

DOING THE HARD THINGS

Like most folks, I like to think I'm a pretty good judge of what I am capable of and what I'm not. I *can* write a rock opera, I *can't* read my gas meter. I *can* ride a unicycle, I *can't* do long division. I *can* give a good sermon, I *can't* play video games. And over Thanksgiving I learned that I *can* survive a week in Hawaii with my parents, but I *can't* surf to save my life.

Generally I cut my losses and only really focus on the things that I *can* do. It's oh so much easier on my fragile ego, if unadventurous. This rule applies to almost everything save one: meditation.

I am a terrible meditator. I hate it. It hates me. And yet, for some mysterious, inexplicable reason, I *have* to do it.

Now, my spiritual director and I have gone 'round and 'round about this. "Don't do something you hate," she says. "There are plenty of other ways you meet God," she says. I know it. And I give those other ways proper attention. But after a couple of months away from it, some unseen hand taps me on the shoulder and says, "Time to do *zazen*."

The thing is, I don't perceive any reward from doing it. I don't feel closer to God when I do it. I don't have any mystical experiences when I do it. I don't emerge with any deep insights. I don't even necessarily finish with a feeling of peace or well-being. Sometimes it is just an exercise in frustration, after which I ask myself, "Why did I just put myself through *that*?"

Other folks who meditate aren't very sympathetic. My friend Séan meditated for his very first time twenty years ago and instantly found himself transported to some astral plane. "Goody for *him*," says my inner wise-ass.

My bishop is no help either. "Just sit," he says. I tell him why it doesn't work and he smiles at me. "Just sit," he repeats.

"But—" I begin.

"Just sit," he interrupts.

"You are no help at all," I tell him.

"Just sit," he smiles. I am sure I am not the first to fantasize about episcocide.

So why *do* I put myself through it? I guess it's because I believe that on some level, I am being called to a level of consciousness that I am not now aware of. I believe that once I break through, it will crack open the world like an egg. I want to see things as they are, without the filters of culture, religion, and ego. I want to see the world as God sees it. This is suicide of course, because if I ever do gain this gift of true sight, I am certain it would break my heart and turn my universe on its ear.

Why does God call us to hard things? The end is as terrible as the means, and yet I cannot seem to avoid it. This kind of sight will only come through diligence, through great effort, through discipline.

These are naughty words in our day and age, especially for those of us who serve a grace-full rather than a punitive god. Why would God ask this of me? Doesn't God know how hard it is? Why can't I be charged with something more in line with my personality, like, oh, I don't know, being a stand-up comedian?

It is precisely because it is hard that I have to do it. This is not masochism. It is the simple realization that the spiritual life is no picnic. God often has a tough job picked out for us, which sometimes

requires difficult preparation. We don't have to like it, you know. We just have to do it.

The articles in this issue are a testament to such spiritual endurance, and the rewards to be found on the other side of the effort.

In N. Graham Standish and Ellen McCormack's amazing synthesis of Adrian van Kaam's formation science, we are confronted with a system that seems staggering at first. And how could it not be? Van Kaam is attempting nothing less than a comprehensive model of spiritual, psychological, and social formation. Getting one's brain around this system is harder than *zazen*, but it is well worth the effort.

No one knows hard knocks better than Edwina Gately. This courageous Roman Catholic laywoman has ministered to the poor and marginalized from African villagers to inner-city prostitutes. She founded an order which sends hundreds of lay missionaries all around the world. Working for justice in every corner of the earth is no picnic, but the fruits of her work are abundant. Through her poignant conversation with Dorothy Whiston, she invites us to join her in the hard, rewarding work of living justice.

Of course, anyone who has tried to build up a spiritual direction practice from scratch knows how trying and frustrating it can be. Elizabeth Stout certainly does, and she shares some advice for building your practice of spiritual direction which could make it a little easier for those just starting out. As any Christian knows, the benefits of hard knocks are best enjoyed vicariously!

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Our two Contexts and Cultures articles are not as lighthearted as Liz' article. They both deal with helping people through the most difficult of circumstances. Sarah Stockton invites us to consider the twelve-step sponsor as a type of spiritual director. This "enlargement" of our ministry has profound implications, both for our community's solidarity with twelve-step sponsors, and for sponsors themselves, who may not be aware of the spiritual ramifications of their role.

Robert Grant caps our articles with an explication of how trauma can both impede the spiritual journey, and with enough discipline and hard work, provide the catalyst for spiritual awakening and healing.

This morning, as I sat concentrating on my breath, I once again struggled to remain calm and focused. Cars passing. Yes, I hear you, and I'm setting it aside. Our recently acquired stray, Hunden is whining in his crate. Yes, Hunden, I hear you, and I'm setting it aside. My stomach starts rumbling audibly. Yes, tummy, I hear you. I'll feed you soon, and I'm setting it aside. Momentary panic over my incomplete "Focus" column makes my heart race. Yes, I feel your anxiety, I tell myself, and I'm setting it aside. It's not easy, but I can wait fifteen minutes to get at the keyboard. I have to. It is what I am called to do. z

—John R. Mabry