



BY AMIE HOLLMANN

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SEARCHING for the perfect souvenir and savoring a bowl of gelato, I found myself at the bottom of the Holy Stairs in Rome. I was on vacation, taking in the impossibly blue sky, the salty rhythms of the streets, history under every footstep and culture around every corner. The Holy Stairs, or *Scala Santa*, is a marble staircase transplanted from Jerusalem. Tradition has it that Jesus walked up these very stairs on His way to meet with Pontius Pilate.

The only way up the stairs is on your knees. So, slowly, I began the journey like all the other pilgrims. It was awkward at first and only became increasingly uncomfortable. As I tried to concentrate on prayer, I realized I hadn't been on my knees in a long time. My knees were out of shape. Prayer, whether on my knees or otherwise, had not been a priority. I had managed to fit God neatly into my itinerary, but God wasn't much more than a convenient stop on the tour.

This experience reflected the sad state of my spiritual life. I had been a Christian for most of what I could remember. But I spent more time fixing my hair than reading the Bible. My faith was flabby. I was in need of some serious spiritual discipline.

Discipline sounds like a dirty word in our "eat what you want and still lose weight" society. We want results without the work. But we have to rethink the results and the work. Jesus tells us in Matthew that the big

picture is about loving God with our whole being and sharing that love with others. Spiritual disciplines help us focus on the big picture and translate it onto the small screen of our daily lives.

Even though "how to" spirituality books put a fresh face on faith practices, spiritual disciplines are nothing new. The Old Testament shows us how prayer, meditation, scriptural study and worship provide a functional framework for faithful living. And Jesus led His followers by example, opting for late-night prayer vigils instead of watching the *Late Show*. Washing feet instead of calling for room service. Daily living out what He taught in humble service and simplicity. Even Paul, of "doing what I don't want to do and not doing what I do want to do" fame, was still training for a marathon.

But what do spiritual disciplines look like today in the frenzied 21st century? Kelli B. Trujillo, author of *The Busy Mom's Guide to Spiritual Survival* (Wesleyan), went in search of answers. But what she found was not a "quick-fix 12-step program to a better, more disciplined you." Instead, while exploring 15 disciplines—including silence, solitude, stewardship, worship, fellowship and hospitality—she discovered a new perspective on traditional practices and creative ways to incorporate them throughout her hectic day. Conditions we often think are not conducive to faith became places for God to break in. Nothing was off-limits.



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But the point is not to become a spiritual superwoman. “Spiritual disciplines help me get out of that mode of trying hard and into a more authentic, honest place spiritually, a place that recognizes I can’t be like Jesus through my own efforts,” Trujillo says. “Through spiritual disciplines the Holy Spirit is at work in my life, strengthening me and changing me and molding me.”

Practice may not make perfect, but that doesn’t mean we give up. Even after years in the spotlight as an author, teacher and speaker, Joyce Meyer gives her audiences the same challenge she directs at herself. She shared with *Radiant* the importance of spiritual disciplines. “I’ve gone through times in my life where I kept trying to fit God in and fit God in and fit in prayer and fit in studying, and I never got room for that stuff. You need to stop trying to work God into your schedule, and you need to put Him first and let your schedule honor God.”

Over time she found that disciplines like morning prayer became a healthy habit and an essential part of her day. “Whatever you do for a period of time, that’s what you begin to crave and desire,” she says. “And for me, now, to go out without spending time with God is almost like going out without being dressed ... I feel like I’m missing something.”

Some practices might not be as foreign to our routines as we think. Meditation seemed a little out there to me until I realized I was already doing it regularly. I was meditating on my flaws, my feelings and my schedule. Brooding and worrying. My mind was full of selfishness, pride and fluff. The petition in Psalm 19 that the meditation of my heart be pleasing to God challenges me to replace the old “me, myself and I” mantra with something more meaningful.

Spiritual disciplines lead us to look outside ourselves. When we do, we can embrace a wider view of giving, one that’s not just about how much you put in the offering plate on Sunday morning. Meyer talks about transforming our ideas of giving into becoming an “aggressive giver.” “Giving, to me, is a completely different thing than being a giver,” she says. “When you are a giver, then you actually look for opportunities.”

As a leader of her church’s women’s group, Christina Bender, 28, finds opportunities to serve all around her. Simple acts like regularly giving blood, growing out her hair for Locks of Love, picking up trash and baby-sitting take on new significance when love is at the center of service. “I have learned to really dig deep into the love of God, to smile and offer care and assistance at times that are really not ideal, to people who are maybe unlovely to others or even unpleasant,” she says.

While working for a nonprofit social justice organization, Rebekah Sloane, 31, found service a natural expression of her faith. But she felt God challenging her to take on disciplines, which have not come so easily. “I’m working on incorporating more meditation and prayer into my daily life ... those disciplines have always been difficult for me, but over the past few years I’ve found myself increasingly longing for a deeper, fuller spiritual life and feel that meditation and prayer may be part of drawing me deeper.” For Sloane, growth meant revisiting childhood disciplines that didn’t “resonate” with her as an adult.

I have to confess, sometimes prayer seems about as appealing as fin-

ishing all my peas. But it doesn’t always have to be served up the same way. We can enjoy some creative freedom with our faith practices. After reading Trujillo’s book, I decided to try out “breath prayer,” an ancient Christian practice Trujillo describes as “praying a short memorized prayer by silently saying one phrase as you breathe in, then praying the next phrase as you breathe out.” She suggests using Bible verses. It’s a way of making Scripture part of my daily vocabulary.

Spiritual disciplines bring me back to basics. Who I am. Who my neighbor is. Who God is. Reminding me that God is present even when my days are disheveled. The late British Christian writer Evelyn Underhill says in her book *The Spiritual Life* (Ariel Press), “We mostly spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have and to Do. We are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life.”

When I finally arrive at the top of the stairs, I have not arrived at spiritual enlightenment. I am the same. The same sloth Christ went to the cross to save. Looking down I see my fellow knee-weary travelers. The skeptic in me wants to see all this as some empty historical exercise. But God is here. Calling. Closer than my breath. Closer even than the bruises on my knees. *r*

AMIE HOLLMANN lives with her husband and son in inner-city Montreal, where they serve in a ministry to recent immigrants.

SPIRITUAL CLOCK

Have you found it’s better to spend time with God in the morning or in the evening?

Joyce Meyer: Well, I believe it’s better in the morning. I think the Bible even talks a bit about doing it in the morning—but it also talks about seeking God in the evening and the evening sacrifice. Some people’s lifestyles require different things, but I do believe that anybody who can start your day with God, it helps you just prepare for that day. And that’s what I do, but I’m very careful not to make it a law for somebody whose lifestyle just doesn’t allow [for] that. And I know some people who say, “I’m just no good in the morning, and doing it at night works for me.” But when evening comes, I just want to rest, so my favorite part of every day is getting up, getting my cup of coffee and spending the first two hours with God.

Speaker and author **Joyce Meyer** has a number of books on growing spiritually, including *Knowing God Intimately: Being as Close to Him as You Want to Be* (Joyce Meyer Trade). Visit Radiantmag.com to read *Radiant*’s full interview with Meyer about spiritual disciplines, reaching young women and her summer crusade in Cambodia.

