



Spiritual Practices in Times of Crisis or Grief

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We are living through the COVID-19 Pandemic. Most of us are restricted to our homes except to perform or receive essential services. Most of the news we hear is bad news: lack of adequate equipment for healthcare providers, record unemployment, a stock market in free fall and, of course, daily statistics about the spiking spread of a killer virus. Our world is upside down.

Uncertainty about how to survive the crisis is pervasive and yet we cannot gather together in groups to encourage one another. Anxiety and sadness are everywhere. We yearn for comfort. We pray for peace. Sometimes our familiar prayers are comforting. Sometimes not.

I propose that you try some new prayer practices during this harrowing time. People of faith call upon the divine in many different ways. People of no faith call upon forces within or beyond themselves, too. Imagine sending a letter to someone you cared about and receiving no reply. You might send more letters, but you probably would also send an email or make a phone call. You wouldn't just assume the receiver had abandoned you. For the same reason, try a new way several new ways) to reach out for the comfort you need.

Here are some ideas. You will find more if you look.

- Walk a labyrinth. Find one on labyrinthlocator.com. Or print out a labyrinth on paper and 'walk' it with a pencil, a crayon, or your finger. Here is a template: <http://zdi1.zd-cms.com/cms/res/files/382/ChartresLabyrinth.pdf>. Don't rush this: imagine the labyrinth as a journey toward peace.
- Find a concise devotional book such as *Daily Bread* or *Forward Day by Day*, or look for daily devotional prayers on-line. Commit to spending 15 minutes a day reading and re-reading the passage for the day and letting it sink in. First thing in the morning is a great time.
- Go to a place that speaks peace to you, such as a beach, a park, or a high mountain lake. Then open your heart to the beauty of nature. Just watch and listen intently. If you cannot go to such a place, look for photographs of peaceful scenes and/or recordings of rain or waves or birdsong and sit quietly taking it all in. Let nature soothe you.
- Pour out your anger or anxiety. But set a timer. And follow up with an equal amount of time for something soothing, like a warm bath or hot drink.
- Try *Lectio Divina*. Begin with a short passage of scripture or a familiar Bible story. Read it through slowly several times and meditate on its application to your current situation.

- Meditate. There are several websites that provide instruction, as well as images with sound effects that can help you focus. There are also very good guided meditations for sleep, anxiety, stress, pain, chronic illness, etc. Try healthjourneys.com or one of the phone apps like Calm, Insight Timer, Breathe, or Lumosity Mind. YouTube also has hundreds of recorded meditations.
- Light a candle, naming a person or group on your mind as you strike the flame. Play soothing music and watch the flame, repeating your concern and imagining it being effectively addressed.
- Create a piece of art or music, or spend several minutes contemplating what someone else has created. If you don't think you have artistic talent, try coloring a mandala downloaded and printed from the internet or sing along with your favorite choir or group. There are dozens of examples on YouTube of musicians and singers recording their parts separately to safely create virtual choirs and orchestras; let them inspire you and join in if you are able.
- Use beads. Nearly every religion since prehistory has had a practice of fingering beads as a way to focus prayer. For each bead, repeat a brief prayer or verse or name a concern, then move to the next bead for a new prayer.
- Create a sacred space in your home. Add a candle, a statue, an image, or a sacred book. Spend some time just sitting in that space every day.
- Centering or contemplative prayer. Virtual groups can be joined from your home. Look for virtual groups in your area or try contemplativeoutreach.com. The point is to listen for God's voice rather than presenting a list of petitions.
- Write a letter to your future grandchildren or great grandchildren. Tell them about what has sustained you through hard times and what has delighted you in good times. Try to encourage them.
- Keep a gratitude journal. Write down at least three things every day. Repetition is okay. Short phrases are okay, but more detail is better. Instead of writing 'the sunset' or 'the rose blossom,' describe the colors and scents and sounds. Instead of 'my family,' describe a special moment with them.
- Reach out to someone you think might be lonely. Listen to them.