

Spiritual practice: Piety in America

by [Robert Wuthnow](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

To focus on spiritual practice means emphasizing the importance of making a deliberate attempt to relate to the sacred. To suggest that people of faith can benefit by paying attention to spiritual practice is hardly a novel idea. But Americans are conditioned to believe in quick fixes, often believing it sufficient to mutter a self-interested prayer or to be part of a religious community or to take solace in the fact that someone else has reported a dramatic encounter with an angel in the morning newspaper.

An analogy may be instructive. Suppose it were discovered that most of the population suffered from ill health--perhaps from high blood pressure, poor nutrition, a lack of exercise or chronic anemia. Suppose there were ample hospital wards, nursing homes and rehabilitation centers. Imagine further than someone said: "Let's get all the sick people and put them together in these wards; they can talk to each other, and soon they'll be better. Get them together, perhaps they can experience a healing power in their midst and even be encouraged to help care for one another; in any case, they'll soon be better." Ludicrous as this idea may seem, it is the way many people talk about spirituality.

What we know about physical health is that we have to take responsibility for it. Getting support from other sick people and visiting the doctor may be important, but basic health begins by practicing it from day to day. Throughout history, the saints have known this about spiritual health as well. The idea of spiritual practices encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own spiritual development by spending time working on it, deliberating on its meaning and how best to pursue it, seeking to understand the sacred through reading and from the counsel of others, and seeking to have contact with the sacred through personal reflection and prayer.

Practice-oriented spirituality is thus different from seeker-oriented spirituality chiefly in providing a more orderly, disciplined and focused approach to the sacred. People we have talked with who were trying to practice their spirituality from day to day were not immune from having to choose what to do and where to focus their

attention, but they tended to settle into a routine that permitted them to cultivate a deep spirituality rather than being influenced by their moods, circumstances, or exposure to constantly changing ideas.

One man provided a nice illustration of this difference in discussing why he tries to study the Bible for a significant amount of time every day. He realizes that he is a "hot-tempered and hasty person," so his Bible reading provides a stabilizing and moderating dimension to his life. "I figure that if you just keep to the same actions," he explains, "they become your habit eventually, [and they] lead to a certain kind of living pattern." As he reads, he also tries not to focus on each verse separately because that approach can be influenced too much by his needs at the moment. "We have to think about God's intent from a broad perspective," he says, "rather than just take a particular message only for our immediate needs."

Some religious leaders insist that people are incapable of practicing spirituality on their own and thus need to be encouraged to participate actively in their local congregations. The people we talked to who viewed spirituality as a practice were seldom isolated from others from whom they could receive (or to whom they could give) assistance. But they also insisted that spirituality had become meaningful to them mostly because they worked at it on their own. In fact, many observed that they had been unable to practice spirituality until it ceased to be a feature of the familiar spaces in which they had been raised, and most said their religious communities took on meaning only when they began to practice spirituality in other ways.

Paradoxically, it is spiritual practice, rather than a spirituality of dwelling, that is most capable of generating a balanced perspective on the sacredness of the world. By engaging in spiritual practices, the practitioner retreats reflectively from the world in order to recognize how it is broken and in need of healing; then, in recognition that the world is also worthy of healing because of its sacral dimensions, the practitioner commits energy to the process of healing.

In her book on contemplative prayer, Joan Chittister expresses this paradoxical relationship between spiritual practice and the world. "Contemplative prayer . . . is prayer that sees the whole world through incense--a holy place, a place where the sacred dwells, a place to be made different by those who pray, a place where God sweetens living with the beauty of all life. Contemplative prayer . . . unstops our ears to hear the poverty of widows, the loneliness of widowers, the cry of women, the

vulnerability, the struggle of outcasts."

A woman who works with AIDS patients elaborates this view of prayer. When asked about prayer, she says her understanding of it is best expressed in a story about one of her patients. "Her name was Valentina. Her husband had already died of AIDS. She had infected her little girl [in vitro] who was then about six years old. She herself was dying. She lay in the bed, swollen beyond belief. She was coughing up blood. She couldn't even lift the tissue to cover her mouth. She was suffering terribly. She looked up at me and said, 'Do you think God cares?' I told her, 'Yes, I [do], and I believe that what breaks our hearts also breaks the heart of God.' She said, 'Do you think God could take my life and spare my daughter's?' I said, 'Valentina, that is a very good prayer.'" Then, as the woman telling the story pauses to control her own tears, she whispers, "Is there a more holy prayer than that?"

Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that in the United States "our practice" is generally better than "our creed." We can extend this idea: the strength of U.S. culture at the end of the 20th century is what many of its detractors dislike the most--its messiness. The ways families and personal lives are organized inevitably require many to negotiate and to live with confusion. People of different faiths are forced to interact with each other, to band together, to form alliances and coalitions, to compromise, and to bargain with other groups to get what they want. The outcome of this process is always uncertain. In many ways, a spirituality of seeking may be well suited to a system of this kind. Spiritual seekers do not have a corner on the truth but are forced to gain insight and support from a variety of sources; and they need to exercise personal responsibility, even though they are embedded in webs of social relationships.

Spiritual practice takes this kind of seeking a step further, adding the vital element of sustained commitment, without which no life can have coherence. Practices may be messier than the commanders of large-scale institutions would like, but they ultimately sustain these institutions by giving individuals the moral fortitude to participate in them without expecting to receive too much from them. If Americans' practices were, indeed, better than their creeds, there would be much about which to be optimistic.

Traditionally, the spiritual ideal has been to live a consistent, fully integrated life of piety, such that one's practice of spirituality becomes indistinguishable from the rest of one's life. The Benedictine David Steindl-Rast expresses this view when he writes,

"We must avoid putting too much emphasis on practices, which are a means to an end. The end is practice, our whole lives as practice."

The shift that has taken place in U.S. culture over the past half century means that attention again needs to be given to specific spiritual practices by those who desire to live their whole lives as practice. This heightened level of attention has been necessitated by the fact that fewer people live within spiritual enclaves that they can take for granted and because more options are available from which to piece together a spiritual life. Nevertheless, the point of spiritual practice is not to elevate an isolated set of activities over the rest of life but to electrify the spiritual impulse that animates all of life.