

# THE MAKING OF AN ORDINARY SAINT

My Journey from Frustration to Joy  
with the Spiritual Disciplines

NATHAN FOSTER



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*To Christy,  
for carrying me when I could no longer walk.*





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## Foreword

Throughout Christian history (and even before), there has been a great conversation about the growth of the soul. How is human character formed and transformed? Is it possible for us to grow in virtue? Can we genuinely develop the moral character of Jesus so that we do indeed think God’s thoughts after him? If so, how exactly does this happen? How should we best understand the developmental nature of Christian spirituality? Is it possible to rightly order our love for God in such a way that we can actually make progress forward in the spiritual life? These questions—and a thousand others like them—have been studied and discussed and debated all through the Christian centuries. In one form or another, these matters have been a continuing theme in all the devotional classics.

Think of the writings of Evagrius Ponticus on the “deadly thoughts” and the “godly virtues”—our discussions today about “the seven deadly sins” draw directly from his writings. Or think of Origen of Alexandria and his forty-two stages of the soul’s journey. Or consider Teresa of Avila and her *Interior Castle*, or Saint John of the Cross and his *Dark Night of the Soul*. The list could go on for a long time indeed.

I say all of this to underscore the fact that we have a long and respected tradition about how the human personality grows in virtue and in the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. With *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*, Nathan Foster steps directly into the mainstream of this tradition.

Nathan makes three important contributions to the great conversation about the growth of the soul. First, his insights come to us in narrative form. The vast majority of writings on these themes are given to us in didactic form. Of course, direct teaching is not a wrong approach and can often be quite helpful. Much of my own writings are didactic in character. But Nathan writes to us on the slant, if you will. He tells us stories, most importantly his own story. He leads us on the journey of how he began growing in grace and what his journey can teach us about a continuing with-God kind of life. This stands in the tradition of Augustine of Hippo and his *Confessions*, of Julian of Norwich and her *Showings*, of John Woolman and his *Journal*. Closer to our own day, I think of Thomas Merton and his *Seven Storey Mountain* and Frank Laubach and his *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. A narrative approach adds depth and variety to the great conversation about the growth of the soul.

Second, Nathan shares with us out of the context of ordinary life. Frankly, many of the writings we have about the growth of the soul have grown out of monastic settings. Now, these settings have substantial advantages and have given us a wealth of wisdom. But they also have considerable drawbacks. Perhaps the most pointed drawback was famously expressed by the caustic comment of John Milton, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue.” You see, it is one thing to experience progress in moral virtue when everything in our day is ordered around the hours of prayer and where there is an absence of many of life’s everyday frustrations. It is quite another to learn to “pray without ceasing” in the midst of an overbearing boss, children clamoring for our attention, dishes piling up in the sink, and a shortage of money to pay the heating bill.

Nathan has much to teach us here. He engages the Christian spiritual disciplines smack in the midst of all the frustrations you and I must face in our daily lives. He never holds back from sharing with us the many difficulties and frustrations of his efforts. Indeed, the subtitle to his book is quite telling: “My Journey from Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines.”

This leads to a third contribution, which in some ways is the most significant of all. In Nathan’s efforts to describe for us the struggles of an ordinary person in ordinary circumstances, he is careful to share with us the full range of human emotion: anger, joy, fear, ecstasy, exasperation, delight, agony, and more. You see, in religious circles (as in all circles, I suppose), it is so tempting for us to share only the mountaintop victories, the glorious healings, the astonishing triumphs of the human spirit. We draw back or perhaps ignore our less than stellar moments or even outright failures in our practice of the spiritual disciplines. And consequently, how elusive is our progress into Christlikeness, into sanctification of life. Or, conversely, we will swing to the other extreme and simply glory in our wretchedness, a kind of gutter-to-the-cross saga.

Here Nathan brings us into genuine balance. He never shies away from plunging us into the painfulness of shortcomings, but he also helps us experience with joy the steps forward into Christlikeness. The full range of emotions is ours as we walk with Nathan in his multi-year experimentations with the spiritual disciplines.

With *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*, Nathan Foster has made a valuable contribution to the great conversation about the growth of the soul. Get this book. Read this book. Allow this book to lead you into your own experiences with the classical disciplines of the spiritual life.

Richard J. Foster



# Introduction

## Beginnings

The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits.

Albert Camus<sup>1</sup>

In 1978, my father, Richard J. Foster, wrote *Celebration of Discipline*.<sup>2</sup> The book was well received; it has sold some two million copies in English and has been translated into twenty-five other languages.<sup>3</sup> It continues to be taught in multiple settings from seminaries and universities to Sunday schools and home study groups. It is beginning to be referenced in history books for its influence on Christianity. Many have noted that my dad's work helped launch a movement toward what we know today as spiritual formation.

My father is now retired, and his formal public life is ending. As he comes to this end, he feels discouraged. "It's almost as if spiritual formation is just another fad in Western Christianity," he told me. "The disciplines aren't merely pious exercises for the devout. People don't seem to understand the 'big picture' of how the disciplines are a means of grace to transform the human personality."

I wonder about that "big picture."

I wonder what spiritual formation is all about.

Dad said he wrote *Celebration of Discipline* for all those who are disillusioned with the superficialities of modern culture.

I'm disillusioned—not just with the shallowness of our culture but with life in general. I spend more time lost with the question “Is this all there is to life?” than I care to admit.

I'm in my midthirties, and for the first time I'm starting to understand some of the midlife issues people often struggle with. Recently, my older brother joined the Air Force and was deployed to Iraq. Working in a medical unit there, my brother, who once had a bumper sticker that read “Who would Jesus bomb?” now talks about guns and bomber planes, carelessly throwing around terms I don't understand like *theater of war* and *AFSC*. I have to give him credit for being far more creative in his midlife crisis than the traditional manner of buying a red convertible and having an affair. I think mentioning this sort of offended him, as did my sloppy salute and “Aye, aye, Captain!” I guess he's not that type of captain.

While I'm not interested in either midlife crisis option, and my work teaching at a university is extremely meaningful, I feel lost in this frustration that I spend my days feeling overwhelmed by doing things that don't really matter to me. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but my silly hobbies mean a whole lot more to me than the other ways I spend my time. I guess I'm looking for a new quest, new dragons to slay, much like my brother.

It feels unfair and a little cliché to say, but I'm also disillusioned with the church. I get why males in my generation are leaving in droves. There are many good things about organized religion that I find valuable: it helps me connect with others, it gives me a place to serve, and my kids seem to like it. But I have next to no expectation of church facilitating a space for me to connect with God. So often it seems like just another noisy, busy activity that fills my schedule. I'm left living with an ache, an intuitive longing for a deeper spiritual connection.

I don't know what to do with that, but a new program, sermon series, study, or service project, as good and well intended as it may be, doesn't seem to change much. I'm not critical or angry about this; it is what it is.

I find I think a lot about life, death, and my place in this mysterious venture we call human existence. In recent years, I've found myself nostalgically drawn to reading, watching, and visiting anything historical. With childlike imagination I've tiptoed through history looking for my place among the tombs of my genetic past. When visiting an old British castle or Native American reservation, a hush overtakes me. I caress the walls and study the pictures, desperately searching for connection. I re-create stories and imagine I've finally discovered the home of my people, like a lost explorer returning to an empty village.

I don't know what to do with the echoing memories of human history. I listen and try to learn. When I pay homage to the past, I find meaning and the courage to show up for life. I often think of my loved ones who have passed away and wonder if I carry the hopes and dreams they had for me. As odd as it may sound, I want them to be proud of me.

And so this was the proverbial soup that spawned this project. It started with a scenario from my overly dramatic imagination. I was an old man gingerly navigating a dusty and flower-speckled Colorado canyon trail, relying heavily on a tattered, hand-carved stick, my wrinkled and weathered frame ambling along. This was my dad's canyon. For the last half of his life he had come here often. His thoughts and prayers were locked in these walls; this was his old castle, his vacant farmhouse. In my daydream, I was there to honor his passing. Resting on the bench I had donated to the state park to place in his memory, I cracked open a faded red book my father had written when I was four years old. I imagined I was at the end of a yearlong process of diligently studying and experimenting with the twelve

ancient spiritual practices found in that book. It was a project to say good-bye to him, to process my grief.

And there it was: my new challenge lay before me. What if I spent an entire year intentionally and intensely working on my spiritual life, following the instruction from one of my father's books? The project would be to creatively and intentionally work with what he had outlined in his book *Celebration of Discipline* as twelve historic practices of the Christian faith: submission, fasting, study, solitude, meditation, confession, simplicity, service, prayer, guidance, worship, and the one I personally dreaded the most—celebration.

Funny, I had been almost giddy about this idea. It never occurred to me that I might be embarking on something terribly boring and potentially painful. I had a project, something to do with my angst and lost hope for life. I was beginning a journey into modern-day “monkhood,” though of course without the robes or celibacy. My one-year experiment would eventually turn into four.



The concept of the spiritual disciplines is really quite simple: we do the practices that Jesus did. Over time these practices become habitual, thus enabling us to respond to life in a way more like Jesus would if he were to live our life. As we submit our will to spiritual practices, God's grace brings forth character transformation. This seems to be the dominant means God uses to bring about change in our lives. Christian spiritual formation is the process of becoming people formed into the likeness of Christ's character. If I want to respond to life with love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, I can't just force or fake it. When someone cuts me off in traffic, I quickly learn the quality of my spiritual habits. So if I practice living like Jesus did, then God takes my little effort and begins to form within me a person

who naturally responds to life well. This is what the old writers called being a “well-established person.”

The most frequently cited metaphor for understanding the point and power of the disciplines is that of athletes in training. Being able to perform athletic feats is only possible because of the hours upon hours of specialized preparation. After shooting the game-winning shot in the 1993 NBA finals, John Paxson said, “I just caught the ball and shot it as I have my whole life. I’ve been playing basketball since I was eight years old, and I’ve shot like that in my driveway hundreds of thousands of times. It was just reaction.”<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell challenges the commonly held belief that luck has to do with success.<sup>5</sup> He sets forth the idea that practice—ten thousand hours of practice, to be precise—is what brings about expertise in any realm. The common denominator from professional athletes to Bill Gates to the Beatles is that they all practiced intensely at their craft before they rose to the public’s attention. I don’t know about praying for ten thousand hours, but it’s a place to start.

“Nate, it’s a little like this,” my dad would say. “I can put a basketball in the hoop given enough tries, but I can’t do it when it needs to be done. Look at the top stars who are able to score in clutch time in games. That’s only because they have trained for years.”

“So maybe one way to quit being selfish and yelling at my kids is to spend more time with the disciplines? Would it then become a habit to respond to life with more patience and self-control?” I asked.

“Yeah, Nate, you’re on the right track.”

Apparently in the first century AD when Paul said to “train unto righteousness,”<sup>6</sup> this was something they understood in their culture. In his day the success of athletes was seen as more of a product of training than of natural ability.

Practice develops into habit, for better or, unfortunately, for worse. For example, if we continually practice poor nutrition,

we become very good at eating things that are bad for us. Here is another way to look at the topic: virtue is good habits we can rely upon to make our lives work well; vice is destructive habits we can rely upon to destroy our lives. Both are habits.

It's hard to remember that seeing the results from our habits takes time. Lots of time. We don't gain fifty pounds or learn to smoke two packs a day overnight. Neither do we suddenly quit being a self-centered egomaniac who micromanages others. Growing fruit takes time. In our society, we want instant results. We have no interest in taking two years to get into shape or thirty years to succeed. Much like it takes years of practice for a person to play Mozart's Requiem well, we can't be trapped into thinking spiritual formation will happen in forty days or even forty months. This work, this process, involves more like forty years.

Unfortunately, our religious culture expects people to automatically be well established when they come into the faith. As a result, good people with good intentions who desperately want to do the right thing end up faking the spiritual life, pretending they have things together, or just hiding who they really are all because they either don't have the tools or haven't put in the years. Rather than our churches becoming places where people can be open and vulnerable about their journeys, where people work toward spiritual growth, they so often become some of the most dishonest and disingenuous of gatherings.

I can still hear my dad whisper with excitement, "Nate, can't you see? The end result of practicing the disciplines is actually *joy!*"

The idea of becoming spiritually formed made sense, but the joy part was completely lost on me. Fasting and confession seemed too serious, saintly, and monastic to be joyful. Joy is for children, not adults, and certainly not men. Joy is roller coasters, wanderlust, and Santa Claus, not prayer and solitude.

So instead of joining the military or buying a red convertible, I decided to go saint.

But before I launched into my journey, something strange happened that began a profound shift in the way I looked at the disciplines.

It all started with a bike ride.





## Understanding Submission

Submission is the spiritual discipline that frees us from the everlasting burden of always needing to get our own way. In submission we are learning to hold things lightly. We are also learning to diligently watch over the spirit in which we hold others—honoring them, preferring them, loving them.

Submission is not age or gender specific. We are all—men and women, girls and boys—learning to follow the wise counsel of the apostle Paul to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”<sup>1</sup> We—each and every one of us regardless of our position or station in life—are to engage in mutual subordination out of reverence for Christ.

The touchstone for the Christian understanding of submission is Jesus’s astonishing statement, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”<sup>2</sup> This call of Jesus to “self-denial” is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. It has nothing to do with self-contempt or self-hatred. It does not mean the loss of our identity or our individuality. It means quite simply the freedom to give way to others. It means to hold the interests of others above our own. It means freedom from self-pity and self-absorption.

Indeed, self-denial is the only true path to self-fulfillment. To save our life is to lose it; to lose our life for Christ’s sake is to save it (see Mark 8:35). This strange paradox of discovering

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fulfillment through self-denial is wonderfully expressed in the poetic words of George Matheson:

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conqueror be.  
I sink in life's alarms  
When by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms,  
And strong shall be my hand.<sup>3</sup>

The foremost symbol of submission is the cross. "And being found in human form, [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."<sup>14</sup> Now, it was not just a "cross death" that Jesus experienced but a daily "cross life" of submission and service. And we are called to this constant, everyday "cross life" of submission and service.

All the spiritual disciplines have the potential to become destructive if misused, but submission is especially susceptible to this problem. As a result, we need to be clear regarding its limits. The limits of the discipline of submission are at the points at which it becomes destructive. It then becomes a denial of the law of love as taught by Jesus and is an affront to genuine Christian submission. These limits are not always easy to define. Often we are forced to deal with complicated issues simply because human relationships are complicated. But deal with them we must. And we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us through the discernment process.

Richard J. Foster

# 1

## Submission

### Submitting to the Will of Wind and Children

Upon having his monastery invaded by Chinese soldiers and a gun pointed in his face, the Tibetan monk remained calm, continuing his prayers. The soldier angrily shouted, “Don’t you realize I have the power to kill you?” Undeterred in his prayers, the monk replied, “Don’t you realize I have the power to let you?”

For two days I cut through twenty-mile-per-hour winds on a bicycle for two hundred twenty-four miles across rural Ohio. I can’t believe I paid money to endure twenty hours of torture with three thousand other lunatics. Never again.

I won’t belabor the details of the night before the ride and the five hours of sleep I had in a police parking lot while lightning and rain raged outside my minivan, or the frustration of the night after the first day of riding when I tried to sleep on a high school gym floor to the accompaniment of thirty chronic snorers, or the mystery of the gym lights surprisingly set ablaze at 5:00 a.m. What I want to talk about is simply the ride.

When I signed up for this adventure, my only expectation was to finish without excruciating pain. It was early spring, and my

winter legs were hardly prepared for a ride of this length. The idea that I would have to battle such wind never crossed my mind when I left home for this journey. After only thirty minutes of wrestling my invisible opponent, my unrelenting pride was the only thing that kept me from calling my wife and begging her to come rescue me!

I was completely spent. Mother Nature brooded from every direction, wobbling my flimsy cycle back and forth. The prospect of slugging through over a hundred miles of her frigid rage struck me with profound terror. My only hope lay in finding a group to ride with.

Drafting is when two or more cyclists ride inches behind each other, creating a sort of wind tunnel. It's as exhilarating as it is nerve-racking riding just inches from a stranger's tire at twenty-plus mph. But some say that when you follow closely behind another rider, you can reduce your workload by up to 30 percent. On a ride like that day's, I was sure to encounter a multitude of herds huddled together, pedaling in unison in what is known as a paceline.

I usually avoid drafting; I don't care to exchange the scenery of a backcountry ride for a prolonged view of someone's spandex-clad buttocks. Besides, looking for a way to ease my effort seemed counter to the reason I signed up to ride 224 miles. However, today was an entirely different proposition. I was now willing to stare at anything to ease the brutality of the elements.

When you meet other cyclists wearing skintight polyester jerseys with zippers down to the belly button, Velcro shoes, and shorts that leave nothing to the imagination, you tend to find a sort of camaraderie that requires no introduction. I found the first paceline I could and joined right in.

As I nestled in the funnel, the flock of riders shielded me from the viciousness of the wind. The warmth and comfort given by these twenty strangers was glorious. Drafting is a perfect metaphor for community. The gift of being carried by

others contrasted with the frustration of submitting my will to the leader who was setting the pace. The strong take turns at the front, fighting the tempest for the village. When we move together, we're always affected by the consequences of each other's actions. Like every community, trust is required. If one falls, we all fall.

In life and on the bike, I find communities outgrow me, and I them. And so I spent that first day in absolute misery, vacillating between the frustration of submitting to the pain of going it alone and the boredom of the paceline. I just wanted to go home.

It was 4:00 p.m. when I spotted the Ohio River on the Kentucky state border and wheeled across that day's finish line at an old high school whose gymnasium would provide our night's lodging. My riding partner for the last two hours informed me that his heart rate monitor estimated he burned eight thousand calories that day. We certainly ate enough food to validate his calculations.

After six hours of rest and gorging, I staggered off to bed. Out of the shadows of a barren hallway, a new arrival's raspy voice greeted me. He was stocky and at most four-foot-ten. His skin was a leathered olive brown, illuminating his Eskimo ancestry. Beyond his thick glasses resided a deep soul with a friendly smile. He wore clothing more akin to that of a homeless man than a cyclist. Of the three thousand people who participated in the day's 112-mile torture, he was among the first to start out and the last to finish. My new friend had apparently been riding for almost seventeen hours. According to Jesus's upside-down kingdom language, my new friend was actually first. I was well versed in the cutting-edge method he employed, as this was the way my father and I used to climb the giant mountains of Colorado: painfully slowly. I should have known I was standing in the presence of greatness, yet I almost overlooked what this vanguard would have to teach me.

"Did the wind die down?" I inquired.

“Not really. But the stars came out. I hardly needed my lights.”

“Were you really riding all day?”

“Yeah. It always takes me a while. I just take my time and enjoy the ride.”

“There was nothing to enjoy today. That wind was awful!”

“Just made the ride more interesting.”

“Interesting?” I snapped in disbelief.

“Oh, sure. It just creates a new set of challenges. If you think this was bad, you should have seen the weather a couple years ago. We had wind *and* rain. It took me even longer.”

“And you came back?”

“Sure. It doesn’t have to be bad. Did you see the new foliage in the mountain pass?”

“No, I didn’t see anything. That was about the worst ride ever. I hated every minute of it.”

He paused, lowered his glasses, and looked me over as if I’d just criticized his dog. “The wind’s okay. You just have to accept that the ride is going to take a little longer.” He slowed his words and spoke in a gentle whisper. “God’s power is on display, you know. Just submit to it and enjoy yourself. Find the freedom.”

“Enjoy it?” I started to smirk. “I’ll find freedom when I get to go home.”

He just smiled and asked where to lay his sleeping bag. I stumbled off to bed.

The next day was much of the same. The only changes were my sore legs, worn patience, and windburned cheeks. Eventually, the hours and miles passed with a blur of cyclists.

It must have been mile 60 when my paceline whizzed past the short-statured man I had met the night before and the clanging of his gadget-outfitted ride. Serious cyclists never attach a horn and cooler to their bikes. In fact, he was probably the only person out there who had a kickstand. I decided to leave the group and joined his five-mile-per-hour pace (my six-year-old son could have walked faster). He was smiling like a bewildered madman,

clearly happy to see me. Apparently, he had only slept a couple of hours and left at 2:00 in the morning. Eager for company, he informed me of the turtles in the nearby stream bobbing their heads and the hawk above riding the wind.

“Watch the hawk, brother. The wind is his friend!” he shouted through the howling gusts.

“The wind’s no friend of mine,” I said with a laugh.

“What a glorious day to be riding. I was thinking about an old quote from John Muir, ‘I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for in going out, I found, was really going in.’<sup>1</sup> Looks like today I’ll be going for more than sundown.” His laughter was muted by the wind.

“What?” I asked.

He just smiled with a knowing that challenged my soul.

I looked to the hawk as he practiced his dance. Low on the horizon, aiming his head toward the sun, he powerfully thrust his feathered body upward. Soon his labors brought him to an invisible peak. Quickly adjusting his angle, he succumbed to the force of the wind, gently gliding left, then right, down and up again. This majestic creature was playing. The man was right; it was beautiful. The hawk’s example of effort and grace would soon become my metaphor for the spiritual disciplines.

We rode together in silence until I could take no more of his pace. A sign for espresso gave me an out. “A cup of joe awaits me up ahead,” I shouted as I waved good-bye.

“Good-bye friend, good-bye . . .” Our grand companion, the wind, quickly stole his voice.

Sometimes when I read the Bible I find myself tempted to imitate Thomas Jefferson and take scissors to the parts that don’t suit me. One of the first passages to hit the blade would be Paul’s words to slaves. In his letter to the people of Ephesus, he has the gall to suggest that slaves should serve their masters with respect and fear. I like to think that Jesus had started a revolution, that justice was to reign as he ushered in his kingdom on

earth. Few evils in our world parallel the institution of slavery. I believe God would like to see slavery in all forms abolished. So I want Paul to denounce the social evil of slavery, not affirm it. I want hardcore restitution called out. I've been mining this verse for a couple of years now, and I wonder if Paul's call was really about setting the slaves free after all. I'm starting to think that maybe he was offering a key to internal freedom, the type of freedom that can never be stolen. Do our external circumstances always dictate the level of freedom we feel? Can we find freedom through submission?

A few miles down the road, something clicked. My slow, crazy friend's example began to make sense. It was clear that no matter how much I fought on this trip, I was not going to get my own way. Slowing my cadence, I pondered a new solution to my predicament.

What if I submitted to this pain? After all, submission is one of the disciplines.

What if I welcomed my invisible nemesis?

Could giving up be a spiritual practice?

Could I find freedom in my misery?

Within minutes of mustering a feeble attempt to embrace the wind, I noticed a shift.

Unconsciously, I had spent the entire trip tightly clenching my muscles in order to fight the wind, wasting priceless energy. For the next couple of miles I tried to loosen my body by methodically moving my neck and arms about. Something incredible happened. I suddenly became relaxed, and instead of perceiving the violently rushing air as my enemy, I began to imagine it as the presence of the Holy Spirit engulfing me.

I stopped staring at my speedometer and the gradually ticking miles. My pace slowed as I soaked in the dancing wheat fields and bending trees. For the remaining miles that day, I practiced the ancient discipline of submitting, and in her might, the wind sung the song of God's power and love, fierce yet freeing.

I'm sort of embarrassed to admit this, but it actually shocked me to see that my spiritual life could be practiced in the midst of that insanely awful trip. I didn't expect to find a way to actively practice a spiritual discipline in the windy, scorched Ohio farmland. For some reason I was under the illusion that spiritual activities and lessons had to come from books and speakers and that there were special ways that we practiced the disciplines, but they could not come from meeting a strange man riding his bike in rural Ohio, watching birds, and giving in to the wind.

That day on the bike, the anonymous sage showed me how to find freedom in the wind, but maybe more importantly, he showed me how to practice spiritual disciplines in the midst of life circumstances.

And by the time the man who drafted God finally finished his two-day trek, the staff of the bike tour had long since packed up and gone home. He finished with no fanfare, no roaring crowd, not even a volunteer to offer a drink when he pulled into downtown Columbus. Only his loyal friend, the wind, who had shepherded him the entire trip, was there rustling the trash in applause.

It seemed as if the discipline of submission had found me. Up until that point, all I had done for this project was begin thinking about practicing the disciplines, and all of a sudden the opportunity presented itself. Not to mention, it came as I was doing an activity I normally wouldn't have thought of as having any spiritual value. Could I break free from typical methods? Could I practice the disciplines in interesting and unusual ways? Maybe I could get creative with this project. The following week I decided to try.



When I told my family about the project, my daughter seemed really interested in what I was doing, which led me to a strange thought: What if I spent an entire day donating my complete

attention to my nine-year-old daughter and four-year-old son by submitting entirely to their will? I am a fairly engaged dad, but parenting is an area of my life where I almost always feel like a failure, particularly in spiritual matters. This exercise seemed like not only the perfect opportunity to give a little spiritual teaching to my kids but also a solid chance to learn more about my chronic desire to have my own way.

After setting a budget and clarifying just how much candy and travel could be involved, I tried to explain to the kids the spiritual significance of submission, but they were so filled with Disney-like enthusiasm and excitement that I'm not really sure they heard anything I had to say. At least I tried, right?

In the following days they planned the schedule for our event, and my learning immediately began. I really struggled to avoid dropping manipulative suggestions as they decided to spend the day at an outdoor zoo during twenty-degree weather and a freak spring snowstorm. My unease continued as I heard rumor of potentially squeezing in a visit to Chuck E. Cheese's. This day would surely challenge my resolve.

As the snowy zoo, crowded pizza place day began, I was surprised to instantly feel an air of freedom in my submission. I didn't have to make decisions or be responsible for the outcomes. I didn't have to wrangle everyone to get out the door; if we were late, it didn't matter. The day wasn't about me. My only task was to give my undivided attention and to try to do so with a reasonably positive attitude. As a result, the usual anxiety that I tend to bring to family outings was pleasantly absent.

I've been noticing over the last few years that the things and circumstances I want often leave me unfulfilled and unhappy, while situations I don't want turn out to be not only good teachers but also sometimes even fun. In recent years I've been coming to the conclusion that I have very little idea what's going to be good for me. I think I know what I want, but historically, some of the best things for me I never would have chosen.

That day as we watched the freezing animals, I encountered a deep serenity from surrendering my desires and accepting life for what it is and not what I want it to be. I think this same peace comes when I accept people for who they are and not who I want them to be. Strangely, I found myself able to joyfully collapse my will into providence. When I let go, God shows up.

The frigid zoo wasn't too bad. As it turned out, we were the only people willing to visit the creatures on that cold day, so we had the place all to ourselves. And while Chuck E. Cheese's was filled to capacity and the sound decibel was at least that of a concert, I actually enjoyed the two-hour frenzy.

But on the drive home, I was left with the frightening realization that by surrendering my desire to have my own way, I was in fact giving my kids free rein to have their own way. What was good for my soul may have actually been bad parenting. I tried to salvage the situation by explaining to the kids all I had learned and the freedom we can experience by submitting to God. I think they were too sugared up to hear my teaching.

When the day was over, I began wondering about what happens when we're given the power to have our own way. One of the greatly ignored ironies of our day is the apparent consequences of attaining the cultural prize of wealth and fame. Few things stack the statistical cards in our favor for divorce, drug addiction, depression, and suicide like having wealth or notoriety. The misery of the rich and famous is well documented. With all the freedom money can buy, people so often live in bondage to themselves, their image, and the world we have created for them. In contrast, according to the biblical account of Matthew, Jesus gave a strange farming analogy about being yoked to him. (A yoke is a plowing device that binds two oxen together so that the stronger one can lead and train the weaker.) Essentially, Jesus was saying, "Chain yourself to me, and I'll teach you how to live as you were created to live." He said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>2</sup> Jesus knew that as humans, we are by nature

slaves—slaves to power, slaves to approval, slaves to escapism. So instead of leaving us bound to our selfish desires, he calls us to chain ourselves to his rule of love. Freedom through submission. In a sense, that sums up the spiritual disciplines. On this day I learned that voluntarily letting go was one way to be free from my oppressive desire to have my own way.

Later that night my daughter reflected, “Dad, I think it’s really cool that you submitted to someone else for the day. I think I want to try that. What if I gave my whole day to my brother and just played with him all day long?”

Funny, for all the talking I did, it was my example that she ended up hearing.



## Submission

Saint Patrick (390–460)

Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, was actually British. At age sixteen, Patrick was kidnapped and forced into slavery in Ireland. After six years of slavery, through a precarious and providential series of events, Patrick escaped and returned home to England.

Once home, Patrick began having visions in which Irish voices called out to him, “We beg you to come and walk among us once more.” Clearly Patrick had no interest in returning to a land where he had been a slave, but the visions persisted, with Christ speaking to him in the vision, saying, “He who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks within you.” Eventually Patrick submitted to the dangerous call of returning to Ireland.

Stories of Patrick and his work among the people of Ireland abound. And while what is fact and what is myth is unclear, what is known is that his missional work altered the culture so drastically that he's still celebrated some 1,500 years later. Some scholars even believe that had Patrick not introduced the teachings of Jesus to Ireland, the monasteries would not have been founded, and therefore much of the classical literature of the Greeks and Romans would have been lost during Europe's dark ages.

Even today, the historic Celtic Christian communities have much to offer Western Christianity.