

Contemplation 101

By Gretchen Gundrum, PhD

If you feel some resistance to the idea of meditating, you're not alone. In our busy, on-the-go lives, finding time for anything extra—like a special time for prayer—can seem next to impossible. But, the benefits of quiet time for thoughtful reflection can be huge. It's worth exploring a spiritual practice that helps us become better friends with God by centering our minds and hearts. Less busy is good. More connected spiritually is very good. So, let's keep it simple, which is usually the best way to go.

- ☞ Find a quiet place where you can be alone. Make yourself a cup of coffee or tea. Savor the warmth of the aroma and the taste. Light a candle. Say, "Good morning, God, I'm here to spend some time with you." Maybe as you start out, it will only be 10 minutes in the early morning. The habit of that 10 minutes can transform your life. If you enjoy this special time with God, you may find you want to stay longer. Don't feel close to God? Not sure who God is for you at the moment? That's OK. You're putting yourself in the place to find a connection, to learn more. Intention is key.
- ☞ Remember that there is no "one right way" to pray. The most important thing is bringing our whole self to God. Some days you may feel happy, others, not so much. The stresses of our families and jobs, the losses that grieve our hearts, the fears that can derail us, or the anxieties that gnaw at us are all part of what it means to be human. Sitting before the Creator with whatever I'm bringing this day is enough. Talk to God as you would a dear friend.
- ☞ Your mind wanders. That's what minds do. Don't beat yourself up for not being a perfect contemplative. Just notice it and gently renew your intention to stay connected to the Ground of our Being. Using a word like *love* or *peace* can be a means to gently come back to mindful attention.
- ☞ Some of us are visually-oriented, others more drawn to words or sound. Finding a picture that moves your heart can be a catalyst for contemplation. Perhaps a photo from the Hubble telescope or an image from a holy card will inspire you. Or, a piece of symphonic or "praise" music will gentle your mind and heart. Often a hymn from Sunday worship will reverberate within and lead you to a place of deeper connection to the Divine.
- ☞ A walking meditation may be best for you. Being in nature or even walking in your neighborhood can inspire awe. Stop to look at just one leaf. Touch the bark of a tree and marvel at its years of growth and endurance. There's no limit to the beauties of creation that inspire reverence.
- ☞ Spend time stroking your pet. Did you know that petting a dog or cat (and probably even a gerbil) can reduce anxiety and lower blood pressure? When you add the sensation of furry warmth to the unconditional love and acceptance you get from your pet, it's a very short hop to understanding, by analogy, the love that God has for us.
- ☞ If you don't have time for any other type of mindful meditation, starting or ending your day by naming three things you're grateful for is a reliable way to shift your attention to what's deepest and most important in life.

The important thing is to start.