

An Altar in the World February 4
Chapter One: The Practice of Waking up to God
Chapter Two: The Practice of Paying Attention

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

St Francis read the world as reverently as he read the Bible.

In the Bible, people encounter God under shady oak trees, on river banks, at tops of mountains, and long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to lilies of the field and birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay.

Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. Wisdom is gained by practicing what is right and noticing what happens when the practice succeeds and when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what they need to know.

Reverence is the recognition of something greater than self-something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding.

(examples given: God, birth, death, sex, nature, truth, justice, wisdom)

Classical philosopher Paul Woodruff says: To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god-this is the opposite of reverence.

An irreverent soul who is unable to feel awe in the presence of things higher than self is also unable to feel respect in the presence of things it sees as lower than self.

Reverence can be a pain, but it can also heal.

Related Scripture:

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob at Bethel and his dream of the ladder with angels to heaven

Exodus 3:1-13 Moses and burning bush

1 Kings 19: 1-14 The Lord appears to Elijah

Check-in Question:

If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

Reflection/discussion:

- Where have you found God out in the world, in people you encounter, in nature?
- Do you tend to over think decisions before acting or are you reckless enough to try something and see what happens?
- Where does our church/most churches encourage people to find God more: in church or in the world?
- Have you ever been disappointed when you looked for God in church?

- When do you make time to consider the lilies?
- Barbara Brown Taylor's dad had a gun-cleaning ritual. Do you have a cleaning/organizing ritual for something that you respect/love? (your car, your CD/DVD's, your coffee maker, your kitchen spices, your iron skillet, etc)
- Do you find reverence is a part of our worship services?
- What commands our attention? (examples: speedometer, watch, cell phone, mail, email, list of things to do, messes at home)
- How do we separate what is urgent from what is important?
- Reverence requires a certain pace. Does your lifestyle's pace allow for reverence?
- The first time Barbara Brown Taylor drove behind a truck with chickens huddled inside their cages and their feathers glancing off her windshield, she began eating chicken with unprecedented reverence. Think about your last big meal-try to imagine all the effort and work that brought that food to your table. Where was the food grown? Did it have to be delivered? Did someone cut the meat for you or did you buy it whole? Did food require refrigeration to keep from spoiling? Did someone shop or cook for you?
- Tell of a time when you thought the ground you were standing on was holy.

Homework:

Look for pictures of Jesus this week. Bring one you like to our Zoom next week. And also choose one or both of these assignments:

This week when you say grace before a meal, don't thank only God. Try to include gratitude for all the energy expended during the multiple stages to prepare that food for your table.

This week when you find yourself annoyed by someone, try looking at him/her as a human being instead of an obstacle.

An Altar in the World February 11
Chapter Three: The Practice of Wearing Skin
Chapter Four: The Practice of Walking on the Earth

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

In an age of information overload, when a vast variety of media delivers news faster than most of us can digest—when many of us have at least two e-mail addresses, two telephone numbers, and one fax number—the last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation...

Wearing my skin is not a solitary practice, but one that brings me into communion with all those other embodied souls. It is what we have most in common with one another.

Related Scripture:

Jeremiah 2:26-32, Jeremiah 7:3-15

John 13:1-17 Jesus washes his disciples' feet

Check In Question:

Show the picture of Jesus that you found this week and tell us what you like about it. OR: Tell us what scars have become part of the skin you wear?

Reflection/discussion:

- What did your body tell you first thing this morning?
- Think of a time when your body sent you clues that something was amiss. (examples: tears, aches, moans, goosebumps, fever)
- Our bodies remain God's best way of getting to us. Deep suffering makes theologians of us all...Why me? Why now? Why this? These are natural questions to ask when you are in pain but they are just as relevant when you are in pleasure. Do you agree or disagree? Share an experience when you asked these questions.
- How did Jesus spend his last night on earth with his disciples when he wanted to teach them what they needed to know in order to thrive when he was no longer around? Hint: Jesus said, **Do** this, not **believe** this, in remembrance of me. (he did concrete things: washed feet and shared supper)
- Most of us, Taylor writes, walk without really thinking about what we are doing. We walk while talking on the phone, dragging a child, or attempting to text while holding onto a latte. Can you remember a time when you felt fully present and aware while walking? Do you have a walking "practice" such as the ones Taylor refers to? What are the spiritual benefits of multitasking for you? What are the spiritual costs?
- Taylor writes, "Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are." What emotions does this statement stir up in you? Do you think it is possible to change—either personally or culturally—in this regard?

Good is the Flesh
by Brian Wren

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Homework:

Our bodies take real beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. After considering all the obstacles/accidents/illness that your body has survived, try saying these words in an attitude of prayer before God:

Here I am. This is a body like no other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul's address. Thank you for breathing life into these lungs, for the electrical impulses that have powered millions of unnoticed heartbeats, for the chemistry taking place at my taste buds that have brought me pleasure at countless meals, for the thousands of miles these feet have carried me. For these things and more, I give thanks.

An Altar in the World February 18
Chapter Five: The Practice of Getting Lost
Chapter Six: The Practice of Encountering Others

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

If you do not start choosing to get lost in some fairly low risk ways, how will you ever manage when one of life's big winds knocks you clean off your course?

Anything can become a spiritual practice one you are willing to approach it that way- once you let it bring you to your knees and show you what is real, including who you really are, who other people are, and how near God can be when you have lost your way.

We have just enough faith to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another-Jonathan Swift

The nature of the encounter is not important. What is important is that at least one person is willing to treat it as holy.

Related Scripture:

1 Kings 19:1-9 Elijah fleeing fury of Jezebel

Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus' 40 days in the Judean desert

Matthew 2:1-12 A journey in search of a king and going home by another way

Genesis 18:1-15 Abraham and Sarah's visitors

Matthew 25: 34-40 When did we see you hungry and feed you?

Genesis 32:22-32 Jacob wrestles stranger

John 6:1-15 Feeding of 5000

Luke 7:36-50 Jesus anointed at Bethany

Luke 11:38-42 Mary and Martha

Check-In Question:

Share a time when you were lost. Did you discover something you would not have otherwise?

Reflection/discussion:

- When you are going somewhere new, do you depend on GPS, read a map, ask a stranger for directions? How do you like to find your own way?
- Read the first three Biblical stories listed above of being lost. What caused the characters to be lost? What did they lose by being lost? What did they gain?
- What was the reason for God's choice of Abraham and Sarah as first parents of Hebrew people? (willingness to get lost)

- Recall a time when you showed hospitality and when you received hospitality. Which changes you more-receiving hospitality or providing it?

- Is it easier for you to love humanity in general from a distance or someone in particular at closer range? To help someone far away or someone in your own family?
- Have you ever volunteered for something and come home tired and dirty, but also oddly refreshed, with more lift in your heart than you could have gotten from a day at the beach? Share about your volunteer experience.
- Why should we love strangers? (because we've been strangers; because the stranger shows you God. because God does)
- Read the next group of scripture passages listed above. What did the people who showed hospitality give up? What did they gain?
- Rabbi Sacks claims "the supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image," for only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up. Have you ever expanded your view of God by encountering someone unlike yourself?

Ponder this bit of wisdom from the Desert Fathers and Mothers we read about in this chapter:

The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard; but if a bottle is hung above the stone, allowing the water to fall drop by drop, it wears away the stone. So it is with the word of God; it is soft and our heart is hard, but the one who hears the word of God often, opens her heart to the fear of God.

Homework:

The best way to grow in empathy for those who are lost is to know what it means to be lost yourself. Show some kindness this week for someone who is living in a foreign country, someone with a child who won't stop crying, someone who is grieving, someone who lost a job.

An Altar in the World February 25
Chapter Seven: The Practice of Living with Purpose
Chapter Eight: The Practice of Saying No

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

Whatever our jobs in the world happen to be, Luther said, our mutual vocation is to love God and neighbor.

God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by subtracting — Meister Eckhart

A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity. — Karl Barth

Saying no is a more difficult spiritual practice than tithing or praying on a cold stone floor.

Related Scripture:

Luke 10:38-42 Mary and Martha

Mark 14:32-35 Jesus in Gethsemane

Exodus 20:1-17 Genesis 1:31-2:3 Leviticus 25: 1-5

Check-In Question:

Tell 3 jobs that you have held, but only two of them are true. We'll guess which job is fabricated.

Reflection/discussion:

- Do you ever struggle with wondering if you are doing what God wants you to do?
- Does a sense of purpose make the menial/tedious parts of our jobs easier?
- Are there volunteer positions that you especially enjoyed or fed your soul?
- Every job offers the chance to recognize the divine in human form or to act like a jerk. Think back on work you've done and when you've recognized the divine and when you've been a jerk. What happened to you? What happened to the other person?
- Barbara Brown Taylor lists these as the tools of her trades: martini glasses, green ink, saddles, communion bread and wine, newspaper stories. What could you list as your unlikely tools?
- Many people work at jobs that are too small for them. Do you agree or disagree?
- Does being in demand make you feed your sense of worth?
- When you are not busy, do you feel like an underachiever, like it is something to hide?
- How do people in China respond when someone asks, "How are you?" (see page 123 "I am very busy, thank you.")
- Think of a time when you should have said, "No, I want to stay home tonight."
- "No, I have enough work for now." "No, I have all the possessions I can take care of." Did you? Is it too late to say it now?
- Read the scripture passages related to this chapter out loud.
- What was the FIRST thing in creation that God called "holy?" (see page 127: Not a people or a place, but a day)
- According to Leviticus 25:1-5, who/what else deserves a Sabbath rest? (see page 132: Your land-tired fields and vineyards, tired grapes!)

- The incline in work time by the average worker was matched by a steep decline in what? (see page 129: unpaid activities on which most societies depend: care of very old and very young, civic duties, volunteer work, support of arts and church)
- How does rise in consumerism relate to loss of Sabbath? (see page 130)
- What are the killing rhythms of our culture that Sabbath helps us to resist? (see page 134: drivenness, depletion, compulsion and collapse)
- Do we put “Thou shalt not work on the Sabbath” in a different category from the other ten commandments of not killing, not lying, not stealing, etc? Why?

Homework:

Choose a Sabbath enabling assignment that fits your life from the three options below:

1. Complete the chart below and then rebel against one of the obstacles you list.

Things that give you life, but you never do

Reasons it is impossible for you to
do take time to do them

2. Resolve not to add anything else to your calendar without subtracting something else.
3. Praise yourself- and your classmates- for saying “No” (instead of feeling guilty).

An Altar in the World March 4
Chapter Nine: The Practice of Carrying Water
Chapter Ten: The Practice of Feeling Pain

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

Anything that sustains life has holy dimensions too.

No task is too menial to serve as a path.

Pain makes theologians of us all.

Pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy.

Pain can erase most of what you thought you knew about yourself.

Related Scripture:

John 21:1-14 Miraculous catch of fish

Job 6:2-4 weighing anguish

Job 6:14-21 devotion of friends

Job 7:7-21 why not pardon me?

Job 38 Lord questions Job

Job 42: 1-6 Job's reply

Check-in Question:

Tell of a time when the lights/power went out for you.

Reflection/discussion:

- When the power went out in the snowstorm, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “necessity brought us together. It was our common language, one that did not require words.” Have you had an experience of necessity bringing you into community with someone? (maybe an accident, illness or loss of income)
- Surviving the power outage in the cold showed Barbara Brown Taylor how to live as most people in the world live, preoccupied with survival. Does being able to choose our work set us apart from those who have no choice?
- Does our culture regard physical labor as the lowest kind of work?
- Do spikes in pain bear some relationship to leaps in growth?
- List different approaches to handling pain. (page 157: deny it, numb it, fight it, decide to engage pain when it comes, giving it my full attention so it can teach me what I need to know)
- How did pain/difficulty help you become more than you were?
- What questions does pain prompt you to ask?
- Pain is provocative. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that all the world religions got started through a connection with pain.

- What is the difference between pain and suffering? (page 161 pain: unpleasant sensation r/t tissue damage, originates in body. Suffering: happens in mind, mind decides what pain means and whether it is deserved, makes judgment, takes blame, assigns guilt, measures loss)
- How did Barbara Brown Taylor's eye injury change the way she prayed? (page 158: God stayed with her through the pain instead of removing pain)
- Which is harder-to sit with someone in pain or to feel it yourself?
- Barbara Brown Taylor calls Job one of pain's most eloquent poets. Read the Bible passages above for a review of Job. What are some of the different approaches Job takes in questioning his pain? (Can you find curses, tears, sarcasm, humility, indignation, reason?)
- Which hurts Job worse-his troubles or God's silence?
- Does God answer Job's questions? What does he learn? (page 168: His pain does not set him apart from other living creatures. If anything, it secures his communion with them).
- From your own experience and others', what helps in dealing with pain?

Closing:

"What a Friend we have in Jesus"
 What a friend we have in Jesus,
 All our sins and griefs to bear!
 What a privilege to carry
 Everything to God in prayer!
 "Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
 Oh, what needless pain we bear,
 All because we do not carry
 Everything to God in prayer!
 Have we trials and temptations?
 Is there trouble anywhere?
 We should never be discouraged,
 Take it to the Lord in prayer:
 Can we find a friend so faithful
 Who will all our sorrows share?
 Jesus knows our every weakness,
 Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Homework Assignment:

Wear stretchy clothes for active movement next week!

An Altar in the World March 11
Chapter Eleven: The Practice of Being Present to God

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

God is happening and I am lucky enough to know that I am in the midst.

Prayer is like a radio wave that carries music through the air whether I tune in or not.

Related Scripture:

Lamentations 3:25-29 (Read from The Message, if possible)

John 14:5-14 (ask for anything in my name)

Matthew 18:20 (2 or more gathered in my name)

Check-In Question:

Share an example of when you/someone you know saw an event as an answered prayer.

Gathering Activity:

Movement Prayer

Reflection/discussion:

- Read the scripture passages above to get a sample of what the Bible tells us about prayer.
- Barbara Brown Taylor states that prayer is more than saying prayers at set times. What does she include in her expansive definition of prayer? (page 178: Waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I'm doing, when I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me, when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive)
- Is the point of praying to sharpen my listening or God's?
- In John, Jesus told Thomas that if he asked for anything in Jesus' name, he would do it. What is it about "in his name" that we don't understand?
- Barbara Brown Taylor states she tells God what she wants and trusts God to sort it out. Do you edit your wants for God or let God sort it out?
- Do you hunger for evidence that God hears your prayers? Do you get a response?
- What does Barbara Brown Taylor mean by saying that divine response to prayer is one of those beauties that remain in the eye of the beholder? (page 182: The meaning we give to what happens in our lives is our final inviolable freedom)
- Waiting is certainly a kind of prayer. Describe a time when waiting changed your perspective. (page 183) (for test results, surgeon's report, child to come home, war to end, market to recover)
- What does waiting teach us? (pages 183-4: our lives are not within our control, we are inextricably bound up with others)
- When was the last time you held still long enough for the shy deer-soul inside of you to step into the clearing and speak? (page 185)
- How might the habit of praying prayers of gratitude now affect us later in life when we don't have as much control over our circumstances and abilities? (page 184)

John Baillie's "A Diary of Private Prayer"
O Holy Spirit of God,
visit now this soul of mine,
and linger within until eventide.
Inspire all my thoughts.
Color all my imaginations.
Suggest all my decisions.
Lodge in the nooks and crannies of my being and order all my doings.
Be with me in my silence and in my speech,
in my haste and in my leisure,
in company and in solitude,
in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening;
and give me grace at all times to embrace thy mysterious companionship. Amen.

Homework:

Read blessings of Jan Richardson and John O'Donahue for next week from provided resources.

An Altar in the World March 18
Chapter Twelve: The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

It is forbidden to taste of the pleasures of this world without a blessing. — The Talmud

A blessing is not the function of a particular role. It is the natural expression of the fiery love and inclusiveness of our inner spirit. It is the manifestation of a soulfire, and each of us can be its hearth. To bless us is not the prerogative only of ministers, priests, and rabbis; it is not the exclusive domain of saints and holy people. It is a natural human ability, and anyone can do it. — David Spangler

To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. — Henri Nouwen

A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we offer others the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of refuge from everything in them and around them that is not genuine. We enable people to remember who they are (and whose they are). — Rachel Naomi Remen

A blessing does not confer holiness. Because God made these things, they already share in God's own holiness.

Related Scripture:

Romans 12:14-18 Bless those who persecute you

Genesis 27:1-40 Jacob gets Isaac's blessing

Genesis 32:22-28 Jacob wrestles with God

Psalms 72:17-20 Blessing of David

Check-In Question:

Would you rather jump off a high diving board or try to say something holy in front of other people?

Gathering Activity:

Share favorite blessings from Jan Richardson and John O'Donahue from homework.

Reflection/discussion:

- Read the scripture passages above to sample some Biblical blessings.
- It is a big mistake to perpetuate the illusion that only certain people can bless things. Do you feel worthy to bless something? What things do you bless, if any? How do you decide what to bless? (grace at dinner, bedtime prayers with kids, someone who sneezes)
- When you pronounce a blessing, do you confer holiness or simply recognize it?

- What does Barbara Brown Taylor mean when she writes: the key to blessing things is to receive their blessing? (page 196)
- Are we smart enough to tell the difference between what is bad for us and what is good? (page 205: The blessing covers your ignorance and seeds your curiosity...so this is what life has brought you! How will this change things? What can you make of this?)
- Can you bless/embrace things as they are instead of waiting until they are what they should be? (page 206)
- Read from the book (page 205) about the dream and the blessing of the monster. What do you make of this?
- Read from the book (pages 207-209) about the benediction of Barbara Brown Taylor's father in the ER. Have you ever received or desired such a blessing?

Closing Activity:

Write a blessing. While we play some music, write a blessing that recognizes the holiness of someone, something or sometime. Some suggestions:

Waking up – offer blessing for the day ahead and another day of life.

Getting ready – gratefulness for a hot shower and blessing on those without clean water. Blessings on the people who maintain the water system providing this resources so conveniently.

Those we love – imagine each one in the eyes of your heart, asking God to bless them

Meals – blessing for the farmers, people who transport food across many miles, those working in soup kitchens.

Strangers – blessings on the homes you pass as you drive or walk or the people you pass by on the streets.

Those you meet or talk with during the day – bless someone you will see or talk with or follow on Facebook or somehow engage with today.