

Your Regular Checkup

If a "physical" is important, so is a "spiritual"
Gordon MacDonald

My doctor's scheduler called several weeks ago and said it was time for my annual physical.

"Are you talking a whole-nine-yards physical?" I asked.

"Actually, ten yards," she responded.

A day or so later my dentist's scheduler called to say it was time for an annual check-up on my teeth.

I know I'm supposed to be thankful for both of these examinations, but the truth is that I'm not ... until they're over. Why?

Well, how about the loss-of-dignity issue when they put you in that paper gown? Then there's that moment of realization when you know that they *know* you haven't kept all the promises you made during last year's examination (dropping a few pounds and flossing every day). Finally, and more seriously, there's always the chance that you'll hear bad news: a needed surgical procedure or a root canal.

Still, a wise person heeds the scheduler's summons and shows up at the appointed hour.

As I left the doctor's office the other day, I wondered if there was an equivalent of a physical for one's interior life. If people need *physicals*, don't they also need *spirituals*?

I saw Psalm 139 in a new light: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me." The writer of these words seems to be inviting a spiritual. There is abundant, if not infinite, space in the spiritual dimension of one's life. Who, but God, could ever know everything in that space?

I have become increasingly aware of the enormous amount of activity inside of me that I neither understand nor fully control. Impressions, attitudes, urges, motives, and initiatives bubble up and out of that darkened space, and not all of it is noble. It's similar to all the physical activity deep inside my body that I don't know much about either. It just happens with or without my conscious consent.

Jeremiah seems to be thinking similar thoughts when he writes those oft-quoted words: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Only God can fully search the space called the "heart" and provide a remedy that leads to integrity and reliability.

When the Quaker writer, Thomas Kelly, mused upon the mysteries of one's spiritual space, he concluded: "Each of us tends to be not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. And each of these selves is a rank individualist, not cooperative, but shouting out his vote for himself when voting time comes. And even when a consensus is taken, the disgruntled minority agitates on the streets of the soul."

I have lived the life of a so-called leader, one of those blessed to be in front of a group of people and tasked with pointing the way in which everyone should go. In that role I have experienced joy

and heartache, achievement and failure. I have learned many lessons along the way. Among the most important of them: make sure you get periodic "spirituals."

Admittedly this is a latter-life conviction because, when I was young and self-confident, I was quite sure I could be my own examiner. Then one day I came to appreciate the line that comes out of the medical profession, "The doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient."

Or as Dorotheos of Gaza said, "I know of no falling away of a monk which did not come from his reliance on his own sentiments. Nothing is more pitiful, nothing more disastrous than to be one's own [spiritual] director."

This idea of having a spiritual is no novel idea, of course. The prophets conducted more than a few of them with the kings of Israel. Think of Samuel with Saul, Nathan with David, and Isaiah with Hezekiah. The kings were in denial; the prophets were there to conduct the examinations.

So it was with Paul in his letters to Timothy. This son in the faith of his was a good man but apparently not the strongest of men physically or temperamentally. The content of Paul's letters would suggest that he needed someone to chide him about the "flossing" of his life.

On the physical side it would appear that his stomach was problematic. Forgive me if my imagination conjures up the picture of Paul writing his letter to Timothy while Luke (the physician) is sitting near.

"Tim's feeling poorly in the stomach," Paul says to Luke. "Any thing you want to say to him?"

Luke responds, "Tell the kid to back off on the water and increase his wine intake." My childhood Sunday school teacher (Baptist) was always sure this Pauline advice was a textual error.

More importantly, Paul was bothered by a certain hesitance in Timothy's leadership style. The young man appears to have been empathetic but not firm. He seems to have been a friend but not a mentor. He clearly abounded in mercy but may have lacked the courage to rebuke. This suggests serious leadership weaknesses.

All through his letters to Timothy, Paul conducts a spiritual. At one point he outlines the categories of examination: Timothy's speech (the way he talks and the things he says); his life (the way he conducts himself in real time); his love (the way he interacts with people); his faith (the way he walks with God); his purity (the quality of his personal life). If one is lacking in any of these, all the organizational genius and charisma in the world isn't going to cut it. His spiritual influence will be ultimately neutralized.

"Watch your life and doctrine closely," Paul writes. Regularly review how you're living and what you firmly believe. All these instructions suggest that Paul knows that each of us—sans a spiritual—will drift in the direction of self-destruction.

There is an interesting exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus on the day when a woman—long sick with a horrendous disease—touched the edge of Jesus' clothing and was healed.

"Who touched me?" Jesus asks. Peter, surprised at the Lord's hyper-sensitivity, tries to blow off the moment. Jesus insists, "Somebody touched me. I felt power going out of me."

What a contrasting picture. Jesus knew when he was being drained of power; Peter and the others, including you and me, did not.

You watch Peter, for example, on the night of the Last Supper—his unexamined self-confidence when he assures Jesus of his unstinting loyalty and his readiness to stand by the Lord's side even if it means dying. Mere words! Jesus gives him a brief spiritual and warns him as to what's about to happen: total failure. The diagnosis was exactly right.

The Savior appreciated the value of spirituals, those which he conducted on himself (being aware of power being drained) and those which were accomplished in communion with his Heavenly Father.

Aware of a leader's vulnerabilities, John Chrysostom wrote (back in the fourth century): "The priest's wounds require greater help, indeed as much as those of all the people together ... because of heavy demands and extraordinary expectations associated with pastoral office."

That's pretty insightful. Leaders in Chrysostom's time struggled to remain strong and supple each day, just as many of us do today.

Have I made my point? That some kind of a spiritual is a necessity for any man or woman who accepts the responsibility for shepherding others?

Let me pursue this metaphor of physicals and checkups just a bit further.

Self-testing

There are physical examinations I can conduct for myself. For example, I check my own blood pressure regularly because of my mother's lifetime history of hypertension. I watch my food intake (well, my wife, Gail, does) carefully. I am careful to work out 5-6 days a week. These activities are part of a program of self-care. Then there is, of course, the big annual physical—the one I wrote about at the beginning of this article. That one I dare not do myself.

Let me suggest that there is a parallel in spiritual care. Is one's diet of Scripture and the writings of Christian champions nurturing the soul? There is the regular (almost daily) scouring of my interior life which, like my physical workout, I conduct myself.

I see this in the journal-writings of W.E. Sangster, the great English Methodist of the 20th century. One day as he engaged in a personal spiritual, he wrote: "(I have) a sense of certainty that God does not want me only for a preacher. He wants me also for a leader—a leader in Methodism.

"I feel a commission to work under God for the revival of this branch of His Church—careless of my own reputation; indifferent to the comments of older and jealous men. I am 36. If I am to serve God in this way, I must no longer shrink from the task—but do it.

"I hate the criticism I shall evoke and the painful chatter of people. Obscurity, quiet browsing among books, and the service of simple people is my taste—but by the will of God, this is my task. The Church is painfully in need of leaders. I wait to hear a voice and no voice comes I would rather listen than speak, (but there is no voice ...).

"Bewildered and unbelieving I hear the voice of God say to me, 'I want to sound the note through you.'"

Examined by others

Consider the occasional encounters one might have with personal friends and a mentor (some might prefer the term spiritual director). Here we invite the examination of others. Had I done this all of my life, I wouldn't have some of the regrets I have about bad choices back in my younger years.

There was a time in recent years when a person I both like and respect accused me of harboring an attitude of bitterness. He could have literally punched me and I would not have been more surprised. It would have been pointless to deny the accusation. I could only take it back to three close friends who knew me extraordinarily well.

"Could you guys take some time and talk about me behind my back?" I asked. "I want you to think back across the last several years and see if you remember any hint of bitterness in my life. And if you think you see something, please tell me. I must know so that I can deal with it."

A few weeks later my three friends invited me to lunch. They informed me that they had met together and discussed my request with great care. "We have concluded," one of them said, "that there is no bitterness in you. The man was wrong."

It was like a physician saying, "The lab tests have come back clear." One needs friends who will do things like that.

When my doctor gives me a physical, he follows a predetermined procedure. His nurse-assistant has already equipped him with information about my blood pressure, my pulse, my temperature and the condition of my eyes, ears, nose, and throat. She's also provided him the results of my blood tests. In some years there's even the results of a stress test on my heart.

Some kind of a "spiritual" is needed for any man or woman who accepts the responsibility for shepherding the souls of others.

When he joins the process, he lights up his computer, brings up my file and studies my past records. Then the probing, tapping, thumping, listening ("breath in; hold it; okay, breath out") begins. This is followed by questions, lots and lots of them. Some questions are cleverly repeated so as to assure that my responses are consistent. Heart pains? Getting up at night too much (an old guys' question)? Sleeping well? Joint pains?

Then there is a final lecture about living safely. Since many premature deaths come through accidents, he wants to know if I wear a helmet when I go out biking, a floatation device when I am in my kayak, and a seat belt when I drive. He insists that I stay away from too much sugar, sodium, and fatty stuff.

So what would a spiritual sound like? If I were the "doctor," I'd start by asking questions about these areas.

1. My patient's conversion story. And I'd ask if that commitment is still current. Does my patient still truly believe that Jesus is his or her Savior, and does the joy of that "hour I first believed" still exist? I'd follow up my first question with this one: when was the last time you returned to the cross and reaffirmed your decision to follow Jesus?

I have disciplined myself for many years now to make a daily visit to the cross. No longer do I base my relationship with Jesus on a decision made 50 or 60 years ago. I have found it better to re-enlist each morning so that my delight in Jesus and my appreciation for him is as fresh as the new day. As my alcoholic friend says, "It's one day at a time, baby."

2. Memory. Any events in your recent or far-off past that are plaguing you? Resentments, anger, unresolved conflict, or regrets that need examination and resolution? Behaviors, attitudes, desires that are costing you the respect of your spouse, your colleagues, your constituency? How about one's forgiveness capacity, one's readiness to repent?

3. Motivation. I'd ask, "Why are you doing what you're doing in leadership? Do you have a sense of calling from God—a call affirmed by others who are close enough to see the Spirit of God in you? Is whatever your call is getting you out of bed in the morning with a reasonable degree of enthusiasm and anticipation? Or has your call degraded into a job, slowly sapping you of your vitality?"

I'd listen carefully to these answers, watching for signals that one might be driven to be recognized, admired, or even loved for the wrong reasons.

4. Discipline (a tough word that some would prefer to avoid). I'd ask my patient, "What are the things you systematically push yourself to do because they don't come naturally to you but which are necessary in order to make you a more effective person and leader?" I could, if necessary, offer categories of discipline: physical, intellectual, financial, time management, emotional, ego, worship.

The practice of disciplines produces an artificial suffering designed to make us all better, more resilient people. As my track coach used to say, "If we make the practices painful, the race will be a pleasure."

So, I'd ask: What are your personal disciplines and what progress is being made? Are your disciplines simply wishes or words, or are you actually maintaining them on a regular basis?

Stress tests

In conducting a spiritual, I'd want to take the equivalent of stress tests. Tests that indicate, for example, the amount of pride or hubris when the crowds are abundant and the applause is sustained, and the despair or anger when the crowds are small and the applause is silent. Do the test results indicate the presence of unbridled ambition, the need for self-advancement in order to assuage some need to prove oneself?

I can see something like an EKG chart measuring one's resistance to counsel or correction. A test that might evaluate one's closed-mindedness, one's need to be right. There might also be a test that shows hyper-sensitivity to criticism or outright opposition. The results can be indicators of health in a leader.

"How are your personal relationships?" I'd want to ask. Do you love your wife (your husband) more today than you did a year ago? More importantly, does she (he) feel secure in your love? Ditto: your children if you have them.

Would you call yourself a good friend to those 5 or 8 people who know you best? Have they grown from being close to you? Do all of these people in your intimate circle experience your persistent gratitude?

Finally, what are you seeing out in the larger world, and how do you feel about it? Are you in touch with any people who are among the so-called unchurched? Do you know people who are poor, from different cultural orientations, a part of other generations than yours?

Health Maintenance

Just as my doctor likes to talk about accidents and concerns for safety, my spiritual would include a little litany of cautions. Paul's reminders to Timothy are illustrative: "don't be hasty in appointing new leaders ... keep yourself pure ... speak boldly to the rich ... turn away from godless chatter ... endure hardship ... don't be intimidated." This is good stuff to hear on a regular basis from someone you respect.

I am drawn to the words of an orthodox theologian, Alexander Elchaninov, who said, "You cannot cure the soul of others or 'help people,' without having changed yourself. You cannot put in order the spiritual economy of others, so long as there is chaos in your own soul. You cannot bring peace to others if you do not have it yourself."

Elchaninov makes an important point. We submit to physicals and spirituals not merely for the sake of self-interest, not simply to dredge up interesting information about ourselves but because, as leaders, we want our lives to be centered in Jesus Christ and his call for us to serve others in his name.

All these ideas came about because the other day, my doctor and my dentist—bless them—decided to find out if I am still healthy. I am now waiting for their conclusions.

Author's note: I am appreciative of an essay by Khalil Samar, "The Spiritual Director: A Guide and Mentor," where I found the comments about Dorotheos of Gaza and Alexander Elchaninov.

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