

What being vaccinated has taught me about spiritual restlessness

**I have the freedom to say yes to things again.  
And I still have the freedom to say no.**

by [L. Roger Owens](#)

May 19, 2021



[RyanJLane](#) / Getty Images

During the course of COVID quarantine, something remarkable happened: I tasted satisfaction, even happiness. No doubt St. Augustine was right that our souls are restless until they rest in God. But when all my travel was canceled, my office was moved to my basement, and my world shrank to the size of our modest ranch home and its sunny front yard, my own restless soul experienced a season of contentment.

I began to look forward to a daily breakfast of oatmeal and banana, and I found pleasure in the hum of the bowl as I scratched it clean with a scrub brush every morning. Taking a walk with my kids or watching a squirrel arc its way across the yard—these became occasions of genuine joy. When a friend posed the question on Facebook, “What surprising thing have you learned about yourself in pandemic?” I found myself responding: “How little I need beyond my family, some good books and movies, my walks, and time to write and pray.”

It seems I was discovering the meaning of *enough*.

But that began to change a few weeks ago, when I stood in line at a Baptist church early on a Saturday morning to get my second COVID vaccine shot. When I walked out of that church, I felt the walls of my world expand and sensed freedom rush back in. And with it came my old companion: restless dissatisfaction. I stopped at Chick-fil-A on the way home and scarfed down a chicken biscuit in the car. Suddenly, oatmeal would no longer do.

That engine of restless wanting, having idled quietly for 14 months, was being revved.

A couple weeks later, I was taking my oldest son to Target. During quarantine, the thing I was perhaps most happy about was not having to shop. No more waiting in lines or roaming the aisles of Sam’s Club or running to the store to pick up *just one more thing*. But now, on the way to Target, I declared, “I can’t believe how good this feels!” In the store I marveled at how many people were out shopping.

“Not everyone has been in hiding like you, Dad,” my son reminded me.

I left Target with five different kinds of chips in my cart, including chili-cheese Fritos, which I’d forgotten existed. I intended to take them to a small outdoor gathering later that evening, but after one bite I knew I had to have them for myself.

What was happening to me?

There might be a clue in the old monastic practice of observing “custody of the eyes”—keeping one’s gaze downcast in order to prevent the passions from being stirred by visual stimulation. There’s a brief story in the sayings of the desert fathers about a monk on a journey. Some nuns were approaching him, and when he saw them, he stepped off the road to avoid meeting them. The abbess, traveling with the

nuns, said to the monk, “If you had been a true monk, you would not have looked to see that we are women.”

It’s a cryptic story, prudish and puritanical by our contemporary judgments. There seems to be little in it for us.

Unless we consider a deeper lesson, one I believe being vaccinated has helped me to understand: quarantine, for many of us, has been an enforced custody of the eyes, and *acedia*—that intoxicating brew of restlessness, craving, ennui, and dissatisfaction—thrives on stimulation. Stripped of opportunity and stimulation, restless desire fizzles out like a fire deprived of oxygen. But as soon as possibility returns and is indulged—that wide-eyed trip to Target, to the wine store, to the used book sale at the library—and we see new potential objects of desire, we begin again to want things that for a time we were content to forget.

I felt that restless craving acutely at the library just the other day. For the past year, the books on the shelves at home had been enough, along with the few I’d thought to request for curbside pickup. I was fine rereading Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* for the fourth time and seeing, perhaps for the first time, how John Ames could spy beauty and glory in the routines of life and in his neighbors and friends in what many of us would consider a suffocatingly small town.

But that day I stood stunned by the array of books published in the previous year that I’d never seen. I checked out an armful, and they will sit stacked by my chair and incite anxiety because I don’t have time to read them all. Having allowed myself to look, there was no going back. No stepping off the path.

If recent economic reports are any indication, I’m not alone. Because of pent-up demand, prices are increasing, rising more than 4 percent in April from a year earlier. As reporter David Gura noted on NPR, “There is this desire to travel. The price of plane tickets went up more than 10 percent from March to April. Hotel rooms have gotten more expensive. And the cost of car rentals is up more than 16 percent.” If it’s related to escape, to getting out and seeing the world, the cost is going up. Now that we can travel and shop again, it seems we must.

Recognizing this problem doesn’t mean I won’t enjoy a chicken sandwich or a late-night milkshake. It means practicing, if not strict custody of the eyes—I won’t don blinders in the chips aisle—at least increased vigilance. When a seemingly unprovoked urge to hop in the car and drive some place to shop or eat strikes, I

hope to pause and interrogate the moment: *Where is this coming from? What am I trying to escape? Do I really need what I think I want? Will it make me satisfied, happy?* I need to remember that, along with a vaccine-enabled freedom to say yes to those urges more often, I also have the freedom to say no. The freedom to look at what's right in front of me and declare it good enough.

As Pentecost approaches, I've been thinking about the early Christian community described in the book of Acts. They were content with the daily and weekly rhythms of prayer and worship, satisfied enough with God and with each other to let go of their acquisitiveness and to share, happy that their lives were being upheld by a Savior who met them as they gathered for a simple meal, sustained by a Spirit who inflamed their desire for God. Here, surely, is a community that can teach us something about finding rest in God, even in a world of distractions and endless delights.

Of course, they'd never tasted chili-cheese Fritos. Lucky them.