

*H*ealing techniques

Lectio divina in spiritual direction + spiritual formation

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"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Psalm 119: 105

Throughout the life of spiritual traditions there arises the development of sacred text. Most often, at the outset it is a traditional canon passed from master to disciple by word of mouth. As the tradition deepens and time progresses, the texts are written down and the oral canon

becomes a written canon: less fluid and more solid.

I have removed from the process the participation of the Holy One, Blessed be He. It is not out of disrespect, but I believe each of the spiritual traditions addresses this issue differently. It is not my intent to discuss the origins of sacred text composition. Instead, I would like to turn to a spiritual practice known commonly as *lectio divina*. It is a way of being with sacred texts.

I have chosen this practice to review in terms of spiritual direction + spiritual formation because it is a practice that can occur at many levels in today's spiritual milieu. It can be an individual practice utilized in private devotion. It

can be a group practice for members of a single community. It can be a pan-religious and/or ecumenical practice using texts common to the communities present. It can be performed by the sick, the well, and the dying alike. One does not need to have any training in anything other than listening.

The Latin translates simply as "holy reading." It is a way of reading and participating with scriptures that requires an interior listening once the text has been read. It is a mulling over of the text and then a taking away of a central theme that is found to be in the text and of importance to the participant.

Whether one uses the four-point practice described by the

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Trappist Monk Father Thomas Keating or the three-point practice described by the Trappist Monk Father Basil Pennington it does not matter. There are also countless other variations found in religious texts from history and suspended in cyberspace on the Internet today. There are some essential concepts present in them all. That is what we want to look at.

The beginning of the practice begins in the quieting down of one's life and distractions, the reading of a chosen text of scripture. In most practices, the text is read over and over and over again. The text is read quietly, simply, and reflectively. It is good to choose the number of repetitions you will make. When you have read that many repetitions of the text, you stop and sit in silence.

During the silence you allow your mind to listen again and again to the text—interiorly—and sense if there is something in particular that speaks to you. If the mind wanders, allow it. Only, when it does wander, gently nudge it back to the text by repeating it again inside.

Once an idea, concept, or word seems to emerge as if it is speaking to you—as if God has spoken this idea, concept, or word to

you, then you sit with this “spoken-thing” in silence. After a time, you arise and take this spoken-thing with you throughout the day and see how it fits into your life that day.

This interior practice has other sister practices that can be attached to it. One can go back later and “act out” the drama of the scripture in your head and replace any people in the text with you. If someone in the text walks to a temple, make that someone you. If someone in the text feeds the poor, let that someone be you. You can also journal what you have heard as the spoken-thing and elaborate on its portent in your life at that time. You can continue on with that spoken-thing over a period of days, using it as a mantra to repeat and mull over.

This simple practice seems benign, but it has proven to not only bring direction and “settledness” to peoples’ spiritual practice but also offers comfort and peace, “a very present help in times of trouble.” It has enabled people to hear the scriptures anew (overhearing) and allowed the texts to become alive and God-breathed.

I had used the practice back in college after a professor shared it with us in class. But, it did not

come to life for me until I practiced it with patients in hospice care. Many of the active patients benefited from it, but I also used it for patients who were not alert or oriented.

It is helpful when using it as a therapeutic intervention in spiritual care to do a need assessment and to find out what scriptures have been helpful to people throughout their life. If the person is not alert or oriented ask the family and community to help assess what texts had been most helpful. Then, simply concentrate on these texts in the sessions.

The power behind this practice is not only that it puts us in touch with the *spirit* and the active *presence* of the Holy One but also puts us in touch with the “I” that I have been throughout my life. We may touch on pieces of ourselves that we lived 40 years ago and ways of being that were critical to us then, that we have forgotten.

Contact with the “I” and the “Thou,” and contact between the “I” and the “Thou” are the central roles and functions of spiritual direction + spiritual formation. Scriptures can provide a platform—the “space” if you will—for the Divine Encounter. *Lectio divina* can carry the message—the spoken-thing of that Divine Encounter.