

Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms* (INP, 2006)

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A RULE OF LIFE

Cultivating Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation

We long to see our lives whole, to know that they matter. We wonder whether our many activities might ever come together in a way of life that is good for ourselves and others. Lacking a vision of a life-giving way of life, we turn from one task to another, doing as well as we can but increasingly uncertain about what doing things well would look like. We yearn for a deeper understanding of how to order human life in accord with what is true and good.

CRAIG DYKSTRA AND DOROTHY BASS,
PRACTICING OUR FAITH

Living into what we want in any area of our life requires some sort of intentional approach. Building a solid financial base, retirement planning, home improvements, career advancement, further education, losing weight or becoming more fit—all of these require a plan if we are to make any progress in achieving what we desire. The desire for a way of life that creates space for God's transforming work is no different. However, if we look closely at the way we live day to day, we may well notice that our approach to spiritual transformation is much more random and haphazard than our approach to finances, home improvements and weight loss! Many of us try to shove spiritual transformation into the

nooks and crannies of a life that is already unmanageable, rather than being willing to arrange our life for what our heart most wants. We think that somehow we will fall into transformation by accident.

Jesus had something to say about this. He used parables to picture a person who has searched long and hard for something very valuable and very special. In one story the prized item is a piece of land; in another it is a valuable pearl. In both stories, the merchant has been looking for this prize all his life, and when he finds it, he doesn't hesitate. He sells everything he has so that he can buy what he has been searching for.

Both the field and the pearl are metaphors for the kingdom of God—that state of being in which God is reigning in our life and his presence is shaping our reality. The kingdom of God is here now, if we are willing to arrange our life to embrace it. Paul speaks in passionate terms of using every ounce of his energy and intentionality to present every person mature in Christ—beginning, presumably, with himself. The only question, it seems, is, How bad do you want it?

Christian tradition has a name for the structure that enables us to say yes to the process of spiritual transformation day in and day out. It is called a *rule of life*. A rule of life seeks to respond to two questions: Who do I want to be? How do I want to live? Actually, it might be more accurate to say that a rule of life seeks to address the interplay between these two questions: *How do I want to live so I can be who I want to be?*

St. Benedict was the first one to develop a rule of life, to help monks who were living in community to order their days very simply around three key elements of their life in God: prayer, study and work. St. Benedict's Rule, like any rule of life, is simply a pattern of attitudes, behaviors and practices that are regular and routine and are intended to produce a certain quality of life and character. I prefer the language of rhythm because it speaks of regularity that the body and soul can count on, but it also speaks of ebb and flow, creativity and beauty, music and dancing, joy and giving ourselves over to a force or a power that is beyond our-

selves and is deeply good. Over time, as we surrender ourselves to new life rhythms, they help us to surrender old behaviors, attitudes and practices so that we can be shaped by new ones.

DEVELOPING A RHYTHM OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Developing a rhythm of spiritual practices takes time. It takes time to explore a variety of disciplines so that you have some sense of their meaning for your life and how you might incorporate them realistically. It takes time to learn how to arrange them in a way that fits your life and also has beauty, like a dance or a beautifully arranged symphony or the ebb and flow of seasons and tides. It's best to try each discipline one at a time and work with it for a while rather than trying to load on too much all at once. Once you have experienced the basic disciplines, as we have done in previous chapters, you are in a position to arrange your life around the practices that open you to intimacy with God that results in the kind of change your heart is longing for.

An effective rhythm of spiritual practices will be very *personal*. No two individuals will have exactly the same rhythm, because no two people are alike. Your rhythm of spiritual practices will take into account your personality, your spiritual type, your season of life, the sin patterns you are contending with, the places where you know God is trying to stretch you. For instance, a relatively unstructured, spontaneous personality will need to be careful not to craft a rhythm of life that feels too structured and confining. A person who is more structured and enjoys closure will probably like having things mapped out in more detail.

We can also choose disciplines that address the areas of sin and negative patterns that God is helping us to become aware of. If we are becoming aware that we lack discipline in our speaking and interacting with others—prone to gossip or empty chatter, cynicism or meanness—then God might be inviting us into the discipline of silence. If we are aware of a driven quality in our life and work, the daily discipline of sol-

itude plus the weekly discipline of sabbath may be an emphasis for us. If we notice that we are having problems in one or several of our relationships, an emphasis on self-examination may be needed. All of the disciplines described in this book are basic Christian disciplines that we all need; however, at different times different ones need to be emphasized based on the need of the moment.

Our rhythm of spiritual practices also needs to be ruthlessly *realistic* in view of our stage of life. A married couple with young children will have radically different rhythms from those of the retired couple whose children have left the nest. If we do not take into account a realistic assessment of our stage of life, we are doomed to fail.

One of the great temptations of the spiritual life is to believe that if I were in another season of life, I could be more spiritual. The truth is that spiritual transformation takes place as we embrace the challenges and opportunities associated with each season of our life. This involves honesty regarding the challenges ("At this stage in our family's life, it is just not possible for me to get more than a half an hour in solitude a day") and willingness to embrace the opportunities ("Being around small children is teaching me so much about being a child in God's presence"). Our expectations about ordering our life during the different seasons need to take into account what's real and can't be changed; otherwise we set ourselves up for frustration and failure. This is a place for learning how to be compassionate with ourselves, because God certainly is.

An effective rhythm of spiritual practices will also be *balanced* among the disciplines that come easily to us and those that stretch us. For those who are extroverted, the disciplines of solitude and silence will be more of a stretch, but it is a stretch toward wholeness. Introverts may feel that they don't need relationships in community, but nothing could be further from the truth. Without a balanced approach to spiritual disciplines, we run the risk of cultivating a one-sided spirituality that will disintegrate under pressure from the part of us we have left undeveloped.

Without community, the introvert would run the risk of becoming isolated and disconnected from reality. Without solitude, the extrovert would run the risk of becoming shallow and unable to discern the still, small voice of God. Without some structure, the spontaneous, unstructured personality can become undisciplined and unfocused. Without some ability to go with the flow, the highly structured person can become rigid and overly attached to his or her own way of doing things, leaving little room for being surprised by God.

Once we have identified a basic rhythm of spiritual practices, it is important that we enter into it with a great deal of *flexibility*. This does not in any way lessen the depth of our intentionality, but it does help us to avoid becoming rigid and legalistic or even selfish about our rhythms. We need to become as clear as we can about what is optimal for our spiritual life and commit ourselves to it, but then we need to hold it openly during those times when things don't work out exactly as we planned. There will be the morning when we can't have solitude because a child has been sick throughout the night. A crisis at work or with a friend will require our presence and prevent us from leaving work at the exact time we planned. The point is that we know that we have set our intention. We are faithful to it to the best of our ability and to the extent that the day-to-day circumstances of our lives allow.

When we are not able to maintain our disciplines just as we had planned, we can know for sure that God's work is not limited to our spiritual disciplines. He will still find a way to come to us in the midst of our real life on that day. In addition, we should feel free to evaluate our rhythms regularly—especially when we have undergone a major life change—to see if they are still realistic and life giving for us. If not, we are perfectly free to make adjustments with God's guidance. In fact, it is good to take time for “gentle noticing” (rather than critiquing and evaluating!) about every six months, and certainly every time there is a major life change, and to make adjustments rather than becoming rigid in our practices.

A SIMPLE PROCESS FOR CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL RHYTHMS

The process of beginning to cultivate our own rhythm of spiritual practices begins with *attending to our desire*, noticing what words, phrases and prayers seem to most consistently capture our sense of longing for God and for spiritual transformation as we are experiencing it these days. *How bad do I want it? Am I willing to rearrange my life for what my heart most wants?* We then express our willingness to God directly, acknowledging the mystery of spiritual transformation and our powerlessness to bring it about. It is important to know, really *know*, that spiritual transformation at this level is a pure gift as we make ourselves available to God. Otherwise our rhythm of spiritual practices can become nothing more than a spiritual self-help program that is full of human effort.

Then we take time to *listen to our experiences with spiritual practices*. We reflect on our experiences with various spiritual disciplines and invite God to show us which have been most life giving and have resulted in true life change. We take note of those times when it seemed as if God met us in the context of our practices and of the transformation that resulted. We observe which disciplines were most stretching for us as well. *Which spiritual practices and relationships have seemed to be most powerful in meeting the desires of my heart?*

The next step is to *begin developing a plan* based on these reflections. *What am I beginning to understand about my minimum daily/weekly/monthly requirements for ongoing spiritual formation? Which disciplines do I know I need to engage in regularly as a way of offering myself to God steadily and consistently?* We ask God for his guidance in putting together a rhythm of spiritual practices that will meet our desire for life-giving connection with him and authentic spiritual transformation. It's important to give thought to the disciplines practiced in solitude, disciplines related to life in our body and disciplines related to life in community.

We take into account the limits and opportunities of our life stage,

our personality, our current circumstances, asking questions such as the following:

- What practices will I seek to engage in on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly? Yearly?
- Where will I engage in these disciplines?
- What time of the day/week/month/year?
- What have I learned about the significance of community for spiritual transformation through the "journeying together" portions of this process? Where might there be an opportunity or an invitation to enter more deeply into community on the basis of shared spiritual disciplines?
- Are there other activities or practices that are particularly suited to my personality type or spiritual type? How will I incorporate these into the rhythm of my spiritual practices?
- Are certain practices particularly needed based on sins and negative patterns that I am aware of?

Making practical arrangements is part of crafting the plan:

- What schedule changes will I need to make in order to consistently choose these life-giving disciplines?
- What arrangements do I need to make with those I live with in order to make this possible?
- Are there any questions or conversations I need to have with those I work with in order to make this possible?

Once we have crafted a plan that is concrete and specific, we *commit ourselves to it prayerfully out of our desire for God* rather than a sense of duty or obligation. Remember, a personal rule of life is a means of opening ourselves in a consistent manner to God's transforming work in us.

Then we *periodically take time to notice*. As we enter into this new way of living, we can feel free to explore and experiment with our rhythms

and make adjustments along the way. After about six months, it's good to take some extended time in God's presence to notice how it is going and whether some larger adjustments need to be made. Every time we go through a major life change (getting married, having children, taking on a new job, retiring, moving, having surgery), we do well to reevaluate so as to make adjustments that are realistic for our new situation.

FRESH DISCIPLINES FOR A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

As we become more intentional about living according to our deepest desires, it becomes increasingly important to notice the effects of technology on our mind, our soul and our relationships. The effects of technology are so pervasive and have sneaked up on us in such subtle ways that most of us have little awareness of how deep and far-reaching those effects really are.

I realized the full extent of my own frustration with the intrusiveness of technology one morning as I sat on a flight from San Diego to Chicago. I had just completed several days of speaking and was more than ready to go home. As we prepared for takeoff, a man sitting near me was talking very loudly on his cell phone, obviously trying to nail down one last business transaction before the flight attendant ordered us to turn off all phones. Because the previous several days had been quite full of words and activity, I was longing for some uninterrupted quiet and was irritated that I had to listen to the man's conversation.

In that moment I "saw" my world and what it had been reduced to: the only place of refuge from the overstimulation of our highly technologized life was a speeding bullet thirty thousand feet above the earth! And even that small place of refuge was temporary. I realized that I needed a whole new set of spiritual disciplines to deal with the contemporary reality of encroaching technology.

Technology is not evil; it is how we use technology that determines whether it is a force for good or for ill in our lives. As we seek to cultivate

spiritual rhythms, we do well to consider disciplines that correspond to the temptations arising from technology so that we can protect the elements of our lives that we value most. Although there are no cookie-cutter approaches to these disciplines, it's helpful to think about certain times of day and aspects of life in relation to the kinds of technologies that affect us.

In the morning. Early morning is a special time of day, when we are in a more rested and undefended state than we are at any other time. The new day stretches out before us unspoiled and full of potential. If we are getting enough rest, the time when we are waking up and preparing for the day is a time of quiet alertness, openness and receptivity, and even energized creativity. How we choose to spend this time has potential to set the tone of the whole day, and depending on the demands of our life, these may be the only moments we have all day for silence and deep listening to God.

At one time I noticed myself slipping into the habit of turning on the cell phone as soon as I wake up and checking my e-mail before I even had my first cup of coffee. Slowly and imperceptibly, these habits were robbing me of moments that used to be for silence, prayer and being present to God. Since I work primarily in a home office, I was often full-bore into the work of the day before I was even fully awake! More recently I have been establishing a discipline of no technology before 9:00 a.m., choosing instead to preserve that time for quiet preparation for the day ahead. Then when it comes time to engage the world, including the world of technology, I find I am much more grounded in God (rather than frenetic) and much more enlivened in my spirit. Although turning on the cell phone and checking e-mails in the early morning hours continue to be temptations, I keep asking myself, *How do I want greet God in the morning? Do I want to begin the day with technology or with quiet listening?*

In the evening. The way we transition from the working day into the evening hours is also very important, because if we do not really transi-

tion, our work can bleed into every nook and cranny of our life. The accessibility of e-mail from any Internet connection and the fact that we now wear pagers and cell phones like clothing intensify the temptation to believe that if we do one more thing, we'll somehow catch up with all that needs doing. On one level (the level of checking tasks off a list) this may be true, but on another level (the level of being human and needing time for rest, leisure and relationship) we just get further and further behind.

Those of us who work away from home can become much more intentional about marking a clear ending to the workday when we shut down computers, work cell phones and pagers. We can use the ride home to review the day and call it done. We can join God in his pattern of working and resting and say, "The work of this day is enough, and it is good." If we work from home, unplugging from certain elements of technology can be a symbolic act of releasing the work of this day to God and being fully present to the gifts of eventide: a shared meal, conversation with family and friends, contributions made to life at home, leisure and rest.

Solitude, silence and sabbath. The intrusion of technology into every nook and cranny of our lives in contemporary culture makes it necessary to be very thoughtful regarding our use of technology on the days we have set aside for solitude, silence and sabbath. When I first started leading retreats more than ten years ago, nobody but doctors and a few others in helping professions carried cell phones or pagers, so we didn't really have to deal with the issue. As time went by, more and more people had these devices, but they didn't usually bring them into a retreat setting. Now it is necessary to prepare people ahead of time for the prospect of turning off technology in order to enter into the quiet, and even then participants experience quite a bit of anxiety about being unreachable. It's as if they really feel that the world can't go on without them, even for a day. People are also bringing computers on retreat, because they journal on their computer. In theory this should work, but it may leave an

opening for technology to intrude in ways we don't intend. For true silence, we do better to unplug completely.

Because life in contemporary culture requires us to move at high speeds and to be accessible nearly all the time, we need *more* extended times of solitude in which the RPMs of body, mind and soul can slow down. Most of us really need one day a month in solitude, completely unplugged not only from people but also from computer and phones, to maintain enough inner quiet to hear God and allow him to touch us in the deeper places of our being. It is not expedient, it is never convenient, and it means we are inaccessible to family and colleagues. However, on these days we are completely accessible to God, which in the end is better for everyone around us.

Decisions about the use of technology are highly personal, but our attempts to be more thoughtful and disciplined in this area do offer us hope—hope that we do not have to live at the mercy of forces that are subtle and yet intrusive and all-consuming. As we seek to take control of the effects of technology in our life, we are reclaiming space for our soul and for the things that matter to us most deeply.

BY WAY OF EXAMPLE

My own rule of life these days is very simple, even though it has taken me years to settle into it with clarity. The exact details do not matter to anyone but me; what matters is that it works for me at this time and that when I am living it I am a better person.

Daily. My daily rhythm includes solitude and silence (with no technology) from 7:00 to 9:00 in the morning. This includes at least a half an hour of being in silence and then moving into prayer with words, reflection on Scripture and the other disciplines we have explored. This time also includes getting dressed and making other preparations for the day and sometimes even a short walk, but doing so quietly and prayerfully rather than allowing other kinds of stimulation. At 9:00 I transition

into the workday. Of course I have to maintain some flexibility when I am traveling and speaking.

In the late afternoon or evening, I unplug from work-related technology and transition to evening time by going on a bike ride (when possible) and using that time for the examen. I have one spiritual friend I connect with daily and others with whom I connect with weekly or monthly.

Weekly. My weekly rhythm includes commitment to Sunday as the sabbath for myself and for our family. On this day we disconnect from work and work-related technology; we rest, exercise, cook special food, and enjoy each other and friends, choosing activities that are worshipful and also pleasurable.

Monthly. I try to set aside one day a month for solitude, completely unplugged. I also receive spiritual direction once a month and combine it with my solitude day if possible.

Quarterly/half-yearly. At least once a quarter I enter into some sort of extended retreat with others, usually from the Transforming Center. The prayer rhythms, extended times in solitude and engagement in spiritual community are vitally important for my own spiritual health and well-being.

Yearly. Our family takes a vacation of one to two weeks for rest and recreation. In addition, I also try to engage in some kind of training or guided experience where I receive teaching and guidance that keeps me learning and growing.

These rhythms are so specific to the particularities of my life that I almost hesitate to delineate them. I describe them here not so you will try to duplicate them exactly (please don't!) but so that you will have a glimpse of what a concrete, specific rule of life can be. Let me hasten to add that I am not able to do it this way all the time; sometimes life gets in the way. But it is what I shoot for, and that means I hit the mark much more often than I would if I didn't have my aim clearly in view.

Each of us must find our own way of cultivating a rule of life that fits

with our own situation. A busy executive describes his own process of establishing a rule of life this way, "I have struggled to practice a coherent life of the Spirit in the midst of the intense workday pressure of casting vision, leading meetings, making budgets, handling personnel problems and so on. I love times of quiet retreat, but they are not my real world. Consequently I have chosen to develop a 'rule of life' that gives me some reference points for living a more spiritual life in the warp and woof of my job as well. Some aspects of this rule are tangible external disciplines like having a daily devotional time. But others are internal disciplines of the heart and mind that are becoming more a part of my lived out life. My rule is a spiritual reminder of my calling and is based on the Great Commandments." As another example, here is his rule.

Cultivating and ordering the affections of the heart

- having a "quiet heart" that is not distraught with internal regrets nor frenzied by external circumstances
- having a "circumcised heart" that is cut free from having to be right and is free from attachments to sports, food, recognition from others
- having a "burning heart" that is focused on pleasing God
- having a "dancing heart" that serves others with joy and gladness

Nurturing the inclinations of my soul

- having a daily "quiet time" for Bible reading and prayer
- having a weekly sabbath for corporate worship and rest and praying through my rule of life
- being part of Christian community in my local church
- taking quarterly retreats for more extended reflection and recalibration of my rule of life

Strengthening the disciplines and illumination of my mind

- pursuing a "humble mind" that honors unity over victory

- desiring a "renewed mind" that resists conformity to the world for the sake of spiritual transformation
- developing a "prepared mind" for understanding and living my faith

Practicing the habits of my strength

- daily stewardship
 - maintain a minimum of seven hours of sleep a night
 - thirty-minute quiet time resting in assurance of God's love
 - vigorous exercise three times a week
 - healthy diet
 - no evening television without my wife
- stewardship of gifts of study
 - reading in areas of history and culture
- stewardship of vocational calling
 - being involved and attentive to others: listening, learning and loving them
 - investing in others: taking time to teach and touch others with grace
 - inspiring others with vision, encouragement and empowerment

Loving my neighbor as myself

- being friendly with neighbors
- being compassionate to those in need
- seeking justice and mercy in the world
- being an agent of reconciliation: making all things new rather than all new things
- being a person of engagement and not avoidance

He concludes by saying, "I do not 'obey' my rule as with an arbitrary checklist, but I do allow it to shape my daily life through the promptings of the Holy Spirit."

☞ THE POWER OF COMMUNITY FOR SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

It is impossible to overstate the importance of community in the spiritual transformation process. This is not the same thing as the Christian busyness that often accompanies church life; it is about quietly sharing the journey with others who are also drawn to deeper levels of spiritual transformation that enable them to discern and do God's will. As noted earlier, Jesus chose a spiritual community to accompany him on his spiritual journey on this earth, and he defined his spiritual community as those who were willing to seek out and do the will of God (Mark 3:33-34).

The desire to know and do the will of God and to live a life that made this possible formed the disciples' primary identity, and it was on this basis that they came together in unity. They ate together, traveled together, slept out under the stars together, ministered together, talked, asked questions, argued and challenged each other. They stayed together under duress, conflict, betrayal and even death, seeking to do the will of God and to become more like Jesus in the process. In the crucible of community they were shaped and molded to become the future leaders of the church. They were changed as individuals, and ultimately they changed the world through the inauguration of a new kind of relationship with God through the person of Christ.

Taking a closer look at the relational rhythm of Jesus' life, we notice that within the small group of twelve there were three disciples with whom he was especially intimate. These three he invited to be with him in his most private moments of grief and agitation in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even though they failed him significantly then, Jesus' request to them show that he was in touch with his need for intimate friendship and spiritual support. It is one thing to tell someone about something that you have wrestled with and overcome in the past tense; it is quite another to invite someone to be with you in your current struggle when you aren't

sure of the outcome! Relationship at this level is truly transforming.

Within the larger community of faith there are a select few with whom we can feel safe enough to move more deeply into confession, truth telling, asking penetrating questions, challenging and confronting one another, giving and receiving spiritual guidance. In Christian tradition, this kind of relationship is called spiritual friendship. Such relationships are characterized by a spark of affinity that over time deepens into love. They are characterized by each person's profound willingness to be known by the other. As that love grows, a level of challenge is accepted and even expected because there is deep commitment to each other's well-being.

As you conclude your initial work with your spiritual rhythms, it is of utmost importance that you realize that you cannot do this alone. None of us can. Within your commitment to the larger faith community, the church, seek to identify at least one other person, if not several, who shares your desire for God and is willing to walk the path of establishing spiritual rhythms with you. "Two are better than one. . . . For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

The path to spiritual wholeness lies in my increasingly faithful response to the One whose purpose shapes my path, whose power liberates me from the crippling bondages of my previous journey, and whose transforming presence meets me at every turn in the road.

ROBERT MULHOLLAND,
INVITATION TO A JOURNEY

☞ SACRED DESIRE, SACRED RHYTHMS

Desire has its own rhythms. Sometimes it ebbs and sometimes it flows. But in the end it is the deepening of spiritual desire and the discipline to arrange our life around our desire that carries us from the shallow waters

of superficial human wanting into our soul's movement in the very depths of God. Sometimes the tide brings us closer in to the shore and the soul frolics in the waves. But increasingly we find our life to be hidden in the depths of God, and whatever is seen on the surface springs up from those depths full of beauty and grace.

I don't know about you, but I yearn for the freedom and beauty of a life that is completely oriented to the reality of God. I long to experience my soul hidden and content in the very depths of God, so that what is seen on the surface is transformed and energized by what takes place in those depths. The choice to orient our life to God's transforming presence is always ours; sacred rhythms help us to say yes to this desire, day by day by day.

Ask me not where I live
or what I like to eat. . . .

Ask me what I am living for
and what I think is keeping me
from living fully for that.

THOMAS MERTON, *Thoughts in Solitude*

PRACTICE

As you come to the end of this book, schedule some retreat time or some extended solitude at home to reflect on your experiences with the spiritual disciplines you have explored. As you begin your reflection, take time to enter into the kind of quiet that enables your soul to come out in God's presence.

Attend to your desire. Ask: What words, phrases, prayers seem to most consistently capture my sense of longing for God and for spiritual transformation as I am experiencing it these days? What do I sense is most needed these days?

Acknowledge the mystery of spiritual transformation and your pow-

erlessness to bring it about. Ask: In what area(s) of my life right now am I most aware of my need for transformation and my powerlessness to bring it about? Acknowledge your powerlessness to God, and tell him of your desire to make yourself available to him in a consistent way so that he can do his transforming work in you.

Listen to your experiences with spiritual practices. Invite God to show you which disciplines practiced in which ways have been most life giving to you. Notice points of consolation and desolation as well as times when it seemed as if God met you in the context of your practices. Notice which ones have been most stretching and which ones are resulting in deeper levels of connection with God and transformation toward Christlikeness. Ask: Which spiritual practices and relationships seem to be most powerful in fulfilling the desires of my heart right now?

Begin developing a plan. Based on your reflections, what are you beginning to understand about your minimum daily/weekly/monthly requirements for ongoing spiritual formation? What you have observed? What concrete activities do you want to engage in as ways of offering yourself to God steadily and consistently? Ask God for his guidance in putting together a rhythm of spiritual practices that will meet your desire for life-giving connection with him and authentic spiritual transformation.

- solitude and silence (daily and extended)
- prayer
- *lectio divina*
- examen of consciousness
- self-examination and confession
- honoring the body
- discernment (consolation and desolation)
- sabbath
- community

Write out your plan. Be sure to take into account the limits and opportunities of your life stage, your personality, your circumstances.

1. What practices will I seek to engage in on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly? Yearly? Where will I engage in these disciplines? What time of the day/week/month/year?

2. In the "journeying together" process, what have I learned about the importance of community?

What spiritual disciplines will I share with a spiritual friend, or a group of friends, so as to grow together?

3. What additional activities or practices are particularly important given my personality type or spiritual type?

How will I incorporate these into the rhythm of my spiritual practices?

Are there practices that are particularly needed because of my sins

and negative patterns? (See appendix A, which lists various sins and the disciplines that can help address them.)

4. How will I need to adjust my schedule in order to consistently choose this rule of life?

What arrangements do I need to make with those I live with?

Do I need to have any discussions with those I work with in order to make this possible?

Take a break. After you have captured in writing your desire and plan for establishing spiritual rhythms, take a break if you wish. Go for a walk, take a nap, do some reading, pray or sit in silence. If you are spending time on this at home, feel free to set it aside for a day or two. Then come back to it and take another look at your plan.

How does it look and feel to you now? Is it personal enough? Balanced? Realistic?

Are you able to think of it as a flexible undertaking rather than a legalistic straitjacket?

Are there any questions or concerns that you would like to raise with your spiritual friend or others who can pray for you?

Commit yourself prayerfully. Are you able to commit yourself to this plan *out of desire for God* rather than a sense of obligation?

As you feel ready, commit yourself prayerfully to your personal rule of life as a means of releasing yourself in a consistent manner to God's transforming work in you.

Notice gently. Feel free to explore and experiment with your rhythms and make adjustments along the way. After about six months, take some extended time in God's presence to evaluate how it is going and decide whether any larger adjustments need to be made.

A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

"The older you get, the gentler and kinder the Mystery seems."

A DEVOUT NINETY-FOUR YEAR OLD WOMAN

I have a confession to make. Toward the end of the writing of this book, I lost my rhythms. For various reasons, I struggled to get the manuscript in on time, and as the deadline loomed, I had to radically reorient my life toward finishing this project. Without going into all the gory details, it is enough to admit that it happened—just like it happens to all of us from time to time—and to tell you what I discovered during that time.

From the vantage point of being outside my normal rhythms for a time, I saw my life more clearly than I sometimes do. I became deeply aware of the fact that I love my life when I am living it within the rhythms that God has guided me into; there is a goodness in it and manageability to it that my whole self longs for and leans into. Yes, there is busyness and work, but there are also times of rest and delight that my soul can count on. There are the normal pains and challenges of life, but there is also the everyday beauty and fullness that comes from paying attention and finding God in the midst of it all.

As I worked my way through those long weeks (and thank God it was only a few weeks!), I found myself saying, "I don't want to write about rhythms anymore; I just want to live them!" In the midst of struggling to