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# Praying When You Feel Spiritually Empty

by Stephen J. Hrycyniak

Your spirit is parched and withered. In prayer you hear only the echo of your own pleas. You wander aimlessly through a barren soul-escape, searching for a Companion to

comfort you, living water to renew you. But you find only emptiness.

Praying when we feel empty is certainly a test of our spiritual fiber. We all prefer "Rocky Mountain High" experiences to the "Sahara Desert Dries." Snowcapped mountain peaks are, at least at first glance, so much more inviting than the arid wasteland of the desert.

## Enriching your prayer life

The desert can be a mighty uncomfortable and scary place at times, but I've found it's often the place where real inner growth happens. The barrenness and emptiness we feel drive us to press on toward refreshment, meaning, and a revitalizing experience of Love.

◆ **Embrace your emptiness.** The feelings we have in prayer are neither right nor wrong. They are the rich raw material of our reactions to life that furnish us with insight into ourselves.

When we feel spiritually empty, we are faced with two options: evade or embrace. If we avoid facing this feeling, we will probably choose not to pray because we "don't feel like it." If we embrace the feeling of emptiness in prayer, however, we enter into dialogue with our emptiness to discover its deeper meaning for us.

The hard reality is that true conversion requires nothing short of dying to our self-centered world-

view so that we can arise to become a person for others. We sometimes need to be stripped of the worldly yearnings, attachments, and dependencies that distract us from our relationship with God and cause us to veer off course on our spiritual journey.

This stripping-down process is actually an identification with the "One who emptied himself unto death." And in this identification with Jesus, we discover that emptiness is to a great extent a constant companion on our journey but one that can teach us much about ourselves.

◆ **Decide to persevere in love.** "Love is a decision!" This classic Marriage Encounter "ism" clearly expresses the reality that to love in re-

### Creating your own prayer experience

Write down your personal reflections on the following questions:

How does my feeling of emptiness or dryness in prayer make me feel about myself and my relationship with God? Does discipline sound like a dirty word? Why? What does that indicate to me? Are there any concrete things I need to do to keep moving toward a maturing love for God? Be specific.

Having reaffirmed your commitment to your inner growth, end this quiet time by slowly and meditatively praying the following Prayer for Refreshment by St. Augustine:

O Holy Spirit, Love of God, infuse your grace, and descend plentifully into my heart; enlighten the dark corners of this neglected dwelling and scatter there your cheerful beams; dwell in that soul that longs to be your temple; water that barren soil, overrun with weeds and briars, and lost for want of cultivating, and make it fruitful with your dew from heaven. Oh, come, refreshment of those that languish and faint. Amen.

lationship is essentially an act of the will. It transcends how we feel at any given moment.

*“Even the saints have had their dark hours, days, and weeks. They say then that ‘God has left them’ in order that they may know truly how utterly wretched they are of themselves, without his support.”*

—Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics*

This was a liberating truth for me when I experienced profound disillusionment and moments of despair in my marriage. Knowing that I could work at building my relationship, even though weighed down by the heavy negative baggage we had accumulated in our marriage, gave me new hope for us as a couple.

There is a clear parallel here to our love relationship with the “One who first loves us.” Spiritual emptiness is sometimes a way God uses to help us discover the deeper motivations of our relationship with the Divine. When the honeymoon is over and the feelings of ecstasy begin to fade, we may begin to ask ourselves how we got into this.

Yet the movement from infatuation to commitment is at the crux of any maturing love. And the movement from a self-centered spirituality to a healthy God-centered spirituality is part of the ongoing purification that is part of a deepening re-

lationship. As we respond to the invitation to come away with our Beloved, that empty feeling loses much of its power to affect our spiritual life.

◆ *Seek a spiritual companion.* Feeling spiritually empty and removed from some measure of the Spirit’s consolation can also stem from the effects of serious personal sin. It may point to the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in our life so that we can feel right with God again.

Sharing your struggles in prayer with a spiritual friend who is experienced in the ways of the Spirit can help you discern the nature of your challenges and put them in proper perspective. A spiritual friend can be a spouse, neighbor, pastor, or pastoral counselor—essentially, anyone you feel comfortable with in sharing your spiritual journey.

A spiritual journal is also a practical and helpful way to bring your emotional and spiritual lives into balance. A journal can become the forum for a written dialogue with those parts of yourself that might help you to better understand what’s behind your empty feelings and thereby

*Our experience of dryness in prayer, then, is not merely a frustrating experience of the absence of God. It is an essential experience of our identification with Jesus, who “learned obedience through suffering.” More concretely still, the Lord allows it so that we may “learn obedience through suffering,” that we may acquire that “passion for God” of which Kierkegaard speaks, that passion for the Father’s will which possesses Jesus in St. John’s Gospel.*

—Thomas H. Green, S.J.  
*When the Well Runs Dry*

move you toward integration. Journaling can also be a good way of looking back over the long haul of your spiritual journey to chart the growth you've experienced.

◆ **Practice spiritual discipline.** "Cast out into deep water," Jesus said to the disciples who were weary after a night's fishing. This, no doubt, was the last thing the disciples felt like doing, but in responding to Jesus' invitation they experienced firsthand the prodigality of the reign of God as their nets filled to overflowing. Likewise, the absurdity of obedience to the discipline of daily prayer is filled with the promise of overflowing grace.

The word *discipline* might have an unpleasant ring. Yet if we are to be disciples of Christ, we need to accept discipline as part of our spiritual life—not out of blind obedience to authority, but as a personal expression of investing ourselves fully in all that we value.

Writing a "rule of prayer" can help you concretize your personal spiritual discipline and, consequently can be a means of staying faithful to prayer even when you are feeling spiritually empty. Your "rule" will be a written list of the spiritual disciplines you are committed to try throughout the day. This might include the times and places of your daily prayer, prayer forms that are most helpful, or spiritual resources.

Since the list is a personal one, no two rules are alike. I find this approach particularly helpful be-

cause it gives expression to my commitment to prayer, helps me to practice the truth that "love is a decision," and disciplines me in prayer in spite of how I feel.

## Lifting your heart to God

The works of the spiritual giants of ages past teach us not so much how to attain the heights of mystical ecstasy as how to remain faithful in what is essentially an extraordinarily ordinary journey. Spiritual emptiness is all part of the package.

If you are feeling spiritually empty, you are at the brink of a special opportunity for deepening your love relationship with God. In those moments when you feel like giving up, hang in there. A passionate God is pursuing you—a God who experienced the agony in the garden, the betrayal of those closest to him, the abandonment of the cross, only to rise to new life! It is when we are completely empty that God can best fill us with new and abundant life! ◆

### Exploring further

**Books:** *When the Well Runs Dry* by Thomas H. Green, S.J., Notre Dame, Indiana, Ave Maria, 1979. *Way of the Ascetics: The Ancient Tradition of Discipline and Inner Growth* by Tito Colliander, Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985. *Dark Night of the Soul* by Saint John of the Cross, New York, New York, Doubleday, 1959.