

TRACTION: A PROCESS OF MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

By Bob Young

One of the challenges of pulpit ministry is that Sunday is always coming! Not only does the sermon loom weekly (during my years in full-time ministry that was two sermons) there are also bulletin articles, correspondence, classes, and many other projects. One must learn to write and prepare lessons and materials, even during the dry times.

I remember those days in full-time ministry when I went to my office, committed to writing something, but produced very little. Often the problem was not an inactive mind; but that my mind was racing so quickly from thought to thought that I had trouble finding a focused perspective.

This is the problem of mental traction. Traction simply means that one cannot get hold of anything specific and concrete to move forward. Some days, it is difficult to get mental traction. The mind (like a mental engine) is operating, usually multi-tasking, trying to handle lots of different concerns and plans (according to what scientists and psychologists tell us). An engine running without traction—merely spinning the wheels—is of no value.

A related problem is spiritual drought, often the result of a lack of spiritual traction. The situation is similar. Sometimes spiritual drought comes from a lack of spiritual desire. But more often, the spiritual desires have not shut down, but the spiritual needs within and without are overwhelming. “Spiritual” activities may actually increase, but the results are meager.

Where and how does one find the power to refocus? What should one do when one experiences mental or spiritual drought? How does one renew the spiritual life? What will help start the writing process? Here is a sequence I have found helpful. It serves as a guide for sermon preparation, writing projects, and many other things that I really need to get done. It focuses my attention and helps reestablish life’s spiritual priorities.

- First, identify a concept that captures, demands, and focuses your interest and attention; or identify an activity that is very high priority.
- Second, use that focus to exclude other items and ideas from the present moment.
- Third, decide what specific aspects of the subject you want to explore, or exactly how you can best accomplish the goal.
- Fourth, think about related areas that could profitably be included as you explore the subject, or undertake the task.
- Finally, go through the steps necessary to develop the writing project, pursue the task, or refresh spiritual activity.