

Announcing a new Transforming Center resource

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us
by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

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Editor's Note:

The Transforming Center takes very seriously its mission to equip leaders to guide their churches in becoming spiritually transforming communities. If you are like most pastors and Christian leaders, many people who are longing for something more in the midst of their complicated lives come to you looking for guidance. One way that we seek to empower you as a leader is to provide published tools that will further your own journey of spiritual transformation and also help you to lead others. That is why we are so pleased to offer our latest resource, the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. This easy-to-use handbook catalogues sixty different spiritual disciplines, helping you and those you serve to choose the disciplines that are right for you based on desire and need. It provides Scriptural basis for each discipline, guidance for practicing the discipline and questions to help you reflect on the work of God in your life within that discipline. This *eReflections* contains an excerpt from the introduction to Adele's book and also includes a sample discipline.

May the practice of the disciplines described in this handbook draw you and your congregation deeper into the way of Christ.

From Desire to Discipline
Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

Week after week good church people come to me with their R rated lives and a question. "Does God's presence in me really change anything?" A woman, who reads the bible every day asks, "Why don't I get something out of all that reading? Isn't it supposed to help me when my husband is verbally abusive?" An overtired busy bank officer asks, "Is spiritual dryness a permanent state?" A distressed pastor uncomfortably sits in my office and asks, "What does it mean when I'm too busy to pray." A married couple asks why God seemed closer to them before they were married. The banker, the woman, the pastor, the couple -- they all have something in common. In the midst of busy, scattered, exhausted and hurting lives they want to experience a great love with God. Desire and desperation gnaw at their hungry souls; and they want to know if God will show up for them.

Jesus said in Matthew 11. 28-30 (The Message) "*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?*

Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Living “freely and lightly” can sound too good to be true. How can hectic and demanding schedules yield to the aching desire for “unforced rhythms of grace? What good is a desire to “recover your life” if you’re plain old “burnt out?”

The desire for a different sort of life doesn’t appear out of thin air. The longing for “something more,” no matter how weak or crackling with heat, is evidence that God is already at work in your life. You wouldn’t want more of God ever – if the Holy Spirit wasn’t first seeking you. It is the Trinity’s action within that fans the small flame of desire motivating us to “keep company with Jesus.” In fact, the very desire or desperation you feel can be God’s way of readying you to “walk with” and “work with” Jesus. Take heart, transformation happens as you keep company with Jesus.

What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Wanting to work with and watch Jesus is where transformation begins. Will power and discipline *alone* can never fix your soul. Striving, pushing, and trying harder will not “recover your life.” “Unforced rhythms of grace” depend on something more than self mastery and self-effort. The simple truth is that *wanting* to keep company with Jesus has a staying power that “shoulds” and “oughts” seldom have. Jesus wants us to recognize that hidden in our desperations and desires is an appetite for the Lord and Giver of Life. In fact, he says “*You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.*” (Mt. 5.6 TM)

The very first thing Jesus asked his soon to be disciples was “What do you want?” (Jn. 1. 37) Over and over again he asked about desires:

- “What is it you *want*?” (Mt. 20.21; Luke 10.51; Mark 10.36)
- “What do you *want* me to do for you?” (Mt. 20.32)

- “Do you *want* to get well?” (Jn. 5.6)

Jesus knew you wouldn’t get well if you didn’t *want* the responsibility that came with wellness. He also knew that the mother of James and John was clueless about the meaning of her request to have her sons be power brokers in Jesus kingdom. (Mt. 20.21) So he presses her to consider what her desire might mean. Jesus never attempts to shut down people’s longings; nor does he ask people to transcend their longings as some religions do. He knew human desire to be an incurable black hole of opportunity. Accompany him and watch him welcome people who want something more:

- “A man with leprosy *begged* (Jesus). . . . If you are willing, you can make me clean.” (Mk. 1. 40)
- “They *pleaded* with him (Jesus) to leave their region. (Mt. 8.34)
- “*Save* us we are going to drown.” (Mt. 8.25)
- “*Grant* that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left.” (Mt. 20.11)
- “Sir, (Jesus) *give* me this water.” (Jn. 4.15)
- “If you (Jesus) can do anything take pity on us and *help* us.” (Mk. 9.22)
- “The man who had been demon possessed *begged* to go with him (Jesus).” (Mk. 5.18)
- Lord *teach* us to Pray. (Lk 11.1)

Jesus doesn’t grant requests like a genie in a bottle. He works with people allowing their desires to draw him into the core conversations of life. For Jesus, requests for water, healing, rest, vindication, approval, status, etc. all engage soul hungers. Misguided, self destructive, true or addictive, desperations and desires opened doors to relationship. Learn from Jesus as he keeps company with people who *want something*. Watch him attend to the hole in their heart that is bigger than the galaxy. Many of his deepest interactions with people get at two things: 1) the true nature of one’s desires, 2) a spiritual practice (in quotations below) that helps them make space for God in their lives.

- Martha desperately wanted Mary to help her. Jesus tells Martha to “detach” from her drivenness to serve and attend to the first thing – to him. Luke 11. 41-42.

- The man cured of demon possession wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus calls him to be a “witness” knowing that in telling his story to those who know him can change all their lives. Mark 5.19
- The rich young ruler wanted eternal life, but he didn’t want it enough to give his earthly wealth away. Jesus called him to “confess” and reorder his priorities. Mark 10.21
- The “Lord’s Prayer” comes to us through a disciple’s desire to connect with God like Jesus did. “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1) Jesus gave the disciple a spiritual practice to *learn* and *do*. He offered him a prayer to *say*. There was no seminar on prayer. No steps and techniques for talking to God. Through praying this prayer Jesus gave the disciple access to the same relationship to the Heavenly Father that Jesus, the beloved son had.

Spiritual disciplines give the Holy Spirit space to brood over our souls. Just as the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep at the dawn of creation so he hovers over us today, birthing the ever fresh Christ life within. The Christ-in-me identity is not bound to a generic one-size fits all program for union with God. The Holy Spirit knows the spiritual practices, relationships and experiences that best suit our unique communion with God. He knows how to help us live into the “unforced rhythms of grace” that Jesus offers to teach us.

Spiritual transformation, “recovering your life,” comes from partnering with the Trinity for change. That doesn’t mean we give the Holy Spirit an agenda or a demand. We give a *desire*. We bring our ache for change, our longing for belonging, our desperation to make a difference. Then we keep company with Jesus by making space for him through a spiritual discipline. Our part is to offer ourselves lovingly and obediently to God. God’s part is to work within us and our desires doing what He alone can do. Our desires don’t obligate the Holy One. God is free to come to us in spiritual disciplines as he wills not as we demand. But unless we open ourselves to him through spiritual practices we will miss his coming altogether.

Day after day, Jesus calls us: *“Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”* (Matthew 11:30, *The Message*)

The examen makes us aware of moments that at first we might easily pass by as insignificant, moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives.

Linn

Dennis

THE EXAMEN

DESIRE:	To notice both God and my God given desires through out the day.
DEFINITION:	The examen is a practice for discerning the voice and activity of God within the flow of the day. It is a vehicle that creates deeper awareness of God given desires in one’s life.
SCRIPTURE:	<p><i>For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.</i> Colossians 1:9</p> <p><i>And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.</i> Philippians 1:9-10</p>
PRACTICE INCLUDES:	<p>A regular time of coming into the presence of God to ask two questions: Possible ways for asking the questions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful? • When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today? • What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day? • When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others and myself? When today did I have the least sense of connection? • Where was I aware of living out of the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit? • Where did I experience “desolation?” Where did I find “consolation?”
GOD GIVEN FRUIT:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep company with Jesus through out all the highs and lows of the day. • Recognize God’s presence in my experiences. • More discernment and receptivity to God’s voice.. • Freedom from “acting the guru.” Point others towards listening to God, not to me. • Gratitude • Awareness of my growing edges. • Awareness of God-given desires • Awareness of invitations to prayer that God presents to me through out the day.

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