Play as Spiritual Practice

An Individual Spiritual Study

The Prayer Bench - Janice MacLean
Introduction

Welcome to this Individual Spiritual Study. In the spirit of play, you have all the time you need. These pages contain choices and you can choose to fill whatever time is available to you with these activities and practices.

You might want to spend a day on each session or do more than one session a day or spread your soulful play over many days.

These pages contain the process for Five Sessions. You will find the video, audio recordings and other resources on a password protected webpage on the Prayer Bench website. The sessions can be completed in an hour or take all day.

WEBPAGE: http://prayerbench.ca/play-as-spiritual-practice/
PASSWORD: PB15Play#

It is helpful to read over each session before you begin and make sure you have everything you need from the web page.

This Study/Retreat is based on a Play-Full Life: Slowing Down and Seeking Peace by Jaco Hamman. Reading the book will supplement this resource. It does stand alone without it. I also refer to Stuart Brown’s book, Play. The music of Michael Jones and much poetry also informs this study/retreat. And practice. I played a lot before bringing this together.

Please contact me if you have any issues with accessing the material. I hope it is a time filled with soul-full play. I welcome your feedback at the end of your study/retreat.

May you know deep vitality as you integrate play practices in the whole of your life.

Janice Maclean, janice@prayerbench.ca, 506 536 4180
Session 1
Play is More Than Just Fun

Opening

Take the time to create a soul-full space for your study/retreat. You might want to make an altar-table. What colour cloth might you use? What symbols of play will you include? Will you place a picture of yourself as a child? Or a picture you like of children playing?

How will you signal the beginning of your intentional time? Will you have a candle to light? Or a chime to sound? Or a stone to hold in your hand? Or a shell?


Once you have gathered a few of your favourite things, sit and enjoy. What will you do now to signal to your self you are entering into this space you have set aside to explore play and spirituality?

Watch Video: TED Talk with Stuart Brown (26 minutes)

When you are ready watch the TED Talk by Stuart Brown on the “Play as Spiritual Practice” website. The video is titled, Play is More Than Just Fun.

Journal Reflection

Here are suggested questions or wonderings. You choose how you want to spend time with them. Perhaps you want to write in a journal or draw responses in a sketch book. What are your questions?

❖ What word, phrase or image do you take away from what you heard or saw in the video?
❖ Did you hear anything about play that surprised you?
❖ Brown says the basis of trust is established through play. Reflect on this. What helps you trust? What is it about your “play face” or “play signals” that helps others trust you?
❖ Reflect on your capacity for play. When are you playful? How do you know? What gets in the way?
❖ Brown says, “Play allows us to explore the possible.” How might this be true for you?

¹ See the Play as Spiritual Practice web page for a recipe.
Explore backwards on the “most clear, joyful image” you have of play. Describe it. What emotions do you recall?

What invitation is present for you when you hear that we do not need special set aside times to play but our whole lives can be “infused with play?”

**A Time to Pray - Play**

**Practices and Activities**

Play and prayer takes the shape of our personalities. There will be always be choices in this section. Some may appeal and others may not feel like you. You will know what you need. Some days you may want only activities or practices that are familiar or comfortable. Other times you may want to explore something that isn’t so attractive. Our resistance often has much to teach.

You may only have time to choose one activity/practice. You may have time to do several. You may come back another day and choose one of these instead of one suggested or and you might repeat one you enjoyed. It’s very flexible!

**Responding with Your Hands**

* Meditation with Clay (or Play dough):*

1. Take some clay or play dough.
2. Find a comfortable place to work with the clay.
3. Take time to reflect on the issues of your life.
4. Begin to express your feelings in the clay. Dig, pound, hold it, rub it gently. Etch it, roll it, or break it in pieces. Play with it. Let the clay and your actions speak to you. For instance, the clay may be hard and cold when you begin. The warmth of your hands may make it more supple. This may suggest something to you. Enjoy it.

   Alternate between working with the clay and quietly looking at it in contemplation.

   Try to experience this as play. Whether or not you create a recognizable object does not matter.

* Colour or Create a Mandala: * Mandalas are found in almost every spiritual tradition. Visit the “Prayer as Spiritual Practice Web Page” to download and print a mandala you can colour. Notice the focus this practice can offer and how settled you may become. You might want to draw your own mandala. There is a sheet on the web page that offers some guidance.
Playing with Your Imagination

Gospel Contemplation: Imagining scenes from the gospels.
Guidance from www.ignatianspirituality.com

Choose a story from the gospels. Read it until you are familiar with the details.

“Close your eyes and reconstruct the scene in your imagination. See what is going on and watch the men and women in the scene. What does Jesus look like? How do the others react to him? What are the people saying to one another? What emotions fill their words? Is Jesus touching someone? As you enter into the scene, sometimes there is the desire to be there. So you can place oneself in the scene, perhaps as an observer, as one lining up for healing, or as one helping others to Jesus.

Some people’s imaginations are very active so they construct a movie-like scenario with a Gospel passage. Others will enter the scene with verbal imagination, reflecting on the scene and mulling over the actions. Vividness is not a criteria for the effectiveness of this kind of prayer. Engagement is and the result is a more interior knowledge of Jesus.”

Take time as you end to journal or reflecting on what is in your heart.

Taking it Outside

Walking with a Play Mentor: Take a small child or a dog for a walk. Pay attention to their curiosity and try to follow their agenda. If a mentor isn’t available, go for a walk anyway and try to connect with what your young self would see or do.

Closing Your Session

This is an intentional time to reflect on your session and bring it to a close. You may want to create your own closing ritual with some of the items you brought to your space.

Bring your whole self back to the space you created. How will you mark the closing of your session? Cast a light, open glance”² back over your time. What opportunities to play were given? Is there a particular blessing you recall? How will you celebrate it? What intention do you bring to the next time? Will you write it down and leave it waiting for you in your space? Or perhaps you will draw?

² Tilden Edwards, describing the practice of the Examen.
Opening

What will you do now to enter in this intentional time? Take a few minutes to pay attention to your breathing. Allow your breath to let you relax and settle into this space.

Think about this: *What kind of play, activity or toy really absorbed or energized you as a child?* Take all the time you need to remember and get in touch with these memories of playing.

Were you playing alone? Or with others? Was it a game? A day-long adventure? Were you inside or outdoors? Did you have elaborate rules?

Now think about the key qualities, or the outcomes or functions of your childhood play. Did you learn to cooperate making tree houses? Gain appreciation for nature in your outdoor adventures? Learn to be comfortable in silence? Push yourself to take risks? Gain a love of words in reading? Learn to work with your hands? And so much more ….

Make a list of 5-6 key qualities that came out of your childhood play. Set this list aside for later.
Listening to the Audio Recording

When you are ready, listen to the Audio Recording: Play & Spirituality (12:39)

You will find this downloadable recording on the Play as Spiritual Practice Web page.

Be sure you have an image of Reblev’s Icon of the Trinity before you so you can refer to it. (Link on the web page.)

Journal Reflection

Here are suggested questions or wonderings. You choose how you want to spend time with them. Perhaps you want to write in a journal or draw responses in a sketch book. What are your questions?

❖ What word, phrase or image do you take away from what you heard in the recording?
❖ Did you hear anything about play and spirituality that surprised you?
❖ As you look over your life, what messages about play or playfulness have you received?
❖ Are there ways that playfulness has diminished in your life?
❖ How are you playful today?
❖ The qualities of our childhood play are often the qualities of spirituality we seek as adults. I loved times of playing by myself and now, times of solitude nourish my spirituality. I loved to read and now, words are my best way to come close to God. Look over your list. Do you notice ways your spirituality is rooted in your childhood play? What invitations might be present for you now as you recollect the primary forms of playfulness you engaged?

A Time to Pray - Play Practices and Activities

Play and prayer takes the shape of our personalities. There will be always be choices in this section. Some may appeal and others may not feel like you. You will know what you need. Some days you may want only activities or practices that are familiar or comfortable. Other times you may want to explore something that isn’t so attractive. Our resistance often has much to teach.

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Responding with Your Hands

*Meditation and Writing*

1. Take pen and paper.
2. Find a quiet comfortable place.
3. Give yourself permission to play. This is writing for its own sake. Let go the idea of producing a masterpiece. Settle. Relax. Connect with your centre. Breath.
4. Then begin to write a poem; it does not need to have rhyme or meter. Or you may write a stream-of-consciousness passage; this entails writing down whatever comes to you without censoring it -- not thinking about punctuation, spelling, neatness, or what it means.
5. Read over what you have written and just absorb it for a while. Enjoy.

There is a handout with guidance for writing Haiku and Cinquain Poems. Writing a poem at the end of each day is a play-full spiritual practice! ([Link on the web page.](#))

Playing with Images and Words

*Icons: Praying with Eyes Wide Open*

*Use the picture of Reblev's Icon or check out the links for other online icons that speak to your heart.*

*See the web page for suggestions.*

Many of us were taught to close our eyes when we pray. Praying with icons is an ancient practice that involves keeping our eyes wide open, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates. We focus not on what is seen in the icon, but rather on what is seen through it -- love beholding the beloved.

This is prayer without words, with a focus on being in God’s presence rather than performing in God’s presence. It is a right-brain experience of touching and feeling what is holy -- a divine mystery. Icons are not simply art; they are a way into contemplative prayer, and are therefore one way to let God speak to us. They are doorways into stillness, into closeness with God. If we sit with them long enough, we too can enter into the stillness, into the communion. And if we listen to them closely enough, with our hearts, we just may discern the heart of God.

Ready to try it?

To begin your prayer, you may want to light a candle nearby. A flame is a metaphor for the heart, inviting us into the presence of the Holy. Look at the icon as you pray. See it as a point of connection with the Beloved. Are there gestures that help you be open?
Even though you may feel pressured by the demands of the day, try not to pray in a hurry. Better to pray for a short time with quiet attention and each breath than to rush.

Be aware of your breathing. You are breathing in life itself. You are breathing out praise and gratitude, breathing out your appeals for help.

As you pray, cultivate an inner attitude of listening. You may offer words or just look attentively at the icon and let the Beloved speak to you.

Adapted from: http://www.upperroom.org

*Parable of the Children Playing in the Marketplace*

Read Luke 7:31-35

How we name a parable implies an interpretation. What titles have you heard for this parable? How would you name it?

This parable is often interpreted as a parable by which adults are compared to children who are unwilling to listen or to do as they are told. Instead of being compared to them, what can adults learn from these children? Why did the children refuse to play?

In this parable we have a game that did not take place. Why? What kind of play will it take to know what the kingdom is about? What is this parable saying about the realm of God?

*Taking it Outside*

*Parable Walk:*

Go outside for a walk. Expect you will see something, or hear something, or touch something, or smell something that has meaning or a message just for you today. The aim is to practice awareness by engaging all five senses while you walk.

Notice what draws your attention. Pause and pay attention. You might focus on one piece of the natural world, or on one sound. For example, a flower, a twig, a piece of bark, a leaf, a bird song, a tiny insect ...whatever calls to you. How is it made, moving, being? What do you notice, love, wonder about? Practice gratitude.

*Closing Your Session*

*This is an intentional time to reflect on your session and bring it to a close. You may want to create your own closing ritual with some of the items you brought to your space. Bring your whole self back*
to the space you created. How will you mark the closing of your session? Cast a light, open glance”³
back over your time. What opportunities to play were given? Is there a particular blessing you recall?
How will you celebrate it? What intention do you bring to the next time? Will you write it down and
leave it waiting for you? Or draw it?

Resources & Other Links to Explore

You can also visit the “Prayer as Spiritual Practice” Web Page for links to these resources.

Reblev’s Icon of the Trinity
Icons Online
Praying with Icons
Christian Modern Art
Writing Poetry
Writing as Spiritual Practice
Article: Rose Mary Doherty, Holy Play

Session 3
Reclaiming Play & Befriending Soul

Opening

What will you do now to enter in this intentional time? Take a few minutes to pay attention
to your breathing. Allow your breath to let you relax and settle into this space.

You might wish to play or make music that supports your mood. Be present to how the music
rises or falls in your body and imagination. Or choose an activity from your basket and take
a few minutes to enjoy it.

Listening to the Audio Recording

When you are ready, listen to the Audio Recording: Reclaiming Play & Befriending Soul
(11:31)
You will find this downloadable recording on the Play as Spiritual Practice web page.

³ Tilden Edwards, describing the practice of the Examen.
Journal Reflection

Here are suggested questions or wonderings. You choose how you want to spend time with them. Perhaps you want to write in a journal or draw responses in a sketch book. What are your questions?

❖ What word, phrase or image do you take away from what you heard in the recording?
❖ Did you hear anything about play and spirituality that surprised you?
❖ You’ve had opportunity to reflect on memories of play, is there one experience that you would name as a “song-line of your heart.” Spend time savouring it.
❖ Hamman names six enemies of play: Criticism, Control, Compulsion, Competition, Conflict, and Consumption. Reflect on how these or other forces are manifested in your life? In what ways do they hinder or restrain play-fullness in your life?
❖ What would befriending the enemies of play look like for you?

A Time to Pray - Play
Practices and Activities

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You may only have time to choose one activity/practice. You may have time to do several. You may come back another day and choose one of these instead of one suggested or and you might repeat one you enjoyed. It's very flexible!

Responding with Your Hands
Making a Pocket Shrine

A pocket shrine is a portable, pocket-sized sacred space (ideal for pilgrims setting out on a spiritual journey). Simply, it is a small container that carries and protects (enshrines) sacred objects like inspirational words, objects, mementos, treasures, images, and artwork. The form it takes, the message it carries, what it holds is entirely up to you.

How to begin (aka: the shaping):

**Step 1: Choose a small container** - it could be a mints tin, a match box, tea tin, even a recycled tuna can or lid can work.

OR Make a vessel from natural or polymer clay, salt dough, or paper mache.
OR Fold a box from cardboard, Bristol board, or paper. OR Sew or embroider fabric or felt to create a wallet.

❖ Go to the Play as Spiritual Practice web page for links to examples and pattern ideas.

**Step 2:** Choose a ‘big idea’ or ‘life theme’ you’d like to carry with you. You might want to create a pocket shrine illustrating a significant play experience, your song-line of the heart. Or perhaps cherishing a part of you that got lost along the way that you would like to reclaim. Other topics could be: Peace, Love, Healing, Strength, Courage, Creativity, or other words you would use in befriending the enemies of play.

**Step 3:** Collect or create small objects, images, words, quotes, textures, colours, etc. that help you reflect upon, or express, or embody the ‘big idea’ or ‘life theme’ you’ve chosen for you.

**Step 4:** Decorate your chosen container; add your collected and created objects, images, etc. When your pocket shrine is ready, slip it in your pocket, pop it in your purse, pack it in your lunch bag, file it in your briefcase, etc. and make time to enjoy your little creation daily as part of a spiritual practice, a ‘time out’, or anytime you need a little sacred space.

I am grateful to Christine Johnson for sharing the idea and directions for creating pocket shrines in the Lent 2013 retreat series.

**Making a Meal**
Cooking a meal and eating it is a practice of creative living. Herman suggests these creative practices help us grow in playfulness. Be present to meal-making as a playful practice. How might you engage in other daily tasks as practices for creative living?

**Inner Innovator**
Most of Hamman’s book, *A Play-Full Life*, deals with practical suggestions for befriending the enemies of play. He suggests we have an “inner innovator” along with our “inner critic.” Write a conversation or dialogue between your inner critic and your inner innovator. In what ways might this enlarge the inner space that is often restricted when we hear only the voice of our inner critic?

**Playing with Sound**
*Audio Divina* (sacred listening) is a music-assisted contemplative practice.

Rooted in the monastic tradition of *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading of scripture), *Audio Divina* is a practice both ancient and new.
Choose a piece of music. It is best if it doesn’t have words.

Read over the process suggested by Christine Volters Painter on the Pathos blog. (See the web page for this link and a downloadable sheet of directions.)

This contemplative practice helps enlarge our inner space so we can know abundance. Fearing scarcity is an enemy of playfulness.

**Take it Outside**

*Alphabet Prayer*

Here is one of my favourite stories – an Hasidic Tale

*The driver of the Rabbi’s sleigh felt he couldn’t pray as well as the Rabbi. He felt the didn’t have the “right” words. So while he waited in the sleigh when the Rabbi gave speeches, he recited the alphabet telling God that God could shape the letters into the words.*

For your walking mediation: Offer your own wordless prayer by reciting the letters of the alphabet: A….B….C… D…. Find a walking pace that suits the rhythm. (And yes, it’s hard not to sing the alphabet song! It can be your playful prayer too!)

**Closing Your Session**

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**Resources & Other Links to Explore**

*You can also visit the “Prayer as Spiritual Practice” Web Page for links to these resources.*

Many Example and Directions for Making Pocket Shrines

Audio Divina: Pray with Music:

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4 Tilden Edwards, describing the practice of the Examen.
Session 4
Practices of the Playful Heart

Opening

What will you do now to enter in this intentional time? Take a few minutes to pay attention to your breathing. Allow your breath to let you relax and settle into this time.

Make yourself a cup of tea or coffee or any beverage you enjoy. Take the time to savour it. Focus only on drinking your drink. Give full attention to this moment.

Or choose an activity from your basket and take a few minutes to enjoy it.

Listening to the Audio Recording

When you are ready, listen to the Audio Recording: Practices of the Playful Heart (16:28)
You will find this downloadable recording on the Play as Spiritual Practice Web page.

Journal Reflection

Here are suggested questions or wonderings. You choose how you want to spend time with them. Perhaps you want to write in a journal or draw responses in a sketch book. What are your questions?

❖ What word, phrase or image do you take away from what you heard in the recording?
❖ Where there any invitations for you in the practices you heard described?
❖ Practices of playfulness are part of our being and our doing. What “do” you do that helps you “be” in the present moment?
❖ The opposite of play is ..... What would you say?
❖ Hamman suggests that we carry the potential to be playful in all moments of our life. As you reflect on past moments and engagements with others, what signs of playfulness did you notice in yourself? In others?
❖ As you reflect on work, your relationships, and your personal journey, what practices help hold this “marriage of marriages” together? (David Whyte)
❖ What are you aware of now that you can do to nurture your playful Soul?
A Time to Pray - Play Practices and Activities

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Responding with Your Hands
Writing Your Own Catalogue of Play
Based on the poem: “A Child Went Forth” By Walt Whitman (1855)
There is a link to Whitman’s poem on the web page.

Begin with Whitman’s lines:

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object s/he look’d upon, that object s/he became,
And that object became part of her/him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

Now add your catalogue of play images.
These questions will help remind you.

What were the sights of your childhood playground?
What were the sounds of your childhood play?
What were the tastes of your childhood?
What were you doing when your mother called you in for supper and you didn’t hear? What kind of play, activity or toy really absorbed you or energized you as a child?

End with Whitman’s closing sentence.

These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth.

Read your poem out loud. Enjoy.
Playing with Words

*Poetica Divina*

This is another new practice growing out of ancient monastic tradition. This practice uses poetry and invites letting words settle deeply in our heart.

As in *Lectio Divina*, there are four movements to the process.

Begin by **selecting a poem** to read (perhaps a favourite one or check out the webpage for suggestions) and quieting down your mind.

**Read the poem** a few times and listen for the word or phrase that is calling to you this day. Sit with it for a few moments, repeating it softly, savouring it.

Move into **reflection** and allow the phrase to unfold in your imagination. Tend to the **images, feelings, and memories** that arise in you.

Then listen for the **invitation** to you in the midst of the circumstances of your life right now. How are you being invited to **respond**?

After holding this in your heart, spend some time **resting in silence**.

You may follow the same process with a short passage of scripture if you wish to practice *Lectio Divina*.

**Take it Outside**

*Contemplative Walk/Photo Walk*

You might wish to Take your camera or smart phone and make it a photo walk.

“Make time to go for a long walk. As you walk, see if you can allow yourself to not have to “get” anywhere. As you take each step, listen closely to your own intuition about where you are being called next. Slow down enough to see what is around you, notice the details of things – flowers, tree bark, houses, even the patterns on manhole covers or gutters. You aren’t looking for something beautiful, you are trying to be present to life as it is and in that process you will discover beauty.”

-Christine Volters Painter, The Eyes of the Heart Photography Course.
Closing Your Session

Before you close your session for today, you may want to read over the notes for the next session: *Sabbath: Playing with God* and make any plans you need for creating Sabbath space.

This is an intentional time to reflect on your session and bring it to a close. You may want to create your own closing ritual with some of the items you brought to your space. Bring your whole self back to the space you created. How will you mark the closing of your session? Cast a light, open glance”5 back over your time. What opportunities to play were given? Is there a particular blessing you recall? How will you celebrate it? What intention do you bring to the next time? Will you write it down and leave it waiting for you? Or draw it?

Resources & Other Links to Explore

You can also visit the “Prayer as Spiritual Practice” Web Page for links to these resources.

Coffee as Spiritual Practice. - A Prayer Bench Post
Walt Whitman Poem: A Child Went Forth
David Whyte Website and Poetry
Mary Oliver Poetry
Gerard Manley Hopkins Poem - As Kingfishers Catch Fire
Poetry Foundation Website

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**Session 5**

**Sabbath: Playing with God**

Begin by reading these reflections on Sabbath.

**Playing with God.** Sabbath is a day in which you do things differently. It is a day for ‘playing with God.’

**Holy Play.** Sabbath offers space for “holy play” as it is described by Rose Mary Doherty in an article by that title. Holy Play involves activities that stand against doing and producing, bringing us back to being and heightening a sense of appreciation for life in general.

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5 Tilden Edwards, describing the practice of the Examen.
**Sabbath Keeping:** In her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva J. Dawn speaks of four qualifiers for Sabbath keeping:

- **Ceasing**: work, worry, anxiety, productivity, needing to be God, striving to create your own future

- **Rest**: spiritual rest (peace), physical rest (relax), emotional rest (silent space, reflection, meditation), intellectual rest: focus thoughts on God

- **Embracing**: intentionality, community, deeper caring of what we notice, focus on God’s generosity to us, our calling, wholeness

- **Feasting**: music, beauty, food, affection, festival

**The Spirit of Leisure:** Tessa Belecki in *Wild at Heart* reflects: Nurture the spirit of leisure: leisure is not the privilege of those who have the time but the virtue of those who make the time; leisure is making the time for what’s important; leisure is a mental and spiritual attitude, receptive, contemplative stillness. Play is a critical part of contemplative living; we need to read poetry, look at good art, listen to good music, and we need to make our own, unleash our own creative energy, not to share but for ourselves.

**Describing Play in Daily Life:** “Play, for me, might be described as those activities that stand against my doing and producing, bringing me back to my being in God and heightening a sense of appreciation for life in general. Play is often something I’m led to or given, rather than something I pursue. Sometimes just watching a bird that has called me from my work…becomes play. At other times hiking with a friend, enjoying the nature around me…even cleaning my house can be a form of play for me….Maybe what makes an activity play for me is not so much the activity itself but the easy spirit I bring to it…..I seem to have the capacity to enjoy the moment of being in the play without thinking about my productivity or long-range consequences. …Free, non-productive, enjoyable, renewing: these are some of the words that describe play for me. Is it holy? Yes, I think it is.”

- Rose Mary Doherty.

**Question:** In her poem, *Summer Day*, Mary Oliver ends a poem with the question:

> Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

What will you do with your wild and precious Sabbath time?
You may have a whole day or a portion of a day for Sabbath. Whatever time you have is enough. You may spend the time in silence or with conversation, alone or with others.

**Create an beginning** for your Sabbath. You may wish to use an opening from a previous day or create a ritual for this time.

**Begin.** Use your intuition and deepest desires to move through the time you have. Try not to have an ‘agenda’ but respond to the prompting of your playful Soul. You may wish to use some of the suggested practices and activities in the other sessions.

**Close:** You may wish to create your own ritual for closing. Or here is a practice you may wish to use.

*Another form of the EXAMEN*
*Notes from The Awakened Heart by Gerald May*

At what times during the past day did I seem most present, most immediate, most consciously available to love?
When did I seem most absent, most kidnapped or closed off?
What seemed to help or hinder my presence?
How do I feel right now about how the day has been going?
Am I grateful, frustrated, joyful, angry, exuberant, bored, at peace, afraid?
Can I honestly present my feelings right now, just as they are?
Are there any changes I want to make, any special help I need? Any words that expresses my present hope and intention for the time to come?
What is my prayer/intention?