

## HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE JANUARY 2020

### PREPARATION FOR YOUR RETREAT

Welcome to this Prayer Bench Monthly Email Retreat. There is no right or wrong way to make this retreat. Some people sit with it for an hour or so, others take a bit at a time or incorporate it into a daily practice. You bring to it whatever time you have.

You may already have, or want to create, a sacred space or “altar-table” for your retreats. Perhaps it is a quiet space, a corner, a rocking chair, a room with a view, that is just for you. Perhaps you have a little table you can use for focus and a favourite coloured fabric or scarf to put on it. You might want to light a candle. Each month I will suggest items you might want to place in your space to support you on your retreat. The objects act as visual prompts to help nudge us into Mystery.

For this retreat you may want to bring a Blessing Bowl to your space. It may be any bowl you like or which has meaning for you. Put some water in your bowl.

### SETTLING PRAYER

*This is a time for re-collecting. We intentionally bring our energy to this moment. We notice the energy that is stirring in us. We don't judge it or name it good or bad. Here and now is a place for our whole selves. We are here. The Divine is here.*

We settle into an awareness that we are surrounded by Love. Breathe deeply.

When you feel settled, ponder what wisdom or strength there is for you in this phrase from the pen of John O'Donohue. It is from a poem called, “*A Blessing for Equilibrium*”<sup>1</sup>

“As water takes whatever shape it is in,  
So free may you be about who you become.”

With your hands gently stir the waters in your blessing bowl. Enjoy the wetness as a gift of blessing. Use the water to make a sign of Love on your forehead. It might be the outline of a cross, a spiral, a circle, or simply allow drops of water to trace a course down your face. Sit in silence for as long as

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<sup>1</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. Doubleday, 2008.

you wish or murmur your own prayer words as you enter into this time of retreat, or make up a simple chant of O'Donohue's words and sing it to yourself.

## REFLECTION

If it is a good day, my first response to morning is, "*Awake my soul, awake and greet the dawn.*"

It's from Psalm 57. I mean it as giving assent, not just to the day, but to waking up my spiritual heart and cooperating with the whole process of becoming.

This makes me a little holier than is honest though. I often forget. Or I wake already edgy with the fullness of the day ahead or stoking a particular worry that worked its way into the night hours.

I don't know what your particular urgency is. It might be the fullness of the hours of every day, or it might be an emptiness of meaning or a loneliness that creeps in like a drop of dye in bit of water. It takes over, doesn't it?

It might be a temporary worry that gnaws at you for now, or a very real new reality that came to visit your life and is going to settle in for longer than you want or hope.

It may be nothing big, just a sweet desire to live in more unhurried time, or to strengthen your abiding with the Holy, or to summon your internal energies for more creativity, or just to be more present to God or available to others through what you are already doing.

This is incarnation. We're not that far from Christmas! And incarnation is a good word for that desire to give assent to every day as a gift; a good word for the waking of the spiritual heart set in a motion of becoming more of who we really are.

We are spiritual beings on a human journey and we are always becoming. Our journey is about claiming a fuller incarnation by moving deeper into our heart and therefore into the very Heart of the Divine. We become the truth of who we *really* are.

Who am I? This is a query for all stages of life.

Who am I in response to this moment ... and this one?

Who am I? Who am I in my work of becoming who I really am?

*“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!”<sup>2</sup>*

That’s the “feeling settled” end of an unsettling poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I’ve been fond of this poem since I first read it as a young adult in a class at Queen’s Theological College. It’s a poem about being and becoming and the tension between how we experience ourselves often in conflict with how we are seen from the outside.

[You can learn more about this German theologian who died in a Concentration Camp in 1945 and read the whole poem by checking out the Bonhoeffer webpage in the Resources section.]

What best supports our journey of becoming our whole self?

I’ve failed New Year resolutions, or they failed me, so many times that I barely give them a nod now. Perhaps you have a better relationship with them.

Sometimes I have a “star word” that I hope will act as a kind of magnet for the life I want to live on my path to becoming.

Sometimes I come to the threshold of the year with a fierce intention to “order my loves” as Margaret Guenther invites in her book, *The Practice of Prayer*, so that I give priority to what really matters and have “balance” in my life. But striking balance is a false hope, I think. Our lives are way too nuanced with deep and profound relationships (to ourselves, to our partner, to our families, to our vocations, to our neighbours, to the stranger, to God, and that’s in no particular sequence,) to stack them in any order that will last more than a day.

How then shall I live

I’m resisting putting the question mark that the grammar check is compelling. Rather than being an evocative question, I want it to be my comma, my pause, my hesitation in every moment of my day, so I can choose a faithful response to live the best life I desire. I want this to be my first response in the moments that blindside, that knock me off course, that add agenda, that diminish my choices, that pull me off plan, that interrupt, disrupt and bother me.

How then shall I live

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<sup>2</sup> From a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, accessed January 21, 2020 on this webpage: <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/who-was-db2.htm>

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I want this to be my rule, my “regula”, my pattern. I want it to be the trellis, the framework, the signpost that comes alongside every moment of my life so I greet these moments like honoured visitors in my life, there to teach me something, even something I don’t want to learn.

How then shall I live

I want it to be the pattern I trace every time I am foraging through the past or allowing the future to gnaw at my bones. I want this to be a bannister I grab going up and going down all of life’s invitations. I want it to be a vessel for joy and a container for tears.

How then shall I live

I want these to be the words that creep in alongside me in my journey of becoming, my own claiming of incarnation, new waking words, the backbone of my day.

Will these words work for you?

Or perhaps you will discover your own “Rule of Life” (or is it “Phrase of life?”) in the questions and spiritual practices.

## QUESTIONS FOR YOUR REFLECTION/JOURNALLING

*We have many months of email retreats together to explore becoming who we really are and to contemplate the deepening of our spiritual heart. There are many unique human beings sitting beside you in this retreat. We are diverse and how we reflect takes a different shape according to our personalities. So read through the questions and then choose a question or two that compels you and work with it. You can always come back to another one.*

1. How do you start your day? What are your waking hopes for each fresh day? What word or phrase would bring intention to your deepest desire? Perhaps there is a phrase from the Psalms or a piece of poetry that might serve as an anchor or a mantra for your intention.
2. What are your ideas about creating equilibrium or balance in your life? Are there things that worked for you in the past that you can reclaim? Recall times you found joy amidst demanding priorities. What was going on? What might you carry forward into the life you are leading?

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3. Here is a suggestion from a Nursing School: “Draw yourself as a tree. Your roots will be loaded with descriptions of things that give you strength and your good qualities, while your leaves can be the things that you're trying to change.”<sup>3</sup> Put your drawing somewhere to remind you of your particular journey of becoming.
  4. *“Our journey is about claiming a fuller incarnation by moving deeper into our heart and therefore into the very Heart of the Divine.”* What does “incarnation” mean to you? Revisit your favourite Advent or Christmas story and imagine it taking place in your heart. Claim a character (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the donkey, a shepherd, the star, a camel) and get to know them. Let them be the spiritual guide for living and loving life as your best self.
  5. Contemplative practice, being present in all the ordinary moments of your day, invites time and patience. There are no quick fixes. What are your favourite spiritual practices for deepening your spiritual heart? Perhaps you have forgotten one that needs to be revived? Perhaps you are feeling a nudge to explore a practice you have long resisted? Perhaps you need to give greater intention to whatever is nurturing you right now? What is stirring in you? Have a heart-to-heart with the God of your understanding.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

*Here are three choices for Spiritual Practice. Like the questions, choose one or two that invite you to take your hopes or intentions deeper.*

### **Wondering with Scripture: The Waters are Stirring**

Read John 5: 1-9

Read it again.

- I wonder what raises your hackles in this story? What sounds a comforting note?
- I like the image of the waters being stirred. What’s stirring in you these days?
- I like the image of the mat. I wonder what you’ve been doing for the last 38 years (or for a long time) that is keeping you in a stuck place. I wonder what that mat could really be?
- I wonder why the man didn’t have to say yes or no to Jesus’ question. I wonder if there are places in your life being healed or transformed whether you fully cooperate or not. I wonder where the grace is in this story.

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<sup>3</sup> 100 Excellent Art Therapy Exercises for Your Mind, Body, and Soul, accessed January 3, 2020 at <https://www.nursingschools.net/blog/2011/01/100-excellent-art-therapy-exercises-for-your-mind-body-and-soul/>

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- I don't really like this guy on the mat. Do you? I wonder what this story is teaching you about compassion.
  - I wonder why Jesus told the man to pick up his mat and take it with him?
  - Depending on your translation, verse 4 may be missing. Check out a few translations on Bible Gateway (see resources) until you find it. Why is it missing in some translations? I'm not sure there is a definitive answer, nor am I sure that it matters to the deepening of the spiritual heart but I find interesting.

### **Creating a Visual Rule of Life**

A Rule of Life is the practice of an individual or intentional community to live its best life. It is a series of activities, guidelines, intentional commitments or practices meant to keep God at the centre of all that is done.

*[You can learn more about a Rule of Life in the Resource section.]*

A Rule of Life comes from the Latin word "Regula." It has a softer sound than "Rule of Life", doesn't it? The root meaning of "Regula" gives us such images as rhythm, quest, a sign post, a trellis, a bannister or railing to help us move up or downstairs, a vessel meant to contain.

A Rule of Life is meant to keep the Divine at the heart of all we do. It holds our best desires.

I made a Visual Rule of Life for myself. It is a collage of nine photos that help remind me of things that I all too easily let go when life gets hurried, even though I "know" that practicing them gives me the best chance of being grounded, open and awake. Some are things that especially nurture intimacy with the Wisdom Jesus and keep me in remembrance with him.

What would you put in your visual Regula or Rule of Life? Make your own collage with photographs, with magazine pictures, or with symbols.

I call my collage, *How then Shall I Live*. What will you call yours? What 5-6 words act as a trellis, a bannister, a container, to support your spiritual becoming?

### **Being Present in What You Are Already Doing**

Sometimes the last thing we need is to add *more* to our lives. So it is a good thing that we can nurture our spiritual heart through what we do every day; our plain, ordinary day.

John O'Donoue says each day is a holy place where "eucharist of the ordinary happens."

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So pick up your coffee cup and let drinking that first cup of the morning be what calls you into deeper intimacy with the Divine. Let it be the spiritual space in your life where you are your whole self.

- *What is one thing you do each day, which, if you didn't do it, would put your day off balance?*

Give intention to that activity so that it becomes a way that you practice the presence of the God in the ordinary.

The ground we stand on is the source of our faith.  
We are here ... in a world of suffering and mystery,  
in a world where we are totally in the presence of God,  
finding God in the intimate flow of ordinary life, the holy in the ordinary.

This is how we find spiritual space in the midst of the ordinary without adding one practice or another thing to a busy life.

## **BLESSING**

*As your retreat comes to an end, name one intention for yourself you want to carry forth from this time, or write a prayer or a blessing for yourself and those who share this retreat with you.*

Here is another wisp of a blessing from *The Blessing for Equilibrium*:

“As the wind loves to call things to dance,  
May your gravity be lightened by grace.”  
John O’Donohue

Feel free to dance your way into the days ahead.

## **PREVIEW OF THE NEXT EMAIL RETREAT**

Regular subscribers to Prayer Bench will recognize what you have in your hands as the usual pattern for most Email Retreats, but instead of delivering a series in Lent, Advent and Creation Time, with your Prayer Bench subscription, you will now receive an email retreat every month. We’ll explore different themes.

Expect the February Email Retreat on the morning of Ash Wednesday, February 26. It is titled *Made of Star Dust*. We’ll begin a Lent journey filled with mystery, stars, sand, and light. The February Retreat is also the first of two expanded edition email retreats. It will contain a “Pilgrim’s Manual” a

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small handbook that we can carry through the six weeks of Lent offering a weekly prayer, or reflection or practice.

## RESOURCES TO DEEPEN THIS RETREAT

A tribute [to John O'Donohue by Gareth Higgins](#) where Gareth quotes the poem "For Equilibrium."

The poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer "[Who Am I?](#)"

Learn more about a Rule of Life [from the Northumbria Community](#).

Creative ways of [crafting a rule of life](#).

Crafting a [Rule of Life for a Congregation](#).