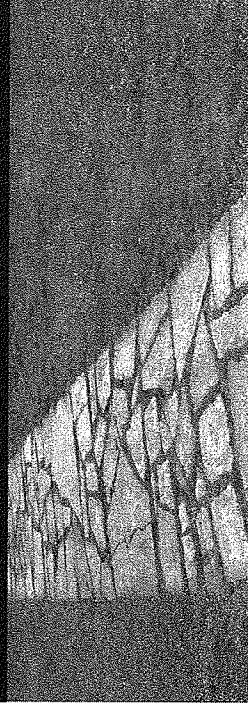




FINDING  
OUR WAY  
AGAIN

BRIAN  
MCLAREN



  
THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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This book is printed on paper containing 30% post-consumer waste.

This book is dedicated to local church pastors and their spouses who are leading their congregations to rediscover the Christian faith as a transforming way of life. Your work is hard, I know. But it is worthwhile, and much depends on your courage, resilience, and creativity. This book is also dedicated to all who are involved in the New Monasticism ([www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org)), and to all who will be inspired by their example, even if from a distance. You are leading the way.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHY SPIRITUAL PRACTICES MATTER

You can't take an epidural shot to ease the pain of giving birth to character. In a sense, every day of your life is labor: the rhythmic agony of producing the person who will wake up in your body tomorrow, creating your reputation, continuing your legacy, and influencing your family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and countless strangers, for better or worse. It is questionable whether you can ever be exactly the same person for two consecutive days: what today throws at you will force you to become better or bitter for tomorrow; it will push you toward breakdown or breakthrough, nudge you a step closer to courage, nobility, charity, integrity, and honor . . . or otherwise.

In a wild world like ours, your character, left untended, will become a stale room, an obnoxious child, a vacant lot

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filled with thorns, weeds, broken bottles, raggedy grocery bags, and dog droppings. Your deepest channels will silt in, and you will feel yourself shallowing. You'll become a presence neither you nor others will enjoy, and you and they will spend more and more time and energy trying to be anywhere else.

Well tended, your character will be a fragrant garden, an artist's home, with walls and halls full of memories and beauty, a party with live music and good jokes and pleasant conversations in every corner. You'll be good and deep company for others and yourself.

That's why, through the ages, people have tried to find ways to tend themselves, to do for their souls what exercise does for their bodies or study for their minds. Through these character exercises, they give birth to the person they are proud of becoming, the person they are happy to be, the one who is trying to be born in them every day—a hero, a best friend, a loving beloved and beloved lover.

This might sound wonderful, and it is, but it works itself out in the mess, drudgery, stress, triviality, trauma, perplexity, and hilarity of odd days and traffic jams—the kinds of things that have happened to you in the last two days, or will happen in the next two. You know. It's that time of month, and your wife is really grouchy, or your husband is complaining about bills again. Your boss is having a torrid affair with the company accountant, which means his mind isn't on his work, which means that things are chaotic at the office, and you're stuck with the mess. You don't know it, but your son is planning to call you tomorrow to tell you he's gay or getting divorced or in trouble with the law or running for governor. Or your husband will lose his job next Friday, or your grandchild will be diagnosed with autism next month, or your air conditioner will break down the morning of the hottest day in twenty-five years, or your government is planning to drop bombs on another country right before the elections. How will these experiences form you?

What kind of person will you become in the math and aftermath of all the fecality life slings at you between diapers and Depends?

Maybe you're one of the fortunate ones for whom everything goes well, for whom success and popularity keep dropping like coins into your hands, and for whom life's pain (so far) is easily treatable with regular-strength aspirin. Vodka, heroin, morphine, or plans for a mysterious disappearance have never once winked in your direction. You are no doubt thankful for your good fortune, but somewhere in the back of your mind you know: in terms of depth and character, a long stint of success and comfort may be the toughest test of all. Thirty years pass, and you've become just another greasy fast-food restaurant where the menu is full of lukewarm entrées under a purplish heat lamp: complacency, pride, ingratitude, superiority, apathy, cowardice, starch, fat, confectioneer's sugar. You develop the habit of expressing your opinions whether others ask for them or not, or perhaps you realize that you actually don't have many opinions, and people think you're someone what nice but have trouble remembering your name. You have become weightless, so any wind can blow you away. It's ironic, isn't it? Our bodies grow fatter, we're all on diets, and our souls, meanwhile, go wispy and anorexic.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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Both the strugglers and the comfortable, then, need to mind the gap between the character they want to have and the character they are actually developing, which is reason number 1 for investing energy in a book like this.

Spiritual practices are actions within our power that help us narrow the gap. They help us become someone weighty, someone worthy of a name and reputation, someone who makes survival worthwhile by turning life's manure into fertilizer. They're about surviving your twenties or forties or eighties and not becoming a jerk in the process. About not letting what happens to us deform us or destroy us. About realizing that what we earn or accumulate means nothing compared to what we become and who we are. As such, spiritual practices are pretty earthy, and they're not strictly about *spirituality* as it is often defined; they're about humanity. Which brings us to the second reason they're important—*aliveness*.

Spiritual practices could be called *life practices* or *humane practices*, because they help us practice being alive, and humanely so. They develop not just character but also aliveness, alertness, wakefulness, and humanity.

The sheer value of being alive seems to be what keeps us getting up after our last stupid mistake or heartbreaking disappoint-

ment or shattering trauma or surprising success, thinking, *Okay, now that's behind me. Let's get on with life. What's next?* The word *life* represents a mystery to us every moment we say it, feel it, and want more of it.

The awareness and mystery of life hit me one morning, on the last day in February. There was a little snow left on the ground from a storm a week earlier in Maryland, where I live. In spite of the cold, some of the birds had been singing their spring songs for about two weeks, an act of faith to greet each chilly dawn, maybe even an attempt to warm it up. I could hear them indistinctly from my kitchen.

I put on my jacket and stepped out in my backyard to pick out more clearly the songs I've come to know. No robins singing yet, although I heard their *pert-pert-perts* a few times and saw them hanging out in the naked trees, like teenagers smoking and joking before school. There was a white-throated sparrow singing (a kind of six-toned whistle, a little mournful, that makes me think of children swinging on a swing set), a cardinal (a stronger whistle—an ascending half note, a descending half note, followed by four ascending quarter notes), a house finch (a happy chatter that sounds like a complex sentence in a language humans can't yet understand), and a glorious Carolina wren (a whistle full of spurts, starts, and stops).

I wanted to get a glimpse of the wren, so I grabbed my binoculars and, after about five minutes, found him, snug against the trunk on a small branch high, high up, easy to miss. As I centered him in my view, I saw his buff brown chest puffing, his head turning left, right, and then up to sing. That mystery and awareness of aliveness suddenly pinged in my brain like a crystal glass struck by a dinner knife. A singing Carolina wren can become, if one listens and looks in the right way, a burning bush in which the divine is dancing like a flame.

This awareness kept ping-pong, dancing, and glowing with decreasing intensity that day as I went to the airport to fly halfway around the world, first from DC to LA, then overnight from LA to Hong Kong. Somewhere over the dark Pacific, the mystery had completely abandoned me, probably because I was flying in economy class, where few good things can long survive. By morning, catching my last flight from Hong Kong to Kuala Lumpur, my neck hurt, and I felt greasy and cross, and the mystery of life didn't impress me much. The Carolina wren of happiness was long forgotten.

Then, as the flight attendants were serving the obligatory scrambled-eggs breakfast, I looked groggily across the aisle: a couple and their two children were stirring. Mom and Dad had a well-behaved boy of about three and a tiny girl in a pink blanket—exactly six weeks old, I heard the mother tell the flight attendant, adding that the baby had come two months premature, which sort of made her minus-two weeks old. Over the next few hours, I watched Dad care for the boy, putting together some miniature LEGOs, taking in a video about penguins,

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guiding him down the long aisle to the restroom a couple of times. Then, just before landing, I watched Mom and baby stare into each other's eyes, mirroring smiles and wide-eyed giggles, two separate persons who couldn't be more connected even if the umbilical cord were still intact, and there was the mystery again. Life—ping-pong, singing, dancing, glowing, even in the cheap seats.

That's why I say that spiritual practices are about life, about training ourselves to become the kinds of people who have eyes and actually see, and who have ears and actually hear, and so experience—with increasing consistency and resiliency, even in economy class—not just survival but *Life*, capitalized and modified by insufficient adjectives such as *real*, *abundant*, *examined*, *conscious*, *worth living*, and *good*.

In these two ways, then, paying attention to "life practices" is worthwhile for everybody, those who consider themselves spiritual and those who don't: first, because nobody wants to become a tedious fart, and second, because nobody wants to miss Life because they're short on legroom and sleep in economy class.

I haven't told the whole story though. Yes, spiritual practices are ways of exercising intention regarding the kinds of people we are becoming at every turn. Yes, they are ways of habitually waking up and discovering Life. But the capitalization of Life points beyond life itself: spiritual practices are also and truly about the Spirit. They are about somehow driving with our windows wide open to God, keeping our elbows in the wind and our hands surfing beside the side mirror.

They're about tuning our radios to the frequency of the Holy, turning up the volume, and then daring to sing along. They're about staying alert so our eyes see the glory of the coming of the Lord, and our ears hear the Word, and our skin feels the warm touch and the gentle pressure of the Presence. (As we will see, spiritual practices are also about being sustained through the perceived absence of the Presence.)

Spiritual practices are a way of putting the universe on fast-rewind until it collapses into a singularity of dark light, so as to recall that all creation originally unfolded from the divine source singing, "Let there be . . ." They are, likewise, a way of putting the universe on fast-forward, imagining it hurtling forward and outward until it is caught up in the wide arms of grace—like a beginning toddler falling with awkward, joyous determination across space toward his mother's arms. And perhaps most important, they are a way of locating ourselves in a present moment no less lighted by the presence of the unseen God from whom we come, to whom we go, and with whom we travel.

Spiritual practices are ways of becoming awake and staying awake to God—that's the third reason.

Perhaps, you say, that should go first—we should talk about spiritual formation as being first and foremost about the experience of God, and second about the formation of character, and then thirdly about the sustenance of wakefulness to life. Perhaps you're right. But perhaps the three can't be so easily separated. Perhaps the kind of person you are becoming determines how much of God you can experience—and maybe even which version of God you experience. Perhaps the acuity of your perception determines whether the signs catch your attention enough to signify for you anything divine or whether the wonders get your attention long enough to set you to wondering.

So for these three reasons, plus one more we'll address in closing, spiritual practices can help reshape us for a more intentional, attentive, and perceptive way of living. But that doesn't explain why *ancient* practices should have a special appeal. For a lot of people, the word *ancient* evokes dust and mildew, cobwebs and mummies. It marries the sexy, young word *spiritual* to the stodgy, middle-aged word *religious*. If you're in the market for spiritual practices, why prefer ancient ones over the latest ones? That will become clear within a few chapters.

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

### CHARACTER

1. Think about who you were yesterday in terms of character, compared to who you are today. How would you fill in these blanks: "Today I'm more . . . and less . . . than yesterday"? Do the same regarding a year ago and ten years ago.
2. What will your character be like in ten years, given your current trajectory.
3. Based on how you answered question number two, if necessary, cry. If possible, celebrate. Write down one step you want to take in response to how you answered question number two.

### ALIVENS

1. Are you awake? What have you missed—in terms of sights, sounds, feelings, smells, and so on—in the last five minutes? The last twenty-four hours? Slow down and be aware of any "Carolina wrens of happiness" that surround you at this moment.
2. Rate yourself on a scale of one to one hundred on how alive you feel at the present moment. A high score isn't the goal; an honest

score is. When was the last time you felt less than thirty? More than ninety?

3. What are the advantages of sleepwalking through life? What are the advantages of being alive and awake while your life happens?

#### EXPERIENCING GOD

1. If your relationship with God was a marriage, how would you describe things to a marriage counselor? What would a better, happier marriage look like?
2. If you pray, talk to God about your previous answers. If you don't normally pray, try it now. Many people find it helps either to write your prayer as a letter or actually pray out loud. If you want to try praying out loud but are afraid people will think you've tipped over the sanity ledge, you might find that taking a walk in the woods or hiding out in your car will give you some space and time.

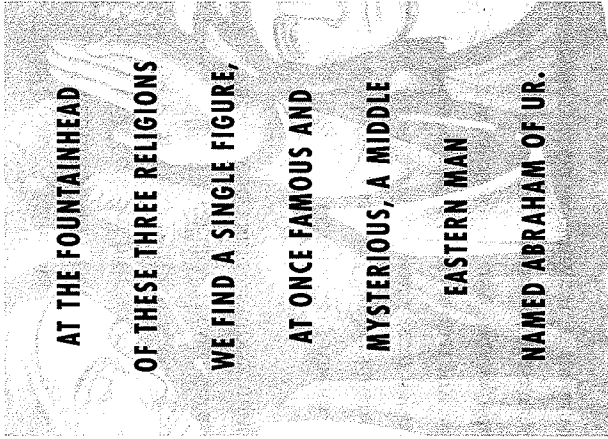
## CHAPTER 3

### THE GENESIS OF PRACTICE

#### FIXED-HOUR PRAYER

Fixed-hour prayer, fasting, Sabbath, the sacred meal, pilgrimage, observance of sacred seasons, giving—all seven of the ancient spiritual practices are common to the major Abrahamic traditions of faith.

The largest religion in today's world is Christianity, accounting (loosely speaking) for about 33 percent of the world's inhabitants. Islam, the world's second-largest religion, accounts for an additional 20 percent, and both religions are daughters of Judaism. Together, these three religions nurture and guide more than half the world's population. And of course, they wield an influence that affects 100 percent of the planet's six-plus billion living human beings,



AT THE FOUNTAINHEAD  
OF THESE THREE RELIGIONS  
WE FIND A SINGLE FIGURE,  
AT ONCE FAMOUS AND  
MYSTERIOUS, A MIDDLE  
EASTERN MAN  
NAMED ABRAHAM OF UR.