

“PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE”

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I recall a funny advertisement from years ago. Set inside a nuclear reactor, they are in full crisis. A loud siren whoops. Headed toward a meltdown, the men at the control panel are at a loss and in full panic mode. Nothing they do counters impending calamity. But a guy in a hard-hat munching a donut strolls behind them, measures the situation, and barks out orders. The technicians hesitate, but obey.

The siren stops. They cheer. The engineers turn to the guy with the donut. “Way to go!” they exclaim, “When did you join the team?” “Oh, I don’t work here,” he says. “I’m with the tour group...But I did sleep in a Holiday Inn Express last night.” One engineer faints and falls off his chair...The ad taps a popular fantasy: we can excel in disciplines without working at them. If we search ourselves inwardly we can all shine in great moments. No need to bother with tiresome repetitions. All we need is a good sleep or reach down deep in our hearts of hearts. It is a *lie*.

“...This is one of the most difficult things to teach beginners wanting to become athletes, musicians, or artists,” writes Gregory Jones, former Dean of Duke Divinity School, and coach of a boys basketball team. “They never want to practice—they want to scrimmage so they can show off their three-pointers or their spectacular ‘Michael Jordan moves’. It’s difficult to help them grasp Jordan’s commitment to the mundane tasks of repetition, discipline and practice.” Commitment to practice makes all the difference in faith matters also. But we usually don’t see it like that. We prefer peak experiences or mystical encounters. Or we become so cerebral we live in our heads alone, reducing faith to opinions, ideas.

A couple decades ago a pop song named *Walking in Memphis* won a Grammy. We still hear it as an oldie. It’s an engaging little ditty about a guy walking through Memphis, taking it in, engaging the ghost of Elvis, and the southern Gospel music subculture. The last verse goes: “Now Muriel plays the piano/ Every Friday at the Hollywood/ And they brought me down to see her/ And they asked me if I would—Do a little number/ And I sang with all my might/ And she said—‘Tell me are you a Christian child?’/ And I said, “Ma’am I am tonight.” Then it skips of into the infectious chorus. This is how pop culture deals with faith. You get caught up in the moment, inspiration lifts you, and you are a Christian. Next day, forget it all. Sure. Just like that donut fellow at the Holiday Inn Express is a nuclear engineer.

What are core practices for Christians? Regularly read, even study the Bible. Pray aloud at meals and for specific people. Sacrifice your pride to forgive and be forgiven before God. Worship every Sunday except if you’re ill or away. Convert hostility into hospitality. Answer hatred with non-violent love. Surprise the afflicted with comfort. Afflict the comfortable, speaking loving truth to power. Observe the sacraments and bring foodstuffs to feed the hungry. Ask amid our daily lives: how

would our attitudes or behaviors change if we were to put God's reign in Christ at the center of everything unfolding around us. That's a sampling of our disciplines.

Christians don't magically emerge from inspiring flashes. No, we're forged out of repeating routine acts that God amplifies over time. Frankly, it is like visiting a physical therapist with funny little exercises. Such acts seem so small but over time bring powerful healing and unexpected transformation. This is what Jesus meant in declaring he who would be faithful in little will be found faithful in much. That is how we become spiritual beings remade in the image of Christ. And this is how God transforms the world. But we regard repetition of such simple acts as boring. Been there, done that. Let's move on. We *never* outgrow these practices.

Surely we are fully initiated into some parts of life in the mere blink of an eye. Go buy a full set of baseball cards or a shelf of porcelain unicorns and we quickly become collectors. But let's face it, such examples are about the shallows of life. If we care to enter life's depths, if we would seriously engage life, more is asked of us. We can't rise up out of thinking long thoughts or feeling heroic and expect to be a neurosurgeon, an Olympic runner, or an international peace negotiator. In truth, becoming Christ's follower is something much more in league with these monumental undertakings. For the heart of who we are is what we practice daily.

Do you remember where you were on Thursday, January 15, 2009? That was the day Charles "Sully" Sullenberger landed that plane on the Hudson River and saved all of those lives. That afternoon Sully did all his ritualized preflight checks. But after take-off, he ran straight into a flock of Canadian geese. Both engines lost nearly all of their power. Multiple, complex decisions were made in seconds.

They couldn't get to a smaller airport. They couldn't put down on the Jersey Turnpike. That left one option: the Hudson River. But crash land on water with nose or wing downward and it's over. Finito. Sully and co-pilot had regularly rehearsed such scenarios for decades without ever having seen such a catastrophe before.

Sully made seven complex decisions within seconds. How was he able to make those decisions? Not by saying heroically to himself, "I need to fly this plane as no plane has ever been flown before!" Or, "I need to reach way deep in my heart and see how I feel about this today." No, they drew upon the orthodoxy of piloting. That meant recalling ritualized in-flight contingency plans and maneuvers they'd practiced for years on clear and benign days when extreme crisis was far away.

Of course, when Sully pulled that off everyone called it a miracle. It was a miracle in a sense, but not as we usually imagine miracles. Because of sturdy habits, Sully had a full repertoire of responses available for that perilous set of events. Faith is like this. Not just a matter of inner dispositions. But also about character. And how's character shaped? Practice the right thing even as we don't feel like it.

I don't mean to trash feeling inspired or thinking deep thoughts. But they do not replace active daily observance of faith in specific, time-honored ways. When I do a memorial service where death has been sudden or tragic, I calm things down in my greeting, by saying, "*Our faith is made for such a day as this.*" In this, I appeal to our learning Psalm 23 years ago or our prayers *for others* suffering impossibly terrible loss or how we let a faith community assist our coping--to recall all of that now. I invite them to draw on all the spiritual work they have done to be equipped for life, death, and loss. For in that moment is too late to start. Invariably, at the reception, a Deacon will take me aside to whisper, "What do people do who don't have a church or practice the faith?" My answer is always, "I really have no idea."

In a former life, I lived in Greeley, Colorado, before the Rocky Mountains. As the Front Range was settled, they called that barren expanse the Great American Desert. Only lost echoes of buffalo pounding treeless, arid plains. Not much there for future population. How could they live there? A man in my church saw beyond this. He was a visionary. When I knew W. D. Farr, he was in his 90s and blind. But as a young man, he foresaw how productive the plains could be--with water. As rain is sparse, he looked to the Rockies on the western horizon, where snow is deep and lakes abound. So W. D. Farr masterminded bringing water to Greeley.

It took much convincing. For most to buy far-away water felt like a boondoggle. But somehow he persuaded folks to dig canals by hand that would route water to proposed farmlands. And these were wide 14 foot deep canals that must have broken many backs. Still, they were all dutifully dug. And the area flourished. Today Weld County ranks fourth in the country for the value of its farm products. And today Greeley has enough water for a population three times its current size.

Just imagine the effort, the backbreaking work, the sheer discipline, every day for many years. Digging water canals in a desert? Right, I have a bridge in Brooklyn. If the water arrived with no canal, it would only become a useless, mucky swamp. But because their unglamorous daily efforts had created a network, the mountain waters created life and bore much fruit. It is a parable, I tell you, the citizens pitching in and digging canals through a trackless desert without any guarantees.

Our spiritual practices are like the canals. We work at them daily. Others see us and scratch their heads. Why engage in such odd behavior? But we persevere because, even if the reasons are not obvious today, they will be soon. When we face life's stark challenges and need refreshment from above, we will be ready and know what to do as the cooling relief of God's baptismal waters finally flow.

Faith-filled practices channel what God can do in far flung wider horizons. Simple habits and daily disciplines create a network through which closeness with God and solidarity as people becomes possible. They don't loom large in the world's view of things, as negligible as a widow relentlessly pressing her case to a judge. But they're near to God's heart and incline our hearts closer to his. By practicing our faith, we enter in God's ongoing work of grace, invisible all around us. Amen.