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Take a deep breath

by Denise Simeone

Have you ever taken pictures at a special event and then found that the photos were out of focus? Or written something, and later realized what were you trying to say was too convoluted to understand?

Having a life that's out of focus can have the same jarring effect. Perhaps we hardly notice because we've become used to doing things so fast that the moments of our day blur together. But sometimes we stop, take a look at ourselves and realize that we're leading an unrecognizable, tangled and hollow existence.

Life passes quickly. We know that we should recognize each moment as a gift and live our time to the fullest. We know we could do more to appreciate the value of each day. Ask anyone who has recovered from a serious accident or a brush with grave illness. They understand the fragility of life; they often speak of that life-changing moment of grasping what they almost lost. And who, having lost someone close, would not wish to go back in time for just one more ordinary moment with them? Sometimes we come to our senses and make changes that lead to a clearer focus, a more purposeful life.

Pastors, pastoral ministers and staffs have the same tendencies as all of us. The work they fulfill each day is life-giving. It offers them opportunities to serve and care for others by doing things that bring them joy. Yet they can also start to define themselves by what they do. That same ministerial work can bring on fatigue and loneliness. Lives that are continually out of focus can lead to depression or addiction. And being out of balance can cause us to lose perspective on the Gospel mission.

Urgent needs surround us, and sometimes we believe we are the only ones who can answer them. We may believe we can do it better, faster, or more efficiently than others, so we choose to take it all on ourselves. That kind of self-reliance is exhausting and unhealthy.

Do we act like we're irreplaceable or invincible? Whose mission are we on, anyway?

For those of us focused on the mission of Jesus Christ, self-reflection is the first step toward restoring the balance to our lives.

- Humility: Do I often feel that I alone know the right answer or can make the correct decision? Do I experience a need to be in control? Where does my temptation to be in charge? come from? How can I relax into humility and become more reliant on God?
- Work relationships: What do I believe about my work with others? How do I treat my fellow staff or committee members? Do I respect their abilities, efforts and time? How do I fare at collaboration? Do I remember that Jesus trusted his disciples, who often didn't understand or who wanted the Messiah to do it their way? I am, after all, one of those disciples.
- Time and energy: What grabs my attention? Do I drop everything to answer cell phone calls? Do I rush from one appointment to the next? Am I centered in the moment, or am I jumping ahead to the next thing or person or event? What kind of pressure do I create for myself?

A friend once told me about going to an intensive workshop where participants could not talk about work, or ask others about their work, for three days. How would we fare under that kind of imperative? How much could we talk about the other significant things in our lives?

Jesus Christ came to fulfill God's mission on earth. He taught us by example. He ministered to the people around him. He traveled everywhere by foot or boat. There were many people he was unable to meet, touch or heal. Yet the ones he did encounter were changed by the experience of being with him. He did not set out to change the world. He simply focused on offering God's salvation and grace to those he met.

Take a deep breath. Trust that the next face you see will be the face of God.

[Denise Simeone is a regular contributor to *NCR*. A longer version of this article originally appeared in the May 2010 issue of *Celebration*, *NCR*'s sister publication.]

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