

## COLUMNISTS

*Simple solutions for hectic lives*

This column is meant to be a kind of tribute to simple solutions. Over the course of the last few weeks, my colleague Deacon Tom Driscoll and I have offered a few sessions of a St. Bernard's on the Road program about balancing obligations to family, job, neighborhood, church, country and world.

As we prepared for the sessions, Tom and I expressed frustration about feeling that we are not in control of our time or our lives, nor has either of us developed an ability to say "no" to countless obligations and expectations that are part of our worlds and that we impose on ourselves.

This realization eroded my self-confidence a bit as I anticipated leading a discussion on a topic I have not mastered myself. However, those attending helped to focus the problem in important ways: our acceptance of an unspoken assumption of our society that the more important you are, the busier you are, and the tendency to equate busyness with goodness or success, feeding into a diminished sense of self. If I don't feel that I'm worth much, I look outward for the approval of others. This approval comes from being busy —



the  
moral  
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

TOO busy — about a whole lot of things.

Another aspect of the problem is that we measure success in terms of the money we make, the things we own, the prestige of the job we hold and the amount of information at our fingertips. The groups also noted that the time set aside for family, worship and interaction with others, for being alone and doing nothing, has diminished as the pace of life has increased.

The groups we met with, like ourselves, were very articulate about naming the problem. Identifying solutions was a bit more problematic. It was almost as if we were all looking for a magic formula or "message from on high" that would

change these life patterns for us, imagining that a thing must be very complex to be effective.

In contrast to this assumption, Deacon Tom offered some very straightforward and simple advice. Citing the work of Henry Nouwen, he urged us to try solitude, silence and prayer. We might try spending a few minutes of each day alone. We can never know our own souls if we are never alone. We should try to spend a few minutes of each day in silence, too. Part of what feeds our insatiable need to be doing something, watching something, or listening to something, is our fear of silence. Facing oneself can be pretty scary. Finally, Tom advocated that every day we ought to try a kind of prayer that is simply "talking to God." Just talk to God in ordinary terms, conversing about what gives us hope, what frightens us, what gives us joy in the details, the events, and the people who make up our lives.

I think some of those attending the program thought they had been deceived because of the sheer simplicity of this suggestion. I think we overlook genuine solutions to problems just because they

seem too obvious and too simple. I recently moved into a house that has access to something I have coveted for years: cable television. I counted on this addition bringing enormous benefits to my life: more insight into world events, better access to sports events, improved entertainment opportunities, even more timely insight into approaching weather trends.

I have become aware of something else happening instead. I haven't watched one single program from start to finish. All I do is "click" to the next station, in case I might be missing something better there. I find cable only intensifies my sense of dissatisfaction and distractedness. The absurdity of the situation shows itself in my occasional wish for even more channels. I have apparently concluded that more of what has already failed to satisfy me will somehow be better!

A gentleman approached me after I had described this cable dilemma. Quietly he told me that he had a solution to the problem. "Turn it off," he said.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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