

Spiritual fever

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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As spring has arrived, so have my seasonal allergies. I've been coughing and sneezing, and my nose has been like a faucet the past few weeks. As if that wasn't enough, however, I recently had to deal with some sort of viral infection that only seemed to make all of this worse. My being prone to illness has increased exponentially the past few years as our kids have attended school and daycare. Last year was one of the most disease-ridden year in our household that I can remember. It was very rare that all four of us were healthy at the same time.

The clear sign that I was dealing with more than allergies was the low-grade fever that slowed me down for most of the day last Wednesday. Almost as soon as I woke up, I knew that something was off: I was cold, felt slightly off balance, and had a general sense of lethargy that I couldn't shake. A flick of the temporal artery thermometer confirmed it, and I relegated myself to doing what work I felt motivated enough to do from home.

It was sometime that evening when the fever finally broke. Not only did I suddenly become drenched in sweat, but a renewed sense of energy and appetite washed over me. I felt normal again, like I could fully engage the world, and maybe eat a cheeseburger.

It's amazing how much even a slight fever can cause you to not feel like yourself. You interact with the world a little more slowly and with less enthusiasm. You have less interest in the things around you because you have to save up as much energy as you can just to move from one spot to another, to do even the simplest things like pour a cup of water or put on a sweatshirt. The situations around you—the concerns of your spouse or children, regular acts like making dinner or helping with homework—seem far off and harder to engage. You're present for these things, but much less so than if your white blood cells weren't so busy.

We get spiritual fevers, too, for a litany of reasons: doubt, sadness, disease, uncertainty around relationships, loss. These have an effect on our emotions, but

they also alter the state of our spirits. Ignatius of Loyola called this spiritual desolation, the effects of which that he lists include passivity, tepidness, and a general sense of disconnect from God and others. We feel off-kilter, like we don't fit in with the world the way we used to or the way we should. We may engage in spiritual practices more slowly, as if we need to muster more energy even to show up, let alone read or pray or sing.

Unfortunately, much like with fevers from viruses, spiritual fevers take a lot of patience, endurance, and self-care. Ignatius advises to stick with what we found meaningful before. Maybe we will hear God in a new way, maybe the fever will slowly dissipate, maybe we'll have a sudden breakthrough that snaps us back with renewed energy. Maybe the fever will change us, like a dark night of the soul, as it burns away what we trusted in before to make way for something deeper. Maybe the fever will take us down a whole new path more completely devoid of what we knew before.

The causes and effects of such a fever are different for everyone. You won't need a doctor, but you might need others, be it clergy, a spiritual director, a mentor, a group of trusted friends willing to journey with you. It will also involve some waiting out as you find your bearings again, however long that may take.

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