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The Rhythm of Retreat

To get out of taking a PE course in college, a young friend of mine enrolled in a ballroom dancing class. This six-foot-tall, stocky young man with a shaved head explained to us how it wasn't so bad, and then he left to buy dancing shoes. We didn't dare laugh because we saw that he actually liked it. So we watched him in his "final exam." I was mesmerized by how he and his partner moved in tandem, leaning away from each other and then coming together again as if this were the most delightful, automatic way to move on the planet's surface.

That rhythm of coming together and moving apart is a metaphor for life with God. In this contemplative dance, God is the lead partner. God comes close, and we follow his lead. We gaze at what we can glimpse of God with great joy.

The back and forth flow of dance is also a metaphor for the spiritual retreat. We move up close during times of prayer, but then God may suggest daring things, and we shudder and push away. We need distance before we can attempt to follow that lead! Other times we push

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away after prayer because the nearness is almost too much. We exhale as if to say, "That was great, but enough of this!" just as we push away from a half-eaten piece of rich cheese-cake. We may need to pause and catch our breath.

This flowing rhythm became a pattern of life for me within the structure of a thirty-day retreat into the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. My spiritual director, Sr. Lucy, a nun of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, instructed me to have five prayer periods a day of not more than one hour. I often fudged and went over, but then I'd end on a note of such delight or confusion or breathlessness that I saw what she meant. The intensity of being so close to God was almost too much, so I needed to push away for a while. So the in-between times created a rhythm of being away: a challenging hike into a canyon every day, a session with Sr. Lucy, Eucharist in the woods, and a walk through the almost life-size, bas-relief Stations of



the Cross every night in the dark. (Since I was on the property concurrently with a Catholic women's retreat, one night I discovered a lipstick kiss on the cheek of one of the plaster-of-Paris Jesus figures. I laughed and thought, *How quaint!* But then every night afterward, I looked for it just to behold it and absorb some of that unknown woman's great love for Jesus.)

To live this way was to intensify the rhythm of being with God—pulling toward and moving away several times a day. But even when I drew back, I seemed to stay near, much the way my young friend's hand grasped his partner's hand firmly when they were as far apart as their arms would stretch. It was as if the arm's-length moments propelled me toward my partner again.

But thirty days? I wondered when I would get bored . . .

especially when my director instructed me to do five “repetitions” on passages such as the Prodigal Son story. I returned to my hermitage wondering if that passage would become like meat I chewed—when I was little—until it dried out and my mother gave me permission to spit it out. But it was not! The passage was different each time. By the last repetition, I had offered my confessions as the older son, forgiven the younger sons in my life who have deserted me, and come out on the other end imagining myself as the Father’s daughter. While the older son sulked and the prodigal son continued to be undependable, I, the daughter, followed the footsteps of my Father and made sure the farm was a place where all the

“father’s hired men have food to spare,” as well as health care and schools and swings for their kids. I loved knowing his farm was a place where people could live fruitfully and return home welcomed. Best of all, I worked side by side with my Farmer Father all day long. People pointed to me and said, “That’s his daughter. Can you tell?”

Perhaps the boredom never set in because my director answered nearly all my questions with this reply: “Ask Jesus.” So I did—not only in the prayer periods, but also on the mountainside and in the woods and, at times, speaking aloud to Jesus with the plaster-of-Paris figures in the night. I returned home with a rhythm of being with God all day long in an intense way. The joy of moving

back and forth with the companion of our souls now made me get out of bed every morning eager to see what sort of steps my dance partner would lead me in that day.

About the Author

Jan Johnson is the author of *Invitation to the Jesus Life* and is currently writing three meditative guides for personal retreats. (www.JanJohnson.org)

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