

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Waiting For The Breakout

by Dr. Mike Armour

Robert Frost described thought as flowing like water spilled on dry ground. It runs, it gathers, it pools, then it breaks forth and runs again.

His comments apply equally to life. There are seasons of brisk movement and rapid progress — times of running. Times of flow. Then there are seasons when things barely seem to move at all. It's as though we're marking time. A friend of mine calls it "marching in molasses."

As Americans, with our "work hard, be productive" ethic, these times of "non-flow" are tough to weather. They get under our skin. They frustrate us. They lead to self-doubt. "What's wrong with me?" we keep asking. "Why can't I get things moving?"

It seldom dawns on us that maybe nothing is wrong. In Frost's words, this may simply be a time of "gathering." A time of "pooling." Even the greatest rivers have pools and eddies. That's part of nature's flow.

Gathering Strength

Our frustration in seasons of pooling can blind us to a greater process at work. As Frost noted, water gathers in pools in order to marshal its strength. It's getting ready to break out anew. And when it does, it's likely to flow in an entirely new direction.

Looked at this way, pooling is a friend, not an enemy. It gives us time to reflect. To regroup. To rethink. To do those vital things that we pushed aside in more frantic hours.

On the surface, pooling seems to be a time when nothing is happening. We're not getting anywhere. To the contrary, a great deal is happening. Life is gathering its energies, preparing to break out and run again — often in unforeseen directions.

I even discover a certain excitement in seasons of pooling, a wonderful sense of anticipation.

- What will happen when the breakout comes?
- Is life about to launch me on some bold new venture?
- What thrills lie just beyond the horizon?

Sometimes I can't go to sleep at night just thinking about these splendid possibilities.

The cynic, of course, will say that I'm crazy, that there's nothing to suggest a breakout is in the works. In his opinion my optimism is groundless, even naïve.

I see it differently. My optimism is no more groundless than his pessimism. Both are merely beliefs about the future. And like all our beliefs, we choose them. They are not thrust upon us ready-made.

In seasons of pooling, I can choose to believe that I'm trapped in a morass, from which there may be no escape. Or I can choose to believe that I'm experiencing the prelude to something fantastic.

To me, it only makes sense to choose optimism. Pessimism is like an undertow that pulls me down at the very moment I should be catching the next wave. Optimism, on the other hand, energizes me and gives me hope. Plus, this energy and hope intensify the forces already aligning for a season of resumed flow.

Pool Time

I'm old enough now to have had my share of "pool times." And the breakouts have consistently come. More importantly, they've always opened new chapters of life that were rich and full and rewarding.

Yet, for years I missed the importance of the "pool times." I saw them as boring, as a sign of malaise. So I fought them. I tried to amuse myself out of my perceived boredom. Or I tried stimulating myself out of my "malaise." What a mistake!!

Today I realize that pooling is nature's way of saying, "You've had enough stimulation for a while. It's okay to slow down. To regroup. To recharge." Now in seasons of pooling, I take longer walks. I read longer novels. I spend more time just "being" instead of "doing" all the time.

And far from boring, I find the times of pooling a blessing. They give me a chance to refocus. To rebalance. To revisit the deeper issues. To be sure I'm still in touch with what really counts.

Which leads me to one final reflection. Growing up on the rivers of East Texas, I learned that some of the best fishing is in the deepest pools. Over time I'm learning the same thing about my life.

A Word About Organizations

Organizations, like individuals, have seasons of flow and seasons of pooling.

Good leaders know the value of pooling and intentionally create opportunities for it to happen. They recognize an organization that has become fragmented, its efforts scattered, its energies diluted. What's needed, they realize, is a time to regroup. And I use the word "regroup" literally. Pooling is a time to "pull the group" back together.

A few years ago I escorted 40 teens on a backpacking trip in the Rockies. For several of them, long treks at high altitude were almost beyond their limit. They began to straggle and fall off the pace.

It became my job to see that no one got lost or left behind. I stayed with the slowest of the stragglers, and soon the line of march was a mile ahead of us, no longer in visual range. It was constant work to keep the stragglers moving.

Then we would top a ridge, and there, a few hundred yards ahead, would be the rest of the group. They had stopped to wait for us. Immediately I could feel renewed energy among the stragglers. Their step quickened. Their shoulders came up. Their faces brightened. No longer were they isolated, lonely hikers. They were “re-grouped” with their friends.

Re-Pooling

When organizations are no longer marching in tight formation, when stragglers are multiplying, when far too many spirits are low, it's time for purposeful pooling. Too often we choose the opposite course. We try to pump new energy into the group. We turn to pep talks and motivational speakers. We start a host of new programs to rekindle enthusiasm. Then we wonder why the positive impact is short-lived, at best.

In reality, we may not need “new energy” in the organization. We may simply need to “re-pool” the energy we already have. Sometimes to achieve more we must do less. And to catch up, we have to slow down.

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