

The Parable of the Three-Legged Stool

In his excellent book, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices that Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (2010), Dr. Curt Thompson describes a simple metaphor for spiritual growth attributed to Henri Nouwen. Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Dutch Catholic Priest, professor, writer and theologian who lived during the last century.

“In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen proposes that a healthy spiritual life includes three significant features—three legs of a stool upon which everything else rests. They include study of (especially, but not limited to) the Bible; prayer; and community. I encourage you to reflect seriously on the depth of your activity in each of these three vital areas of living life with God. These are not requirements you must fill to make sure God is happy. Nor are they the eleventh commandment. Simply put, these three dimensions of living facilitate vital changes in the stories of those people who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... Nouwen rightly points out that if any one of the three legs is missing, the stool will not long stand.” (pp. 60-61)

A couple of days after my cancer diagnosis in April 2016, I woke up on the middle of the night with Nouwen’s metaphor front and center in my thinking. I had read this many months prior, but at that moment in time, I was deeply impressed by the simplicity and power in Nouwen’s three-legged stool image. As a Life and Leadership coach I am very attracted to the simple and powerful tools that can help me grow and help those I serve. At the same time, I realized just how important Nouwen’s lesson had been in my own life and journey, and how critical developing systems and habits for all three legs had been.

At the time of this writing, I have been on my Christian journey for since 1972, when I was 14 years old. For all those years I had practiced sometimes one, sometimes two, and sometimes three of the spiritual practices Nouwen recommends. However, it was not until about 2002-2003, when I began to consistently practice all three. Looking back, I can see the huge differences this has made over time.

Connecting the dots of Nouwen’s metaphor to my own experience and to my role as a Coach created a passion in me to expound upon Nouwen’s lesson and share it widely.

Nouwen advocates three relatively simple activities that just about anybody can make time in their lives to do: “study” the Bible, prayer, and community. I want to restate these as the “3 knows” – get to *know* God, let God get to *know* you, and get to *know* each other.

Bible – Get to know God

According to my Christian worldview, the Bible is God’s revealed word to

humankind, which has a core purpose of helping us get to know Him and what He cares about. For all believers, getting to know God and what He cares about is critical to our growth in our relationship with Him. This is as true for our relationship with God as it is for us and our relationships with our “neighbors,” and whether that be our spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings, our co-workers, our friends, our next-door neighbors, and anyone else we desire to truly know.

The Bible is a fascinating book that has parts that are easy to read and understand, and parts that are quite difficult, and about everything in-between. It is not a single book, but a collection of 66 books of a variety of literary genres, and which were penned over about a 1000-year period. Good understanding and interpretation of the Bible is both an art and a science. We are extremely fortunate in our day and age, to have an absolute wealth of resources that can help us understand the stories and lessons of the Bible. These resources include everything from daily devotionals to scholarly works, and media, which includes books (printed, electronic and audible), streaming videos, good teaching in churches and conferences and much, much, more.

I advocate a daily practice of “Getting to Know God”, select a quality Christian daily devotional to augment your daily readings from the Bible. My personal favorite is *Grace Notes* (2009), by Philip Yancey. I have also enjoyed, *Live in Grace – Walk in Love* (2019) by Bob Goff, *A Year with C. S. Lewis: Daily Readings from His Classic Works* (2003), by C. S. Lewis, *How Now Shall We Live? Devotional* (2004), by Charles Colson, and *In the Likeness of God* (2004) by Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand (not a devotional but short sections, so I used it like a devotional), and others. I refer to these devotionals as “spiritual 1-a-day vitamins”.

Reading a chapter or passage in the Bible and reading page-a-day devotional, every day, will do wonders for your soul.

Prayer – Let God Get to Know You

The second leg of the three-legged stool is prayer. That is, developing a daily habit of having authentic conversations with God where you share with him the deepest areas of your heart – you hopes, dreams, desires, fears, anxieties, etc.

In *The God-Shaped Brain* (2013), Timothy R. Jennings, M.D., says this about authentic prayer...

“Prayer is simply talking to God like talking with one of your friends. It is opening your heart to God and telling him exactly what you’re thinking, feeling, desiring. Prayer is sharing with God the inmost secrets of your life: your dreams, fears, joys and sorrows. Brain research shows that fifteen minutes a day in meditation or thoughtful communion with the God of love results in measurable development of the prefrontal cortex,

especially in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). This is the area where we experience love, compassion and empathy. The healthier the ACC, the calmer the amygdala (alarm center), and the less fear and anxiety we experience. Truly, love casts out all fear! If you want God to heal you, if you want his presence, forgiveness and grace, all you have to do is tell him, give him permission to come into your heart, and then spend thoughtful time in communion with him each and every day.” (pp. 132-133)

As Dr. Jennings points out, God uses daily authentic prayer to shape our character by changing our brain when we habitually connect with Him. It has been my personal experience that developing a habit of daily prayer has had more positive impact on my character than trying to do the right thing, trying not to worry, trying not to give into fear, and/or trying to be more kind, more loving, more joyful, etc.

This is leg two of the easy path to spiritual growth. All of us can find ten or fifteen or twenty or thirty minutes a day to express ourselves to God in prayer. The rewards over time of developing a daily prayer habit far exceed the minimal effort that goes into developing such a habit and walking in it.

Community – Get to Know Each Other

In an excellent blog article, author Rob Loane, writes

“Growing up into Christ involves far more than acquiring the right information. It requires a deep connection between truth and life, between belief and behavior. And such connection only occurs when we take extended time for dialogue or conversation with others about these things that matter most to us.

Dialogue is a critical gift on the journey. The back-and-forth conversational work of listening and question asking, reflection, clarification and discernment are so necessary for development and maturity. Too often in our churches we major on the presentation or the performance—the monologue—without majoring on the hard work of cultivating dialogue.

Many of us yearn for more than the chitchat prompted by the fill-in-the-blank small group questions. We want meaningful conversation around the biggest questions of our lives. We want to candidly ask others whether they think the dreams and hopes we carry within are of the Spirit or not. It is a small, yet powerful matter—our ability to talk and listen—to use words and silence well with each other.

A simple statement that we use around the VantatgePoint3 office, a phrase we have borrowed somewhere along the way, is that “*conversation creates culture.*” **People who have experienced the power of dialogue** listen differently and talk differently. They **trust the fruitfulness of the Spirit’s “behind the scenes” work when two or three people are**

gathered in Jesus' name to discuss and ask questions and listen and pray about deep concerns in their lives. If our faith formation is to move beyond a mostly heady exercise and become a place where our faith is personalized and lived out, then we are going to have to place high value upon practicing the art of dialogue.”

(<http://vantagepoint3.org/from-monologue-to-dialogue>)

The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. We are designed to live in community, and community that matters includes meaningful dialogue on a regular basis.

There are many ways we can get our need for community met. We can join a small group, composed of likeminded believers where we meet once a week for an hour or more, and engage in meaningful dialogue. We can join “serve” teams that serve together in ministry settings and during our time together engage in meaningful dialogue. We can also be part of a church or ministry staff, which engages in dialogue on a regular basis. We can meet with two-three friends regular coffee talks. There are many ways our need for community can be met.

The point is if we are not doing any of these things on a habitual basis, our spiritual growth will be hampered. This is the core lesson of the three-legged stool. We need all three to be able to thrive in growth toward the character of Christ.

Moving Forward

What do you do if you are lacking in one or more of the three legs?

The best answer in my opinion is to think of these as healthy habits. Just like brushing your teeth every day is a healthy habit. Researchers claim that upwards of 46% of our daily activities are driven by habits. Habits are leverage. It takes very little willpower to execute them. We just do them, day-after-day, week-after-week, year-after-year.

In an excellent book on habit patterns, *The Power of Habit* (2012), author Charles Duhigg, describes how habits are formed and how to create and change them. In what he labels *the habit loop*, he shows that habits have three elements that form a loop: a trigger, an event, and a reward.

My goal here is not to teach you about habits, but rather point you to where you can get information on them. My point is that if you think about the three legs of the three-legged stool as habits to create, you will have much better success at implementing them into your daily and weekly routines. This is what I have done, and it works. I habitually find time early in the day for getting to know God, and sharing my life with Him, and I habitually meet with a group of guys once a week to talk about things that really matter.

The habits you create to practice the three-legged table lesions will look different than mine, as they should. The important thing is that you do them, and if you do, your life will change for the better over time.

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