

# How to Plan a Personal Retreat

## WHY DO THIS?

Faithfulness and success rarely happen accidentally. They happen with intention. A personal retreat is a few hours or a day set aside to step back from the current of your life and ask honest questions about where it's headed.

You don't need a cabin in the mountains. A hotel room, a quiet coffee shop, or even a locked bedroom door will do. What you need is honesty, a few hours, and the willingness to sit with whatever comes up.

Here's a framework I use every year, adapted from David Sparks. It moves through four stages: identify your roles, envision your best self in each one, ask hard questions, and build a plan.

## STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR ROLES

You live in multiple "vineyards" — different spheres of life where you show up and where people depend on you. Your first task is to name them all.

These aren't just job titles. Think relationally, vocationally, spiritually, internally. Aim for 8–12 roles. Ask yourself: Who depends on me? Where do I show up regularly? What would I miss if it disappeared?

Some of my roles, for example: Husband. Father. Pastor. Disciple. Ascetic (a disciplined person). Padawan (a lifelong learner). Philocalist (a lover of beauty). Mystagogue (a teacher of mysteries). Yours will look different. The point is to see the full landscape of your life, not just the parts that feel urgent.

Once you've listed them, circle the 3–5 that carry the most weight right now — the ones that take the most time, energy, or emotional bandwidth. Star any that feel life-giving. Put a question mark by any that feel confusing or draining.

## STEP 2: WRITE ARETE STATEMENTS

Arete is a Greek word meaning excellence — the full realization of potential. Not perfection, but direction. There's no point boarding a supersonic jet if it's headed the wrong way.

For each of your primary roles, write an arete statement using this template:

**"I am becoming a [role] that [description of the person I want to be]."**

Be specific. "Be a better parent" is vague. "Shows genuine interest in what my kids are interested in, makes them laugh, and is fully present when I'm with them" gives you something to aim at. You're not writing a guilt trip — you're casting a vision for who you're becoming.

A few tips: Use "becoming" language, not "arrived" language. Capture character and action, not just activities. Let the people you love and admire shape your vision. And don't rush — this is the most important part of the retreat.

## STEP 3: ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Now hold your arete statements up against your actual life. For each of your primary roles, work through these six questions. Write quickly — first thoughts are usually the most honest.

1. **What about this role brings me delight?** Where do I feel alive, energized, joyful?
2. **What about this role brings me dread?** Where do I feel drained, resentful, anxious?
3. **What or who am I undervaluing?** What resource, person, or opportunity am I ignoring?
4. **What should I keep doing?** What's already working?
5. **What should I do more of?** What's working so well it deserves more time and energy?
6. **What should I stop doing?** What's not working and needs to go — even if it's not bad, just not bearing fruit right now?

This part can be uncomfortable. That discomfort is productive. You can't steer a stationary ship — but if you're moving, even slowly, you can adjust course.

## STEP 4: BUILD THE TRELLIS

Vision without structure is a daydream. Now you turn your insights into a plan.

**Pick 2-3 big rocks for the quarter.** These are specific projects or commitments that would move you significantly toward your arete. They should be concrete enough to schedule, realistic for 12 weeks, and important enough that you'd be disappointed if the quarter ended without progress. Connect each one to a specific role.

**Sketch your ideal week.** Block out what's already fixed (work, sleep, existing commitments), then build in time for your big rocks, your relationships, and margin. If your priorities aren't on your calendar, they're not real. Most people have never designed their week — they just react to it.

**Choose 2-3 habits using the PACT framework.** Instead of outcome-based goals (lose 20 pounds, read 24 books), commit to actions within your control that you can do consistently:

- **Purposeful** — connected to your arete, not a random metric
- **Actionable** — based on what you can do today
- **Continuous** — simple, repeatable, compounds over time
- **Trackable** — yes or no, did I do the thing?

"Read for 20 minutes every day" beats "Read 24 books this year."

"Move my body 3 days a week" beats "Lose 20 pounds by summer."

Every action is a vote for the person you're becoming. You're not trying to arrive — you're trying to stay on the path.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

Book the room. Block the day. Bring a journal, your calendar, and these four steps. Take yourself out to eat. Enjoy the silence. And then do the work of asking what kind of life you're building — and whether it's the one you actually want.

Do this once a year. Review it once a quarter. Adjust as needed. The goal isn't perfection — it's trajectory. And trajectory requires intention.

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*This framework is adapted from David Sparks' personal retreat methodology. You can find his work at [macsparky.com](http://macsparky.com)*