

Divine subtraction

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

Recently I received a letter from the CEO of a not-for-profit corporation that is dear to my heart. After seven years of leadership, he said, he believed it was time for him to step down. The first reason he gave was that the organization needed new vision for a new millennium. As noble as that sounded, I did not buy it. The second reason struck me as authentic. It was time, he said, for him to live a more contemplative life than his present position allowed.

I am hearing the same thing from a woman friend of mine who is a partner in a big Atlanta law firm. She became pregnant with her first child, and while her belly grew bigger and bigger, she interviewed nannies and tried to figure out how she was going to cope with a six-week maternity leave. Then her son was born and she lost all track of time.

When she returned to work, her heart did not belong to the firm anymore. She says that the turning point came one day when, in between clients, she blockaded herself in her office to use her breast pump. Since her door did not lock, she rolled her desk chair up against it and was sitting there with her blouse unbuttoned when her telephone began to ring. When she did not answer it, her assistant began to tap at the door, wanting to know if anything were wrong.

Now she is thinking of giving up partner status in order to have more time at home. At this point in her life, feeding her son his supper every night and taking him to the playground on weekends is more important to her than winning multimillion-dollar lawsuits.

These are stories about wealthy, privileged people, and as such they have little to do with how most people in the world live their lives. But they do reflect the corporate culture in which many of us live, which is why I bother to share them. They also match my own sense that it is time to slow down. As an eldest child, I have been an overachiever since the moment I learned to recognize the glint of expectation in my parents' eyes. As a woman, I have grown up attentive to the needs of others. As a Christian, I have believed it is my duty to refuse no one who begs anything of me,

and to go two miles for every one that is asked of me.

Now, just for a lark, I have decided to take a year off from extracurricular activity. I have proclaimed the year following my 50th birthday a Jubilee year—no sowing, no reaping, no gathering into barns—a year for freeing slaves and forgiving debts, whoever and whatever those turn out to be. For one year I am going to work 40-hour weeks and stay home as much as possible. I am going to attend to my most intimate relationships, including my relationship with God. I am going to love the neighbors I encounter every day, but I am not canvassing the county or getting on airplanes to go find them. I am going to live as human-sized a life as I am able and see what it costs me, both in terms of my grandiosity and my sense of loyalty to God. At least that is the plan.

When I turned down an invitation to speak based on this reasoning, I received a doleful response from one clergyman. While he admired my decision, he said, it reflected an alarming trend in his church. As more and more people learn to say no, he observed, more and more church work piles up on his desk. "It reminds me of the story about what happened when Uncle Ted was cured of his delusion that he was a chicken," this man wrote. "While his family was glad that he was healed, they still missed the eggs."

His letter made me think of all the Uncle Teds (and even more Aunt Marthas) on whom the church depends—people who wear themselves out doing whatever needs to be done so that other people can eat omelets. I wonder what would happen if they too were healed? Once a lot of church work went undone, would it turn out to be superfluous, freeing more human energy for the work of the church in the world? Would clergy become so overburdened by institutional maintenance that they would rebel, reclaiming the tasks of preaching, teaching and pastoral care that were once central to their callings? Would even the most jaded churchgoers begin to see that faithfulness to God is something different from multiple committee memberships and four evening meetings each week?

I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty, and when the ones we love most are the ones we see least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand.

If more and more people are slowing down, I am not sure that their decision should be interpreted as a retreat from the self-sacrifice demanded by the gospel. It may also signify a deeper embrace of divine grace, from which all faithful sacrifice springs. At the very least, it means that some of us have decided to deviate from the corporate culture's values, and to take back some of the sacred time we have too easily surrendered to other gods.

"God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by subtracting," Meister Eckhart wrote 700 years ago. Despite our fear of diminution, what this math promises is fullness of life.