guilt: “I don’t really need to do this,” “What kind of mother leaves her family for a week with an empty refrigerator?” and “I should have brought my family along; they need it too.”

But as the miles passed, the almost-empty roads, the rural landscape and the quietness began to work magic. My hands began to loosen their tense grip on the steering wheel. I already felt calmer—and hope was building in me that God might use this time away to restore me.

Five days later, I retraced my journey on those rural roads. With the windows down and the radio off, my mind was still busy, but with thoughts of a different type. As I thought of my husband and children and their needs through our recent East-to-West transition, I was able to pray for them in a deeper, more trusting way than I had for a long time. My heart for ministry, which had been numb for a stretch of time, was waking up. I dreamed about the possibility of taking a group from our church back to our adopted land on a short-term missions trip. I broke the nine-month musical silence when I sang praise songs in the privacy of my van. All at once, as I maneuvered curving mountain roads, I realized that I was refreshed. Creativity and energy and praise were returning—and hope had been restored.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

My five days at a missionary retreat center was just what I needed. But how did I even know that I needed to get away? The truth is, that I was weary to my core and unable to take any action to help myself. Caring brothers and sisters saw my condition and made a diagnosis: emotional exhaustion and possible burnout because of the trauma of our transition back to life in the U.S. Beyond a diagnosis, God was gracious to give them a prescription—a care plan to restore me back to emotional health.

Through debriefing with our church and the Navigators, I began to understand how very tired I was. I left China tired, and then, as mom’s do, I set aside my need for rest to attend to the huge task of settling my children—grades 6, 8 and 12—into their new lives in their passport country. Our sending organization very gently but persistently suggested the value of taking a sabbatical after 18 years of serving overseas. My husband was able to take a manner of one, but I found myself unable to even sit and read anything for more than five minutes. The needs around me—carpooling, phone calls, dusty floors, and dirty dishes—seemed to scream at me throughout my waking hours.

Across the table over lunch that week in Colorado, missionary care counselor Shirley Wilson asked me about taking a sabbatical. My question, in a choked voice, was how could I even entertain the idea of a sabbatical—a release from regular responsibilities to refresh and renew and learn—when I faced the task of guiding my children through their transition, not to mention the relentlessness of the tasks of daily life. I can’t just take off three months from life, I said.

Shirley saw my sense of drowning in my eyes—and she threw me a lifeline. “Why don’t you take mini-sabbaticals?” she asked, coining a new phrase right then—mini-sabbatical events. With some well-placed questions, Shirley guided me to discover what would best refresh me. My deepest longing, she helped me see, was to get away by myself, in places with heavy doses of mountains and pine trees and quietness, where I could rest, explore, hike, bike, read and pray.

REST FOR MY SOUL

My first foray into solitude came seven weeks later. I left our home in Boise, Idaho, and drove two hours to a little inn on the Billingsley Creek just before it pours into the Snake River. I wanted to quiet myself enough to hear God's voice. I took my Bible down to the creek-side swinging bench. My weariness was so deep that all I could do was open it up to the Psalms. I remember how I read a few verses, only to have my eyes blur over with tears. During my three days there, I did my part by showing up on that swing with God's word in my lap, asking Him to restore me. And He did. One of the greatest burdens I carried with me on that first retreat was the deep disappointment for my daughter Claire and her college admissions process that year. I was able to walk away from that three-day retreat with thankfulness for the scholarships to the local university—and feel a huge burden lifted.

A MIRROR FOR REFLECTION

On my Oregon “mini-sabbatical event,” God revealed to me a root reason for my weariness. I'd been putting the blame solely on the transition of the past months, but He gently reminded me that my weariness came mainly from the accumulation of the sacrifices of 18 years of living and reaching out cross-culturally.

One day I sat in the sunshine on my private deck, meditating on **PSALM 20:1-3**:

May the Lord answer you when you are in distress; May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

May He send you help from the sanctuary And grant you support from Zion.

May He remember all your sacrifices And accept your burnt offerings.

I began by asking God to do this for me, to answer my distress, protect me, and send me help and support. As I took the time to reflect and let His spirit work through His word, I could see how He had been doing this all along. He remembered my sacrifices even before I did—and I began recounting in my journal a long list of ways He had answered, protected, helped and supported me.

NURTURE FROM NATURE

Significant as these spiritual moments were for me, it would be dishonest to make it sound like I spent entire days in monk-like meditation. In truth, these deeper moments punctuated days full of walks, bike rides, hikes, meals out and a good novel.

On my first trip, my walks were leisurely—mostly on the way to the small-town diner where I ate comfort food three times a day. But the springtime greenness and brilliant blue skies helped me rediscover both the beauty of my home state Idaho and the value of quietness. I cruised my van slowly down the country roads, marveling at the landscape carved out by the Snake River. On one drive down in the canyon, a bird burst into song just as I drove past; the beauty of it and a sense of God's love brought tears to my eyes.

This was physical restoration, after almost two decades of urban life—where instead of mountains, construction cranes rose above the horizon at every turn, and instead of the serenade of songbirds, the blare of taxi horns and yells of teaming life were what constantly assaulted my senses.

The healing power of nature was just as important in my second and third retreats, but I felt more energetic and was able to be much more active, enjoying long hikes and bike rides.

RESOLVED TO REST

While I couldn't manage a lengthy sabbatical, Shirley's prescription for personal retreats—my mini-sabbatical events—were just what I needed to renew my body, mind, and soul after the years' sacrifices of service and the transitions of the last year.

As I climbed into the small backcountry plane to leave my last retreat—feeling energetic, rested and hopeful—I resolved not to wait until my weariness calls for emergency measures. I am determined to make this a life-long habit—to take time out to seek solitude, rest and renewal. To come to Him and let Him give me rest.

MATTHEW 11:28-29

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...
You will find rest for your souls.*



TWELVE STEPS TO RENEWAL

Tips for planning your own personal retreat

SIDEBAR TO *REST FOR THE WEARY*

1. Admit your need for rest. There's no shame in being tired because you're serving others. You're only human.
2. Put it on the calendar. Once you determine your need for a rest, get a date on the calendar before it fills up. Stick to it. Resist the inevitable temptation to cancel as the time draws near.
3. Get the support of your family and friends. Share with your husband why you'd like to try a personal retreat; after all, he's the one who'll hold down the fort when you're gone. Ask your close friends to pray for you through the process.
4. Resist taking someone else. A personal retreat is a great idea, so everyone who hears your plans will want to come along. For maximum renewal, keep it solo. Encourage them to take their own personal retreat.
5. Don't feel guilty. While it's true that you're leaving behind needs and tasks, the unselfish thing is to make renewal a priority. You'll return strengthened for the tasks at hand.
6. Customize your retreat. Think through what's restful for you. Rustic or luxurious? Active or quiet? Mountains or ocean? Near or far?
7. Include the nature element. The heavens do declare His glory, and are the perfect setting in which to be renewed.
8. Take advantage of resources. Check with your ministry organization for retreat venues in your area designed especially for ministry workers. These are usually low-cost and sometimes offer counseling and other resources.
9. Think creatively. Consider off-season church camps, a friend's mountain cabin, or an inexpensive motel in a place you'd like to visit.
10. Address the whole person. Include elements of rest and renewal for your body, mind and soul.
11. Take a well-stocked tool chest. Be prepared. Pack your Bible, a devotional and other Christian books, a songbook or hymnal, and your journal. (But don't feel bad if you don't use much of what you bring.) For the whole person, pack a good novel for lighter reading, as well as your favorite snacks.
12. Have great expectations. Expect God to meet you in a special way. He specializes in giving rest to the weary. All He asks of us is to come.