

An exercise in religion

Joe Davis, 45, is a minister at Maybridge Community Church, in Worthing, West Sussex, and serves on the board of Renovare Britain and Ireland. Here he helps us understand that you don't have to be quiet and contemplative to engage in spiritual practices and exercise. Even an active extrovert can gain huge benefits from exercising body and soul.

Tell us a bit about yourself

I have been married to Rachel for 26 years and have two grown-up children at university. according to Jeremy Clarkson, I am now well into middle-age as, over the last three years, I have developed an interest in gardening. I also don't believe it is important to waste hormones on growing hair!

over the last few years my passion has become helping people to follow Jesus more closely in a dynamic, interactive relationship. This includes practising many spiritual disciplines both old and new.

What kind of person are you and how do you learn?

I'm an extrovert so I gain energy by being with people. I love to spend time eating great food and chatting with friends. I love exercise and run three times a week. I also try to swim at least once a week and have gym membership.

I'm an activist so I process things by speaking them out before deciding what I actually think. It took the team at the church a little while to figure this out.

I'm a real team player and I love to solve problems in groups. I also get a real buzz out of sharing a journey, especially a spiritual journey with a group of people.

You are someone who likes to train. Can you explain what you think Paul meant when he said 'train yourself in godliness' (1 Timothy 4.7)?

No-one would dream of deciding to run a marathon and the following day go out and do it. It takes months of slowly building up the long runs and doing shorter faster runs. Our life in the kingdom of God is also a steadily-growing thing. You don't just go from not knowing how to live for Jesus to perfect living in one fell swoop.

So I look at spiritual disciplines like training runs for a marathon. I'm learning to practise patience in my car and in the shopping queue. It's building my patience muscle so that I can exercise it fully with some of life's bigger challenges. I learn to resist the temptation of food through regular fasting and gradually I learn that my life doesn't have to be ruled by my desires. I practise not worrying about small things, but rather to pray. Sure enough I find it easier to give up worrying about the bigger issues in my life.

As an extrovert how do you cope with practices such as silence, solitude and prayer?

A guy I work with loves to go and sit in silence, in a hut on his own in the middle of a field for 48 hours (or longer if he could). at first I genuinely thought he was mad, or at least sad. But I have grown to value solitude myself but in a very different way. Sometimes I go into the centre of London and enjoy being anonymous in a crowd. I often sit in the Catholic cathedral and, if I can afford it, I go and sit by the shark tank in the London Aquarium. For me this is still real solitude that works with my nature and temperament. I find I can concentrate and pray there.

What about fasting?

I always consider fasting a relevant discipline for me as I love food and I love to cook. at first I would remember to stop eating but wouldn't actually pray or study – so it was fairly pointless spiritually. I now try to go one day a week with no food. Whenever I feel a hunger pang it triggers a prayer within me about my need for God and my hunger for more of him.

What practices would you encourage other active people to engage in?

I would always encourage active people to practise keeping the Sabbath. It brings a real sense of peace to your whole being. Fasting for me has also brought with it an increasing confidence. As an extrovert one of the disciplines I have found quite powerful

is secrecy. I found that when I do 'good' things I like to talk about them and get some sort of recognition. But it is great to do your good deeds secretly. Even little things like picking up some litter and putting it in the bin teaches you that we are living for the audience of one. It brings a real sense of freedom to understand that we are not working for other people's praise but for Father God and all that he has done for us. Truth-telling or never saying anything critical about anyone is good practice for those of us who like to talk. When I suggest to a group that we are going to go 24 hours without saying anything negative, the normal response is laughter.

What practice have you found useful?

I regularly do a 'thanksgiving' run which is a discipline of counting our blessings. While I am running I try and make my mind focus on not asking God for anything but rather thanking him for everything good in my life. It's amazing the effect the combination of exercise and thanksgiving has on my mood.

What is the relationship between your body and soul?

These two areas are inextricably linked. If I feel fat and flabby, my thinking and mental outlook gets skewed. Similarly, when my thinking is faulty, I normally have a physical response though illness or weight gain.

What I find so helpful about spiritual disciplines is that they are often physical ways of training your whole self for godliness.

Can you sum up how physical and spiritual exercise can go hand-in-hand?

I think that most of our problems or the sins that we face are rooted in our bodies, in habits that have formed over many years. So training our bodies in these practical ways makes a massive impact – at least that's what I have found it does for me.

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