

Relax. Enjoy. God loves you, and you want to be closer to him. That's the motive for trying spiritual disciplines.

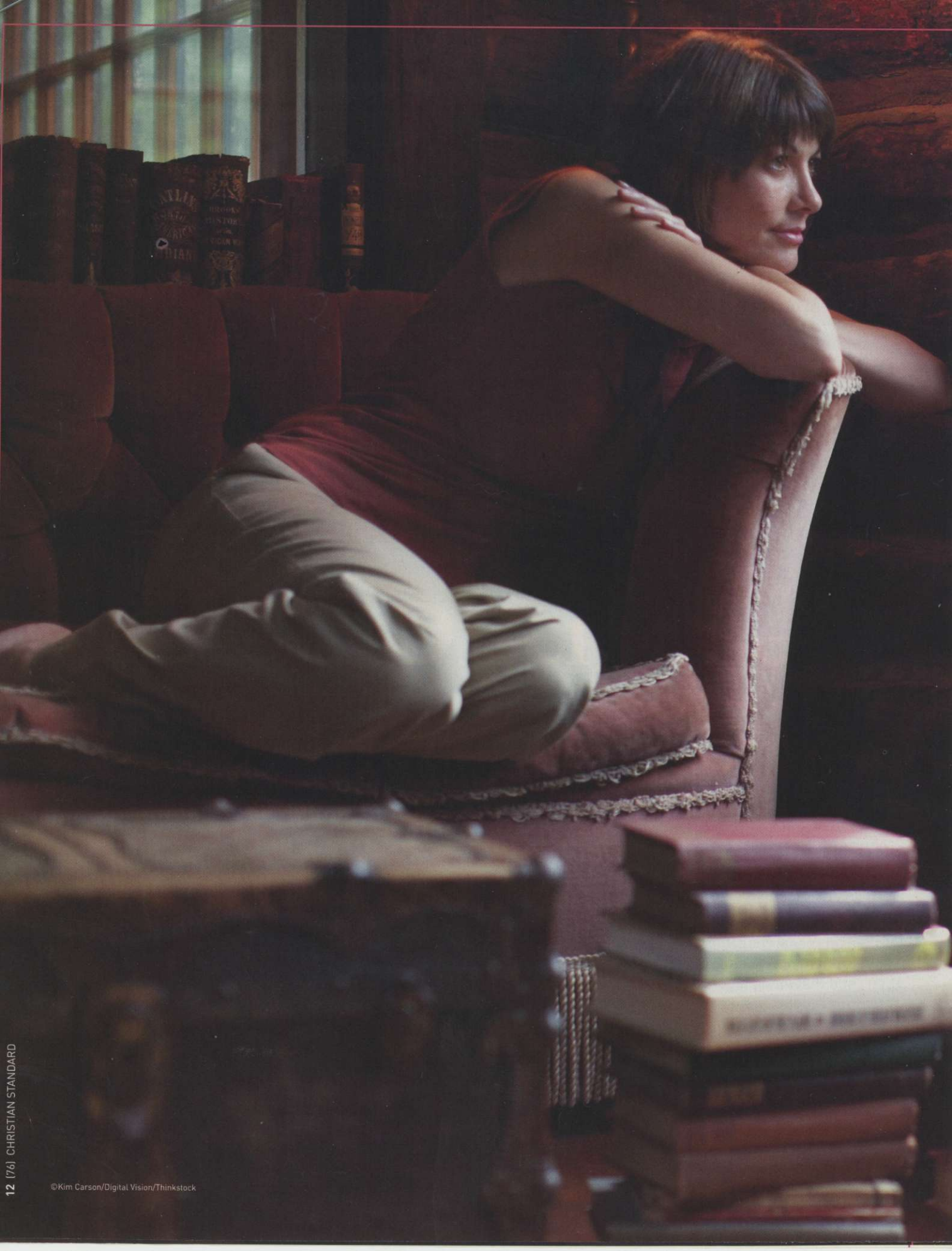
Spiritual Disciplines Are Not About *YOU*

BY JAN JOHNSON

When people ask about the college classes I teach, I hesitate to name this one: Developing Spiritual Disciplines. Why? Because they usually look at me as if I'd just asked to give them a flu shot. So I quickly add, "But we have a wonderful time! Students do interesting experiments and report encounters with God that make me cry when I grade their papers." Then their faces soften.

The idea of spiritual disciplines is frequently misunderstood. The crux of a person's misunderstanding is in thinking that disciplines are about *them*. No, spiritual disciplines are about **God**. So let me offer some thoughts about these lifelong learning lab activities invented by God, who really likes to *be with us*.

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SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ARE NOT ABOUT YOU

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Contrary to what some people think, spiritual formation is not about doing spiritual disciplines or practices, such as *lectio divina*. It's about relationship—interacting with God, abiding in Christ, and living according to the Spirit. As we engage in activities that help us do these things, we experience life with God in the present.

Historically and biblically, followers of Christ have not focused attention on the disciplines themselves, but on union with God, that is, *oneness* with God. The apostle Paul used phrases such as being “in Christ” and “with Christ” more than 200 times to describe this union. It's a beautiful union: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). So our desires and thinking become centered around God, not on doing spiritual disciplines.

Making disciplines the focus is what got the Pharisees off track. They were so careful about Sabbath-keeping, even tithing from their spice racks, that relationship with God was lost.

The Central Role of Transformation

The goal of spiritual formation is not to *do* disciplines, but *inward transformation into Christlikeness*. Disciplines help one to begin slowly and progressively to approach life as Christ did, think as he did, and then quite organically, act as he did. For example, practicing solitude and silence have the effects of making us less hurried and more attentive listeners, which equips us to love whoever is standing in front of us (rather than ignoring them or only pretending to listen to them). The result is deeper obedience in loving one's neighbor as one's self (Matthew 22:39).

But my attention cannot be focused on myself and whether I'm changing: *How am I doing?* When self-improvement is my focus, my spirituality is about *me*, not about God. I become the *star* of my spirituality rather than Christ. The *focus of attention* should always be on God and oneness with God. Personal transformation is the Spirit's work. You do the connecting; God (not you) does the perfecting.

God Is the Guide

It's not unusual for people studying spiritual disciplines to tell me they're going to start doing all the disciplines we studied. “Please don't!” I reply. “Ask God to show you what discipline would best help you connect with him.”



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God's invitation to consider a discipline often comes through a class or a book or the example of another person's life that resonates with us. You will be attracted to it and challenged by it. These invitations usually come in gentle but persistent nudges.

Sometimes the invitation comes as we notice our lack of character. A few years ago, I began to realize I lacked compassion. I already volunteered at a shelter for the homeless, which had helped me with this. *What else should I do?* I asked God. I was led to study Jesus' miracles, practicing what I call “picture prayer.” I found myself in gospel scenes, usually as an onlooker ignoring the hurting person. As I admired Jesus' compassion in those scenes, I slowly sensed increasing compassion within me.

So the Spirit does the heavy lifting, we just cooperate. The Spirit *leads* us into practices, *empowers* us, and *surprises* us with fellowship with God. Finally, the Spirit astonishes us with changes in our character. Paul said: “But if *by the Spirit* you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13, *author emphasis*). The Spirit uses disciplines to quietly transform behavior, so that you gradually become the person your mother prayed you would become.

Experimentation

Spiritual disciplines are too often regarded as hard work, but it's wiser to consider them as experiments. You try something to see if and how it leads you to connect better with God. If after trying it several times, you find it creates anxiety or self-focus, or you find it dull and lifeless, ask God to show you how to change it or try something else.

An experimental approach keeps us from thinking in terms of success and failure. That really doesn't count here. The only way to fail is not to experiment at all. To do anything is progress, because you will have learned something about how to better connect with God. And please don't be heroic; “*no pain, no gain*” is not true of disciplines. Misery creates burnout, not a genuine connection with God.

Keep in mind that there is no single way to do a particular spiritual discipline. It's wise to personalize each discipline, and even tweak it as you go along. If fasting for a day causes you think about food all day long, try fasting for only one meal, and spend that time in prayer. Or try fasting from coffee and using each “coffee nudge” to pray for some-

one you love who is struggling. The guideline for every spiritual discipline is this: *Do it as you can, not as you can't.*

As with all experiments, it's wise to start small. Because introverts and extroverts often do practices differently, copying what others do may not work. Or doing it the way you did it 10 years ago may no longer create space for you to interact with God. When I had two little children 17 months apart, I read the Bible once a week. I set it on my night table and left it open to that passage all week long. I meditated on it and prayed it back to God. Now that my children have grown, my Bible reading practice is much lengthier and steadier.

Everyday Life, Not Martyrdom

Perhaps you've thought that only special people—like pastors, monks, and missionaries—do spiritual disciplines, while the rest of us just watch football. Many spiritual disciplines are woven into normal everyday life. While I take silent retreats (a practice of silence), I have benefited just as much from the everyday practice of “not having the last word.” When someone zings me, I don't zing back. When I *just wanna* say one last thing to my husband, I don't. Can I be content without explaining myself? Can I trust God to defend me? Nurture me? Not entirely, but I am much more content and trusting than I was this time last year.

Thinking these thoughts may have become the most transforming practice for me: *What would it look like to love God for the next 10 minutes? What would it look like to love the person in front of me for the next 10 minutes?* (See Matthew 22:38, 39.) This specific method of practicing the presence of God has been a catalyst in helping my “Christ focus” to grow. It is helping me learn to love people, which I'm sure my husband could testify is something of a transformation for me.

Heart Exam

As with any practice, observe your thoughts and the movements of your heart. Don't get sidetracked by externals. In Bible reading, it isn't about getting to the bottom of the page. It's about absorbing what God is saying to you today. With disciplines of abstinence (see chart), the questions might be: What am I like when I don't get what I want? Can I be content if I don't eat a certain thing (selective fasting) or buy the latest technology (frugality)?

Defining Some Terms

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: activities in which Jesus immersed himself and which, when undertaken, bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his kingdom¹.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: specific activities of disciplines. For example, sleep (recommended highly in Scripture) is a specific practice of silence and often solitude.

There is no complete list, but here's a start.

ENGAGEMENT (activities you do)	ABSTINENCE ("refraining from" activities)
study	silence
Scripture meditation	solitude
prayer	secrecy (not letting good deeds be known)
service	sacrifice (giving up what I need)
submission (giving into the other person's will)	frugality (not owning or acquiring more than is needed)
confession	chastity (not treating people as objects)
worship	simplicity of speech, lifestyle, or time
celebration	fasting (e.g., from eating food, spending money, or watching TV)
fellowship	

¹Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 10, 156.

How might I be using eating or shopping or owning something new to satisfy a desire that only God can fill?

Christians do mostly disciplines of engagement these days. They become full, even bloated, if they don't routinely deny themselves (disciplines of abstinence). Even though a Christian may read her Bible every day, she has arguments with people at church when she doesn't get her way. Only as we say no to self-indulgence is space created to say yes to God in living adventurous, abundant lives full of relationships and meaning.

Invitation, Not Guilt

Please stay away from guilt and self-scolding. Such things will not draw you

to God. The key word is invitation. Over and over in the Old Testament's prophetic books, God says, “Return to me.” God continually invites us and draws us. God loves us into goodness. Think of a really good grandmother—one for whom you would scrub floors all night. Why? Because she loves you. She sees through you but she loves you (and bakes cookies for you).

That's God. He sees through you yet loves you into goodness. But it's key that you want God enough to be drawn in through various spiritual disciplines.

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