

BEGINNING ANEW

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Happy new year! A new academic year at Stanford. A new year for Jews, since this is the second day of Rosh Hashanah. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted," in the words of Ecclesiastes.ⁱ For the academic cycle, this is the time to plant. Jesus speaks of planting in today's gospel lesson from Matthew:ⁱⁱ "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds...fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away... Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold..."ⁱⁱⁱ

My question to you today is "How do we plant our new intellectual lives this year in good soil, and not on rocky ground?" I have three simple answers to suggest, close to (but not synonymous with) Ecclesiastes' advice to eat, drink, and take pleasure in our work.^{iv} My advice is to eat well, exercise, and practice some kind of contemplative discipline daily. Then intellectual crops have good soil in which to bloom, no matter what age you may be. I'm trying hard this new year to practice what I preach on all three counts.

A good friend of mine recently told me about visiting a doctor because of his insomnia. He's had a terrible time sleeping, sometimes getting only a couple of hours a night, and it's deeply

affecting everything he does, from his work to his relationships to his attitude toward life. The physician told him that he had two choices: Take some excellent new medications that are now available or dramatically change his lifestyle -- that is, get on a diet, go to the gym, and meditate at least 20 minutes every day. My friend chose the fancy new medications.

After a month of feeling cotton-headed and drugged, though, even after full nights of sleep, he decided to begin anew and change his lifestyle. Now he's starting to sleep through the night without drugs, and he's feeling great during the day. There have been big gains too in work efficiency, people skills and general disposition.

So what about eating right? The idea of dieting strikes fear into many people's souls, or it feels like such terrible deprivation, or it's just plain boring. I'm not necessarily talking about dieting, anyway. I mean getting some moderation and balance into one's eating habits. One can get help here from newer movements concerned with natural foods or vegetarianism or from very old traditions like keeping kosher in Judaism.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People, counters the notion that eating with restrictions limits enjoyment in eating. He challenges us in his book To Life! to attend a traditional Jewish wedding, to compare it to most non-Jewish weddings, and to take note of the variety of food available at the reception and the gusto with which all this kosher food is consumed. He sees keeping kosher as a way to eat intentionally and appreciatively, giving thanks to the other species with which we co-habit the earth and which, on a regular basis, we eat. For Kushner, that giving of thanks has progressively convinced him over the years personally to become a vegetarian.

I've found that eating intentionally and appreciatively, as a non-Jew and non-vegetarian, can also mean something as simple as eating slowly and savoring each bite. Enjoying eating in this way doesn't feel like much of a deprivation, and it has the side benefit of helping me to eat less. As for eating opportunities at Stanford -- in terms of variety and balance of foods available three times a day -- I know of few universities in the country that do better than our Dining Services.

When talking to nutritionists, I've found that somehow they are always linking eating well to exercise. Stanford, winner of the Sears Cup or the Director's Cup nine consecutive years as the nation's top all-around athletic program, obviously has fantastic sports facilities and activities, available not only to our world-class athletes, but also to any and all students, faculty and staff. One of the best ways to exercise here, of course, is to join an intramural team or work out with others, but there are also plenty of good ways to exercise alone.

For example, I try to swim laps several times a week, which has a meditative aspect to it as well -- for me becoming acutely aware of rhythmically breathing in and out as I'm close to drowning. I then feel totally renewed when I get out, after less than a half hour of swimming. I've found that running can have the same effect, but without the drowning sensation.

One of the strangest aspects of exercise, it seems to me, is how counterintuitively it works against feeling tired. A major excuse I often use for not working out is that I'm exhausted. "Not enough sleep last night," I'll rationalize. "If I do this, I'll never make it through the day or through the evening. I have too much work to do." Yet, ironically, exercise almost always makes me less tired, at least in the sense that I feel sharper and more alert, and I work more efficiently. I sleep better at night, too, which means I become more rested over time.

Finally, for all of us who overtax our brains, there's a need for a spiritual discipline like meditation or prayer. Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School first started studying the medical effects of meditation and prayer some thirty years ago. A national best-seller resulted, called The Relaxation Response. By just sitting quietly and comfortably for 20 minutes a day, concentrating on something like one's breathing with a passive attitude, there were demonstrable physiological changes leading to reduced stress levels in experimental subjects, along with increased alpha wave levels in their brains, which I understand are associated with feelings of well-being.

This modern rationalist and secularist then began studying what he called the "age-old wisdom" of prayer and meditation practices in both Eastern and Western religious traditions. He found common elements in virtually all cultures which allowed people to change their everyday modes of thinking. Normal thought processes are outwardly directed, he explains, toward events, attachments, and sensory contacts. Prayer and meditation allow us to find a place of deep relaxation within. And among other things, meditation is good for your health.

So, eat well, exercise and meditate, as you begin anew this fall. Then you can go ahead and study and work. Then the seeds you plant will fall on good soil and not on rocky ground. These are my new year's resolutions, anyway. Happy new year to each of you.

NOTES

i. Ecclesiastes 3: 1-2.

ii. Matthew 13: 1-9.

iii. Ibid., 13: 3, 5-6, 8.

iv. Ecclesiastes 3: 13.