

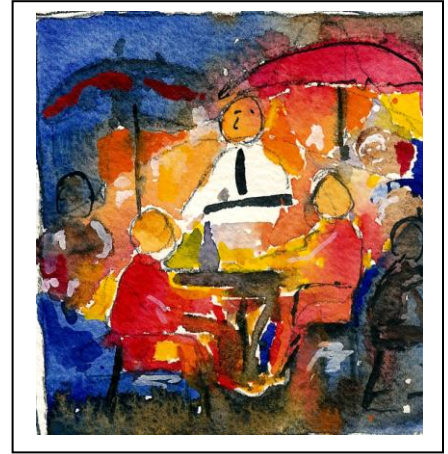
Making Space for God Days

A Retreat Guide by Steven Stuckey

Purpose of a Retreat Day—Care of Soul

Athletes care for their bodies with proper rest, nutrition, and exercise. Their attentiveness to their physical selves enables them to withstand the stress of completion and achieve their goals. Professional musicians treat their instruments as treasured friends. Workers of all sorts are mindful of the tools of their trade, treating those tools with respect. So what is the equivalent for servants of the Triune God? Our body and soul!

The purpose of a retreat day is to care for our physical and spiritual self that is energized by the invisible animating force that is God's Spirit. Our soul is our hidden spiritual life with Father, Son, and Spirit. That life is expressed through our thoughts, feelings, values, and longings. It includes our conscious and also unconscious self with its many parts.



Hospitality- Watercolor on Paper by Steven Stuckey

During the course of a day we care for our souls by looking back over the month and remembering what we have experienced. We grow in knowledge and love for God and self by taking extended time for Scripture reading and prayer. We examine our longings, desires, dreams, and disappointments and invite the Lord to reveal his presence at the deeper levels of our being. Finally, we care for our souls by looking at the month ahead, anticipating the spiritual demands on us and planning accordingly.

Preparing for the Day

It helps to have a plan for how to use your time. You are not obligated to use the plan, but without one your mind will wander and you may end up at the end of a day feeling like you squandered an opportunity. A plan helps the voices in our head relax knowing that they will be attended to in due course. It is important that you enter the day not feeling rushed. Plan to get a good night's sleep before you come and have your materials ready the night before so you are not throwing things together at the last minute.

Length of time

Determine a start and ending time. Most groups I meet with begin at 10:00am and conclude at 4:00pm. Others find it very helpful to periodically schedule an overnight at a local retreat center. If lunch is involved, make arrangements ahead of time so that you are not distracted.

Location

You need a quiet place away from your normal work routine. Many enjoy being able to walk outdoors when the weather is pleasant. Most find it helpful to have a desk and a comfortable chair to sit in. On retreat days, individuals often discover how fatigued they are and having a bed or even a bench to lie down on is also useful. Catholic Retreat Houses, public gardens, public libraries, and even private homes other than your own are all good options.

Joining with others

Spending time with the Lord and attending to your invisible spiritual needs takes time and discipline. But it is easy to dismiss the practice in the face of pressing external demands. Joining with others for a retreat day is one solution. The resolve of two or three is more effective than going it alone. In addition, some of us are more extroverted than others. Scheduling time to pray together, share a meal together, or review what we discovered at the end of the day are good ways to address those social desires.

Equipment that you will need

Bring a Bible, journal, and pen. A retreat guide such as *A Guide to Prayer*¹ is an excellent resource providing suggested scripture passages and reading for reflection. If you are an artist and art helps you connect with the Lord, bring along appropriate materials such as drawing pad, water colors, or camera. Check the weather report for the day and wear comfortable clothes and good walking shoes. If you plan to be outdoors at a public garden, consider bringing a comfortable lawn chair or seat cushion. Pack a lunch, water bottle, and snack food in case you get hungry in the afternoon. Leave at home or in your car anything that may distract you during the day. Turn your cell phone off and avoid doing email during the time.

Components of the Day

Arrival

After you check in to the site and greet your friends, find a quiet location where you can settle yourself. Get your materials ready then take a few minutes to just sit quietly and adjust to the new surroundings. Take a few deep breathes, relax and listen.

Opening Prayer- Invocation

Pray something like this: Almighty God, as you sent Jesus to be for us light and truth, send now your spirit upon us to grant grace and strength to follow in his footsteps this day. Amen. You may instead want to pray the Lord's Prayer or read Psalm 23. The point is that you are consciously inviting Father, Son, and Spirit to be with you as you in turn surrender to their guidance.

Review the Previous Month

Take some time to review your calendar from the previous month and read through your journal entries for that same time period. Answer the following questions:

1. What events, people, experiences, or things you viewed or read stirred you or made an impression on you? Pay attention to what affects your energy.
2. What feelings were generated as a result? (E.g. anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, joy, envy, pride, etc.) When have you felt those things in the past?
3. Did you notice any common themes during the month?
4. What are you thankful for? What do you long for?
5. Note two or three items that you would like to speak further with the Lord about.

¹ *A Guide to Prayer*, Job and Shawchuck, Upper Room Books, 1983

The purpose of this exercise is to glean material that you can use during your time of prayer later in the day. You are attempting to discover the affects that external conscious behavior and experience have on your internal, unconscious self. Christ dwells in our hidden, inner world and his transformation of us starts there.

Looking Back Prayer

Take question five from above and make that the topic of prayer with the Lord. Tell him not just what you think but how you feel. Listen for a response. It may help to journal the dialogue. Pay attention to reoccurring thoughts, images, and feelings. Write down significant observations or insights.

Take a Walk

You need a break. Get a cup of coffee or walk around the retreat area. Don't worry about praying. Just enjoy whatever brings delight to your heart. If it is near lunch time, don't try to squeeze anything else in. If you have time and energy go to the next step.

Scripture Reading

Read your selected passage of scripture in *Lectio Divina* fashion. Read it through slowly three times and each time pay attention to your heart. Does something in the text move you, stir an emotion or thought. After the third reading, go back to the parts that you noticed made an impression on you, and speak to the Lord about those things. Identify the feelings and look for patterns. Is there anything from the reading of Scripture that speaks to whatever came up in your review prayer time? Journal that.

Reading for Reflection

Take 30-40 minutes to read any devotional material that you brought with you. Retreat guides such as *A Guide to Prayer* have sections called reading for reflection. As with other reflection times during the day, pay attention to your heart and make note of what makes an impression. This could be a sign of the Holy Spirit speaking to you.

Prayer for Others

If individuals or situations came to mind during the day, offer them now to the Lord. Don't worry about what to ask or how to ask it, the Lord knows the situation better than you. You may find it enough to just hold the image of individuals or situations in your mind as if offering them to the Lord for his blessing.

Make it Concrete—the Plan

If you have had an insight, experienced hope, or been convicted during the day, it is very important that you find a practical way to make that faith experience part of your conscious reality. If you don't, the experience will evaporate like the image of a dream rather than bring about inner transformation. Ask the Lord for his help. Identify at least one thing you will do as a result of the day with him. The one thing may involve apologizing to someone, creating a small artistic memorial, writing out a confession, or pledging to take a specific action step. Whatever it is, make sure the action is practical and measurable. It is not good enough to say for example—I will think or pray about this thing. If that is the step it needs to include a time, place, and length of time.

Briefly review your calendar for the coming month. Ask the Lord to help you anticipate. If the month seems too full, do you need to make some adjustment? If specific events seem stressful, decide who to ask to pray for you or what will help you stay connected to the Lord. Schedule your next retreat day.

Benediction

Conclude by thanking God for the time together. An example: Father, Son, and Spirit, thank you that you have been with me this day. You are my God and I am your servant. You love me with a love that is high, long, wide, and deep. You have forgiven me my sins. You empower and now send me back to your world. Help me to be faithful and attentive to your leading. Amen

Dealing with Distractions

Distractions and fatigue are common experiences on retreat days. If a thought keeps pestering you and writing it down does not settle it in your mind, face it head on. It may be the Lord wants you to address something. Identify the feeling behind the thought. Explore it from different angles. Ask the Lord for insight. If you find you are overly tired or bored, ask yourself what part of you is feeling tired or bored. Is there something in you that needs tending to?

It is **not** our job to create an exciting, insightful, religious experience. Our job is to show up, be as attentive as we can, and receive with open hands whatever comes our way. The goal is to be with the Lord and He with us. Resist efforts to critique the time. Not only is it impolite, we are usually only 10% aware of what is happening to us anyway. Trust the Lord and His ways of working. He knows what he is doing.²

² Written July 2012. Documents/Making Space/Making Space Guide