

My To-Be List

What I learned from a 50-year spiritual checkup.

by Philip Yancey

When I turned 50 this year, I underwent a complete physical checkup. Doctors poked, prodded, X-rayed, and even cut open parts of my body to assess and repair the damage I had done in half a century. As the new millennium rolled around, I scheduled a spiritual checkup as well. I went on a silent retreat led by a wise spiritual director.

In those days of silence and solitude, I paid attention to what might need to change in order to keep my soul in shape. The more I listened, the longer grew the list. Here is a mere sampling, a portion of a spiritual action plan for my next 50 years.

Come to God with your own troubles, as well as the world's. I need to find a better balance between the need for personal serenity and a proper concern about global hunger, injustice, and environmental issues. I look at the example of Jesus, who surely cared about similar matters while on earth. As he said to the anxiety-prone, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Question your doubts as much as your faith. By personality, or perhaps as a reaction to a fundamentalist past, I brood on doubts and experience faith in occasional flashes. Isn't it about time for me to reverse the pattern?

Do not attempt this journey alone. Find companions who see you as a pilgrim, even a straggler, and not as a guide. Like many Protestants, I easily assume the posture of one person alone with God, a stance that more and more I see as unbiblical. The Old Testament tells the story of the people of God; Jesus' parables unveil the kingdom; the epistles went primarily to communities of faith. We have little guidance on how to live as a follower alone because God never intended it.

Allow the good, natural beauty, your health, encouraging words, to penetrate as deeply as the bad. Why does it take about 17 encouraging letters from readers to overcome the effect of one that is caustic and critical? If I awoke every morning, and fell asleep each night, bathed in a sense of gratitude and not self-doubt, the in-between hours would doubtless take on a different cast.

For your own sake, simplify. Eliminate whatever distracts you from God. Among other things, that means a ruthless winnowing of mail, and giving catalogs, junk mail, and book club notices no more time than it takes to toss them in the trash. If I ever get the nerve, my television set should probably land there as well.

Find what Eric Liddell found: something that allows you to feel God's pleasure. When the sprinter's sister worried that his participation in the Olympics might derail his missionary career, Eric responded, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure." What makes me feel God's pleasure? I must identify it, and then run.

Always "err," as God does, on the side of freedom, mercy, and compassion. I continue to marvel at the humility of a sovereign God who descends to live inside us, his flawed creatures. "Quench not the Spirit," Paul says in one place, and in another "grieve not the holy Spirit of God." In so many words, the

God of all power asks us not to hurt him. Do I show that same humble, noncoercive attitude toward people of whom I disapprove?

Don't be ashamed. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," Paul told the Romans. Why do I speak in generalities when strangers ask me what I do for a living and then try to pin down what kind of books I write? Why do I mention the secular schools I attended before the Christian ones?

Remember, those Christians who peeve you so much, God chose them too. For some reason, I find it much easier to show grace and acceptance toward immoral unbelievers than toward uptight, judgmental Christians. Which, of course, turns me into a different kind of uptight, judgmental Christian.

Forgive, daily, those who caused the wounds that keep you from wholeness. Increasingly, I find that our wounds are the very things God uses in his service. By harboring blame for those who caused them, I slow the act of redemption that can give the wounds worth and value, and ultimately healing.

My spiritual checkup offers one clear advantage over my physical checkup. From my doctor, I learned that no matter what I do my body will continue to deteriorate. At best, a good diet and exercise routine will slow that deterioration. Spiritually, however, I can look forward to growth, renewed vigor, and improved health, as long as I continue to listen, and then act on what I hear God saying.

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