



Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation

Ruth Haley Barton

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Winner of a 2006 Logos Book Award! Do you long for a deep, fundamental change in your life with God? Do you desire a greater intimacy with God? Do you wonder how you might truly live your life as God created you to live it? Spiritual disciplines are activities that open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. Picking up on the monastic tradition of creating a "rule of life" that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines, this book takes you more deeply into understanding seven key disciplines along with practical ideas for weaving them into everyday life. Each chapter includes exercises to help you begin the practices--individually and in a group context. The final chapter puts it all together in a way that will help you arrange your life for spiritual transformation. The choice to establish your own sacred rhythm is the most important choice you can make with your life.

Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation Details

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Lindsey Goetz says

This book was everything I hoped it would be. I loved how she coupled theory with practice. My rhythms already began changing as I read the book and I love that I have concrete steps to take to continue to arrange my life around spiritual growth.

Nick says

It's a very feel good book, which I am not a fan of. There was very little scripture throughout the whole of the book.

Lauren says

This book came to me just at the right time. It has really helped me order my life for rest and balance, as it has helped me examine my own rhythms and how they might best dovetail with important spiritual disciplines like self-examination while going for a solitary run in the woods, or sitting in silence in the early morning, and putting boundaries on when you answer cell phones or check email, or what-have-you. It's about living a life that is nourishing, not just filled with additives or bulky fillers. It's about paying attention to ourselves (in the sense of knowing what is lifegiving spiritually/physically/emotionally) so that we can attend to the Holy and thus be able to participate with others in a meaningful way in this life.

Andrea says

great book for busy leaders to consider the rhythms that will sustain them

James says

My standing critique of books on spiritual disciplines is that they are too individualized in their expression and too anthropocentric. That is, they give you a set of practices which you can apply in the privacy of your own home as a means to deepen your spiritual life (whatever that means). What often is missing is the communal practices of the church (worship, word, sacrament) and a sense that the practices commended are less about bringing you into a more satisfying religious experience and more about tuning into the reality of God's presence.

So how does Barton measure up? Pretty good. She does stress the importance of community (everyone always does) but occasionally this book does feel like what she is advocating is a deeper, privatized religious experience. But this was mediated for me by the fact that I read this book with my church. Also, where she

begins more individualistic and self-centered, the book moves towards a Spirituality which is more appropriately communal and Godward.

There are some really helpful and thoughtful suggestions about how to integrate Spiritual practices into your life. But the real value of this book is its accessibility. As someone who is read a lot on the Spiritual life, I can point to books that are deeper, better framed and more comprehensive than this book. But a lot of that would be lost on most people. What Barton offers is something thoughtful and engaging that normal people without theological education and academic proclivities can get into. And she is helpful. I especially liked her thoughts on developing a rule of life.

Trace says

This book was actually extremely helpful to me at this stage in my life, as I'm working on creating a mother's "rule of life". Her chapter on the Sabbath was very beautiful and almost worth the cost of the book itself. There is also a very handy appendix at the back that shows which spiritual discipline corresponds (or that is useful) for any personal issue that you are wanting to sort out.

I'll be referring to this book again.

Shannon Upton says

True confession: I didn't read this book—I started skimming around Chapter 3 and kept skimming to the end. Despite being a Christian non-fiction writer, I struggle with a lot of Christian non-fiction and this was one of those books. To me, it just wasn't very good reading. But, I loved her premises and her points (for the most part) and I am going to do some of the exercises she prescribes at the end of the chapters. Much of what she says about seeking and resting in Christ is spot-on what I say in my books (I just tend more toward the practical end). If you're a more laid-back reader, I'd definitely recommend *Sacred Rhythms*!

Renee says

i initially loved this book--but when i began to read it with a more critical eye, I realized the author used absolutely No scripture to back up what she was saying, that a lot of the spiritual practices she recommends are unbiblical, and that essentially this book is about mysticism. so i wouldnt recommend it.

Laurie says

solitude and silence (daily and extended) • prayer • lectio divina • examen of consciousness • self-examination and confession • honoring the body • discernment (consolation and desolation) • sabbath • community

One can begin one's [spiritual] quest by attending to the desires of the heart, both personal and communal. The Spirit is revealed in our genuine hopes for ourselves and for the world. How brightly burns the flame of

desire for a love affair with God, other people, the world? Do we know that to desire and seek God is a choice that is always available to us? ELIZABETH DREYER location 22

At times the deeper longings of our heart are dismissed as mere idealism-beyond the realm of possibility this side of heaven. At other times, subtle fear or outright discomfort arises in the face of such expressions of our humanity. location 37

The longing for significance, the longing for love, the longing for deep and fundamental change, the longing for a way of life that works, the longing to connect experientially and even viscerally with Someone beyond ourselves-these longings led me to search out spiritual practices and establish life rhythms that promised something more. location 47

It is not until after we have settled into our desires and named them in God's presence that we are ready to be guided into the spiritual practices that will open us to receive what our heart is longing for. location 76
In Christian tradition, this structured arrangement of spiritual practices is referred to as "a rule of life." A rule of life is a way of ordering our life around the values, practices and relationships that keep us open and available to God for the work of spiritual transformation that only God can bring about. Simply put, a rule of life provides structure and space for our growing. location 87

The disciplines themselves are basic components of the rhythm of intimacy with God that feed and nourish the soul, keeping us open and available for God's surprising initiatives in our lives. location 94

you are also invited to experience community by choosing a friend or two or even a small group with whom to take the journey, using the guidance provided in the 'Journeying Together" appendix. This appendix will guide you in experiencing each discipline together and will also provide questions to help you debrief your experience. Thus the spiritual disciplines form the basis for your interactions with others in community, and your life in community becomes a safe place to practice the patterns and behaviors that bring about substantive change. location 110

The reason we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire. MEISTER ECKHART

Mark 10:46-52:

Jesus asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?" -- what is my most inward, honest desire? Is it a longing for Him?

in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now that is the deepest essence of who you are.

The more authentic our desires, the more they touch upon our identities and also upon the reality of God at the heart of our being. Our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep inner wells where the longing for God runs freely.

Jesus' interactions with the people he came in contact with during his life on earth make it clear that desire, and the willingness to name that desire in Christ's presence, is a catalytic element of the spiritual life. It is one of the most powerful motivators for a life lived consistently with intentionality

The soul is like a wild animal-tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to

come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance. PARKER PALMER, A HIDDEN WHOLENESS

The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience union with God unmediated by the ways we typically try to relate to God. By "unmediated" I mean a direct experience of God with nothing in between: an encounter with God that is not mediated by words, by theological constructs, by religious activity, by my own or other's manipulations of my relationship with God.

Solitude is a place. It is a place in time that is set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from the noise of interpersonal interactions, from the noise, busyness and constant stimulation associated with life in the company of others. Solitude can also be associated with a physical place that has been set apart for times alone with God, a place that is not cluttered with work, noise, technology, other relationships, or any of those things that call us back into doing mode...solitude is a place inside myself where God's Spirit and my spirit dwell together in union. This place within me is private and reserved for the intimacies that God and I share.

The most essential question in solitude is How have I been wanting to be with God, and how has God been wanting to be with me?

Sit quietly at the base of the tree that is your life and begin to notice what is true about you these days. Don't rush or try to make anything happen. Let your soul venture out and say something to you that perhaps you have had a hard time acknowledging: Is there a particular joy you are celebrating? A loss you are grieving? Are there tears that have been waiting to be shed? A question that is stirring? An emotion that needs expression? Sit with what comes into your awareness, becoming conscious of God's presence with you in that awareness. Don't try to do anything with what you are knowing except be with it. (In other words, don't scare it away.) Feel the difference between trying to fix it and just being with it. Feel the difference between doing something with it and resting with it. Feel the difference between trying to fight it and letting God fight for you. What does it mean for you to be still and let God fight (or work) for you in this particular area? Practice this way of entering into solitude regularly until it becomes routine for you to begin your times in solitude by being quiet and letting your soul come out and then rest in God's presence. You will likely be surprised at what your soul wants to say to God.

The Word of Scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all.... Do not ask "How shall I Pass this on?" but "What does it say to me?" Then ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right into you and taken possession of you. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, LIFE TOGETHER

Yes, I can!:

Now, perhaps you can remember a time when you were exchanging love letters with someone. Do you remember the sense of anticipation you had when you opened a letter? Can you recall how wonderful it was to have this special person express their feelings for you? Do you remember where you would go to read the letter-perhaps a quiet, private place-and how you savored each and every word and pondered what these things might mean? What emotions did you feel? Do you still have those letters tucked away in some special place to remind you of that special person and that special time? The sad truth is that many of us approach the Scriptures more like a textbook than like a love letter.

In Western culture in particular, we are predisposed to a certain kind of reading. We have been schooled in an informational reading process that establishes the reader as the master of the text. As the reader, I employ key techniques that allow me to use the text to advance my own purposes. With this kind of reading, the intent is to cover as much ground as possible as quickly as possible. Our emphasis is primarily on mastery, that is, controlling the text for our own ends-gathering information, interpreting or applying the information, proving our point about something, gaining a ministry tool or solving a problem...When we are in an information-gathering mindset, we are analytical in our approach and at times even critical and judgmental. We are reading through cognitive filters, made up of our preconceived thoughts, feelings, biases, doctrinal systems, teachings and life experiences that have shaped us. When we are in this mode, it is exceedingly difficult for us to hear anything new because we have so many unconscious defenses in place.

READ FOR RELATIONSHIP: Rather than rushing on to the next chapter so that we can complete a reading or study assignment, we stay in the place where God is speaking to us, contemplating its meaning for our life and for our relationship...In this listening stance, Scripture becomes an instrument of God's control rather than a tool that we control to our own ends. Then, as God speaks to us through Scripture, we respond to what we read with our heart and soul rather than just our intellect.

For my Bible reading/journaling time: In addition to asking, What does it say? What does it mean? How do I apply it to my life? all questions that promote primarily cognitive activity and allow us to remain firmly in control of the whole experience-we might ask:

- How do I feel about what is being said? Where do I find myself resonating deeply? Where do I find myself resisting, pulling back, wrestling with what Scripture might be saying? (Note: It is important to notice these inner dynamics without judging them, because they have much to tell us. You may even notice that you feel resonance and resistance at the same time. For instance, you may have a deep sense of the rightness of what the text is saying but on another level have the feeling There is no way I can do that! This is a particularly important dynamic to notice, because it indicates a place where God is at work beyond your own cognition.)
- Why do I feel this way? What aspect of my life or my inner being is being touched or spoken to through this Scripture?
- What do my reactions tell me about myself-my attitudes, my relating patterns, my perspectives, my behaviors? Am I willing to look at that in God's presence?

Lectio Divina -- reflective Bible reading:

1. read the passage once or even twice, listening for the word or the phrase that strikes us. This word somehow stands out from all the rest, causes a visceral reaction or brings about a deep sense of resonance or resistance, The mood is gentle, reflective, and we have a sense of expectancy that God will speak to us. After the reading there is a brief period of silence in which we remain with the word, savoring it and repeating it without trying to figure out what it means or why it was given.
2. read the passage a second time, and this time we reflect on the way our life is touched by this word. We might ask, What is it in my life that needed to hear this word today? Or, if the passage is a story: Where am I in this text, and what do I experience as I allow myself to be in this story? Again, there is a brief period of silence in which we stay present with God with whatever comes.
3. Is there an invitation or a challenge for us to respond to? What is our response to God's invitation? This is the first and unedited response to what we have heard. It is the prayer that comes most naturally in response to what we have heard God say to us, and we allow it to flow freely in the moments of silence that follow.
4. read the passage one last time, and this time the invitation is contemplation-to rest in God. We are like the weaned child in Psalm 131 who has received what it needs from its mother and can now rest with her in peace and quiet. Here we rest with God and enjoy his presence, realizing that God is the One who will enable us to respond faithfully to whatever invitation we have heard from him. We resolve to carry this word with us and live it out (incarnation) in our daily life. We continue to listen to it throughout the day as we are led deeper and deeper into its meaning and it begins to live in us.

True prayer isn't about words: "Eventually, when we stop the flow of our own words, another gift comes to us, quietly and imperceptibly at first: we find ourselves resting in prayer."

Formally or at least informally, "pray the hours:" In the morning we begin with praise, affirming God's presence with us and his loving care toward us and committing the work of the day to him. At midday, when tasks and to-do lists are pressing in and human effort is at its height, we stop to renew our awareness of God's presence, rest in him for a few moments and ask for his peace and guidance regarding the things that are concerning us. In the evening we place the cares of the day in God's hands and offer up general intercessions for ourselves and others, as well as bringing needs that are specific to us and burdens we are carrying for ourselves and others.

Years of experience have proven this true:

Any approach to the spiritual life that sets up false or awkward distinctions tintions between prayer and life, or prayer and the other disciplines, seems to unnaturally rip apart elements of life that belong together or to unnecessarily complicate something that is in its essence quite simple. And so it happens that all of life becomes prayer. From prayers that are more formal and structured to those that are informal and spontaneous, from prayer with words to prayer that is beyond words, from the most intimate expressions of love expressed privately to God to words spoken in unison by God's people when they gather, from the eloquent written prayers of the church to the breath prayer that is nothing more than a gasp of need or a sigh of love or a groan of longing, from the prayers uttered tered in beautiful cathedrals to prayers offered on the side of a mountain-every tain-every breath we take can be a prayer, uniting our heart to God and harnessing the energy of our life to his great purposes.

There is a big difference between saying, "I'm sorry if I hurt you," and saying, "I'm sorry I hurt you. I realize now that it was my insecurity that produced such bad behavior. I have really prayed about this, and I believe God is showing me how I can avoid doing that again. Will you forgive me?"

Too true -- I want to be different! "I have talked to young people who have never heard a parent or any adult actually admit to sin or bad behavior or offer an apology without making excuses or blaming someone else."

Focus: "This capacity to recognize and respond to the presence of God in all of life is a spiritual habit and practice that keeps us connected with God's larger purposes for us and for our world rather than being consumed by self-interest."

The capacity to discern and do the will of God arises out of friendship with God, cultivated through prayer, times of quiet listening and alert awareness. There are at least three beliefs that are crucial for a right practice of discernment. The first is belief in the goodness of God...The second foundational building block of the discernment process is the belief that love is our primary calling...What does love call for in this situation? What would love do?...The third foundational building block is the belief that God does communicate municate with us through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is given to help us know the demands of love in our situation.

Pray for "indifference," "a place where I want God and his will more than anything-more than ego gratification, more than looking good in the eyes of others, more than personal ownership or comfort or advantage. I want 'God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.' ...When we have died to our need to be wise in others' eyes or to prove ourselves according to human standards, we are finally ready to ask for God's wisdom and receive it."

Here are questions that can help us to reflect on the objective facts and gain insight into any deeper dynamics

involved in a decision as we reflect flect on them in God's presence:

How does this choice fit with the overall direction tion and calling of God on my life? (Remember Jeremiah's experience of calling.) Is there one word that captures my sense of calling these days? Does the current choice enable me to continue living into my calling?

Which choice brings the deepest sense of life, inner peace and freedom (John 10:10; 2 Corinthians 3:17)? Is there a growing sense of wholeness, authenticity, congruence with who I am in God? Or might this decision draw me away from God?

Is there a particular Scripture that God is bringing to me relative to this choice? What is it saying to me?

Is this choice consistent with what I know of the mind and heart of Christ and his redemptive purposes in the world?

How will this direction nurture the fruit of the Spirit in me-particularly the fruit of love? What does love call for? What is God doing in my character and spiritual growth? Will this choice continue to nurture this growth?

Does this choice reflect the value of what is eternal nal and permanent and holds the deepest value rather than what is transient sient and impermanent? On my deathbed, which choice would I wish I had made?

How does this choice fit with others' observations of who I am and what God is doing in my life? Am I willing to open up every facet of this decision to a trusted spiritual friend for their wisdom and insight? Is there anything in the broad tradition of the Christian faith that might inform my decision?

I must be intentional in seeking wisdom: "Jesus himself was very intentional about setting aside times of solitude for intense prayer and listening to God at important choice points in his life."

It is about falling so deeply in love with God that nothing else matters. It is about trusting God so much that all we want in this life is to abandon ourselves to the goodness of his will. It is about knowing God so intimately that we can tell what he wants just by turning our heart toward him. It is about loving ourselves and God and others so much that we will wait until we understand what love calls us to and then give ourselves to it, even when it costs us.

Sabbath rest -- Substitute mental busyness for physical activity, and this is still needed: "Muller's descriptions of sabbath practices...Light a candle, alone or with friends. Let each of you speak about those things that are left to do, and as the candle burns, allow the cares to melt away Do no be anxious about tomorrow, said Jesus. The worries of today are sufficient for today Whatever remains to be done, for now, let it be. It will not get done tonight. In Sabbath time we take our hand off the plow, and allow God and the earth to care for what is needed. Let it be ..." --

What might change if I set the Sabbath aside for spiritual, emotional, and mental rest?

Life rules: see notes

Brenda Seefeldt says

This is my 3rd time reading this book. Need I say more?

Makayla Millington says

A book that, when read carefully and applied thoughtfully, has the rare capacity to transform the reader's

spiritual life without compromising the intricacies of relationship with God. Barton doesn't shy away from tackling difficult questions, and acknowledges the unique walk of each follower of Christ. A refreshing, "fluff-less" book, best read slowly and with time to process and practice between chapters. Strongly recommend to anyone who seriously desires deeper intimacy with the Lord.

Each chapter delves into a spiritual discipline, including solitude, prayer, Scripture, the body, discernment, and others. Personally I found the chapters on solitude and discernment most helpful and challenging.

Ed says

Upon her awareness of "Christian fatigue syndrome" (9) overtaking her life, Ruth Haley Barton began searching for more balance in her life, especially her spiritual life. She recounts the anxiety felt over internal and external expectations of who she should be and what she should do as a Christian. The added stress of the intense busyness of her life (doing some very good things) nearly crippled her spiritually and she intuitively felt there must be a better way to go about living the Christian life. Her desire for a different way intensified from a sense of emptiness in her spiritual life, especially when considering Jesus' promise that He came to give full life to His followers (cf., John 10.10, 15.11). Barton considered much of her Christian journey to that point a façade – going through the motions, doing and saying all the right things, but without the supposed (and promised) rewards. This book is a distillation of what she discovered as the remedy for her spiritual brokenness.

In the book Barton describes eight spiritual practices, or disciplines, that revolutionized and revitalized her spiritually and seeks to help the reader better understand each practice and to encourage implementation in the reader's own spiritual life. Each chapter is well organized and follows a similar pattern. She begins with a description of the spiritual, physical and/or emotional issue(s) that result from a lack of exercising the particular discipline featured in the chapter. She then provides personal examples and anecdotes to help the reader understand the practical implications of a life void of the particular discipline. Barton's transparency and authenticity in sharing her personal struggle(s) is a real strength of the book. Finally, each chapter ends with a section labeled "Practice" with practical instructions on how to develop the discipline and implement it into the reader's own experience. The value of this section is that the suggestions and recommendations are measured and reasonable without the need for additional instruction or reading on the matter.

While there are many good suggestions for Christians, e.g., reading Scripture more slowly for transformation not just information, seeking solitude for communion with God, fasting from technology and recovering the biblical principle of "Sabbath", I disagree with most of Barton's conclusions and suggestions for practice. Phrases like "opening up", "touching the soul" and "consciously aware of God's presence with you" pepper the book leaving the reader to wonder if this is a book about orthodox Christian practices or some syncretistic New Age, Eastern mysticism, heterodoxical amalgam. Barton seems to recognize the boundary with which she is flirting when describing 'breathing prayers' because she attempts a defense of why that particular type of prayer is not "magical or mystical" nor is it the "same thing as mantra of Eastern meditation practice" (71). However, her apology does little to change the perspective and further underscores the concern when she describes 'breathing prayer' as something that "arises from deep within our being" and that they are "to the spiritual life what oxygen and the pulmonary system are to life in the body, a way for us to breathe rhythmically and reflexively with the Spirit—the very breath of God" and that we do not "think our way into [our] breath prayer; [we] discover it by listening to [our] deepest longings and desires" (71). If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it is probably shod through with Eastern transcendental principles.

Another weakness of the book is Barton's penchant for emotionally embellishing (almost reading in to) the text of Scripture. For example, in retelling the account of Bartimaeus from Mark 10 (cf., Matt 20; Luke 18) she speculates that when "Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by . . . he had a sense of new spiritual possibility" (23) . . . or he had a sense of new physical possibility, i.e., he knew Jesus could physically heal and restore sight. The latter is plainer in the text. She goes on to say that the "honesty, the desperation, the humanness of the cry was completely arresting" and that Jesus had no choice than to stop and seek out the one brave enough to release such a "soul cry" (23-4). I understand that what the author wants to communicate is what Augustine communicated much more succinctly 16 centuries earlier in his *Confessions* when he famously uttered, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you" (Book 1, 1.9). Give me Augustine – for the win!

In the end, I would not personally recommend this book to anyone seeking guidance in spiritual formation or spiritual disciplines. I think the author does a fine job identifying a far too common ailment of contemporary Christians, i.e., the "Christian Fatigue Syndrome", but her offer of a remedy is impotent. There are far better options available today and to spend valuable time in this resource may only serve to muddy what could otherwise be crystal clear waters. Any value the book may contain is negated by its syncretistic tendencies in practice and the hyperbolic conjecture and poetic license of the author in dealing with Scripture.

Jeremy says

In this book, Barton discusses basic spiritual disciplines that make up the sacred rhythms of life. She intros it with a discussion of the vital nature of these rhythms in our lives, and concludes the book with a description of a "rule of life", a way of structuring your sacred rhythms based on your unique person and your stage of life.

Read it.

Michael Culbertson says

Many people think of spiritual disciplines as a dusty drudgery of obligation, but Ruth Haley Barton compellingly shows that beneath any dusty exterior, spiritual disciplines are foremost about fulfilling our deepest and most personal longings—our desires to be who we truly are, to find meaning in our life, to love and feel loved despite our ugliness, to connect with God and others. Barton suggests that tasting the fulfillment of such deep seated desires that spiritual disciplines facilitate will lead us to want to drink deeply from the rich interior fountain of these life-giving practices.

Written in an easy, compelling, and heart-felt style. Chapters are moderately short and have a good balance of exposition and illustration, vision and reality, theory and practice. Each chapter concludes with practical suggestions for how to begin engaging with the given discipline, and there is a brief guide at the end of the book for reflecting with others on the material and experiences.

Highly recommended.

Cindy says

Excellent book to challenge the Christian to deeper intimacy through spiritual disciplines
