

Nurturing Connection with Self and God through Spiritual Practice

By Rev. Rob Courtney



If there's one thing I've learned in the past few years it's the importance of simple, consistent practices and how far they can bring us. For example, I am not an athletic person, or at least that's what I always thought. Nevertheless, a few years ago I started walking on a consistent basis, and found that combining this walking with simple portion control of my food led to weight loss - imagine that!

A very simple, consistent practice led to the kinds of results that doctors had always told me could be possible. This wasn't some kind of fad diet. It didn't require me to starve myself or give up foods I loved, or prepare myself for Olympic competition. Simply, it was a consistent practice - walking and eating less. I started to wonder, "Hmm. Could I *run*? I'm not an athletic person, but could I do that?"

It turns out I could! My wife bought me a book that had a 13 week run-walk program. It was very straightforward and simple. About 18 weeks later (after overdoing it and injuring myself, forgetting to keep it simple), this non-athletic person ran a 10k! I'm not saying I looked like a gazelle doing it, or that I was very fast, but I did something I did not think was possible for me. The key? Simple, consistent practices.

As I've reflected on what was, for me, a major accomplishment, I have become fascinated by the concept of practice. As a priest in The Episcopal Church I realized that this concept of simple, consistent practice is also exactly what I usually commend to people who are seeking to deepen their spiritual connection with God. Now, I believe firmly that God can and does show up everywhere, all the time, for everyone. God shows up outside of the context of worship services, Bible reading, private prayer, etc. But, I have a much greater chance of *recognizing* God's presence if I'm engaging in consistent, simple spiritual practices. Just like learning to run, learning a new language, learning a musical instrument, or anything else. One might be accidentally attuned to do any number of these things well quite easily without a lot of practice, but not everyone will. Yet, no matter how natural my abilities, I'm far more likely to get better if I'm regularly, consistently creating the conditions for the possibility of growth through practice. The spiritual life is absolutely no different—practice helps attune our senses to know where God is at work in our lives and in the lives of others.

One such practice I've been using is the practice of keeping a written prayer list. As a clergy person, people regularly ask me to pray for them, but even non-clergy who have friends in a faith community also get prayer requests. Whenever people ask I say, "Of course!" I do my best to remember, but let's face it—we all have a lot of things on our minds. It's not always easy to remember every request, as sincerely as I might try. So, I started writing these requests down in the back of my planner. My list has gotten quite substantial at times. I've found this practice has done several things for me and the people around me.

Intentionality

Keeping a written prayer list makes me more intentional. As soon as I get the chance I write down the name of the person or persons for whom I've been asked to pray. Sometimes I need write a

little reminder next to the name about why I'm praying for them, but often just the act of putting down the name brings the rest to mind when I return to it. Doing this helps me take much more seriously people's requests for prayer. I also share with people openly now that I keep a written prayer list. When people know this they often approach me individually asking to be on my personal list. Since I write the names down and talk about the list they know I take it seriously. Now those requests aren't just those things that go in one ear and out the other—they are an intentional spiritual responsibility.

Over time the list has also made me ask more questions about what people want me to pray for specifically. When I talk to someone about something they or a loved one is experiencing, I will not just say, "I'll put you (them) on my prayer list." I ask, "What would you like me to pray for specifically?" Often the answer is predictable—healing, peace, etc. Sometimes it's surprising! It creates intentionality in the person asking, too. It makes them truly think about what they're seeking from God.

Connection with Others

Keeping the list helps me maintain a stronger connection with people. As I go through the list each day I will usually realize there's someone I need an update on. It forces me to reach out to them to ask how they're doing. This is meaningful to people to know that I'm thinking of and praying for them, and it forges deeper connection.

It also gets me connecting with others on a different level each day, and becomes a source of blessing for me. It keeps me from getting too caught up in my introverted side. It helps me to put my own personal issues and concerns into perspective when I'm acting as a source of prayer for others. I don't have to take on their problems, I don't have to fix their problems, but I can be part of their journey as someone who cares.

Connection with God

Maintaining the list, and the connections, allows me to see the outcomes of people's stories, which reveals how God is working in their lives. Whatever that outcome looks like, or however the situation changes, people are always grateful for my prayer in those circumstances. It makes me feel empowered to have been a part of their journey in this unassuming, quiet way. That's not to say outcomes of the things I'm praying for are always good—unfortunately, that's just not how life or God works. But it gives me a stronger sense of where and how God is at work in the situation, and allows me to see some of the outcome of the story in a way I wouldn't with a quickly forgotten prayer request.

The Power of Prayer

That's a whole lot gained from the simple practice of writing something down, and then sitting with that writing as part of my daily prayer. It draws me closer to others, and closer to God, and empowers me. It's a practice that not only provides some personal growth, but gets me outside of myself. People often talk about "the power of prayer." I've always been a little suspicious of that phrase because it makes prayer sound like a magic trick. I think now, though, that I understand prayer's power differently. For me, through this practice, I've seen the power of prayer to affect and change *me*, the pray-er, primarily. It also has a powerful effect on the people with and for whom I'm praying. This is truly God's work. This simple, consistent practice has helped me to be more attuned to God's presence in my life, and in the lives of people around me.

Just as I did not have to engage an athletic person in a practice that got me running, one does not have to be a clergy person to make a practice like this one your own. You can begin praying for people even if they have not asked you directly! What would it look like, for instance, to make a list of the people you love? It can be people you see regularly, or maybe people with whom you've lost touch. Do you care about them? You can pray for them. Heck, you can pray even for people you do not care about or like at all—it might change them and you. What about people who you are grateful for? What about your doctors, nurses, or caregivers? Remember, it's a slow, quiet process, and you can make the list as short or long as you would like. The important part is just to start somewhere, and set aside a few moments to do it every day. You might be surprised at where such simple, consistent practice can lead.

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