

The Soul's Regeneration: Training the Fitness of the Spirit and the Flesh Go Hand in Hand

There are times when the modest value of physical training referenced by Paul the Apostle in 1 Timothy 4 is a variable of critical significance for the fate of our soul's regeneration process. Those times are the subject of this brief piece I'm pinpointing as when we are mired in spiritual warfare. These are pivotal junctures when we must access muscle memory to override sinful yearnings and temptations that lead us astray. It's been my experience as a psychotherapist, as a non-believer and more recently a believer, that physical training is a quasi-spiritual discipline. No doubt it is the horsepower provided by the locomotive muscles of the temple of our souls that permits us to love on faith. We are too easily seduced to lazily coast along as The Devil and his agents are round the clock opportunists who will take every opportunity to breach our defenses to co-opt the authority of our conscious egos. It is only through training the big muscles that I have learned to just do what's right in God's eyes in spite of laziness, carnal desires, etc., working at cross purposes with my passionate and grateful wishes to actualize my birthright as made in The Lord's image. As long as we live we are vulnerable to regress into self-centered and self-aggrandized neural patterns where we pursue archaic longings by invoking outdated scripts and roles.

Instances when we cease to consciously exercise our free will may be indicative of us feeling overwhelmed and threatened by clashes between God's will for us and our own. We resurrect timeless memories of dependent subservience on false icons, parents and surrogates who may not have been followers of Jesus, or who professed to be, yet who in reality usurped the Lord's authority with regularity. These conflicts, as well as our vulnerabilities to regress to old norms, are dynamic. They are either habits that are strengthened through repetition or weakened through disuse. Although we may not see it as such, for the duration of these episodes we are ultimately accountable for not "minding the store" as our exercises of free will temporarily go on holiday. Since there are no guarantees that God in His infinite wisdom will swoop in and take the steering wheels we have let go of, it does make survival sense for us to invoke the authority of the false idols who at one point ensured our survival. It is obviously a wishful myth that we can over-reference old archetypes and find comfort and security in

obeying or pretending to obey their mandates as we live the unfolding present circumstances of unknowns and uncertainties.

Over-referencing old models can be as simple as: “well no one said anything about me missing the last three weekly Bible study groups, so I guess it’s okay,” or “I am overwhelmed and frankly resent my brothers’ and sisters’ needs as burdensome. Anyway, I don’t bother them with mine so why am I beholden to them?” Likewise, one cannot readily reconcile loving God with our heart and soul, or even loving our neighbors as ourselves, while habitually forgetting or rationalizing not returning calls and emails. Clearly such hypocrisy is indicative of our looking at the world through obsolete lenses, ones that sanction behaviors in accordance to old cultural models. How else might some of us explain ritually not showing up for our brothers and sisters in small groups, knowing full well that the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives rests to some degree on regular communion with God in the presence of other believers? In truth, it's not above any human beings to dignify and give power to what may be subconscious thoughts such as: “Nobody cares enough to notice if we don’t show up, or they couldn’t possibly be upset or affected because no one ever expresses disappointment or anger.”

Clearly, the Devil and his agents are delighted over this aspect of human nature, as these episodes are faith-eroding cancers that not only thwart God’s vision for us disciples as Kingdom Builders but also throw into question the enduring legitimacy of our baptisms. I certainly regard such micro-patterns of slighting God as nothing less than rolling the dice on the fate of my soul come Judgment Day. As I said earlier in this article there is no coasting on our spiritual journeys.

Whether or not we respond in Godly ways when are challenged by stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, impatience, greed, etc., is in my mind a function of how well we have learned and reinforced our spiritual disciplines. If we as adults habitually regress to old norms, these automatic responses may win the day and they are not God-fearing, loving or righteous.

Eschewing God’s wishes to conduct our lives according to His prescriptions may or may not be a time-limited act of self-deception. We human beings are by nature full of hubris. However, in truth we have no idea what reaches critical mass or is a tipping point when self-centered tendencies leave us on slippery slope hurtling towards the Devil’s lair. What we easily rationalize and minimize as un-impactful

and innocuous commissions or omissions when strung together are a much bigger deal, potentially imperiling our righteous ambitions.

Believers do not fare well living on leaps of Faith. I'm defining a leap of faith as forsaking fresh infusions of the Holy Spirit by dint of communions with God and our fellow Believers. Our unseen Savior must be a sensory rich, transformative and heart-changing experience for us to remain on a righteous path. It's my contention that when we are most at risk of falling prey to "not feeling it" in the moment, we are most in need of habitually acting as if we did "feel it." Meaning, we must have a storehouse of implicit memories to trigger righteous behaviors when we are most vulnerable to yielding to old sinful habits. These are the moments when our spiritual warfare is raging and perhaps leave us feeling tired, depressed, anxious, or stressed out. These are the moments when we are most incapable of sound reasoning and judgment. I have found there to be a direct correspondence between my abilities to forsake short-term gratifications for long-term objectives when I am both physically fit and spiritually disciplined.

My anecdotal experiences have been validated in performance laboratories. Implicit memory traces learned through intensive practice will take precedence during crises. This can be compared to muscle memory. In such times we cannot rely on our prefrontal cortexes to save the day on the fly. This is why pilots-in-training will attempt to condense lifetimes of flying experience by simulating contingencies which may be once-in-a-lifetime life or death emergencies. As Captain Sullenberger attested after landing a commercial airliner in The Hudson River, he could not given his state of alarm have improvised. He was able to reproduce a series of moves learned during endless simulations.

So my unwillingness or inability to process my resistance to completing an interval workout of running when it is cold, and windy, and I'm tired, depressed, or feeling sorry for myself, is immaterial if I have a long track record of "just doing it no matter what." My implicit memories are so dominant that absent insurmountable obstacles such as severe injury or illness, I'm able to get my rear in gear in order to transcend whatever internal resistance is operating. I ramp up to jettison the gravitational pull of my flesh's desires to take the path of least resistance, and without fail, triumph over adversity. I am convinced I am building righteous character, and I take delight in glorifying God. My mantra is that I am God's

warrior sprinting one stride at a time. I have the same attitude about my regimen of spiritual disciplines. If love of God is an action verb, then I am confidently primed to act on the side of pleasing God. I pray with gratitude for all who will read this article and consider that getting your spiritual muscles in shape and getting your locomotive muscles in shape go hand in hand.