

MY RULE OF LIFE

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Each of us, as Anglicans was directed, in the Catechism's Supplementary Instructions, to frame a Rule of Life in accordance with the precepts of the Gospel and the faith and order of the Church; taking into account regular attendance at public worship, the practice of private prayer and Bible study, bringing the teaching and example of Christ into everyday life, boldness of spoken witness to faith in Christ, personal service to the Church and the Community and offering money for the support of the work of the Church. (page 555 of the Book of Common Prayer). Most of us, I expect, promptly forgot all about this shortly after Confirmation.

Later, wanting to succeed in business, finding our lives out-of-control, or facing some personal crisis many of us turned to the self-help section of our local bookstore for guidance - to books, perhaps, such as Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change". There are many others, and it seems more are being written every day. Whatever the self-help authors have to say it would seem that they are not satisfying the reader on some deep level, for people seem to be always looking for something else.

We all do have a Rule of Life, whether or not we have written it down, or even consciously formulated it. No decision, after all is also a decision. My Rule of Life has not been previously written down. It was not formulated following the precepts of the Church, or indeed Stephen Covey. In the context of this paper I will describe my "Rule" and how it came about; and evaluate it in the light of Esther de Waal's "Seeking God...", as well as the commentary on prayer found in H.A. Williams' "Becoming What I am".

My “Rule of Life”

In many respects I have been quite an active “Church” person. I have been a member of Advisory Board – indeed I was its Chair – a Treasurer, a People’s Warden, a Lay Delegate to Synod and a Planned Giving Officer for the Diocese of Niagara. I have also been on the Board of the King-Bay Chaplaincy, and have attended its version of Cursillo (Discovery). Moreover, I was a regular member of a 4th Day Group. Despite all of this, I did not “pray” regularly outside of corporate worship, and I never did read the Bible on any kind of a systematic or regular basis, or participate in any organized Bible Study.

I did not regard the Bible as something of contemporary relevance – particularly the Old Testament. The New Testament, of course, had meaning, but primarily because of the Christmas and Easter festivals. I believed in God, and in Jesus, but I didn’t believe that the Bible per se had much of specific relevance for me in my life.

I began to get some idea that I was wrong about this when, in the midst of personal crisis, I was introduced to the “Serendipity” series of support group materials; which are, of course, bible based. I participated in or led groups on Separation and Divorce, Grief, and Mid-Life Crisis using these materials; and found, to my astonishment, that the “Bible Track” was an easy transition from the so-called “Secular” one, and that it was both interesting and very relevant. I also began to use a compendium called “The Bible Incorporated into Your Life, Job and Business”, which I had been introduced to through “Discovery”, and found to be useful in dealing with life’s ups and downs from time to time. Still, I did not read the Bible directly, myself, on a regular basis. Moreover, my Rule of Life seemed to stumble along from crisis to crisis.

What did bring me to follow a Rule of Life was not Church, or anything the Church did. Rather, it was the School of Philosophy. I have attended the Toronto School for about ten years now; in large part because I had become a “seeker” for meaning in my life, and had not found the answers to my questions in Church. The School introduced me to a broad range of philosophers and philosophies, both from the West and the East. In particular, I was introduced to the Indian Scriptures – the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads – and began to appreciate the wisdom that was found there. I also began to participate in Sanskrit classes as a vehicle to understanding these scriptures better, and indeed formal Gita study. Imagine my surprise when the School of Philosophy announced morning classes based on the Gospel of John. Later, on the School’s summer Residential or retreat, Psalm 119 was the basis for 10 days of study, in some considerable depth. As a result I began to view my own tradition – Christianity – in a new and more positive light.

Part of my experience at the School of Philosophy was to attend an annual residential retreat of some eight to ten days, at which time we lived and worked according to a “Rule of Life”. The intent was to demonstrate the efficacy of the Rule, and prove to us that it was do-able, so that we would continue it throughout the coming year. The Day began at 6:00 a.m. with a dedication in assembly, followed by a half hour of meditation. A mixture of work – manual work – and study periods, comprised the balance of the day. In the evening there was another half hour of meditation followed by some uplifting entertainment – perhaps a classical music concert - before retiring. In summary the Rule modeled was 1 hour of meditation, in ½ hour sessions, 3 hours of study, eight hours of work, with the balance of the day being given over to meals, leisure activities and sleep.

The School also had a strong belief in service ... that service is where joy is to be found. As a result of my School experience, I was accustomed to offering service and to working as a member of a group.

As a result of our experiences at the School of Philosophy – my wife was also a member - some five years ago we changed our life's focus to one of service and accepted the responsibility of helping to run a Christian Children's Home in Sri Lanka. Since then, we have been volunteering there 4 to 5 months each year. Wanting to stay involved with the School of Philosophy, which was our spiritual focus, we asked the School Leader for a Course of Study to follow during our time in Sri Lanka. To our surprise he prescribed Bible Study, and gave us a specific model to follow using the King James Bible and a Cruden's Concordance. As a result, I discovered that the Bible did have contemporary meaning and relevance. Indeed, it whet my appetite for more, and I began to read from a so-called Common Bible, a Revised Standard Version, and was thus introduced to the Apocrypha. In particular, I "discovered" the wisdom literature – The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus. What I now find in the Bible is wisdom – knowledge about the Creator and the Creation, advice about how to live my life, and how to deal with the issues that arise within it, inspiration, support in difficult times, hope, joy – all of the things I was "seeking" in other traditions, but could not find in my own ... and it was all there, all the time, right in front of me.

In Sri Lanka I have taken on the responsibility for the children's Chapel services – morning and evening prayer - daily. As such I now have to follow a lectionary, and give short talks to the children to attempt to explain and amplify what was said, and to confirm their understanding. In order to prepare for this, I have had to start some Bible Self-Study with the help of Barclay's Daily Study Bible, and a parallel New Testament. I

do not, at this time, declare any degree of expertise; but I am now reading and using the Bible on a regular basis.

Having become accustomed to attending Chapel twice a day in Sri Lanka. I determined to follow a similar course in Canada. By putting God first it has been possible to do, without significant difficulty. Along the way I also acquired a Spiritual Director, and as a result of working with her found the “Online Retreat in Daily Life” produced by Creighton University, a 34 week program of guided study.

At this time, my “Rule” is substantially the one I was introduced to at the School of Philosophy. I meditate in the morning and evening, and have incorporated the Creighton material and the Rosary as a focus for that meditation. I attend corporate worship, for the most part, twice a day. During the course of the day I have been able to do the three hours of study.

In order to evaluate my “Rule” I will first summarize what De Waal and Williams have to say on the subjects of prayer, work and balance.

Prayer

According to Esther de Waal, prayer lies at the heart of the Benedictine life. It holds everything together, sustains every other activity, and is its root, fruit, foundation and fulfillment. Prayer is “*opus dei*” – the work of God – and nothing whatever is to be preferred to it.¹ The disciple is to be silent and listen, for how can one hear the Word until one is silent? St. Benedict, concerned about the cessation of the inner noise as well as external chatter, believed that Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times (42.1)². As de Waal notes, without it one cannot have much hope of establishing

that relationship with God of hearing and responding which will help root the whole life in prayer.³

St. Benedict believes that spontaneity must be upheld by structure and freedom by ritual. Moreover, the personal prayer needs corporate prayer, and the awareness of the presence of God needs to sometimes be fed by external sources.⁴ For these reasons, he imposes a rhythm and form on the life of prayer through the scheduling of the Daily Offices within the context of the Rule.

De Waal notes that “ultimately praying is living, working, loving, accepting, the refusal to take anything or anyone for granted but rather to try to find Christ in and through them all”.⁵ She goes on to say that “Christ is to be found in the circumstances, the people, the things of daily life”.⁶ The final purpose of the monastic life, she notes, is not the *opus dei* as celebrated in the Divine Office, “but the work of God in uninterrupted prayer, which is the search for God in all things”.⁷

H.A. Williams says “Prayer begins as the opening of my heart and mind to God’s love for me”.⁸ However, he goes on to comment, “...if, as I have told you I do, I find prayer difficult and baffling, that is due to my being unable when I pray to unravel myself from my own sophistication”.⁹ He believes we need to be simple in our approach to God – as small children in approach to perfect parents. The problem is that we all still have a small child in us, but our parents were less than perfect so that child is often prematurely aged by layers of defensive measures (sophistication) we’ve built up.¹⁰

Williams remarks that our sophistication is a protection against absolute love because we ‘re very frightened of that without recognizing that we are; and that becoming fully ourselves is a risk that may commit us to God knows what, God knows

where.¹¹ Therefore, he says, when we pray we keep ourselves tied up in knots, because its safer to keep on our armour of sophistication and plump for security.¹²

The paradox of simplicity, he believes, is that It is extremely difficult to achieve. It is the result of maturity, and one of the fruits of discipline and experience.¹³ Our problem seems to be that we think simplicity means spontaneous, but we misunderstand what spontaneity means. To Williams, spontaneity positively requires formality.¹⁴ In this, it would appear, he agrees with de Waal and St. Benedict. What he is talking about here is the formality of the timetable. He believes we are unlikely to pray unless we set aside specific times for it. Furthermore, he notes that what matters is not length, nor frequency, but regularity.¹⁵

Williams also addresses the formality of the procedure we adopt to pray, noting that the formality of the procedure is to enable us to be spontaneous.¹⁶ Printed prayers – like the Lord’s Prayer, the Anima Christi, a collect from the Prayer Book – are fine If they help us realize God’s presence and converse with him. He notes that we must not be snobbish about printed prayers being a second-rate form of devotion. When they become meaningless it’s time to move on to another form.¹⁷

Williams also believes that the enrichment of our mind and imagination is a very important preliminary to prayer, that If we don’t read books about our Christian faith that may be an important contributory cause of our prayer being dead and unreal. We cannot expect results because the leaven hasn’t dough to work on. God’s Word cannot become incarnate within us because we haven’t given it the flesh to do so.¹⁸ In this also it would appear that Williams is in accord with St. benedict and de Waal. The Rule, after all contemplates 4 hours of daily study.

Williams believes that as far as our prayers are concerned, what we read is like the coal in the cellar. It doesn't, of itself, offer spiritual warmth, and may remain in the cellar of our mind a long time, but the time will come when the fire of God's presence within us will play on the mental 'coal' we've accumulated. At that time the coal will contribute mightily to the warmth and reality of our prayer. However, we have to trust God to use our mental coal when and as He sees fit. Our part is to see the cellar of our mind and memory is kept well stocked.¹⁹

In summary, Williams believes that it is our job in prayer to put ourselves at God's disposal by the discipline of regularity, faithfulness to our Rule, and the use of common sense.²⁰ In this also he appears to be consistent with de Waal and St. Benedict's Rule.

Work

In St. Benedict's Rule all activities described are equally valid and to be shared by the community. No single monastic work is more important than another.²¹ However, work is to be kept in proportion by prayer and study. Breaking off to pray ensures work doesn't become end in itself.

De Waal notes that St. Benedict is equally concerned about work becoming self-fulfillment. In the Rule, the point where the craftsman becomes puffed-up by his craft is the point he's to be removed from practicing it.²²

For St. Benedict, work takes its place in the Rule as part of the rightly ordered life. He wanted his monks to work because he knew that a normal person cannot be always praying or studying. Accordingly, in the Rule work carries as much dignity as Chapel worship or devotional reading in the library.²³ However, work must be put into perspective with the rest of life – it must be dropped at the right moment. The

importance of obedience to the monastic timetable is to prevent the tyranny of one element of the life over the rest.²⁴

Balance

Balance is so central it underpins all else in the Rule. Indeed, de Waal describes it as "...the keystone of the whole Benedictine approach to the individual and the community".²⁵ St. Benedict believed that body, mind and spirit together make up the whole person. Therefore he designed the daily pattern of life in the monastery to incorporate time for prayer, study and manual work. Indeed, he held that all three should equally become a way to God.²⁶

The Monk's day was organized into a rhythmic succession of these elements: 4 hours of liturgical prayer, 4 hours of spiritual reading, and 6 hrs of manual work, within the framework of the monastic offices. De Waal notes that the purpose of the Rule is to create a favourable environment for the balanced life to flourish.²⁷ "The principle of moderation in all things", she notes, "pervades every aspect of monastic life".²⁸

Evaluation

In light of the above I appear to have arrived at a somewhat reasonable place, through God's grace; certainly not by any intention of mine. I recognize, however, that there is still much work to do.

Since I am human, I am not always consistent in following my Rule; particularly when I have to do it on my own. I know that I function better in a group in such matters – someone to whom I am accountable, if only voluntarily, for following my Rule. To some extent, a Spiritual Director can fill this function; but, in addition, I would like to submit to the discipline of a small group – like the 4th day groups from Cursillo. At this point in my journey I now feel that I can benefit from that.

I know that I have a lot of work to do in the area of making my prayer simple. I have always had a predisposition to use a book or some other printed material for my prayers – things like the Jim Cotter modifications of the morning and evening offices, or the weekly guides from the Creighton “Online Retreat ...”.

I do find it difficult to pray spontaneously in public, without the crutch of printed prayer. I confess to be somewhat unnerved in an ecumenical group where Baptists and Pentecostals are finding no difficulty in producing lengthy extemporaneous prayers.

My tendency is to side with Brother Lawrence, and dedicate all I do to God.²⁹ By myself, I invariably get things all fouled up, so I have developed the habit of giving everything to God and trusting in his direction.

With the practice of meditation I am trying to listen.

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¹ Esther de Waal, Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 145

² *ibid*, 146

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*, 149

⁵ *ibid*, 152

⁶ *ibid*, 153

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ H. A. Williams CR, Becoming What I am: A discussion of the methods and results of Christian prayer, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977), ix

⁹ *ibid*, 5

¹⁰ *ibid*, 7

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*, 8

¹³ *ibid* 15

¹⁴ *ibid*, 27

¹⁵ *ibid*, 28

¹⁶ *ibid*, 29

¹⁷ *ibid*, 30

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- ¹⁸ ibid, 21
¹⁹ ibid, 22
²⁰ ibid, 37
²¹ de Waal, 107
²² ibid, 108
²³ ibid, 109
²⁴ ibid, 110
²⁵ ibid, 85
²⁶ ibid, 86
²⁷ ibid
²⁸ ibid, 90
²⁹ Brother Lawrence, The Practice of the Presence of God, (Madras: Samata Books), 55