John’s Sabbatical

From July through December last year, I was on a six-month sabbatical for a time of rest and renewal. This time off was an incredible and unique gift! In hindsight, 18 years of inner-city ministry without an extended time away was not healthy for me or the ministry. I am committed to keep learning and growing in health on my life journey, and this time away was exactly what was needed.

Morgan and I traveled over 15,000 miles in our 1993 Toyota truck, camping and backpacking throughout the western US and Canada. We practiced what we called “radical trust” of where to go and where to stay—through prayer and discernment. Even if it did not make sense to us at the time, we tried to ask and then follow.

We wild camped in many national forests, slept on friends’ and acquaintances’ floors, soaked in hot springs, backpacked to alpine lakes, talked and prayed for miles and miles, had picnic tailgates eating hummus and veggies in Denver, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Toronto, visited 11 National Parks, listened to the entire Chronicles of Narnia while we drove, and hiked countless trails. It was the freedom, adventure, and simplicity we love. It was glorious.

We had a loose itinerary and sought God’s discernment on the details of where to turn, who to see, when to stop, and what we were to explore personally. At one point in our trip after a morning of changed plans and a road closure, we found ourselves at a brewery in Missoula, MT. We took a literal and metaphorical unexpected left turn and headed towards Washington state, truly unsure of why we were being lead there. As we approached the Pacific NW and met with friends there, the ‘whys’ kept revealing themselves. Clearly this was the Spirit’s leading. But I will never forget the questions and absurdity of driving west, and wondering, “Are we trusting? Or are we crazy...?” Maybe both.

Mt. Robson, near Jasper, British Colombia  Yosemite, California  Escalante, Utah
Walking the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James) in October continued the theme of practicing radical trust.

The Way is an ancient spiritual pilgrimage across northern Spain. It is believed that the Apostle James is buried in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and The Way developed in the Middle Ages as Christians journeyed to his grave. Today, similar to its peak in ancient times, a quarter of million people walk part of the Camino each year! We stayed in small towns and slept in bunk beds in hostels for pilgrims along the route. We walked an average of 15 miles a day. Every morning we drank strong Spanish coffee, and mid-day we ate a sack lunch of baguette, cheese, olives, and sardines in a church courtyard or a waypoint along the trail. It was a simple routine.

In total, we walked about 600 miles over 40 days from St. Jean Pied de Port, France to Muxia, Spain. We, with people young and old from around the world, walked the same path that millions of people have walked for centuries. All had unique stories, each encountering crossroads in life and seeking greater insights. The oldest pilgrim we walked with was Joe, an 81 year old from Slovenia, and the youngest, Linus, an 18 year old Swede.

Using Father Richard Rohr as a spiritual guide, the Camino was as much an inner spiritual journey as a physical one—our physical, emotional and spiritual selves are intimately connected. I found that as my body broke down through constant walking and lack of sleep, my heart and mind opened up on a deeper level. This deeper level is an inner journey of discovering the created image of God within me, who I really am beneath all that has defined me on the exterior—even my thoughts about myself. On many levels, it feels like I am finally waking up to who I truly am. This is new and exciting, but also uncomfortable and takes hard work. It is the inner work of exploring and understanding my past and core motivations of who I have tried to be. I understand this to be my “false self.” It is the new wineskins metaphor Jesus talks about—growth requires change and depth. If you are interested in a snapshot of Rohr’s description of false self/true self, check out this short meditation (https://cac.org/what-is-the-false-self-2017-08-07/) taken from his book *Immortal Diamond* that Morgan and I listened to as we walked the Camino.
This journey into the true self has opened up new dimensions of growth and depth that I did not previously know existed. And like almost everything, takes time, consistency, and practice. On the practical level, I am paying attention to the details of each moment a little better. I am more focused on each person in front of me, less worried about what has already happened, and less apprehensive about what needs to happen in the future.

Since I’ve been back from the Sabbatical, I’ve participated in a men’s group also started by Father Richard Rohr along the same line of spiritual growth, and my journey continues. An elder in the group shared this advice that stuck with me, “Be fiercely indifferent to the things that do not matter and fiercely attentive to the things that do.” These are good words to live by in my post sabbatical day to day.

I come back to East Central Ministries very grateful for everyone who allowed me to take this time of renewal. Blanca Pedigo did a wonderful job filling in as interim director, and ECM’s board and staff all contributed to filling all the leadership pieces while I was gone. I come back to ECM as the Executive Director very humbly and mindful of empowering the diverse leadership that ECM already has. I am also committed, as on the sabbatical, to practice radical trust here at ECM and in our neighborhood, constantly seeking the Spirit to determine the next steps.

I wish you all great grace on your journeys,

John Bulten, Director of ECM
(written with Morgan’s help, as is the custom)
At the end of April, Christy Sobolik took a job at the NM Immigrant Law Center. Christy worked with us the last three years and played a key bilingual communications and administrative role at ECM, writing everything from grants to updates to social media posts, managing volunteers, giving tours, helping folks who came to our office, trouble shooting technology problems, and generally helping ECM run more efficiently and effectively in many ways. Thank you, Christy! We miss you!

A Few Pictures from ECM Life

Growing Awareness Urban Farm had a busy and productive spring. Thanks to all who helped or bought tomato or chile seedlings!

UNM medical school presentation to kids & ECM youth fitness class.

The Common Good thrift store has 40+ volunteers that sort, sell, and fix almost everything!

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