

Prescription for the Soul

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When I was in my psychiatric training, I was told to be very careful to always attend to the whole person when caring for patients. The said intention was that practitioners should attend to the mind, the body and the social aspects of the person (the “bio/psycho/social model”). Two parts of the self were left out of this equation (and still are in the modern formulation of the self) – the will or heart (yes, we do make choices) and the soul. I hope that this “prescription” will help you want to set your will to attend to your soul. The soul is the oft forgotten center and most fundamental part of the person. It is unconscious for the most part, and it helps to coordinate the other parts of the self to function as a unit for the good of the person. (If interested, read about the self in *The Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard.)

The following suggested exercises, used routinely, help to repair and grow the soul like rain and the sun grow plants – slowly and faithfully. The point is never to use them as a set standard by which one can count one’s accomplishments or to judge one’s lack of compliance, but to use as a guide and a goal towards a healthier soul – and overall health. You, of course, can choose different disciplines and spend more or less time as you are able. It is important to start with the easiest of goals and increase them later – much like a beginning runner would do – than to set high goals and fail right out of the gate. I hope that these practices might bring you new life.

Exercises

1. Sit twice a week for 15 minutes in silence or prayer. Two book recommendations that would serve as a guide for this discipline are *The Mindful Way through Depression* by Mark Williams (an excellent secular guide to meditation whether you are depressed or not) and *Into the Silent Land – a Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* by Martin Laird.
2. Read something that nurtures your soul for 20 minutes twice a week.
3. Go out of your way, at least once a week, to help someone. Start small. Think helping a neighbor carry in groceries or offering to run an errand for someone. Richard Rohr, Catholic priest, author and teacher, has written that we don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are. Engaging others through service – especially others who are different from you – helps one to shift one’s focus off of his/her own self and see the world from a different perspective.
4. One day a week forgo all sweets, all liquids but water or social media. The purpose of fasting is to learn to be content when we don’t get our way (a thought from Dallas Willard). Each thought of restriction on that day can be a reminder to look for something good in your day.

One day a week be intentional to celebrate all the good in your life or do something you really enjoy. We spend so much time fixing problems, it is good to balance out those efforts with reminders of the good that we enjoy. Along those lines, I encourage you to be intentional about acknowledging your own successes. If you are the kind of person who takes responsibility for your mistakes, and if you want to live an honest life, then you must take responsibility for your successes, too. This is not a narcissism exercise. You can be proud of what you have done while giving thanks for the ability to do it. Owning one’s successes increases your confidence and trust in yourself, thus growing your ability to produce further good.