

Five Simple Ways To Maintain Spirituality

On one occasion, Elder Marion D. Hanks is reported to have asked President David O. McKay, “How would you suggest I maintain my spirituality?” President McKay, who was known for his deep spirituality, said he did five simple things at the beginning of every day:¹

I arise early.
I wash my body.
I put on my new linen.
I subdue my spirit before the Father.
I wait for the inspiration of the Father.

Since I first heard this counsel, I’ve tried to follow it. Although, of course, maintaining spirituality requires much more than simply getting a good start on the day, there is a pure and private joy that comes to my soul in these simple practices. They have become an important way for me to express to my Heavenly Father my determination to make my love and obedience for Him the most important thing in my life at all times and in all places.

“I Arise Early”

First, “I arise early.” This is counsel that comes directly from the scriptures. In D&C 88:124, we read:

Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; *arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.*

This was also the practice of our Savior. In Mark 1:35 we read:

And in the morning, *rising up a great while before day*, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.²

There are many days when it is hard for me to keep the Lord as the first thing on my mind when I wake up. I am easily seduced by immediate worries, concerns, and interests as I start my day. But when I resist this temptation and decide that I will not let anything else interrupt this early morning priority, this small symbol of my determination to “seek ... first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” and put “all these things”³ aside I find my power to resist other temptations increases.

Moreover, morning communion gives me the godly perspective I need to be able to deal with these problems appropriately. Henry Ward Beecher said, “The first hour of the day is the rudder of the morning.”⁴ This reminds me of what Joseph Smith taught: “If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it be a hard matter to get right.”⁵

Harold B. Lee, as an apostle, shared some instruction that he had received directly from the President McKay:6

President McKay sometime ago in talking to the Presidency and the Twelve, urged us to give time for more meditation so that we could tune in with spiritual forces that we had a right to and should expect to direct us in our work. He said, "The best time for me is early in the morning when my mind and body are rested. But when the inspiration comes, and it can come just as clearly as though you were taking down a telephone and dialing in for information; when the Lord tells you what to do, you have to have the courage to do what he instructs you."

Elder Boyd K. Packer shared the following:7

I have learned that the best time to wrestle with major problems is early in the morning. Our minds are then fresh and alert. The blackboards of our minds have been erased by a good night's sleep. The accumulated distractions of the day are not in our way. Our bodies have been rested also. That is the time to think something through carefully and to receive personal revelation. For me, it is the best time to prepare lessons for a class I am to teach.

I heard President Harold B. Lee begin many a statement about matters involving revelation with an expression something like this: "In the early hours of the morning, while I was pondering upon that subject..." He made it a practice to work in the fresh, alert hours of the early morning on the problems that require revelation

I have a friend who bought a business. A short time later he suffered catastrophic reverses, and there just didn't seem to be any way out for him. Finally it got so bad that he couldn't sleep, so for a period of time he followed the practice of getting up about three o'clock in the morning and going to the office. There, with a paper and a pen, he would ponder and pray and write down every idea that came to him as a possible solution or contribution to the solution of his problem. It wasn't long before he had several possible directions in which he could go, and it wasn't much longer than that until he had chosen the best of them. But he had earned an extra bonus. His notes showed, after he went over them, that he had discovered many hidden resources he had never noticed before. He came away more independent and successful than he would ever have been if he hadn't suffered those reverses.

There's a lesson in this experience. A year or two later he was called to preside over a mission overseas. His business was so independent and well set up that when he came back he didn't return to it. He now has someone else managing it, and he is able to give virtually all his time to the blessing of others.

I counsel our children to do their critical studying in the early hours of the morning when they're fresh and alert, rather than to fight physical weariness and mental exhaustion at night. I've learned the power of the dictum, "Early to bed, early to rise." When I'm under pressure, you won't find me burning the midnight oil. I'd

much rather be in bed early and getting up in the wee hours of the morning, when I can be close to Him who guides this work.

I realize that some of you may be thinking: “I’ve always been a night person. The morning is the very worst time for me to do my reading, thinking, and praying.” Of course, I realize there may be some exceptions — you’ll have to figure out for yourself if you’re one of those. But, if at all possible, I urge you to give it a try for two weeks: get to bed early and get up early enough to take time to commune with God. If you are like me, you will see some significant improvements in your spiritual life.

“I Wash My Body”

After speaking of the need to arise early, President McKay counseled: “I wash my body. I put on my new linen.” Washing and putting on clean clothing is a symbolic act that tells the Lord we want to come before Him at our best. Just as baptism prepares us for receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost; just as taking the sacrament with a broken heart and a contrite spirit prepares us for the promised blessings of the Spirit; so President McKay taught that we will be better prepared to kneel before the Lord if we are physically clean when we engage in what will usually become our most important prayer of the day.

Of course, it is best not only when we physically prepare, but also prepare mentally and spiritually. This can involve some planning and actively pointing our minds toward the Lord. It means that instead of letting the thousand-and-one things that normally start to fill our souls with worry and concern at the beginning of the day, we take control of our minds and hearts and submit them to God singlemindedly. Speaking of family prayer in the morning, Brigham Young taught the same principle in his own inimitable way:⁸

Did you pray in your family this morning?” “No.” “Why?” “I was in too much of a hurry.” Stop! Wait! When you get up in the morning, before you suffer yourselves to eat one mouthful of food, call your [wife] and children together, bow down before the Lord, ask him to forgive your sins, and protect you through the day, to preserve you from temptation and all evil, to guide your steps aright, that you may do something that day that shall be beneficial to the kingdom of God on the earth. Have you time to do this? Elders, sisters, have you time to pray? This is the counsel I have for the Latter-day Saints today. Stop, do not be in a hurry. ... [... be calm, contented, composed; keep your pulses correct, do not let them get up to a hundred and twenty, but keep them as nigh as you can, ranging from seventy to seventy-six;] you are in too much of a hurry; you do not go to meeting enough, you do not pray enough, you do not read the Scriptures enough, you do not meditate enough, you are all the time on the wing, and in such a hurry that you do not know what to do first.

What do we do then about all our worries? President Young’s counsel was simple:⁹

“Keep your dish right side up,” so that when the shower of porridge does come, you can catch your dish full.

“I Subdue My Spirit Before the Father”

Next, said President McKay, “I subdue my spirit before the Father.” In my experience, one of the most important ways we can subdue our spirit is to kneel down physically before the Lord. As my wife and I taught our own children about the posture of prayer, we often used the following old saying: “On your knees or on your feet, but never, ever on your seat.” President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:¹⁰

There is something in the very posture of kneeling that contradicts the attitudes described by Paul: “proud ... heady, highminded.”¹¹ There is something in the very practice of father and mother and children kneeling together that evaporates others of those qualities he described: “disobedient to parents, ... without natural affection.”¹²

Since kneeling is an action I use almost exclusively in praying, it has developed a strong association in my mind with concentrated prayer. I find that my body helps my mind and heart form itself to prayer almost automatically as I kneel. Notice that all ordinances of the Church — baptism, confirmation, taking the sacrament, blessings and ordinations, temple ordinances — involve some unique combination of actions of the body with words and thoughts in a similar way. I think that this association is deliberately designed to help us focus our attention during the performance of these ordinances, providing a tangible witness to our covenants, and helping us remember them afterwards. We know from experience that memories that involve more than one of our senses at the same time (e.g., hearing, seeing, doing) are generally stronger and more long lasting.

Kneeling puts us in a position of an actual verbal conversation with our Heavenly Father and will reduce the chances that we will simply drift into thinking of various things or falling asleep. C. S. Lewis wrote to a friend:¹³

And, talking of sleepiness, I entirely agree with you that no one in his senses, if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bed-time — obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration. The trouble is that thousands of unfortunate people can hardly find any other.

Giving in to the temptation to pray in bed, to lay down as we talk to God, not only is the worst way to concentrate our thoughts, it also does not allow us to show the respect we owe to God when we engage in formal prayer.

In C.S. Lewis’ book *The Screwtape Letters*, the fictional senior devil, Wormwood, gives the following advice to his young nephew devil about preventing or reducing the effectiveness of prayer:¹⁴

One of their poets, Coleridge, has recorded that he did not pray “with moving lips and bended knees” but merely “composed his spirit to love” and indulged “a sense of supplication.” That is exactly the sort of prayer we want; and since it bears a superficial resemblance to the prayer of silence as practiced by those who are very far

advanced in [prayer], clever and lazy [people] can be taken in by it for quite a long time. At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, ... that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.

Although there may be a need for praying in different places times where we cannot kneel throughout the day, there is hardly an excuse not to kneel when we pray first thing in the morning and last thing at night as the two bookends of our day.

Standing in prayer can be thought of as symbolizing our readiness and worthiness to hear and obey the word of the Lord. It is no mere coincidence that before heavenly messengers could perform their errands to Ezekiel,¹⁵ Daniel,¹⁶ Paul,¹⁷ Alma the Younger,¹⁸ and Nephi¹⁹ they first had to command these seers to stand on their feet.²⁰ In ancient scripture and tradition, prophets such as Enoch,²¹ Abraham,²² Daniel,²³ and John²⁴ were grasped by the hand of an angel and raised to a standing position in key moments of their heavenly visions.²⁵ As Bible scholar Robert Hayward has said: “You stand in the temple,²⁶ you stand before the Lord,²⁷ you pray standing up²⁸—you can’t approach God on all fours like an animal. If you can stand, you can serve God in His temple.”²⁹ If you are stained with sin, you cannot stand in His presence.³⁰

Age or the physical setting may make kneeling in prayer in difficult or impossible. This story from Elder David A. Bednar illustrates how standing in prayer can be a way of showing our submissiveness and respect:³¹

At the conclusion of the June 2004 [BYU] board of trustees meeting, President Hinckley called upon Elder David B. Haight to offer the benediction. It was the last board meeting in which Elder Haight ever participated. At the age of 97, Elder Haight had some difficulty as he tried to stand and offer the prayer.

After several attempts to rise to his feet, President Hinckley courteously said, “David, it is all right” — suggesting, I believe, that it was permissible for Elder Haight to remain in his chair and offer the prayer.

Elder Haight responded in a voice that was both firm and appropriate and said, “President, I must stand!”

There was simply no way that mighty Apostle was going to sit and pray in the presence of the First Presidency and his colleagues of the Twelve. And of greater importance, he was not going to sit as he communicated with his Heavenly Father. So once again Elder Haight worked to stand — and was successful. I shall never forget the spirit I felt as I listened to Elder Haight pray. I hope on that occasion I was quick to observe a powerful lesson about the dignity and the humility that should always attend our prayers. In my present calling I am blessed by Elder Haight’s example and feel a deep sense of gratitude for what I saw and felt and learned that day....

A final observation on subduing our spirits before the Lord: We may find that the first thoughts that come to our mind when we kneel are some things that we know the Lord wants us to do that day that we don't want to do. This is a test. We pass that test not by worrying and stewing about those things, and even resenting them, but swallowing hard and subduing our spirit to God's Spirit and saying, "Thy will be done. Whatever Thou givest me to do, I will do."

"I Wait For the Inspiration of the Father"

After subduing our spirits, President McKay says "I wait for the inspiration of the Father." Although President McKay speaks of waiting for inspiration, he is not advising us to simply sit still passively until the Lord fills our mind with what we need to know. Think of all the revelations that we learn about in the scriptures. Though, exceptionally, God gives us revelation out of the blue, the most common case is that revelation comes when we are actively studying the scriptures in the line of our duties and pondering questions of importance.

In D&C 76, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working in the line of their duty to translate the fifth chapter of the gospel of John. "And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about."³²

When President Joseph F. Smith was reading the third and fourth chapters of 1 Peter, he wrote: "As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me,"³³ and then his great vision of the work of salvation in the spirit world opened up to him.

We will find revelation coming to us when we are studying the scriptures and pondering them in the line of our own duties: when we are preparing to teach or participate in Sunday lessons, when youth are reading their assigned scripture passages for seminary, when any of us is preparing for a talk or to give counsel to a loved one. Sometimes we may also feel prompted by the Lord to study topics or works of scripture for a personal reason.

A few years ago, my wife and I heard Victor Ludlow, a former BYU professor of ancient scripture, speak about the spiritual value of the psalms and gave us promises about the spiritual benefit that would come through a study of their prophecies of the Savior, their doctrines of temple and priesthood matters, and the beauty of their praise. My wife took this to heart and, in addition to her regular scripture study for Sunday and seminary, worked through the psalms one per day in deep and rich study. It was a rich and rewarding experience for her, and for me also as she has shared what she learned and felt.

Sometimes inspiration comes through pondering and prayer over the course of days or weeks. Elder Richard G. Scott gives the following example. Note that the beginning of his experience with spiritual guidance took place in a Sunday School class:³⁴

One Sunday I attended the priesthood meeting of a Spanish branch in Mexico City. I vividly recall how a humble Mexican priesthood leader struggled to communicate the truths of the gospel in his lesson material. I noted the intense desire he had to share those principles he strongly valued with his quorum members. He recognized that they were of great worth to the brethren present. In his manner, there was an evidence of a pure love of the Savior and love of those he taught.

His sincerity, purity of intent, and love permitted a spiritual strength to envelop the room. I was deeply touched. Then I began to receive personal impressions as an extension of the principles taught by that humble instructor. They were personal and related to my assignments in the area. They came in answer to my prolonged, prayerful efforts to learn.

As each impression came, I carefully wrote it down. In the process, I was given precious truths that I greatly needed in order to be a more effective servant of the Lord. The details of the communication are sacred and, like a patriarchal blessing, were for my individual benefit. I was given specific directions, instructions, and conditioned promises that have beneficially altered the course of my life.

Subsequently, I visited the Sunday School class in our ward, where a very well-educated teacher presented his lesson. That experience was in striking contrast to the one enjoyed in the priesthood meeting. It seemed to me that the instructor had purposely chosen obscure references and unusual examples to illustrate the principles of the lesson. I had the distinct impression that this instructor was using the teaching opportunity to impress the class with his vast store of knowledge. At any rate, he certainly did not seem as intent on communicating principles as had the humble priesthood leader.

In that environment, strong impressions began to flow to me again. I wrote them down. The message included specific counsel on how to become more effective as an instrument in the hands of the Lord. I received such an outpouring of impressions that were so personal that I felt it was not appropriate to record them in the midst of a Sunday School class. I sought a more private location, where I continued to write the feelings that flooded into my mind and heart as faithfully as possible. After each powerful impression was recorded, I pondered the feelings I had received to determine if I had accurately expressed them in writing. As a result, I made a few minor changes to what had been written. Then I studied their meaning and application in my own life.

Subsequently I prayed, reviewing with the Lord what I thought I had been taught by the Spirit. When a feeling of peace came, I thanked Him for the guidance given. I was then impressed to ask, "Was there yet more to be given?" I received further impressions, and the process of writing down the impressions, pondering, and praying for confirmation was repeated. Again I was prompted to ask, "Is there more I should know?" And there was. When that last, most sacred experience was concluded, I had received some of the most precious, specific, personal direction one could hope to obtain in this life. Had I not responded to the first impressions and recorded them, I would not have received the last, most precious guidance.

President McKay told the following story that reminds of the inspiration and comfort that is blocked from coming to us because we do not allow time for the Lord to speak to us each day:35

One day in Salt Lake City a son kissed his mother good morning, took his dinner bucket, and went to City Creek Canyon where he worked. He was a switchman on the train that was carrying logs out of the canyon. Before noon his body was brought back lifeless. The mother was inconsolable. She could not be reconciled to that tragedy — her boy just in his early twenties so suddenly taken away. The funeral was held, and words of consolation were spoken, but she was not consoled. She couldn't understand it. One forenoon, so she says, after her husband had gone to his office to attend to his duties as a member of the Presiding Bishopric, she [was] still yearning and praying for some consolation. She said that her son appeared and said, "Mother, you needn't worry. That was merely an accident. I gave the signal to the engineer to move on, and as the train started, I jumped for the handle of the freight car, and my foot got caught in a sagebrush, and I fell under the wheel. I went to father soon after that, but he was so busy in the office I couldn't influence him — I couldn't make any impression upon him, and I tried again. Today I come to you to give you that comfort and tell you that I am happy."

An Invitation

Because of the great blessing it's been in my own life, I invite each of you to consider getting up a little earlier in the morning than you do now, to clean yourselves up enough to look presentable before the Lord, and to make communion with Him the first thing you do every day. If you do so, and you will have immediate ideas about things you should do or say that will come to your mind even as you are praying. You should write these down immediately and act on them. This is how you will let the Lord know you trust Him and value the inspiration He is giving you. If you follow these practices first thing every morning, allowing adequate time and focusing your attention in humility and submission, you will have the Spirit of the Lord to guide you in everything you do that day. You will not make any big mistakes without first being warned.

Likewise, I hope you will consider making the Lord the very last thought and object in mind when you go to sleep. If you do so, I promise that your sleep will be less troubled, your dreams will be more sweet, and if the Lord chooses to speak with you in the stillness of night, you will be ready to hear Him.

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Endnotes

1 Cited in Y. Kikuchi, How do you open your heart to heaven? (BYU Devotional given 18 January 2011).

2 Cf. Psalm 119:62 as one example of this practice in the Old Testament: “At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee ...” Note that the psalmist did not simply stay up late to pray, instead the practice was first to sleep and then rise early to do so.

3 Matthew 5:33.

4 Cited in J. Longden, Time, p. 2.

5 J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 6 April 1844, p. 343.

6 H. B. Lee, Report, p. 941.

7 B. K. Packer, Teach (1991), pp. 243-245.

8 B. Young, 26 May 1872, pp. 36, 35, 36.

9 Ibid., p. 37.

10 G. B. Hinckley, Blessings of Family Prayer, p. 2.

11 2 Timothy 3:2, 4.

12 2 Timothy 3:2, 3.

13 C. S. Lewis, Malcolm, 3, p. 16. Lewis continued (ibid., 3, pp. 17, 18):

When one prays in strange places and at strange times one can't kneel, to be sure. I won't say this doesn't matter. The body ought to pray as well as the soul. Body and soul are both the better for it ... The relevant point is that kneeling does matter, but other things matter even more. A concentrated mind and a sitting body and a mind make more a better prayer than a kneeling body and a mind half asleep. Sometimes these are the only alternatives. (Since the osteoporosis I can hardly kneel at all in most places, myself.)

14 C. S. Lewis, Screwtape, 4, pp. 28-29.

15 Ezekiel 2:1-2: “And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.”

16 Daniel 10:11: “O Daniel, ... understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright: for unto thee am I now sent.”

17 Acts 26:16: “But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness.”

18 Alma 36:7-8. 22: “7 And behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet; and we all fell to the earth, for the fear of the Lord came upon us. 8 But behold, the voice said unto me: Arise. And I arose and stood up, and beheld the angel.”

19 3 Nephi 11:19-20: “And Nephi arose and went forth, and bowed himself before the Lord and did kiss his feet. And the Lord commanded him that he should arise. And he arose and stood before him.”

20 Nickelsburg explains (G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 14:24-15:1, p. 270):

The seer must be rehabilitated and accepted into the divine presence before he can receive his commission. Restoration by an angel becomes a typical feature in visions, where, however, it is the angel whose appearance causes the collapse.

See also Joshua 7:6, 10-13:

6 ¶ And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads ... 10 ¶ And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? 11 Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. 12 Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. 13 Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.

21 G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 1 Enoch 14:24, p. 267: “And one of the holy ones came to me and raised me up and stood me [on my feet]”; G. W. E. Nickelsburg *et al.*, 1 Enoch, 71:3, p. 93: “And the angel Michael... took me by my right hand and raised me up”; P. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 1:5, p. 256: “He grasped me with his hand before their eyes and said to me, ‘Come in peace into the presence of the high and exalted King’”; *ibid.*, 48A:2, p. 300: “I went with him, and, taking me by his hand, he bore me up on his wings.”

22 J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image* 1, p. 684 figure 53-13.

23 Daniel 8:18: “he touched me, and set me upright”; Daniel 10:9-10: “then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground. And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees.”

24 Revelation 1:17: “I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me.”

25 Note that in Alma 19:29-30, the raising of two individuals who have fallen in rapturous vision is performed by mortal women.

26 E.g., Deuteronomy 10:8, 18:7; 2 Chronicles 29:11.

27 E.g., Luke 1:19.

28 See, e.g., Luke 18:13.

29 Notes taken by David J. Larsen on a unpublished talk by Robert Hayward (R. Hayward, *Aramaic Paradise*).

30 E.g., 1 Esdras 8:89-90.

31 D. A. Bednar, *Quick* (Speeches).

32 D&C 76:19.

33 D&C 138:11.

34 R. G. Scott, *To Acquire*, pp. 7-8.

35 D. O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 1943, pp. 525-526.