



Exploring Spiritual Practices with College Students

Why, What, and How

The Why of Spiritual Practice

It is no secret that college students lead busy, hectic lives – now more than ever. And it’s probably no surprise that living through a pandemic has only added to the stressors in their lives. Many students have reported that their workloads only *increased* when moving to online learning, leaving them often running on empty.

Spiritual practices are a helpful way to slow down from the stress of student life. But spiritual practice is also more than an opportunity for mindfulness. Spiritual practices ground us in our connection to God, one another, and the Holy Spirit’s work in each of us. As a people who believe in a relational God, who is actively at work in our lives, taking time to connect with God is an essential part of what it means to live out our Christian Faith. Spiritual practice provides students with the opportunity to notice how God is moving in their lives, and time to listen for God’s call. It is an integral aspect of their own vocational discernment in a pivotal time in their lives.

When students (and many older folks for that matter) think of spiritual practice, they often think of short list of activities: prayer, scripture reading, and maybe meditation. All of these are important and helpful practices that can nourish our relationship with the Divine. However, spiritual practice can be much broader. Furthermore, the ways in which we pray, and the ways in which we read and think about scripture, can also be far more expansive than what many of us were taught in Sunday school.

Everyone is different, and connects with God in different ways. Likewise, the spiritual practices that resonate with students will also vary from person to person.

The What of Spiritual Practice

One way to expose students to a variety of spiritual practices is to lead them through a semester (or a shorter study) of activities in which they have the opportunity to learn about and engage in a wide range of practices. You can also call on students that you know have a passion for art, writing, music, hiking, or a number of hobbies. You might ask them to reflect on how they connect with God in those practices, and lead the group in an activity in which the whole group can participate in their particular practice. This also offers students the opportunity to practice leadership and bring new meaning to a practice already present in their lives.

A *sample schedule* for your semester may look something like this:

- Week 1: Welcome Back & Intro to Spiritual Practice
 - Practice your community’s traditions of welcoming students back at the start of the semester.
 - Engage students in conversation around the question, “What is Spiritual Practice?”
 - Have students reflect & brainstorm on when they have felt most grounded & connected with God.

- Week 2: Ignatian Prayer
 - Lead students in the [Ignatian Examen Prayer](#).
 - Reflect on the experience of engaging in this kind of prayer, and what incorporating a prayer ritual like this might look like in their lives.

- Week 3: Lectio Divina
 - Engage students in conversation on how they normally interact with the Bible.
 - Lead students in a [lectio divina](#) practice of scripture reading.
 - Reflect on the experience of reading scripture in this way. How was this different (or similar to) how they have read the Bible in the past? How do they connect to scripture through this practice?

- Week 4: Labyrinth
 - If you have a labyrinth near your campus ministry, take a field trip!
 - If you do not have access do a labyrinth, you can create your own on a large piece of canvas (or have your students make one as a group project!
 - If practicing online, you can also create [finger labyrinths](#).
 - Share with students the [history](#) of labyrinths and lead them in a walking labyrinth [meditation](#).

- Week 5: Prayer Wall
 - Facilitate conversation on how students have been taught to think about prayer/how they engage in prayer.
 - Offer students substantial time to read through prayer books and write/draw their own prayers.
 - End with sharing prayers on a prayer wall: have a white-painted piece of plywood (or other appropriate material) and colored sharpies for students to write and/or draw their prayers to share as a collaborative project.

- Week 6: Sabbath
 - Lead conversation with students on their understanding of Sabbath time.
 - Read Genesis 2:1-4 & Exodus 20:8-11; discuss Biblical framework of Sabbath.
 - Have students write down their own “Sabbath plans.”
 - Check out [Soul Feast](#) by Marjorie Thompson for ideas and discussion points on Sabbath time.

- Week 7: Art
 - Before gathering, purchase 11x14 in. canvasses for everyone in your group to have one, along with acrylic paint & paint brushes.
 - Have someone in your group with painting experience lead the group in painting a simple image or design (ex: lavender, mountains, wildflowers).
 - While painting, discuss the connection between art & spirituality.
 - See [Creativity](#) by Matthew Fox for more conversation ideas on creativity & spirituality

- Week 8: Connecting Spiritual Practice & Justice
 - Lead students in conversation around questions such as -
 - What does spiritual practice have to do with the work of justice?
 - How do our spiritual practices inform our work in service and activism?
 - Can the work of justice be its own spiritual practice?
 - If there is an issue that your group feels passionate about, take time to write letters to local, state, and/or US officials regarding your issue.
 - Reflect on the spiritual effects of practicing this kind of advocacy; how does advocacy shape one’s sense of spiritual connection to God and others?
 - For more in-depth reflection on spiritual practice and justice, check out this [study guide](#) from the UU tradition. You may also want to read [Beguiled by Beauty](#) by Wendy Farley, which examines the connection between spiritual practice and our capacity for compassion.

- Week 9: Visualizing Scripture
 - Introduce this practice as another way to engage with scripture using our senses rather than our analytical minds.
 - Choose a passage from scripture that offers a visually stimulating scene (example: Feeding the 5000; Jesus walking on water).
 - Read passage multiple times, each time asking different sensory questions: What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? Where are you in this scene? Who are you in this scene?
 - Reflect on how this visualization practice connects students with scripture.

- Week 10: Creative Writing
 - Encourage students ahead of time to bring a notebook and writing utensil.
 - If there is a student in the group who is an active creative writer (poetry, fiction, song writing) this is a great opportunity to invite them to lead.
 - Leader can share personal narrative of role that writing that has played in their spiritual lives.
 - Engage students in writing practice with creative prompts for poetry and prose.
 - For more ideas and inspiration on creative writing as a spiritual practice, check out [How the Light Gets In](#) by Pat Schneider. [Lauren Graeber](#) is a spiritual writing teacher who is another excellent resource for ideas and workshops.

- Week 11: Yoga
 - Exam season is a great time to schedule yoga so students can relax and get out of their heads!
 - Bring in an instructor to lead a simple yoga practice suitable for all skill levels/bodies (could even be a student who does a lot of yoga!)
 - If you can, practice outside: this will allow students the relaxation of both nature and a body-centered activity.
 - Reflect on our bodies as a source of spiritual knowledge. How does the movement of our bodies serve as a spiritual practice? How do our bodies reveal God's presence to us?
 - For more information on different types of yoga and their connection to spirituality, check out this [article](#). If you don't have anyone available to lead, you can also find some great videos on YouTube. This [video](#) from Yoga with Adrienne offers a great beginner practice.

- Week 12: Closing Reflections
 - Review practices from the series.
 - Reflect on what practices most connected with people.
 - Have students create a Spiritual Practice plan, choosing what practices they hope to incorporate in their routine and putting them in their schedules.
 - Share plans with group, close in prayer.

This schedule can be adjusted based on the time frame and/or activity preferences of your group.

The **key takeaways** are:

- 1) Everyone's version of spiritual practice can look different.
- 2) Exploring a variety of practices can help us understand where we most connect with God, and respect the ways that others connect with God.
- 3) Making spiritual practice a priority is important for our relationship with God, ourselves, and others, shapes how we move through the world and live as followers of Jesus Christ.

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