Personal Reflections on Spiritual Formation

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It seems that, within the last decade, spiritual formation has become the label we want to place on everything and anything that looks and feels remotely spiritual. So before I offer my thoughts, I feel the need to give a short definition. This one I’ve borrowed from Robert Mulholland who wrote An Invitation to a Journey. “[Spiritual formation] is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”¹

So, I’ve asked myself, “When is it or what is it that seems to be a part of that conforming for me?” I’ve noticed that when I consider my own spiritual formation that growth, most often, is a result of both my personal choices and an investment in community.

What I mean by personal choices is being intentional about how I align my heart and head in a way to brush up against God in order to be transformed. Maybe a Georgia friend of mine has it right when, everyday before her feet hit the floor, she prays, “God, help me today to be like Jesus.” What she means and what I mean is that every day we have a choice to direct our path toward Christ-likeness. At some point we have to say, “I need this. . . . I want this. . . . I’m hungry.”

It’s not just about choosing to pray more or fast more or meditate more or read more scripture. If it were just a matter of following a checklist or formula we could simply will ourselves into being like Christ. We wouldn’t need God. We would be our own god. It would be no different than choosing to

ride a bike or swim laps for the sake of physical fitness…the act or discipline becomes the focus as opposed to a relationship with a life-changing God.

On the other hand if we allow ourselves to think that there’s nothing we can do and it’s just about a relationship, then we become tricked into thinking we can simply sit by and wait for God to show up.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes,

“If all human strivings end in moral bankruptcy (and having tried it, we know it is so), and if righteousness is a gracious gift from God (as the Bible clearly states), then is it not logical to conclude that we must wait for God to come and transform us? Strangely enough, the answer is no. The analysis is correct—human striving is insufficient and righteousness is a gift from God—but the conclusion is faulty. Happily there is something we can do. We do not need to be hung on the horns of the dilemma of either human works or idleness. God has given us the disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace.”

So, now it becomes a matter of choosing to practice spiritual disciplines (prayer, celebration, silence, worship) that will usher me into the presence of God so that I can receive His gift of grace. That’s what transforms me. And having tasted what it’s like to be full of Christ as opposed to full of self, I much prefer the former.

But what happens when, for one reason or another, we become incapable, unmotivated, or too distracted to make personal choices toward spiritual fitness? In addition to God’s gift of grace He has also given us another gift . . . it’s called community. Luke, in his description of the early church in the

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book of Acts, writes, “[The believers] were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles . . . and all those who had believed were together and had all things in common. . . . Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” I interpret that they were taking care of not only the physical, but also the emotional and spiritual needs of all.

That’s what my community did for me. That theory was put into practice when I was thrown into the depths of grief. My inner circle of like-minded believers became my lifeline to God. When I was unable to pray, it was Meghan who said, “Don’t worry, I will pray in your place.” When I couldn’t believe, it was Martin who said, “Don’t worry, I will believe for you.” And when I didn’t know how to maneuver through familiar situations, it was Ryan who said, “Don’t worry. You’re discovering a new normal and I will walk beside you.” My community literally nursed me back to spiritual health. From time to time we switch seats on who has the greatest need and who becomes the intercessor.

They have also taught me how to be more like Christ. When I see Lisa spend her lunch hour visiting a sick elderly friend . . . when Carrie is heartbroken over the death of a student . . . when Burt asks me how I’m doing following a difficult conversation and I know that he really means it, I learn more about compassion. I am compelled to be like the Christ that I see in them.

As a strategic arranger I would love to stop here. I’ve given you two main points . . . they are logical and explainable. Rod could do an assessment. Kim could slap it on a spreadsheet, color code it and include bullet points. But it’s not that easy. I must also recognize, accept and receive the
unexplainable, indescribable, unpredictable mystery of God. It’s the passage of scripture that pops up over and over until one day God reveals its meaning. It’s when your path crosses with someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows you and before you know it you’re offered a job. It’s when you feel at your lowest and you turn on the radio and hear a song that reminds you of a happier time and you are filled with hope. I pay close attention to those holy moments. I write them down, refer to them often, and share my stories with as many people who will listen.

I’d like to leave you with a few things to ponder.

1. As you consider your unique personality and strengths, which spiritual disciplines do you gravitate toward? (One of the monks asked the great teacher... Abba Nistero, “What should I do for the best in life?” And the Abba answered. “All works are not (the same) equal . . . the scripture says, that Abraham was hospitable, and God was with him. It says that Elias loved quiet, and God was with him; it says that David was humble, and God was with him. So whatever path you find your soul longs after in the quest for God... Do that and always watch over your heart’s integrity.”)

2. Make a list of those in your inner circle. How are they like Christ to you? Who is it that nurtures your soul? Are you intentional about being with them?

3. If you haven’t already done so, make a written record of all unexplainable Holy moments that you can remember. Find ways to share those stories.

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Finally, I pray for all of us Paul’s prayer to the church at Ephesus, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power for us who believe, according to the working of His great power.”