

Take steps toward better fitness

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Because we value everyone's right to his or her own religious beliefs, we might think it risky to even address the subject of spiritual health. I am willing to take that risk because I believe the condition of a person's spirit is ultimately much more important than the condition of his body.

A spiritually fit person is, first, someone who knows what he or she believes and why those beliefs are held. I am always interested in hearing people share their faith, even when their beliefs are radically different from my own. What frustrates me are the religiously indifferent. These are those who typically think, "Yeah, there probably is a God up there, but I'm just not a spiritual person." It is true that not everyone is a mystic or will have saint attached to his name by succeeding generations. But then, not everyone will win an Olympic decathlon either. However, just as the latter truth should not keep us from wanting to eat right and exercise, the former should not prevent us from taking seriously the questions of what we believe and finding ways to nourish ourselves and exercise spiritually.

Spiritual health also implies practicing what one professes. If America has a spiritual problem, it is not that too few of us believe in God; rather it is that too few of us who believe in God live as if God mattered. Most seem to treasure the idea that they will be with God after they die, but why? Why would anyone hope to spend eternity with someone he had no time for in the present? I have heard the old cliché about persons being "so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good," but the reality is spiritually healthy individuals positively impact the health of communities. Persons in touch with God have a sense of calling, and that calling invariably involves reaching out in charity to others. It is possible to live benevolently without a belief in God - I have met several agnostics who were genuinely kind people. It should not be possible, however, to believe in God who teaches us to "love your neighbor as yourself" and yet live selfishly. But this incongruity is all too common.

Finally, spiritual fitness means a certain preparedness to do battle. St. Paul recognized this when he wrote to Ephesus, "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" I frequently hear sports analysts talk of the importance of teams not "playing the other team's game." A defensive minded half-court basketball team, for example, would want to avoid a high-scoring, up-tempo game. Similarly, a spiritually healthy person recognizes influences in his or her life which can lure one into attitudes and behaviors which run counter to ones beliefs. By means of prayer, meditation, and time spent with others who are similarly committed, the spiritually fit person stubbornly takes a stand and says, "I refuse to play your game."

The writer to the Hebrews exhorted, "*let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.*" I consider it part of my job as Chaplain to be the spiritual equivalent of the master fitness trainer. Fitness in any area requires a first step. Perhaps the current COVID-19 crisis is a good time to do just that. I heard that it takes 10,000 steps a day to lower your cholesterol; but it may only take one to raise your spirit!