

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Bob Rockford

When I was a little kid, my grandma taught me discipline. Whenever I would get the least bit out of hand, or even think about doing something I shouldn't, she would say, "You better behave or I'll get my stick," the dreaded stick. It was in her closet by the bathroom. I don't recall *ever* being on the wrong end of that stick and I don't think I ever saw it until I was much older. But what I do remember was the fear that came over me whenever I passed that closet door. Sometimes when she wasn't looking I would open the door to that closet and look inside trying to see the stick. This always brought a response from grandma who was usually in the other room, "You want me to get my stick out? My grandma had super hearing and x-ray vision. My grandma taught me discipline, and I loved my grandma.

The Marine Corps taught me discipline. In the "Guide Book for Marines" it says, "*Military discipline is the state of order and obedience among military personnel resulting from training.*" They taught me "fire discipline," not to be trigger happy in a fire fight and waste ammunition. They taught me "water discipline," not to use up all your water at

one time. They taught me “March discipline,” to obey the orders on the drill field to execute correct moves. The handbook says, *“With the exception of right step, all steps and marchings beginning from a halt start with the left foot.”* I know it never made any sense to me either. What they were trying to say was that whenever you start moving, from a stop position, you always start with your left foot unless you make a right step, then you start with your right foot. The movement that always caused me trouble was turning right face or left. I’m left handed and it was natural for me to make any of my movements toward the left. Well this would really upset my drill instructor. He would get in my face and yell obscenities, at the same time poking my right shoulder with his finger and yelling, “Your military right dummy, your military right.” Dummy wasn’t the word he used, but St. Mark’s congregation is here and I’m supposed to be on my best behavior. His face always seemed closer to my face than any of the girls I ever kissed, his eyes opened up to the size of silver dollars and his eyeball would quiver back and forth. I could always smell the coffee he had two hours before and he would spit all over my chin. It would seem that the Marine Corps should have taught their Drill Instructors “spittle discipline.” One day it seemed like our

platoon could do nothing right. We were turning the wrong way, not keeping in step, everything we did we messed up. Our drill instructor, Staff Sergeant Ables, was poking everybody and yelling expletives that most of us had never heard of before, calling us things that would make my grandma get her stick. He was having the biggest fit we had ever seen. About the time he calmed down, caught his breath, and found his cover he looked up and saw that we were next to the base chapel. He stopped, bowed his head and said, "Sorry Father." He made the sign of the cross, turned around to face us and continued his fit, yelling and screaming at us again. But what happened during the rest of my training as we learned our military left from our military right and as we learned "march discipline," was that the forty-eight men of my platoon became a team. When we marched we were tight. When each of us took a step and put our foot down on the ground, we did it as one. And what we heard was forty-eight feet hit the ground and making only one sound. That was "March discipline," and it came from the training and practice.

According to a 1913 Webster's Dictionary, discipline is described as a way, "*To educate; to develop by instruction and exercise.*" In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul, in a letter to

the church in Corinth, describes the Christian life. *“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”* Paul uses the *“I punish my body and enslave it,”* as a metaphor for discipline and self-control. Ever since Paul wrote this letter, Athletic imagery has been used to describe pursuing life with God. Discipline, practice, and exercise are the common words used in this description.

Christian Spirituality dates back to the time of the Desert Fathers, who used scripture in their devotionals. Benedict of Nursia was born in 480; he was a student in Rome when he left the city, unhappy with its decadent culture. He settled about thirty miles outside of Rome to live the spiritual life of a hermit. His reputation spread, and small bands of followers began to live with him. Benedict eventually organized them into small groups of twelve, with a spiritual Father or Abbot as the head of the group. They left built a monastery at Monte Cassino, and around 540

Benedict wrote the *Rule of Benedict*, which outlined the life in the monastery, everything from the Daily Office to how to do the dishes. Three elements that guide a Benedictine Monk are prayer, work, and Lectio Divina.

Alister McGrath, in his book “**Christian Spirituality: An Introduction**,” has an academic definition of Christian Spirituality, “*Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.*” In her book “**Soul Feast**,” Marjorie Thompson prefers a more biblical phrase, “the spiritual life,” and describes it as “*simply the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit in us.*” But Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century monk, says spirituality is “*the practice of the presence of God.*”

When we put the words discipline and spirituality together we come up with the term “Spiritual Discipline.” A web site called Spirit Home.com says, “*What makes something a 'spiritual discipline' is that it takes a specific part of your way of life and turns it toward God. A spiritual discipline is, when practiced faithfully and regularly, a habit or regular pattern in your life that repeatedly brings you*

back to God and opens you up to what God is saying to you. Spiritual disciplines help to keep our relationship with God in good working order, and even help develop intimacy.”

Christianity offers us a bunch of ancient stuff that’s about searching for and exploration of the divine. We are explorers, like Robert Ballard, who discovered the Titanic, like Lewis and Clark discovering and mapping new lands. Ancient spiritual practices have been proven over these many centuries to bring the participant into a deeper relationship with YHWH and enfold us in the love of the Creator.

So what are Spiritual Disciplines and how do you practice them? Debbie, Jody and I discovered the term “Spiritual Practices” around eight years ago at a Youth Specialties Conference. We have shared some of these with you and believe they are an important part of who we are as a church. That’s where you meet God, in these sacred times.

I’ve already mentioned one, Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading. There are two ways to read; for **information** as you would read a textbook or for **entertainment**, like reading the Sunday comics. But there is also a third way, **transformational**, the way we read scripture. The three elements that guide a Benedictine Monk are prayer, work, and Lectio Divina. But you also need to know the

importance reading had in the life of the Benedictine monastery. In the Dark Ages clerics and royalty were generally the only ones who could read. Books were scarce and expensive. In the Benedictine monastery a significant part of every day was spent in either reading or hearing scriptures. In the 12th century, Guigo II took the divine reading of the Benedictines and broke it down to what we have today. He saw the reading of scripture as a ladder up to heaven with rungs being parts of the divine reading.

Lectio: reading. The scripture was to be read slowly, savoring the words. We listen for that word or phrase that rises above the rest of the text and grabs us.

Meditatio: meditation. This step is like the clock screen saver on our computers. The time bounces around and we get to see it from different sides and angles. This is what we do with the word or phrase we received from the Lectio.

Guigo calls this step the “interior intelligence” of the text. We begin to meditate on the feelings and emotions that rise up in our inner self. Different text will generate different emotions in different people.

Oratio: prayer. Everything so far has been an entire exercise in prayer. Now Guigo emphasizes that the next step up the ladder is to ask God for illumination. It is asking God why

that word or phrase, why that feeling and then listening for what God has for you about the word or phrase.

Contemplatio: contemplation. This is the time we climb into God's lap and experience the love, to have that union with God, to be in that space where time and eternity almost touch.

The last two years on Good Friday we did the "Stations of the Cross." Legend says that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his mother would walk the path that her son took, from Pilate's house, to Golgotha, and then to the tomb. This path became known as the "*Via Dolorosa*," the Way of Sorrow. She would stop along the path at various places. The path became well known, and informational markers were placed at various points along the way. They were put down to designate spots along the path where he started, received the cross, where he fell, where he met his mother. Later pilgrims coming to Jerusalem would walk the same path, take out their papyrus journals and count the paces between each marker. They would go back to their village and set up a path that followed the path of Jesus, the "Stations of the Cross." By the turn of the 16th century, replicas of the "*Via Dolorosa*," were in Italy, Spain, and Germany. Many of these replicating the exact route in

Jerusalem measured off in paces. This would be a chance for everyone in the village to walk the way of Christ.

The “Jesus Prayer” is an Eastern Orthodox Spiritual Practice. In the simple form it is, “Christ, have mercy on me.” It echoes the ancient cry of the church, “Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.” In Mark 10:47 Blind Bartimaeus yells out to Jesus, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*” The tax collector, in Luke 18 verse 13, beats his breast and says, “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*” This practice goes back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who left Jerusalem because they felt the city was too loud to practice their faith. Can you imagine Jerusalem being too loud back in the 4th or 5th centuries? Ignatius, a 14th century monk, recommends that a person be “*earnest and undistracted,*” and be in a place of absolute silence and in a room that is dimly lit. You may want to light a candle and find a comfortable place to sit, and then bow your head. Then you need to be attentive to your breathing. Breathe in and breathe out in a slow gentle rhythm. Then begin the prayer in rhythm with your breathing. Breathe in: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*”; breathe out: “*have mercy on me, a sinner.*” There were no clocks when the Jesus Prayer was first practiced so the Pilgrim would count the number of

repetitions. They started at 3000 repetitions per day. For us doing between 100 and 500 prayers is a valuable and achievable practice.

Another Spiritual Discipline is called the “Kything Prayer.” Kythe, in Scottish, means “to feel close to.” As the Scottish would say, they are Kith and Kin. To do this you would center your thoughts and picture yourself in the Light; picture the person you want to pray for in the Light with you. Imagine the person’s face and then picture yourself with that person. You might want to place your arms and hands in an “X” shape across your chest as you “hold her or him in your heart.” Philippians 1 verse 7 says *“It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”* After a few minutes, exhale, dropping your hands, releasing your loved one to the arms of God, letting go—the hardest job parents or caregivers have. Let’s try this “Kything Prayer.” Like the Lectio we need to get comfortable so close your eyes and be aware of your breathing. Notice the rhythm of your breathing. Now picture yourself in the light. See the light around you, feel the light on your arms, your face.

(Pause)

Picture the person you want to pray for. Imagine his or her face. Place your arms, or your hands, across your chest in an “X” as you hold this person close in your heart. Now spend time with that person, being and praying for them.

(Pause)

Now exhale and drop your hands, releasing your loved on to the arms of God.

(Pause)

Offer God your thanks and gratitude for this time.

When you’re ready, draw yourself back to the group.

My encouragement is for you to tell someone what went on during this time, share your experience.

In Guided Meditations you listen to a scripture being read and you are asked to imagine yourself a character in the story. Ignatius of Loyola taught his readers to use their five senses to enter into a biblical scene. Once there you would listen to the conversations taking place, smell the food, touch Christ’s robe, or taste the wine. Then Ignatius would have the listener enter into a conversation with Jesus in the midst of the scene—for instance, on the road to Emmaus. After the practice was over you might share with someone who you were and what took place.

There are many more “Spiritual Disciplines” that you can learn. The Prayer of the Examen, the Daily Office, Icons, Sabbath, Fasting, Pilgrimage, and all these are ways that help us “practice the presence of God.” We want to learn to respond more effectively to Jesus and to the message of his life and the Gospel. In the book I just read for my Seminary class on the New Testament “*John, the Maverick Gospel,*” the author, Robert Kysar talks about first century Christians who were with Jesus, as having “Sign-Faith.” They walked with Jesus, they saw the blind see, the lame walk, they saw Lazarus walk out of tomb, they saw the feeding of the 5000 and the calming of the storm, they saw the healing of the woman who touched the hem of the Master’s robe, they ate with Jesus and saw the death on the cross, the empty tomb, and the Teacher cooking breakfast of bread and fish for Peter and Andrew. These people had “Sign-Faith” because they were there to see the signs. But Kysar says this in his book, “*The earliest Christians are convinced by the experience represented in the Gospels as the resurrection appearances of Christ. Well and good. But what of later generations? What experience leads them to faith? Is it the case that the first generation of Christians stand in a privileged position and none of their descendants had hope of*

such an experientially based faith? Are Christians after that first group doomed to secondhand experience upon which to build their faith?”

Christians have been trying to get close to Jesus for over 2000 years. In “*the practice of the presence of God,*” using Spiritual Disciplines we can meet God. This is our time with God. These Spiritual Disciplines are those “Thin Places,” described in Celtic Christianity, places where we may experience a very thin line between heaven and earth.