

Growing your spiritual life workshop led by regional elders:

Introduction:

What is "spiritual practice"

Why is it included in "transformation" or "How does it transform?"

Guidelines for spiritual practice/ individually and in groups

Spiritual practice groups in the congregation

Guidelines for leading a spiritual group

Spiritual Exercise

Bibliography and resources

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

- Phrase is allowed a wide range of meaning—from deep prayer and contemplation, to doing every-day mundane details with a sense of the holy, to social justice and ministering to the marginalized...
- Alexander Cambell (quoted by Joe Driskill): Conscientious Christians need to pray, study the Bible, take communion, listen to the sermon and fast if they are to be faithful followers of Jesus."
- But growing your spiritual life requires going beyond just the religious aspects to seeing the Holy imbedded in everyday life and routine interchanges with others as sacred.
- Joe Driskill: 3 groupings: Inward, Outward, Communal. Our spiritual lives need some element of all three, though our own personal characteristics will determine which ones are the most rewarding and which are the most challenging.
- Inward: prayer, solo Bible study, meditation, listening to music, fasting, contemplation, gardening, journaling...
- Outward: working in a soup kitchen, caring for the environment, being kind to others, donating time and talent to causes
- Communal: worship, community outreach, communion, Bible study/prayer groups; committee meetings
- Joe Driskill: 3 ingredients are necessary to fully appreciate spiritual practices: 1) a true desire to deepen one's relationship with God; 2) a willingness to be disciplined in using the spiritual exercise; 3) some form of accountability.

From *Active Spirituality*: another way to look at areas of spiritual disciplines:

- Discipline of Community (solidarity) (Driskill's communal); Heb 12:25, Ps 122:1; Romans 12; 1 Cor.11:23-26; 12:1-27; 13:1-13) Practice of our faith; opportunities of service and accountability.
- Discipline of Solitude (singularity) (Driskill's inward); the need to nurture ourselves and replenish the well. (Ps. 46:10; 1Thes. 5:16-18; Mark 1:35-37; 6:30-46)

- Discipline of Heart and Mind (study); "Disciple"—life-long learning (Mt. 11:28-30; 28:16-20; 2Peter 3:18; Acts 2:42)
- The Discipline of Service (stewardship) (Driskill's outward); responding to God's love by giving back; Gal. 6:2; 2Cor 9:6-15; Mal. 3:10; Heb 7:3-8; Mk 10:40-45; Rm 12)
- The Discipline of Vocation (Sense of Purpose) (Combined of Driskill's 3 areas); Our calling—"to contemplate God's deep love—and to discern how to manifest that love in the world: 'The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet' (Frederick Buechner)." Gen. 50:15-20; Rm 12:1-3; 8-28; Eph. 4:1=7; Jn 15:1-5; Gal. 5:22-23; Philip. 1:9-11

HOW DOES IT TRANSFORM?

Active Spirituality: God longs to embrace us as we respond to God's gift of grace in faith, hope and love. We need training for the spiritual journey to rekindle the flame of faith and continually reflect the love of Christ.

Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercise*

- Historically Mainline [Anglo] Protestant church have frowned on or been suspicious of the emotional worshiper. They have been uncomfortable with the experiential rather than the intellectual relationship with God.
- Mainline Protestant churches have witnessed a mass exodus of those who seek more than an intellectual distant relationship and whose spiritual needs have not been met by a mainline passionate adherence to passionless orders of worship, oft-used hymns, and words, words, words--all verbal and mental with minimal or no place for quiet reflection time or full holy experience.
- Human beings have spiritual needs (whether they are consciously aware of them or not) that drive them to seek an experience that transcends the limitations of analysis and reason.
- "When leaders and worshipers believe that God's presence surrounds and infuses them, there is a compelling sense of the holy that touches the depths of their spiritual yearning."
- Past mainline Protestant practice: "Many Mainline Protestants live their faith in the paradoxical space between being too modest to speak for God except on social issues [and often non-committally or quietly there] and too reasonable to be truly dependent on God except in times of deep grief, crisis or tragedy." They are not looking for God's activity in the day-to-day activities of living.
- Spiritual practice disciplines move us into a deep, experiential relationship with the Divine that moves us beyond our self-absorbed, self-focused existence. "Our lives become oriented around the values that flow from our religious faith and our religious sensibilities."

- Spiritual practice disciplines help us discover afresh God’s deepest presence in the midst of our lives. This in turn will manifest itself in more spirit-filled worship, prayer, Bible study and community action. Truly transformative!
- For personal/spiritual growth: To be fully human means to be fully alive and honor the complexity of human development in every aspect. When one part of ourselves is “out of whack,” it affects other parts of ourselves. Unmet spiritual concerns and needs may manifest themselves in a variety of ways at different stages in our lives. By learning to listen to our hearts and spirits (God’s leading and nudging) we give ourselves the opportunity to “fine tune” and integrate all the aspects of our lives.

GUIDELINES FOR SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: (Driskill)

- Each person needs to find spiritual exercises that are compatible with his/her personal characteristic and style. E.g. extroverts may not want to sit for an hour and silently contemplate—They may want to do devotionally walking or body movement. Quiet centering prayer, guided imagery, journaling are some exercises that may work for others.
- Beginners need to give themselves permission to experiment with a variety of spiritual practices, but be careful not to “cut and paste” or jump from one to another, which violates the integrity of the practice and keeps one from going deeply into the experience.
- Used consistently, a spiritual practice will open us to the presence of the Holy in our midst at all times. It will provide the framework for our relationship with God.
- However, consistent practice does not mean consistent experience or results! It will not always unfold the same way. Sometimes there will be “mountain top highs” and other times, imperceptible responses. We must always go into the practice fresh, free of expectations or agendas, unattached and open to receiving God’s guidance and presence.
- Practices are most helpful when they are integrated into the fabric of our daily lives, regularly engaging in the exercise.
- We can use the 5 spokes from Kent Ira Groff’s wheel to assess an area where we want to grow our spiritual awareness, identifying some specific behaviors or tasks we can do to strengthen or renew our commitment to that discipline.
- Spiritual practices help us learn how to relate to the holy. Exercises “that require us to “let go” and “give away” are especially helpful for those who have gifts and talents that God may want to use in unanticipated ways” or because a change in our physical ability, environment, age, culture, etc. requires it. (Driskill)

- Leaders of a congregation may want to first commit to growing in the spiritual disciplines (Groff), perhaps in a small peer group together. Then these leaders can consider leading other small groups in the congregation.
- The board might also assess the balance of the congregations own communal life in relation to Groff's 5 disciplines, as individuals may have done for themselves, and in a retreat setting have the congregation commit to renewing or strengthening a discipline and actions to do so.
- Individual leaders can also commit to a regular spiritual exercise, then meet in a peer group, and eventually lead other small groups within the congregation on exploring spiritual practices and deepening their experiential relationship with God.
- Make sure spiritual growth groups that form in the congregation do not become 'elitist' and ingrown, resisting inviting new people. The goal is to include as many people in the congregation as possible in this process. Humility is an important gift of the Spirit to be practiced along with the spiritual discipline (no "holier than thou" allowed).
- Plan opportunities for spiritual growth as part of the adult (and youth) education program.

GUIDELINES FOR GROUP LEADERS: (Driskill)

- Leaders need to be aware when using spiritual exercises, practices and rituals that they are in the presence of symbols and narratives that hold a considerable emotional and spiritual power in the lives of believers and pay attention and be intentional about every detail and act. Always approach leading a group with a sense of the holy, care and wisdom
- You will teach best what you have first experienced. However, realize that not everyone will have the same experience to the practice as you, and some will not be favorable at all! Be appreciative of the variety of ways people express their spiritual life. Be sensitive, compassionate, flexible, unattached to the outcome and open to the guidance of spirit.
- This is not a time to give advise or exhibit expertise, but guidance in helping people understand their own experience (and not judging or analyzing the content of their experience.)
- CONTEXT: leaders need to recognize the impact that the context (environment, situation, timing, those present, etc) may have on the participants. It is important to create safety and security, giving time for people to "settle in" and a place to express anxiety and other feelings if necessary. The tone of the room should be warm and receptive. Take time to "clear the space" and "set the tone" in the room and center yourself as a non-anxious presence (which may mean getting there at least 15 minutes before your participants). You might set up a focus center or altar with a candle and other centering items.

- **USE OF RESOURCES:** Include art, music, internet, film, readings, body movement—anything that invokes the senses, as this will help deepen the experiential, emotional response.
- **CONSIDER THE PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS:** Know as much about your group as possible before hand: age, level of Christian maturity, readiness for experiencing, openness to new things, physical abilities and limitations, gender, etc.
- **SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:** Know the background and theological significance of the practices being taught and used. Do not “cut and paste” to provide a hodgepodge of “nice little experiences.” These are disciplines that have integrity and are intended to be used for years to guide people on their spiritual journey. Have the group agree on one, or individuals commit to one that is practiced each time, rather than some new exercise at each group meeting.
- **TEACHING PROCESS:** make sure there is ample time for 1) Teaching the practice (background and instruction); 2) setting the necessary mood for engaging in the practice; 3) experiencing the practice; 4) debriefing with the group on their experience of the practice
 - 1) Teaching—have a handout with the steps to be followed; teach to the large group, then break up into smaller groups, if necessary.
 - 2) Shift the tone from that of intellectual instruction to reading for experiential practice—shift from head to heart space. May want to allow some non-verbal, quiet, centering time before going into the practice.
 - 3) Allow ample time to experience doing the practice. If it is rushed or cut short, it may have a negative impact.
 - 4) Debriefing in the group gives people an opportunity to consolidate their experience by reflecting on it and verbalizing it. This is not to discuss the content of their practice, but their reaction or experience of the process of the practice itself. It is important to honor each experience, as they will most likely vary from “loved it” to “hated it”!

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE:

I recommend doing the Prayer of Examen from Joe Driskill’s book, pg. 97-102 (Prot. Spiritual Practices) or p. 86-88 from Spiritually Informed...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Groff, Kent Ira. *Active Spirituality: A Guide for Seekers and Ministers*. (need info)

OTHER SUGGESTED RESOURCES: