

Second Week of Lent  
**How is it with Your Soul?**  
**Gaining What We Cannot Afford to Lose**

Ruth Haley Barton

*“The authority that we need must be total. It can no longer come from mere church mandate or Biblical interpretation, but it must also come from our souls. We need Christians who have souls!”*

Richard Rohr

This week’s Gospel reading contains one of the theme verses of the Transforming Center: *For what will it profit a person if they gain the whole world but forfeit their soul? Indeed what is worth more than your soul?*

The words *soul* and *life* are used interchangeably in this well-known teaching of Jesus. Both of these words are used to translate the Greek word *psuché* which literally means *heart, mind, and soul* and denotes life in two respects. One is the “breath of life” which refers to the reality of being physically alive. The other is the seat of the personality—the part of a person that perceives, reflects, feels and desires.<sup>1</sup> Or as Luke 9:25 translates it, *our very own self*—that which makes us who we are uniquely and has been given its very existence by God himself.

The soul, then, is the essence of a person as God has created them. It is the true self that is God-given and God-breathed. In a redeemed person, the soul is animated and indwelt by the Spirit of God. While we cannot take credit for having been given a soul—which is to say, our personhood—we have a choice about whether we will cultivate the true self that we have been given or whether we will squander it in the pursuit of other things that we deem to be more valuable.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 368).

Through this powerful, rhetorical question Jesus indicates that it is possible to gain the whole world by human standards of comfort and success but to lose the very essence of ourselves. Jesus defines true followership as the willingness to deny yourself—to deny that which is not really you (the false self)—in favor of becoming our true self in God, the true self who is radically alive and responsive to the call of God upon our lives.

Taking up one's cross, then, becomes a symbol of our willingness to really live—to take full responsibility for going on the self-sacrificial journey that Jesus himself pioneered and modeled. This journey will not always make sense by human standards since it is characterized by vulnerability, suffering and death. But it is the only journey that leads to Life.

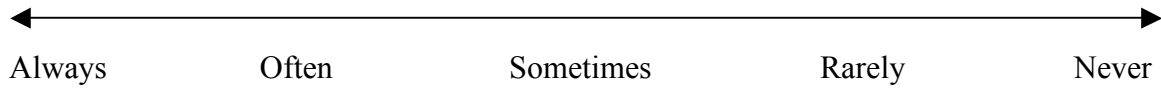
Lent is a season when, free from some of our normal distractions, we have a bit more clarity of mind and simplicity of life to consider whether we are in the process of gaining or losing that which is most real. How do we know if we are gaining the world but losing our souls in the context of ministry? How do we make sure we do not lose our very own selves in the midst of it all?

### **Practice**

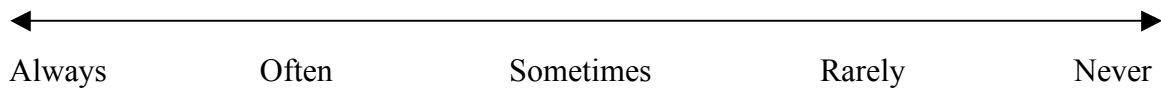
Following is a practice that will help you assess the state of your soul as a person in ministry.



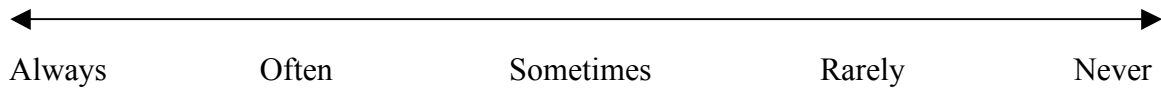
4. I am keeping up with what pastoral ministry requires but deep down I feel that have lost touch with who I am in God and what he has called me to do.



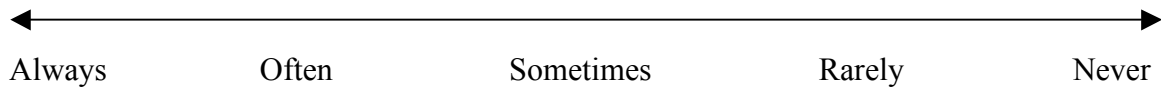
5. I am tired—not just physically but spiritually and emotionally. I don't really know how to get rested.



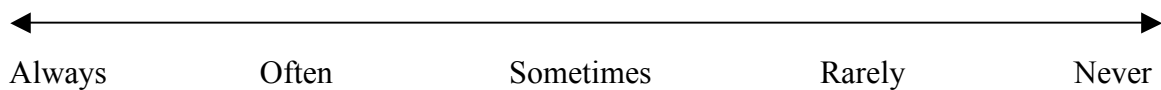
6. I am aware of an underlying irritability and restlessness just beneath the surface of my life.



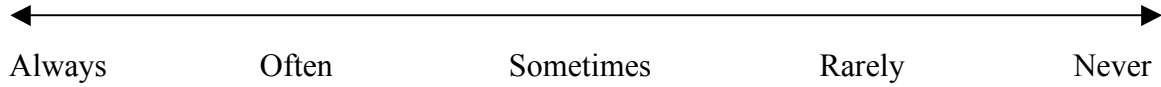
7. I can't stop working even when I know I need to.



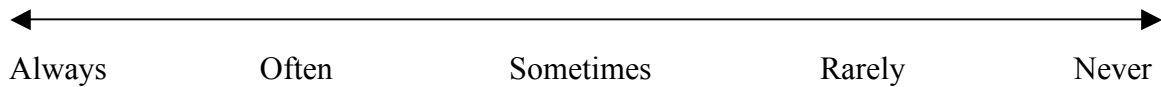
8. I have become emotionally numb—unable to experience a full range of human emotion.



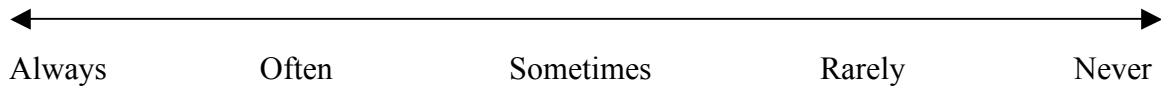
9. I find myself increasingly giving in to escapist behaviors (eating, mindless television viewing, substance abuse, shopping/spending, etc.) or escapist fantasies—dreaming about being somewhere else or having a different life.



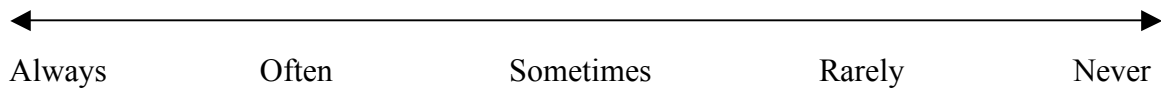
10. I do not have time for attending to my human needs—exercise, eating right, getting enough sleep, doctors appointments and medical procedures, picking up dry cleaning, getting the car washed, making home repairs.



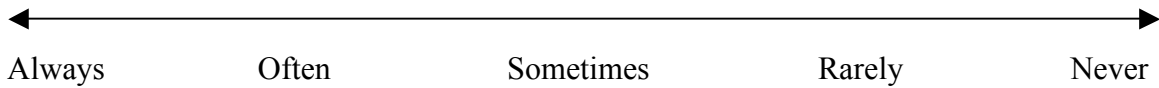
11. I find myself hoarding energy—avoiding people in the grocery store, holing up at home or in my office—for fear that routine social interactions will rob me of that last bit of energy.



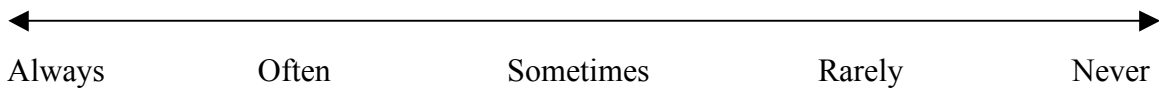
12. My spiritual practices have slipped. Even though I know that practices such as solitude, prayer, personal reflection on Scripture, etc. are life-giving, I find I don't have time or energy for them.



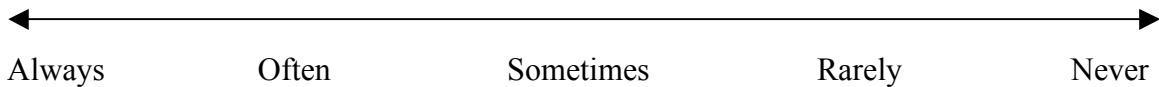
13. I feel isolated with no one to fully confide in and no one who fully understands my situation.



14. My staff team/elders and I are very good at strategic planning and “thinking our way” into solutions, but we do not have a clearly articulated process for discernment at the leadership level. Aside from perfunctory prayers to book-end our meetings, we don’t have a way of seeking God together.



15. It has been a long time since I have felt connected with the presence of God in my own life beyond what I am doing for others. Sometimes I suspect that my vision for ministry has become more important to me than my own relationship with God.



If you find yourself in the *Always-Often* portion of the continuum for three or more of these questions, then chances are you are already becoming dangerously tired and losing your soul in ministry. If this is true for you, you may want to consider reading *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, which addresses these types of depletion and also provides guidance for strengthening your soul in the context of ministry. You might also consider attending a Transforming Center retreat to receive additional guidance in the spiritual practices that will strengthen your soul for the long haul of ministry [[www.thetransformingcenter.org](http://www.thetransformingcenter.org)].

Ruth Haley Barton is co-founder and president of the Transforming Center. A spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, she is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life including *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Sacred Rhythms* and *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* (InterVarsity Press).

©Ruth Haley Barton, 2009. This article is not to be reproduced without permission from the author or the Transforming Center [[www.thetransformingcenter.org](http://www.thetransformingcenter.org)].