

Sustainability in the classroom

Nurturing our Spirits in Transient Places

Simon Carey Holt

First published in *The Christian Teachers Journal*, 15:2 (2007), 10-13



Schools are transient places. They're meant to be. Movement is key to a school's purpose. We want our students to progress—to move up, on and, eventually, away. The old self-deprecating joke about “spending the best six years of my life in first grade” is only funny because it infers the joker's failure to succeed. Educationally speaking, transition is success; progress is good.

That said, it's this transience that makes the teaching profession such an exhausting one. Every year we front up to a new class of students. Year in and year out, we gather our resources and our wits, take a deep breath and do it all again. While it's true a school's success is measured by the constant progression of its students, its health and effectiveness is largely dependent upon the stability of its leadership. A transient student body is good; constant change in teaching staff is not.

So, in the highly transient context of a school, the questions for teachers are these: How do we sustain ourselves for the long haul? How do we maximize our long-term investment in the mission of the school? How do we ensure that our contribution is more than a just a flash in the educational pan? How do we maintain our sense of God's call and presence in our teaching? In short, what does sustainability in the classroom look like?

PRACTICING SUSTAINABILITY

The language of sustainability is now mainstream. Talk of things like sustainable development, sustainable cities and sustainable farming is commonplace. The United Nations

environmental commission defines sustainable development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the future. A commitment to sustainability flows out of the conviction that tomorrow is just as important as today, for eventually tomorrow will *be* today. Similarly, sustainability in the classroom is about an approach to our work that fully embraces the present while ensuring that vibrant teaching continues on into the future.

We know that a commitment to a sustainable environment warrants more than just verbal assent. At a personal level, it calls for sustainable practices, things like using water wisely, recycling, or choosing public transport over the car. Sustainable practices are actions of investment in both the present and the future, knowing that our actions today—no matter how small or domestic—have implications for tomorrow.

Similarly, sustainability in the classroom requires sustainable practices, daily actions that give legs to our commitment to a lifetime of service. In themselves, such practices may not feel deeply significant. Yet a lifetime of accumulated practices like these can transform the nature of the life we offer to God.

That said, there is no authoritative list of such practices. Like the so-called ‘spiritual disciplines’ in the Christian tradition, they will develop uniquely in each new context. Your context is different to mine, as is your life-stage and the professional and personal challenges you face. Our practices will vary accordingly. What's important is that sustainable practices have an important place in your daily life as a teacher.

It is helpful to understand that every sustainable practice we commit to is a

choice. By its nature, a choice is intentional. What follows is a summary of the intentional choices that I have made. Offered under three headings, (i) sustaining our spirits, (ii) sustaining our impact and (iii) sustaining our communities, the list is not prescriptive. It's more an encouragement to explore the choices important to *your* sustainability in the classroom.

1. SUSTAINING OUR SPIRITS

A. Choosing solitude: I've long been fascinated by people like St Simeon Stylites, the 4th century ascetic who sat on a 60 foot pole in the Syrian desert for 30 years. In glorious isolation, he set about nurturing his spirit. Though I confess that from time to time a stint of pole sitting is appealing, the long-term practice is a ridiculous notion for someone called to teach. If I am to have an impact upon my students' lives, I can't do it on a pole. Still, what's increasingly important to the well being of my spirit is the regular choice for solitude.

There is something about the disciplines of prayer, bible reading and meditation that is uniquely nurtured in solitude. In solitude I breathe in, slowly and deeply. It's preparation for all that will be expended—spiritually, physically and emotionally—in the classroom. The routine practice of this deep spiritual breathing keeps me from the shallow hyperventilating more common to the chaos of daily life.

What's important in choosing solitude is that I choose it for the long haul. It's a discipline, a routine practice, the value of which can only be appreciated in retrospect. Should I approach the practices of solitude as having immediate benefit—expecting that each experience

will feel spiritually profound or have immediate effect on my teaching—I'm likely to give up. Just as the earth does not move every time I share a meal with my spouse, it's the daily practice of togetherness that deepens and cements our relationship over time.

B. Choosing to gather: One of the most significant gifts of the church is the gift of gathering. It's what many of us do on Sundays—gathering with other people of faith; an opportunity to collectively breathe in. As theologians remind us, church is not a building with a spire. It's the people of God, *gathered* to worship and *scattered* to serve. The gathering and scattering are linked. If the gathering is all there is, we've missed the point. Equally, should we neglect the gathering, we'll lose touch with what our scattered life is about. In the midst of my own busyness, choosing to gather is intentional. If it's not, it won't happen.

Sadly, this choice is commonly made more difficult than it needs to be by a failure on the church's part to appreciate the purpose of its gathering. We gather to be nurtured, challenged and inspired; we then scatter to be the church in the world. Our scattered life *is* the mission of the church. When the church defines its mission solely by its own services and programs, the gathering becomes a world unto itself. What follows is a demanding schedule of 'ministries' requiring exhausting levels of service on the part of the gatherers. Rather than a re empowering of God's people for the ministry of daily life, gathering becomes a yet one more demanding—even guilt-inducing—experience alongside every other.

I am blessed with a profound sense that I'm *called* to teach. Perhaps not all Christian teachers feel this so deeply, but

many are motivated by a sense of mission in what they're about in the classroom. So they should be. Sadly, it's a sense rarely affirmed by the gathered church. I have sat in many January church services where those enlisted to teach Sunday School have been publicly set apart for their valuable ministry, and I am grateful for them. But I often wonder why we cannot, with equal conviction, have our school teachers stand as we commission them for their ministry. Is one form of teaching more 'ministry' than the other? If the gathered church was more able to celebrate the mission of the scattered church, perhaps gathering would be a more natural and life-giving choice for us all

2. SUSTAINING OUR IMPACT

A. Choosing slow time: I well remember the many sermons I heard in my youth stirring my evangelical fervour and insisting on ever more energetic service for Christ. "Better to burn out for Jesus than rust out for the devil" was our mantra, as though stillness was akin to the decadence of sloth. Tragically, the road is littered with too many enthusiastic disciples burnt out in the early laps of service, often more driven by guilt or obligation than drawn by grace.

Teaching is a demanding profession, both exhilarating and exhausting. Schools are exciting places, but places where the pace rarely lets up. Pacing ourselves to last the distance—to sustain our impact over the long haul—is key to surviving and thriving in the classroom. The choice to live the God-given rhythms of work and rest, service and Sabbath, fast and slow, is a fundamentally Christian one.

I live and work in a society addicted to speed. Life moves at an extraordinary pace. Technology makes it possible to move ever faster. I am sold the line that these tools of efficiency will result in more time for rest. The truth is, speed rules and rarely liberates. Its values and priorities seep into every part of my life and, consequently, I find it ever more difficult to stop.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann describes the call to Sabbath as a call to "holy slowness." In essence, Sabbath rest is a regular span of time in which to live differently, to live slowly. It's not that speed and efficiency are evils. In their place, they are good and empowering gifts. But routine slowness is also a gift and one of sacred proportions. Amidst the demands of teaching, it's one I must choose to build into my life, even in simple ways, if I'm to last the distance.

B. Choosing humility: The call to Christ-likeness in my teaching is a legitimate one, though I do well to remember that the call to *follow* Jesus precludes *being* Jesus. Messianic leanings in the classroom are a one-way street to a blazing but brief career. Choosing humility means living as well with my limitations as I do with my giftedness.

Fronting up each day to a school and to individual students means co-habiting with unrelenting demands, pressing needs and endless opportunities. Should I show up subscribing to the dictum that the need equals the call, I'll be panting too early to make the first lap.

I've discovered over the years that a little humility goes a long way. Giving my best as a teacher does not mean being more than who I am or living beyond my capacities. "Unless the Lord builds the house," the Psalmist once said, "they

labour in vain who build it.” The vanities of ceaseless labour and inflated self-importance in the workplace say far more about where I place my faith than any Sunday morning creed.

C. Choosing perspective: As head of a residential college at one of Australia’s elite universities, my partner dealt first hand with the extraordinary anxiety of year 12 students navigating their way into tertiary education. Amidst the intense pressures and expectations of the system, I heard her routinely remind them that they were more than their ENTER score. Work hard, she would say, but remember to look beyond this year, to see beyond 1st and 2nd round offers. Despite community expectations, she wanted them to know that their year 12 performance did not define the rest of their lives.

As teachers, I reckon we do well to heed the same advice. When I leave a classroom feeling my own inadequacy as a communicator, my inability to inspire, my failure to connect with a particular student, the despondency can be debilitating. We teachers do well to remind ourselves that our worth and impact as teachers is not measured by our performance *this* day, in *this* class, with *this* student, but over the long haul, and in the lives of multiple students, families, and fellow staff members. Perspective is liberating for perspective reminds us that today is not all there is.

3. SUSTAINING OUR COMMUNITIES

Choosing vocation: The word *vocation* is an ancient one, an early Latin rendering of the biblical word *calling*. From a Christian perspective, vocation

has little to do with a particular profession or career. It’s far more about *being* than *doing*.

I said earlier that I have a strong sense of calling to the classroom. While that’s true, teaching is a secondary calling. Primarily, I am called to be a child of God, saved, sustained and empowered by the presence of Jesus. Flowing out of that identity are many callings particular to my life, for the implications of that primary call touch every aspect of who I am: I am called to be a son, a brother, a spouse and a father; I am called to be a teacher, a pastor, and a writer; I am called to be a friend, a neighbour and a citizen.

The point is this. While teaching is a vital expression of my giftedness and passion, I am more than a teacher. My professional role does not define me. Choosing vocation is choosing a much more holistic approach to ministry, expressed through the multiple roles and contexts of my daily life.

My work as a teacher means that the educational community of which I’m a presently a part is an important community through which to serve. But in reality I am a vital part of *multiple* communities: work, family, neighbourhood, church, voluntary associations, etc. A sustainable presence in the classroom means that I do not live for the classroom alone, nor am I defined by it. Important as it is, God’s call upon my life is so much more.

CONCLUSION

I am writing this the last week of January. It’s late Sunday night and my two children have gone off to bed. Holidays mean later nights and lazy mornings. But with only one more week

before school recommences, we're bracing ourselves for the jolt of reality. Before we know it, the demands of the classroom will descend.

Personally, I love teaching. It's hard to imagine doing anything else. Yet I've been doing this long enough now to know that I'll not feel that love every day. It's more an underlying awareness that will surface from time to time. There will also be moments, days, even weeks, when I wonder if I'm really cut out for this, or if it's worth the anxiety and weariness. Inevitably, seasons of doubt and uncertainty will come.

Sustainability in the classroom is a challenge we all face. Flowing out of the conviction that teaching is a sacred calling and one worth living, I've suggested some sustainable practices that nurture our ability to thrive in the classroom over the long haul. They are suggestions and nothing more. At best, perhaps they'll inspire you to reconsider your own practices as little investments in a lifetime of teaching.