

Harpooners

The Poised Harpooner from Eugene Peterson's The Contemplative Pastor

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, there is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat scuds across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great, white whale, Moby Dick. The sailors are laboring fiercely, every muscle taut, all attention and energy concentrated on the task. The cosmic conflict between good and evil joined; chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab. In this boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar; he doesn't perspire; he doesn't shout. He is languid in the crash and the cursing. This man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. **And then this sentence: "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil."**

Melville's sentence is a text to set alongside the psalmist's "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), and alongside Isaiah's "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

Pastors know there is something radically wrong with the world. We are also engaged in doing something about it. The stimulus of conscience, the memory of ancient outrage, and the challenge of biblical command involve us in the anarchic sea that is the world. The white whale, symbol of evil, and the crippled captain, personification of violated righteousness, are joined in battle. History is a novel of spiritual conflict. In such a world, noise is inevitable, and immense energy is expended. But if there is no harpooner in the boat, there will be no proper finish to the chase. Or if the harpooner is exhausted, having abandoned his assignment and become an oarsman, he will not be ready and accurate when it is time to throw his javelin.

Somehow it always seems more compelling to assume the work of the oarsman, laboring mightily in a moral cause, throwing our energy into a fray we know has immortal consequence. And it always seems more dramatic to take on the outrage of a Captain Ahab, obsessed with a vision of vengeance and retaliation, brooding over the ancient injury done by the Enemy. There is, though, other important work to do. Someone must throw the dart. Some must be harpooners.

The metaphors Jesus used for the life of ministry are frequently images of the single, the small, and the quiet, which have effects far in excess of their appearance: salt, leaven, seed. Our culture publicizes the opposite emphasis: the big, the multitudinous, the noisy. It is, then, a strategic necessity that pastors deliberately ally themselves with the quiet, poised harpooners, and not leap, frenzied, to the oars. There is far more need that we develop the skills of the harpooner than the muscles of the oarsman. It is far more biblical to learn quietness and attentiveness before God than to be overtaken by what John Oman named the twin perils of ministry, "flurry and worry." For flurry dissipates energy, and worry constipates it.

Years ago, I noticed, as all pastors must, that when a pastor left a neighboring congregation, the congregational life carried on very well, thank you. A guest preacher was assigned to conduct Sunday worship, and nearby pastors took care of the funerals, weddings, and crisis counseling. A congregation would go for months, sometimes as long as a year or two, without a regular pastor. And I thought, *All these things I am so busy doing – they aren't being done in that pastorless congregation, and nobody seems to mind. I asked myself, What if I, without leaving, quit doing them right now? Would anybody mind? I did, and they don't.*

Slowing Our Spiritual HeartRate

The other day I was playing tennis with a good friend who was really running me around the court. The more winded I became the more unforced errors I found myself committing. After the contest, I was reminded of an experiment that I had performed in the 90's over the course of 40 tennis matches with capable opponents. I wore a heart rate monitor in each match and watched carefully to see at what heart rate I began to make careless errors. I found that, if I could keep my heart rate under 160 beats per minute for most of a match (this was often accomplished by moving slowly between points, taking the full allowable time at the change-over, and by tying my shoes frequently), it was very difficult to defeat me; if, however, a clever and or skilled opponent could move me enough to cause my heart rate to exceed that magic 160 mark, he would generally prevail.

It struck me yesterday that Satan understands this very principle, and has often used it against me. If he can keep me busy and disconnected from my power source, he can generally defeat me at will. He understands that by moving me from side to side (enticing me with *good* things) that he can eventually run me out of breath. My own devotional life, including prayer, study, and meditation, are the ways that I slow my spiritual heart rate. My adversary will do most anything to rob me of that precious time.

Luke 5:15-16 NIV

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.