

## CHAPTER THREE

### TAKING CARE OF THE BASICS

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19

It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for [the Lord] gives sleep to his beloved.  
—Psalm 127:2

#### EATING, DRINKING, SLEEPING AND TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

Why, in a spirituality book of all things, are we going to discuss physical health? Why am I, who is not an expert in medical science, going to discuss the importance of taking care of the body? Because, we all, myself included, need to stop, listen and learn all over again, how to take care of ourselves before we take care of anyone else.

Several years ago I taught the lessons in this chapter as part of a lenten adult education series. To my surprise, people pulled

out paper, took copious notes and asked me a lot of questions. Many of us do not think much about taking care of our bodies. We are so busy being productive and doing “stuff” for everyone else, we need to learn again how to care for ourselves.

Any discussion of spirituality, of right living, even of God’s will for us, has to start with taking care of the bodies God gave us. We are incarnate spirits, which means we express ourselves through our physical bodies. Even in eternity, we will have physical bodies. These new bodies will work better and will never die, but they will be physical. The body is not a shell, like a piece of clothing that we can abuse, ignore, take off and throw away. If we neglect our bodies, our minds and spirits will suffer and be unable to express our being. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to be kind, patient and aware of God when you are hungry, thirsty, sleep-deprived and tense?

20

We express our beings through doing, but we do everything through the body as our instrument. So we must keep our bodies well-nourished, hydrated and rested. If we do, our bodies will serve us well.

### THE MANY WAYS WE ABUSE OURSELVES

Karen Scalf Linamen, author of *Just Hand Over the Chocolate and No One Will Get Hurt*, lists a few: nipple piercing, bungee jumping, bikini waxes and watching the Star Trek Marathon on the Sci-Fi Channel until 3:00 AM.

People today, myself included, seem to prefer the classic abuses: eating unhealthily, drinking very little water and forcing ourselves to function all day on little or no sleep. And we seldom allow ourselves to relax. (Collapsing in front of the television in the evening does not count!)

### We Eat Too Much

Let’s start with food. Americans today are the heaviest they have ever been, in spite of the health food and exercise movements of

the last few decades. Though the topic is not the focus of this book, it cannot be ignored. And believe me it's hard to ignore it. Everywhere we look it's obvious: Americans, especially, are "filling up" on all the wrong things. The busy-ness of our lives has pushed us through fast food drive-thrus or dinners in front of the television instead of around the kitchen table with family or friends—and it has pushed us right into obesity. We're a lonely, "hungry" society that is self-medicating with unhealthy foods. In our cyclical or seasonal crash diets, we try to deny ourselves, only to fall back into our old habits when things don't go as planned or we don't lose the weight we had hoped to. But there is a way out of this cycle if you just stop and listen to what your body is saying, not to mention some good (non-fad) medical people:

- Eat three well-balanced, portion-controlled meals and several small, healthy snacks throughout the day.
- Eat from a variety of foods and lots of vegetable matter.
- Don't eat packaged foods full of salt, preservatives and flavor enhancers.
- Don't deny yourself the foods that you truly enjoy; rather, eat them in moderation.
- Remind yourself daily that the only diet that works is the one you can use for the rest of your life.

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21

### **We Don't Drink Enough Water**

The second way we abuse ourselves is dehydration. With the advent of the extreme marketing of soft drinks and sports drinks, most of us are not drinking enough plain water. I live in the desert where the average humidity is about 12 percent. We desert dwellers soon learn the importance of drinking lots of water. If we do not drink water, we feel lousy and watch our skin shrivel. Water is just as necessary in nondesert areas. Americans are

chronically dehydrated, partially because of our unhealthy diets and partially because of all the stress that is part of our lifestyles.

Though science and research has confirmed the importance of staying hydrated, anecdotally I can confirm what the scientists already figured out. During my last job I had a terrible time focusing after lunch, no matter how little I ate. I thought this was a normal afternoon slump. Then, I started drinking a large glass of water after I ate, and I sipped more water all afternoon. The results were nearly miraculous. I stayed wide awake and ready to work all afternoon. Now I keep water with me on my desk whenever I am writing. If I feel a slump coming on, I drink some water and it helps me to focus the rest of the day.

### **We Don't Sleep Enough**

Let's consider our sleep habits, another area of physical health we neglect. Many of us need much more sleep than we are getting. According to the National Sleep Foundation's 2005 Sleep in America poll, 52 percent of those surveyed felt they were not getting enough sleep. So, how much sleep is enough? While scientists differ (slightly) in stating how much sleep we need, the consensus seems to be somewhere between seven and nine hours per night, far more than most busy Americans get. I know that I was trying to get along on six hours or less (statistically, I was three times more likely to have a "drowsy driving" car crash). I now have upped my nighttime sleep allotment to eight hours, and I am feeling much better. In spite of everything our culture demands of us, until science can change our biology, we had better stick to this basic.

Here are a few helpful hints from the experts about how to get more sleep:

- Work your way up to eight hours if you are getting a lot less.
- Remove all electronics from the bedroom.
- A moderately boring book, not television, is the best sleep aid.

- Never, never lie down in front of the television and allow yourself to fall asleep in the evening.
- Force yourself to turn off the TV and get to bed by a certain time, even if you have to set an alarm to make yourself get up and go to bed.

*Helpful Hints to Help You Sleep*

- When you are ready to go to sleep, pause for a moment to reflect on your day.
- If possible, step outside and look up at the night sky or look up at the sky through a window from a darkened room.
- Calm and relax yourself by telling yourself that God is watching over you. Keep the same level of calm as you climb into bed. If you are anxious about something you have to do tomorrow, write it down, commit the matter to God’s care and forget it.

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23

If none of these things work and you have a constant problem sleeping, you might want to go to a sleep center and be tested. Chronic insomnia is not normal—the body God gave you is designed to sleep. If you cannot sleep, it is often a sign of a treatable medical condition.

**We Don’t Relax**

Another way we abuse our bodies is by never allowing ourselves to relax. Many of us use television to unwind, but watching TV is not really relaxing. The electronic signals, loud advertisements and usual programming are not designed for that. In fact, a lot of the news, talk shows and so-called reality shows seem intended to make us excited and even angry. After a hard day we may look forward to hours of mind-numbing sitcoms, sports or drama, especially with large quantities of snack foods. This is not relaxing, and it’s not good for our bodies. Wouldn’t it be better to work on a hobby you love (gardening, crafts, whatever), turn on some soft music, read a good book or play with the kids or pets?

Try this experiment: Do your usual TV watching in the evening for a week; then try a week doing something totally different. During both weeks keep track of how you feel during the day. Are you more or less stressed? Did you get more or less work done? If there is a noticeable difference, you have some decisions to make.

Most of us do not know how to breathe. To relax throughout the day, especially when you are getting stressed, learn to breathe deeply. Start by closing your eyes and breathing out through your mouth while sucking in your lower abdomen. Now, let go. Let your whole lower abdomen drop. My singing coach said it should feel like a sudden “clunk.” You will notice your lungs fill without your having to pull any air in. You are releasing your diaphragm and making room for your lungs to expand. They will automatically. Repeat this technique slowly for five minutes.

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24

What this little exercise does—besides filling up our lungs with nice oxygen—is cut stress levels to almost nothing. “Take a deep breath” is good advice in a lot of circumstances. It is one biological function we can control at will, but most of us don’t know how. Practice that releasing mechanism. Use it throughout the day. It releases tension, calms us down and wakes us up. And it’s free. What more could anyone want?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Make an inventory of your habits regarding food, water and sleep. Are you satisfied with your level of self-care in these areas? What improvements might you make?
2. Imagine your life without television or very limited hours of television. How would life be different? What would you do instead?
3. Practice the deep-breathing technique. Use it in a stressful situation when you feel yourself getting angry, tense or overwhelmed. What happened?

## SECTION TWO

### AN ENVIRONMENT WITHOUT CLUTTER

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25

How cluttered is your environment? Is your home jam-packed with furniture, knickknacks, appliances, electronics and gadgets? Is every closet and drawer stuffed with odd papers, old bills, faded receipts, magazines, broken toys, outdated clothes, loose marbles and other mysterious objects that you don't even know how they got there in the first place? Does clutter overflow every surface? Do you lose things regularly? Do you feel lost?

The purpose of this section is to understand that physical clutter interferes with our well-being, and thus with our spiritual lives.

First, we play a game that reveals our true attitude toward our possessions. We explore some of the reasons we collect so many things. In the last two chapters we learn practical ways to get our messes under control, learning how to clear out our physical surroundings, then our paper clutter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WHAT IS ALL THIS STUFF?

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27

The more we simplify our material life,  
the more time we will have to live.

—T. Alexander Anderson, *The Gift of Time: Making the Most  
of Your Time and Your Life*<sup>1</sup>

We have examined our cultural attitudes, learned about a new tool (the good-morning journal) to help us center ourselves at the beginning of each day and looked at how well or badly we are taking care of our bodies. This is only a beginning.

Now let's look around at our physical surroundings. Like most people, our homes and offices get a tiny bit out of control and frustrating, don't they?

This section is all about bringing order to our chaos, reducing clutter, thus making our surroundings less stressful. Our homes, especially, should be where we go at the end of a stressful day, where we can be peaceful and relaxed, where we are surrounded by loved ones and belongings which enhance our lives.

We will start by playing a game. Do not skip this step; it is important. It's also a lot of fun.

## THE EVACUATION GAME

(or “You can take it with you!”)

A very nice angel has knocked on your door and announced we are all evacuating. God is shutting down the planet and relocating us to a nicer one. We will never return, but all our basic needs will be supplied on the new planet: home, food, cooking utensils, clothes and toiletries.

Children and pets are, of course, included in the evacuation.

Best of all, we may take anything material with us we want. God understands we all have things we really like, things that express who we are.

Size is not an issue. Each member of the family is given a large bag and a magic wand with which to shrink anything too large to go into the bag.

There is one wrinkle in this plan: We only have three minutes to go through our home and decide what we will be taking.

### The Rules

1. You may not spend more than thirty seconds in any room. Move through your house in any order you choose, but you may only visit a room once and only for thirty seconds. If you have too many rooms in your house, you have to skip some or get through more than one in a thirty-second period (or if you have less rooms, divide the three minutes up accordingly).
2. Use pencil and paper in lieu of a magic wand to write down items you want to take.
3. Use a clock or watch with a second hand to keep track of the six thirty-second periods. One person may be designated the timekeeper for the rest of the family or group. He or she then takes a turn “gathering” while another person keeps time. No one gets to do this exercise again if they forgot something important.