

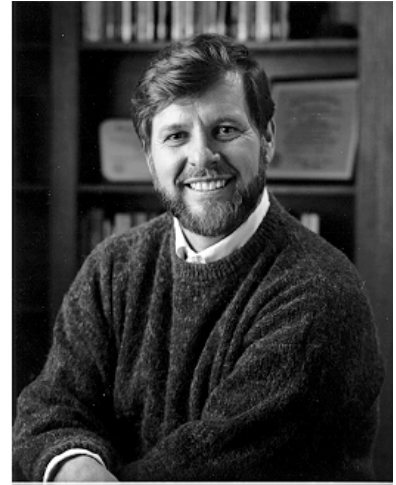
Perspective

Vol. 3, No. 4

Growing Edges

October, 1993

In recent days the growing edge for me has come through putting my prayers into written form. This approach forces me to give careful attention to my heart yearnings toward God. To be sure, God knows what is in my heart. But I don't, and through the simple discipline of writing out my prayers God is working with me to reveal to me what I am seeking. This process clarifies and purifies my asking, so that I learn more and more how to think God's thoughts after him. Here are a few sample prayers—perhaps you can pray them with me.



"A Prayer at Coffee Time"

Somehow, Jesus, I like praying with a cup of coffee in my hands. I guess the warmth of the cup settles me and speaks of the warmth of your love. I hold the cup against my cheek and listen, hushed and still.

I blow on the coffee and drink. O Spirit of God, blow across my little life and let me drink in your great Life.

—Amen.

"A Prayer of Accepted Tenderness"

Today, O Lord, I accept your acceptance of me.
I confess that you are always with me and always for me.
I receive into my spirit your grace, your mercy, your care.
I rest in your love, O Lord, I rest in your love.

—Amen.

"A Sojourning Prayer" (Written while on a trip to Southeast Asia.)

O Lord, my Lord, I am a stranger in a strange land. Absent are all the subtleties of custom and language and sight and smell and taste which would normally give me my bearings.

Jesus, ever-living Teacher, use my out-of-placeness to remind me again of my alien status in this world. I belong to another kingdom and live out of another reality. May I always be ultimately concerned to learn the nuances of this eternal reality so that when it becomes my permanent residence, I will not find it strange in the least.

In the name of him who entered a foreign land so that all who will might come home to that for which they were created.

—Amen.

Peace and joy,

Richard J. Foster

Growing Together

More "Ideas and Exercises" for Practicing the Five Streams

We are constantly amazed at the number of comments we receive over the simple "Ideas and Exercises" section of A Spiritual Formation Workbook. And people are always asking for more suggestions on how to actually practice the five traditions. So here are a few additional hints.

Contemplative: The Prayer-Filled Life

1. Try falling asleep in an atmosphere of prayer. Brother Lawrence reminds us that "those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep."
2. Prayerfully read some of the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers. These stories are not meant to have an "answer," rather they are to open us to the possibilities of a life with God. (You might start with: *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Benedicta Ward, trans. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975. Also consider: *The Wisdom of the Desert* by Thomas Merton. New York: A New Directions Book, 1970.)
3. Spend some time this week listening to contemplative music designed to quiet you, settle you, deepen you. (Compact discs and tapes from the Taizé Community, John Michael Talbot, and the Monks of Weston Priory are especially helpful.)

Holiness: The Virtuous Life

1. Like any good "athlete for God" ask yourself: "What area of life am I especially weak in, and what spiritual discipline would work to overcome this weakness?"
2. Thomas á Kempis notes that "Habit overcomes habit." So ask yourself: What habit is destructive to my life with God, and what habit of righteousness could I develop that would help to overcome it?
3. Allow a trusted friend or small group to pray over you for an increase of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Charismatic: The Spirit-Empowered Life

1. Think of a person who has experienced more of the power of the Holy Spirit than you have. If possible, arrange your life to be around this person to see what you can learn.
2. Think of a person who has experienced more of the grace and mercy of the Spirit than you have. If possible, arrange your life to be around this person to see what you can learn.
3. Read *The Journal of George Fox* as a way of better understanding how a Spirit-Empowered life works.

Social Justice: The Compassionate Life

1. Donate your time to baby-sit for a single mother who could use a little time away from the children.
2. Check out a local nursing home for any person who does not have visitors. Visit him or her and see what develops. You may be in for some delightful surprises; remember the movie "Fried Green Tomatoes".
3. Read Tom Sine's *Wild Hope* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991) or Donald Kraybill's *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978) and see what you can learn. Do not be afraid to disagree and debate with the issues raised in these books—it is how we grow.

Evangelical: The Word-Centered Life

1. Read through an entire book of the Bible in one sitting. Often our Bible reading is so fragmented that we miss the flow of a book. For the New Testament start with Luke, then Acts, Romans, Ephesians, and Revelation. In the Old Testament read Esther, then Job, Hosea, Jonah, and Habakkuk.
2. Memorize one of the better-known psalms like 1, 15, 23, 100, or 150.
3. Take one day and consciously pray inwardly for every person you encounter that they somehow will be introduced to Jesus.

Richard J. Foster

Going Deeper

In this Perspective we want to feature three new/old products: *In Search of Guidance*, *Coming Home: An Invitation to Prayer* and a "Prayer Calendar".

It is a special treat to recommend Dallas Willard's book, ***In Search of Guidance***. Originally published by Regal, it has been updated and reissued by HarperSanFrancisco.

The best book on the market about knowing the will of God, *In Search of Guidance*, cuts through externals and emphasizes that true direction comes only from Christ. All of us at one time or another are guilty of trying to serve the Lord with a narrow focus on acts and deeds. This book helps guide us into creating an intimate partnership with God and becoming co-laborers for the kingdom.

The other products—***Coming Home: An Invitation to Prayer and a "Prayer Calendar"***—contain excerpts from *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* in two different formats.

Coming Home is a gift edition book with the text taken from the introduction of *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. Accompanied by illustrative paintings, the excerpt can create a thirst for a deeper spirituality in people from all walks of life.

The "Prayer Calendar" is perpetual and includes a sentence from *Prayer* for every day of the year along with reproductions of original watercolors. Anyone who has to keep track of specific days will appreciate this reminder of our need and—often suppressed—desire to pray.

All three of these products can be used by a broad range of people: business owners, students, homemakers, law officers, nurses, parents, teachers. And they are ideal Christmas and special occasion presents for families and friends.

Going Places

October 14-22—Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA

November 7—Spiritual Growth Retreat, McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church, Norman, OK

November 9—30 Good Minutes, Chicago, IL

November 12-14—RENOVARÉ Retreat, Heartland Presbyterian Center, Parkville, MO. Contact Chuck Olsen at 816-891-1078

November 19-21—Evangelicals for Social Action, Chicago, IL

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January 3-9—Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA

January 21-22—RENOVARÉ Local Conference, First Presbyterian Church, Boulder, CO. Contact Gwen Brown at 303-442-3523

January 23—First Presbyterian Church, Boulder, CO

January 31—Evangelical Covenant Church Pastors, Chicago, IL

February 1—North Park College, Chicago, IL

February 4-5—RENOVARÉ Local Conference, Southland Baptist Church, San Angelo, TX. Contact Virginia Chase at 915-949-3205

February 7—"Perspectives on the World Christian Movement" Class, Westlink Christian Church, Wichita, KS

February 10-11—Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX

March 17-20—Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Westerville, OH

Growing Pains

Continue to pray that we will discern where God wants our office to be located. We have narrowed the possibilities down to four places and will make a final decision very soon.

Great news! A Spiritual Formation Workbook is now in third printing and the Devotional Classics is in second. Our office has sold almost one thousand Workbooks and over six hundred Classics in the past six months. They are stocked in secular stores such as Barnes & Noble on the East Coast in addition to Christian bookstores. **If you have trouble ordering or finding these two items, emphasize that they are listed as RENOVARÉ Resources for Spiritual Renewal and published by HarperSanFrancisco. Better yet, order them from us!**

The RENOVARÉ Retreats held at Glen Eyrie Conference Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado, continue to be popular and well attended. Richard Foster and Donn Thomas led two retreats in July that had a total attendance of over one hundred fifty people.

Six hundred twenty-three people registered for the RENOVARÉ Local Conference on Personal Spiritual Renewal held in Edina, Minnesota, on September 10-11. The conference in Kansas City, Missouri, on September 24-25 had around three hundred attendees.

We are expanding the RENOVARE Perspective to include magazine articles, interviews, position papers, and other items that we feel are helpful. This issue features an interview with Dallas Willard published in the June 1993 (Issue #129) of *The Door*, Box 530, Yreka, CA 96097. Used by permission.

Door: The Spirit of the Disciplines has sold very well. Are you surprised?

Willard: Yes.

Door: Why do you think people are so anxious to read about spirituality?

Willard: We are not only saved by grace, we are paralyzed by it. We have lost any coherent view of how spiritual growth occurs. Our churches are dominated by a consumer religion that has nothing to do with spiritual growth. But within those churches, there's a huge number of people who are hungry for spiritual growth.

Door: What do you mean that we are paralyzed by grace?

Willard: We have been taught that grace means "you can do nothing to be saved." Such thinking has been extended to "you can do nothing to have spiritual growth." So spiritual transformation occurs, according to this thinking, in one of two ways—inspiration or information. Inspiration means that in one golden moment, one great experience, you will be transformed. I don't want to criticize experience. I have had many wonderful experiences with God, but they don't transform you. The other view, information, is the means whereby you pour truth into your head and suddenly you are transformed. Inspiration isn't going to do it. The only way human character is transformed with grace is by discipline and activity.

Door: But we've read your book. You spend a lot of time suggesting that people do nothing—like silence and solitude.

Willard: There is nothing that requires more energy of the typical American Christian than the discipline of doing nothing. The hardest thing you can get anyone to do is to do nothing. We are addicted to our world, addicted to talk. Talk is the primary way we have of managing our image for ourselves and for others. You may have a perfectly intelligent person who is alone and, when they do something stupid, they will talk to themselves and explain to themselves why they did that. Believe it or not, controlling our tongue is very important. James said that "anyone who can control their tongue is perfect." How do you control it? You get it to stop. You discover that you can breathe without talking. You discover that life goes on. The issue is the same with solitude. The problem with solitude is not being alone, it is convincing ourselves that we are unnecessary, that the world will not collapse if we go away. Solitude is the discipline of letting go of our self-importance, letting go of our belief that we are necessary for the world to continue.

Door: You are right. The more you talk about it, the harder spirituality sounds.

Willard: The interesting thing about spirituality is that it is self-verifying. If you can get people to try the disciplines for awhile, they'll never turn away from them. The problem is, as I mentioned earlier, grace. People believe there is something essentially wrong with any kind of energetic involvement in the process of spiritual growth. People think of religion as a little something you add on to your normal life. Add a little God to your life. But Christ says throw your life away. Forget about it. He can give you a new one. You can't grow if you give God a little bit of your life.

Door: Forgive us if we sprinkle a little sawdust in the tent here, but is sin the problem?

Willard: I call that kind of thinking the "sin-management" model of the gospel which, interpreted, means that if it weren't for sin, we wouldn't need God. Of course we need our sins forgiven. The question, however, is not whether we need our sins forgiven or even if the forgiveness of sins is essential to the gospel. The question is, "Is that the gospel?" Jesus never preached that if it weren't for sin we wouldn't need God. Never preached that.

Door: What did he preach?

Willard: That he came to give us life.

Door: But there are so many interpretations of what "life" means.

Willard: You know the real problem? The real problem is that people in the Church do not believe we can have the kind of spiritual reality they had in the New Testament.

Door: Maybe they don't believe it's possible but, if the sales of your book are any indication, they still want it. We see a real hunger for

spirituality in this culture with the increased popularity of writers like Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Brennan Manning, and Sue Monk Kidd.

Willard: You've mentioned the good people, but there is a lot that worries me about this hunger for spirituality. There is no doubt in my mind that spirituality is a big thing. What is most significant about human beings is not physical, it's spiritual. There is a spiritual world that is very big. It's bigger than materiality, much bigger. The trouble with Evangelicals is that we have defined spirituality carefully within the confines of Christianity. Shirley MacLaine was raised in a Texas Baptist church, and she reacted against that narrow view of spirituality. Now she thinks she has found something else . . . and she probably has. A radical feminist lesbian comes along and wants to teach us about her spirituality. She probably has a spirituality. We had better recognize that there is a spirituality. The fundamental thing about non-Christian spirituality is that it is all inclusive. The kind of spirituality—Joseph Campbell, Shirley MacLaine, Father Leo Booth—we see diffusing around us is a human project. Spirituality is not a set of practices. You can run a set of practices without any spirituality at all. For the Christian, spirituality means a new kind of life that is given through the word of the gospel and the person of Christ. The goal of Christian spirituality is conformity to Christ—not togetherness, or meditation, or acceptance. The issue is discipleship. Discipleship is learning from Jesus Christ how to live my life as he would live it if he were me. The New Testament describes it as "putting off corruption and putting on immortality." Paul calls it "the mortification of the flesh."

Door: Now there's a catchy phrase.

Willard: Don't hear it too much. There is a reason for that. Churches and Christians, by and large, embrace the principle that you ought to be able to do what you want—human desire is good. So is it any wonder in our churches that the copulating statistics are no different among youth within the Church than youth outside the Church? Once you accept that human desire is good, then anything goes. The prevailing accepted belief in our society is that genetics determine action. I do not believe that. Genes don't determine action. But try getting up in church next Sunday and telling everyone that their desires are bad.

Door: All desires are bad?

Willard: Desire itself is not bad. God has desires. Even angels have desires. But in human beings they have been malformed and twisted so that you must always be suspicious of desires—even desires for holiness. We live in a world where the pursuit of desire is conceived as good. No civilization has been able to prosper on that principle. All of the great civilizations have been suspicious of desire. Great civilizations have been able to set limits and say "no" to desire. We can't say no to anything today. The only thing we can say no to is saying no.

Door: At first you said desire was not good. Then you said it was good but twisted. It sounds like you lean in the direction of "total depravity"—the idea that humans are basically bad, even though desire is good. Do you believe in total depravity?

Willard: I believe in enough depravity.

Door: Uh . . . what does that mean?

Willard: There is enough depravity where no one will ever be able to say "I did it." God will not pour holiness upon our heads. God will cooperate with us, but we cannot make it on our own. Total depravity means there is nothing we can do about evil. That is not true. There is just enough depravity so that we must cooperate with God.

Door: What is your opinion of the condition of the Church today?

Willard: We live in a period where the Church is desperately floundering around for something to make it go. Most churches are going under. One phenomena contributing to the decline of the Church is the mega-church.

Door: Why?

Willard: The mega-church drains off people from the smaller congregations around. We are going to see a withering of the small congregation. They can't survive. The mega-church says, "We've got a better show on Sunday." The smaller congregation cannot compete on the basis of entertainment. Really, the mega-church is the swan song of a system—an economic and social system—that really has nothing to do

with Christianity. It has to do with owning property, running programs, and exercising influence in the community. The small church can't do that anymore. The demand on them financially and socially are so different now. Thirty years ago, churches didn't have to worry about being sued out of their existence. Now they do. Church was a simple matter of people who lived fairly close together coming together to worship and to help one another.

Door: The decline of the small church and the rise of the mega-church seems so sad.

Willard: The argument, of course, is that the mega-church meets people's needs. We now have "full-service" churches. These churches have dating services, employment agencies, counselors, child care facilities. What we are talking about is a need-based religion.

Door: Isn't that what it's all about—meeting people's needs?

Willard: The deepest need of the human soul, from the viewpoint of the New Testament, is to get rid of our needs. Just get rid of them and say, "Lord, you know what I need and I am going to leave all that up to you." That is what I would define as a need-based religion. But that isn't what most people mean. What they mean by need-based religion is a religion that responds to whatever I feel I need. Most people suggest that you need good music in a program. What would a service be without music? To be honest, it wouldn't matter if your church was non-instrumental because the problem is not music; the problem is that most churches are still putting on a performance. They are performing to satisfy the people. Growth is understood in terms of an increase in numbers. I have never heard a church-growth advocate suggest that you might have a congregation of 55 people with no new members, no budget increase, and yet the church is growing because these people are becoming prayer powerhouses. What if spiritual growth occurs when the people who are already there grow?

Door: That's a novel idea. Your indictment of a need-based religion, a performance-oriented religion, a religion of oppression seems so . . . right. It also seems so ignored. How do we call people back to what the Church was intended to be?

Willard: We have to reformulate their thinking. Jesus said in John 14, "If you love Me, you'll keep My commandments. The one who doesn't keep My commandments doesn't love Me." If you say to the ordinary congregation, "How many of you love Jesus?" Every hand goes up. Then if you ask, "How many of you keep his commandments?" Well, the response is a little different. We've set up a system where you have trusting Jesus over here and obeying Jesus over there, and no connection between the two. Evangelicals have cut the gospel down to mean simply believing that Jesus died for your sins. That is the gospel, they say. And what they mean is that if you believe that Jesus died for your sins, then enough merit will be transferred from his account to yours, so when you show up at the pearly gates, they won't be able to find a reason to keep you out. That is the version that is preached today. You can understand why, in an age where people are not worried about their sins, that kind of "gospel" doesn't have much effect. The odd thing about this "sin-management" view of the gospel is that even though they talk about sin, what they are really talking about is people's needs. Strangely, evangelism today is centered on people's needs, not their sins—believe that Jesus died for your sins, and your needs will be met. God is supposed to meet your needs because you believe he died for your sins? That is the contract most people have in mind. If people want to go deeper into their faith, that is nice, but it's not required. But if they still persist, they can go into full—time Christian service. I want to ask this: What have they been in? Part-time Christian service, or no-time Christian service? Tragically, if anyone wants to get serious about what Jesus said, they are shunted off to seminary. It takes more grace to drive a truck for Jesus than it does to teach Hebrew in a seminary.

Door: When you get the chance to speak to ministers and leaders of the Church, what do you tell them?

Willard: I ask them "What are you trying to do to people? What is the outcome of your ministry in terms of its effect on your people?"

The hardest thing for the minister to deal with is the contracts or expectations the people have of their minister.

I was with a number of ministers in South Africa, and the people there believe that the minister should come to visit them every so often. He should sit and talk with them, read a little Scripture, pray, and go. The minister was expected to do that.

In our country, of course, most people would prefer that their minister not visit them. These "contracts" are the hardest part to get past.

If you read the Old Testament and watch how the Jewish people responded to God throughout their history, you will see the same thing. The people had contracts. You see it especially in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, where the prophets are debating these contracts with the people. They are saying, "We are the people of God. We come here and worship. It is very difficult to interrupt our adultery and murder to do this, but we do it. This worship cuts into our sinning time, but we are worshipping, so just let us worship and keep your mouth shut." They wanted a nice, safe contract with the prophets and, of course, the prophets didn't cooperate.

Door: But aren't ministers and leaders encouraged to make these contracts in seminary?

Willard: Seminary traumatizes people. Most ministers and leaders rarely get free from the voices that still ring in their head from that period. So much of seminary education is crowding out the things a person really needs to know in order to live before God and have others do the same.

Door: What things?

Willard: At the least, a person in seminary ought to know how to pray, how to keep from lying. That is all covered by Jesus in the Great Commission, "Teach them to do everything I have commanded you." Honestly, I don't know of a single seminary that tries to do that.

Door: We have often noticed people entering seminary with a real passion for God, a real passion for ministry, and graduating three years later passionless. You talk to people in their jobs or at home and they seem to have lost their passion. Why do you think that is?

Willard: Only reality creates passion. When you are not in touch with reality, you don't have passion. We have an inverted, twisted view of passion—that it is mainly something you have to carry. You force it. You make it go. That is what religion has become for most—just another job. When people hear about the disciplines of spirituality they often say, "Oh, more work." But the disciplines are really a way into living from reality. That's why Jesus' yoke is easy, his burden light. You find rest in it. So your efforts to minister are not strained when you take on Jesus' yoke.

Door: Now if there is one thing you want people to understand about the gospel, what would that be?

Willard: What Jesus said to us is true. It's really good for us, and the best thing anyone can do is to bet their lives on him. That is what trusting Jesus is—it is believing that he had it right. So much of what goes on in the Church and in organized religion is nothing more than a systematic attempt to protect our way of living against the wild claims of Jesus on us. Trusting Jesus means that whenever he says something I think is wrong, I say, "He's right and I'm wrong." When we actually begin to live like that, we learn. We progress. It isn't trying that gets us there; it's training that gets us there. As we try, we will have his assistance, as he said in John 14: "Obey my commandments and I will send the paraclete and he will help you." He didn't say, "I'll send you the paraclete and then you will obey my commandments."

We want the help before we try, but it doesn't work that way. That is characteristic of all Jesus' work. He says to the man with the withered hand, "Stretch forth thy hand." The man might easily have protested, "It's withered. I can't." And if he had said that, he would still have a withered hand. Real faith in Christ means we choose his way and we take what comes with that. That's what we call sowing to the Spirit, and of the Spirit we reap everlasting life. That's the gospel.