

The Four Needs for Daily Sanctuary Need #1: Relief from the Weight of the World **by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD**

If you are like most people engaged in the hubbub of work, family, business, and school, sometimes the world seems to hang too heavy around your neck. Accordingly, you will do most anything to gain some relief from all your busyness.

Thoreau reminds us: “It’s not enough if you are busy. The question is: What are you busy about?”

This question strikes at the heart of Western culture today, in which the will seems paralyzed by messages to produce, consume, and stay occupied. Thoreau asks us to go inside for the answer, but most of us would be disappointed with what we find: each day our life seems to be on a frenzied ride with no one pulling on the reins. We find ourselves staying unnecessarily busy and buying things as an escape, habit, or way of life. All too often, in our hustle and bustle, we end up having to wait — in lines, at lights and street corners, or for a commercial to end. Stuck in traffic or some crowd, our feelings of pleasantness turn to impatience and then rage. The sad thing is that we actually believe that all this is the price we must pay for living in an advanced society with most things and desires at our fingertips. Still, for many people, keeping busy may really be about doing nothing that is fulfilling. Do you know people who believe that their work, education, obligations, retirement, and the like have little intrinsic value?

It is no wonder that most people initially embrace the value of sanctuary in their lives out of a state of *world-weariness*. We all know this feeling of not being able to handle another moment of pressure, obligations, and input from the world around us. We are dog-tired from work or family responsibilities, mentally exhausted from having to make numerous decisions about a bazillion choices, and stressed out from job pressures, traffic, miscommunication, and relationships. In short, our spirit feels bankrupt for the day, week, or month, and our batteries are worn down.

After putting out so much energy throughout the day or over an extended period of time, we may simply feel the need to have a little grace of time and space to ourselves, perhaps in a relaxing, tranquil setting or activity. Such islands of sanctuary can serve to patch our weary spirit.

Lifting the Weight of Parenting & Family

Single parents, most of whom are women, know exactly what it feels like to desire just a little time and space to rest their weary spirit. Burdened with several daily “jobs,” only one of which pays real money, such parents are prime candidates for finding a little grace in their life. To preserve a sense of sanity parents should negotiate with their children for some regenerating alone time each day. A child can even help with suggestions and lend support. One mother, for example, simply takes a brief walk throughout her garden. Another’s two children allow her to sit for a few minutes listening to some soothing music. In most instances, when an adult approaches their children or family for a small amount of solace, their wish is usually honored.

Lifting the Weight of Work & School

The demands and stress of work, crowds, and traffic also afflict their toll on the psyche, so much so that we absolutely *must* consider the therapy of sanctuary as relief. I know an executive of a major

corporation who, by his own admittance, inflicts an undo amount of pressure on his staff. His authoritativeness seems to consistently undermine the morale of both his secretaries and sales representatives. On one particular visit to Oregon, we invited him (whom we had never met in person) to have lunch with us at our 22-acre nature sanctuary where we live. He came with one of his sales reps who happens to be one of our best friends. As soon as Herb stepped out of the car we could see him visibly melt inside his imposing six-foot-four-inch, three hundred pound frame. Then over lunch, looking out into meadows and woods, he began to share his life, and how he came to what he called the “shark-infested waters” of his vocation. But his voice was filled with melancholy as he described how as a boy he found inner comfort and joy wandering around the woods where he lived. He pined for such experiences again. He also shared his long-standing ritual of coming home from a fourteen-hour day of work and commuting: sitting in a lone chair surrounded by a jungle of houseplants listening to Buddhist monks chanting. He described the sounds as seeping into the deepest crevices of his soul. Our dear friend was shocked to hear about this side of his boss, with whom he has had a tense working relationship for years.

Herb’s Janus nature is perhaps no different than millions of other people in stressful jobs. Deception lives in all of us to some degree. But Herb, in spite of his ruthlessness as a boss or pressured executive, is also human. And he knows what hurts and heals his aching heart, even if he cannot always have sympathy for others. Everyday he gives himself just a little grace of time and space to empty out his mind. He tries and that is what counts. Knowing his volatile nature at work, a couple years ago we sent him a handmade gift: a little desktop sand garden with a few stones, a small Zen master, and a rake. He was deeply touched. We wrote on a note that when he felt undue pressure or angst he should rake the sand into patterns and sit for a few moments of peace. His staff has told us that he appears more patient and calm.

It is with good reason that most people value the special time and space of sanctuary from the world. Most participants in our sanctuary workshops describe how as youth nature was their primary source of solace. It is touching to listen to the many ways and joys that nature soothed childhood woes, or simply the desire to explore life independent of adults, chores, and school obligations. Many adults today can only imagine that any asylum from the world must come as vacation.

The word vacation itself comes from the Latin *vacatio*, meaning “freedom from service, or an emptying out of the mind.” Indeed, what makes time and space sacred *is* the freedom from the drone of everyday obligations, duties, and stress. Often, however, our vacations or time off become just as busily scheduled and stuffed with activities; we become faced again with the all too familiar issues of money, consumption, desires, and proper communication with family members or other people. The truth is, many people admit to the need for personal space *after* returning from vacation — they realize it did not fulfill their need to simply replenish the soul *through lack of busyness!*

Lifting the Weight of Societal Forces

It’s worth echoing again the constant societal force to stay preoccupied. The media and the marketplace (malls, stores, technological gadgets, etc.) are two powerful forces that plunder our senses daily. The Indian sage, Eknath Easwaran suggests: “when consciousness has been extruded into the senses, not much is available where it is needed — for concentration, security, sensitiveness, self-reliance, and imagination.” In many respects, the assault on our senses separates us from our spirit, our deep sense of heart’s desire for peace. And this is exactly the predicament we find ourselves in when we feel a sense of weariness from our life experiences — our mind is cluttered and overloaded, our nerves are fried or

on edge, and our body is exhausted. In truth, because we are pulled in so many directions, we find our energy has been sapped by the fragmentation of our body, mind, and spirit.

Expand

Sanctuary as Therapy for the Soul

Take a moment and reflect on the circumstances of your own lifestyle. What experiences in your day especially drain you or fragment your energy? How capable are you in turning your back to the messages of media advertising, news, or impulsive buying? In what ways do you, or can you, seek a modicum degree of respite from your duties?

Sanctuary is immediate therapy for the soul. It allows the soul a period of time and space to convalesce from the world. It pulls us back together, serving to create a safety net of consciousness that attempts to restore a degree of wholeness and wellness in our life. How does this happen?

First of all, sanctuary gives us the opportunity to redirect our individual will and quiet the mind. Removed from the world mentally, yet residing squarely within it physically, sanctuary allows us to gain fresh perspective on life. It gives us the feeling of having more control. The unexpected consequence is that we may begin to feel calm and peaceful, even gain some fresh insight into our life about things that don't make sense and should be changed. (need examples)

We have met numerous people who have found sanctuary to be the great catalyst in deciding to do something about an oppressive relationship, an unfulfilling job, or some other life concern. Taking time and space, perhaps in meditation, sitting or strolling leisurely in a natural setting, working in one's garden, or simply by volunteering for a worthy cause — each of these activities may lift the weight of the world just enough from our shoulders so that we can breathe in fresh insight or new hope. Perhaps we feel re-empowered to take action, or maybe we simply feel a sense of peace seep into our weary soul. It doesn't matter. Sanctuary is its own reward and consequence. (give example of a person who has done this successfully)

Another powerful therapeutic effect of sanctuary is this very notion of giving respite to the mind, emptying it out somewhat of clutter at the stimulating the heart. When we move into the reflective rooms of our soul, we begin to see the world differently and our roles and duties therein. As the Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis says: "The new earth exists from within the heart." Sanctuary opens up our heart little by little, giving us a different view of the world that we may desire to help rebuild — one of greater compassion, generosity, hope, beauty, and peace. Such a world is more sacred and contains less separateness. Relieved somewhat from our worldly burdens we may feel lighthearted. (example?)

I am always amazed at how easily Tricia is able to right herself by merely taking a small amount of sanctuary time. Sometimes she comes home frazzled and short-tempered, her heart a little closed perhaps by the stress of a meeting or business adventure. Home and family is a welcome respite, but she needs most is a safe third place, like a little time in a quiet room, a hot shower, a wander in the garden. Afterwards, her view of the world is softened and she feels more lighthearted.

Perhaps the greatest benefit we can expect to receive by visiting our personal isle of grace from the world is that of peace. How is this possible? The answer lies in balancing our mental relationship with the world surrounding us. For most people, their state of mind is like a leaky battery where impatience, anger, guilt, shame, intolerance, judgments, insensitivity are emitted as a type of psychic toxic pollution toward others. But, for example, what if we could stand in line or wait at a stoplight and *conserve* our

mental energy? What we would feel is some element of relief, calm, or peace. Peace of mind is really the powerful conservation of energy within the interior realm of the soul as it interfaces mentally with the physical world. Let's flesh this out.

We have all experienced the effects of concentrated, stored energy at least a few times in our life. More specifically, places that are sanctuary *embody* a tremendous conservation of energy. This energy is not leaking out all over the place, and that's the key. We feel this in holy places and church sanctuaries. We also feel it in an old and deep forest, near the juncture of rivers, or at some natural geographic location of power. We feel this in a meditation room or near altars. We may also feel this coalescence of energy in a sensitively developed landscape like a garden or park, or in specific locations of such places.

Each of these types of places, from the most intimate to the grand, seems to magically pull us into ourselves, very quickly! But as individuals we too are capable of embodying sanctuary, if only for a moment or two right in the middle of all our activities! When we feel calm, peaceful, compassionate, loving, forgiving, courteous, grateful, and joyful, we are experiencing and emitting the same divine energy of the universe. At such times we don't feel psychically, spiritually, and physically drained. Instead we feel fully in control of our world, unflappable and unfettered. Our energy is contained and not leaking out all over the sidewalk. And often our peacefulness is like a magnet that attracts others to our psychic haven.

In summary, you need to learn how to give yourself the grace of sanctuary as a natural feature of your day. Otherwise, the weight of the world will stymie your will. Learn how to distance yourself from the media, news, and the compulsion to spend money. Take a little time away from television and other forms of technology that thrust the world into your face. Engage in moments of inward reflection. Ponder your relationship to the world around you and to God. You *do* need sanctuary in your life, and you can benefit from it immensely.

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

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