

Spiritual Pathways

Various



People are different.

It is bedtime.

When Jesse and Tom were young, I remember going into their rooms at night to pray. I would say to one, I love you and God loves you, and he would say, I love you too daddy. It's a Hallmark moment.

I go over to the other one, say the same thing. He is staring up at me, suddenly still. Then he speaks: "Daddy, you've got something hanging out of your nose."

Two children. Same parents, same gene pool, same family, same house—but they have different sets of wiring. Before I became a parent, I had all kinds of naive notions about how much I was going to shape and mold the little lives that would be entrusted to me. After two of our three children were born, I got educated in a hurry.

I realized that if I was going to fully engage my children, I would have to learn to be present with them in ways that would most honor their wiring and personalities. If I tried to force them into all relating to me in the same way, it would be a disaster.

Everyone who is skillful at interacting with people comes to learn the same thing. Effective bosses and therapists and teachers and politicians master the art of reading and responding to human differences.

Not only that, but our lives are much richer because of the diversity of the people in them.

So why do we think God doesn't know about this?

He is the One who made us, and he made us to be wildly, wonderfully, absurdly different from each other. Thinkers and feelers, backslappers and wannabee hermits, race horses and turtles —"the Lord God made them all."

Yet all too often we fail to realize that our individual uniqueness means we will all experience God's presence and learn to relate to him in different ways, in ways that correspond to the wiring patterns he himself created in us. Frequently in churches we give people a "onesize-fits-all" approach to spiritual growth.

I want to talk about "spiritual pathways." A spiritual pathway has to do with the way we most naturally sense God's presence and experience spiritual growth.

We all have at least one pathway that comes most easily to us. We also have one or two that are the most unnatural and require a lot of stretching for us to pursue.

There is enormous freedom in identifying and embracing your spiritual pathway. It is a little like realizing that if you're an introvert, you don't have to work as a salesman; you could get a job in a library. You don't have to beat yourself up or feel guilty because of what is not your pathway. You can focus on relating to God in that way for which you were made, while at the same time recognizing your need to stretch in certain areas that don't come as naturally.

We will walk through seven spiritual pathways. We need to keep in mind that we all have at least some involvement in each one of them. All of us meet God in our minds, at work, in our relationships, and so on. But you will notice that certain pathways most resonate in you. They are the ones that may open up a whole new level of connection between you and God. Yet each pathway has certain dangers attached to it as well, and we will note those too.

I. INTELLECTUAL PATHWAY

People on the intellectual pathway draw closer to God as they learn more about him. The word "theology" has the same impact on you that the phrase "free ice cream" has on most people.

- When you go to church, you often find yourself marking time during the musical worship until the sermon starts.
- You get a little concerned about small groups containing a bunch of people who are just swapping ignorance with each other.
- When you are faced with crises or spiritual challenges, you tend to go into an analytic, problem-solving mode.

One person who probably walked this pathway was the apostle Paul. He writes about his life as a student of Gamaliel, one of the great Jewish scholars of his day. The richness of Paul's mind has occupied many of the greatest thinkers in the world for the past two thousand years. Perhaps most typical of this pathway is how frequently and irresistibly Paul will move in the middle of his writing from thinking to praising: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory. . . ."

If you're like Paul, the road to your heart usually runs through your head. You hear God best when you learn. You need to continually immerse yourself in great books, deep thoughts, and sound teaching. When your mind is growing, you feel fully alive. Many of your most significant moments of worship or devotion or decision or repentance came when you were in deep learning mode. You may want to sign up for classes at a seminary or go online for distance learning or get tapes of a few great teachers. If you quit learning, you grow stagnant.

The DANGER of this pathway lies in becoming all head and no heart. Dallas Willard once observed that it is extremely difficult to be right and not to hurt anybody with it. Very few people enjoy sitting next to the kid in class who's right all the time—and knows it. One of the remarkable things about Jesus is that he was always right, yet never damaged anyone with his mental superiority. "Knowledge

puffs up, but love builds up," wrote Paul, who was in a good position to know. So you may want to stretch by making sure your growth in knowledge always leads to a growth in worship.

II. RELATIONAL PATHWAY

People who follow the relational pathway find that they have a deep sense of God's presence when they're involved in significant relationships. Jesus' statement that *"where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"* makes perfect sense to a relational type. Small groups and other community experiences become indispensable.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow says that small groups are the biggest social revolution going on in life today, and relational types are one reason why. They are small group junkies.

If this is you, you rarely meet a stranger. Being alone drives you crazy. You sometimes feel guilty when you hear other people speak of long periods of solitude with God. "Solitude wouldn't be so bad," you think to yourself, "if I could just bring a bunch of other people along."

You have often experienced key spiritual moments—being convicted of sin, or encouraged to persevere—as God speaks to you through other people.

I think the apostle Peter may have been on this pathway. He came to Jesus with others. He was part of an inner circle along with James and John. After the crucifixion he was the one who gathered the other disciples to go fishing. The defining moments of his life—his decision to follow Jesus, his confession that Jesus is the Messiah, his denial of Jesus, his caving in to legalists (Paul writes about this in his letter to the Galatians) —all took place in a relational context.

People on this pathway need to lead a relationally rich life. They need to be part of friendships and small groups that are growing in depth and vulnerability. They will discover that they are much more likely to practice prayer or acts of servanthood when they can do it in a relational context. People on this pathway tend to hear God speak to them more in a conversation than from a

book. They stagnate spiritually to the degree they get isolated.

Relational types always have to guard against two dangers. One is superficiality. It is possible to get spread so thin relationally that no one gets past your external self to know you and love you and challenge you deeply. The second is to become dependent on others so that you live as a kind of spiritual chameleon. Practices like solitude and silence will be a stretch for you. They may never feel natural, but they will help free you from getting addicted to what others think.

III. SERVING PATHWAY

On the serving pathway people find that God's presence seems most tangible when they are involved in helping others. Jesus' comment that *"whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me"* is a truth they experience viscerally.

If this is you, you may find that you are somewhat uncomfortable in a setting where you don't have a role to play. But if you can do something—set up chairs, make coffee, help decorate—you feel a sense of God's delight in you. You often find yourself making observations that help you grow, or speaking to God in ways that feel most natural while you are engaged in acts of service.

An example of this in Scripture might be a woman named Dorcas. She gets only a brief mention in the book of Acts, but we are told that she was always doing good and involved in helping the poor.

Mother Teresa would be a kind of modern icon for this pathway. She said that the primary reason she was so involved in serving was not that it was something she was supposed to do, but that it brought her joy. She often felt her own inadequacy when she was alone; she never felt the presence of Jesus more strongly than in those she served.

People on this pathway find that if they are just attending church but have no place to serve, God begins to feel distant. They need to be plugged into a community where they have meaningful serving opportunities. They can enrich their sense of God's presence in their lives by constantly looking for him in the people they serve.

A danger to these people is the temptation to think God is present only when they are serving. They can get so caught up in being God's servant they forget they are his child first of all. They will have to stretch by learning to receive love as well as to offer it. Another danger is that if I am a big-time server, there is the temptation to resent others who are not serving as much as I am.

IV. WORSHIP PATHWAY

People on the worship pathway resonate with the psalmist who wrote, *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" They have a natural gift for expression and celebration. Something deep inside them feels released when praise and adoration are given voice. Some of their most formative moments occur during times of worship.*

A classic example of this occurs in Psalm 73. The psalmist is grouching about how often bad people get all the breaks, how the very people his mother warned him about are living the good life, and how he has been keeping his nose clean all his life and it has never paid off. *"When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me, till I entered the sanctuary of God."*

For the psalmist, it was in worship that he experienced again the reality of God's presence, and that presence changed his perspective on everything.

If this is you, when you worship at church you hope it will go on for hours.

You may or may not be naturally expressive, but somehow in worship your heart opens up and you come alive. You sometimes find yourself in tears, sometimes in moments of deep joy, because God seems so close.

King David probably had this pathway. He wrote psalms and poetry to God. He played the lyre and expressed his delight in God through music. We are told that on one occasion he danced before the Lord with so much exuberance that he stripped down pretty much to his BVDs in the process—something that you probably don't want to emulate if you are, say, Episcopalian or Baptist.

If this is your pathway, you need to experience great worship on a regular basis. You may want to turn your car into a rolling sanctuary. Get tapes of great music that helps you worship, then sing your lungs out as you drive down the road. Don't worry that we're all staring at you from our cars. This is how you connect to God. Besides, you will bring joy to all of us who watch.

Here are a few cautions for people on this pathway: Don't judge people who are not as outwardly expressive as you. Some people are from traditions where no one raises a finger, let alone a hand, in a worship service. Not everybody dances. Some of us are Scandinavian.

Also, guard against an experienced-based spirituality that has you always looking for the next "worship high."

C. S. Lewis wrote about the fatal sin of saying "encore!" by demanding that God reproduce an experience or an emotion. He said that of all prayers, this may be the one God is least likely to grant, because it can lead us to worship an experience rather than the God to whom our experience points. Music, for instance, can be a great gift to worship. But because music affects our feelings so powerfully I can grow dependent on music to produce a certain emotional response. I may need to spend some time worshipping God without music so that my worship is based on who God is and not a matter of getting swept up in certain sounds.

We can begin to judge the worship in our churches superficially by always demanding that they produce a certain emotional response. Engaging in study will be an important stretch for you, so that your heart is deeply rooted in the knowledge of God.

V. ACTIVIST PATHWAY

If you have an activist pathway, you have a high level of energy. You resonate with statements in Scripture such as the words said of Jesus: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

You have a passion to act. When you are in a group that hears a story about injustice, other people in the group shake their heads in sadness. You are vibrating for action: "Somebody's gotta do something! I'm in. Who's with me?"

Challenges don't discourage you; they energize you. You thrive on opposition. When someone says, "This can't be done," you smile and say, "Watch me!"

You love a fast-paced, problem-filled, complex, strenuous way of life. At the end of the day, you want to be able to say, "I ran really hard. I used every ounce of effort and zeal at my disposal, God, and it's all for you." Activists want to run with everything they have between now and the day they die, which will probably be in their early fifties of a heart attack. And when they get to the other side, they are desperately hoping heaven does not consist just of a cloud, a harp, a nice house, and an eternal song-book. That sounds a lot more like eternal punishment to them.

One biblical example of an activist is Nehemiah. When he hears that his beloved Jerusalem has fallen into disrepair, he is upset and wants to act. He invokes a classic example of the Activist Prayer: "*I prayed to my God and said to the king . . .*" For activists, prayer and action naturally go together. They are triggered to look for and depend on God's presence and guidance in the heat of battle.

If you are an activist, you need a cause. It doesn't have to be glamorous or visible, but it has to demand the best you have to offer. Without this, your spiritual life will stagnate.

A caution for you is that you may get so excited about the cause that you begin to run over other people or exploit them because you get so focused on what you want to accomplish. Even God may become a means to an end for you rather than the one you serve. Activists sometimes have a hard time discerning God's true call from their own strong impulses to action. You may need to create balance by spending time in solitude and reflection, so that you allow God to speak to you about what is truly motivating your action.

VI. CONTEMPLATIVE PATHWAY

If you have a contemplative pathway, you love large blocks of uninterrupted time alone. Reflection comes naturally to you. You often feel like an observer in life.

God is most present to you when distractions and noises are removed. Images and metaphors and pictures help you as you pray. If you get too busy, or spend too much time with too many people hanging around, you begin to feel drained and stretched thin.

This is a challenge in American society. What happens when a quiet contemplative type meets a chatty relational type? They get married. And drive each other crazy.

There's an interesting difference between the activist and the contemplative. When an activist says, "I'll call you back," that means, "I'll call you back as soon as I get home, if not sooner because I do have a cell phone with me at all times." When a contemplative says, "I'll call you back," it means, "I'll call you back before I die. Probably right before."

The apostle John—who was known as the disciple that Jesus loved—has been understood to be one who loved to bask in the adoration of God. People like this are often sought out because of their great wisdom and sense of poise.

If you are a contemplative, you may need permission to follow your pathway. American society tends to value networkers and activists; contemplatives don't end up on many magazine covers. Making time to listen to God in silence and solitude is vital to the health of your soul, and necessary for you to experience a deepening sense of his presence. You will need regular, protected, intense, undistracted times alone.

Reading other contemplatives, such as St. John of the Cross or Henri Nouwen, often helps you. You will probably find it helpful to keep a journal. (Relational types almost never journal. They might dictate to a stenographer. Activists don't journal much, though they may sell other peoples' journals.)

You may need to stretch in the area of relationships. It will be tempting for you to retreat to your inner world when friends or work or society disappoints you. Involvement in significant relationships and regular acts of service will help keep you tethered to the external world.

VII. CREATION PATHWAY

Creation types find that they have a passionate ability to connect with God when they are experiencing the world he made.

In Greek mythology there is a character named Actaeon, who could not be defeated in wrestling even by Hercules, because each time he touched the earth he sprang to life again.

For people on the creation pathway, there is something deeply life-giving and God-breathed about nature. Being outdoors replenishes and energizes you. If you are cooped up inside too long, your soul starts to feel stale. We are told that "the heavens declare the glory of God," and that glory shines out of all creatures great and small.

Being out in the creation opens your spirit to God. Naturalist John Muir called nature "the manuscripts of God."

We see in Scripture how Jesus illustrates this pathway (and probably all the other pathways as well). He was constantly withdrawing from people to go up into the mountains or to be near a lake, and there to commune with his Father. He wanted to be out in the creation—which I suppose is not surprising, since he created it!

In Jesus' day, of course, being outdoors was much more a part of life for people automatically than it is for many of us today. We can spend a whole day without even looking at the sky. But if creation is your pathway, you will want to spend large chunks of time outdoors. It will often be particularly helpful to have times of prayer or meditation in nature. (Both Jesus' teachings and the psalms are rich with passages that demonstrate much time meditating on how we learn about God from creation: trees and seeds and sparrows and leviathans and mountains of refuge and rivers of living water.) This may be a challenge, depending on where you live. You may need to bring beauty inside during certain parts of the year; if you do, arrange to have flowers or the flame of a candle nearby as you pray.

People on the creation pathway may need to guard against using it as an escape. People are part of creation too—but you may find that when they disappoint you, you are tempted to run away to the woods. Folks in our day are sometimes prone to think, "I don't need church; I can worship God on

my own in nature." But of course, we have to learn to see beauty where God does, and people are the most valued part of all that he created.

USING THE PATHWAYS TO EXPERIENCE GOD

Once we know which pathways are ours, how do we use this information to help us experience God's closeness?

1. For starters, we need to accept and embrace the unique way God created us. Instead of following "mass production" approaches to spiritual growth, we need to make sure that we spend adequate time and activity pursuing the pathways that most help us connect with God. Understand and build on your pathways.
2. Incorporate practices that involve these pathways into the rhythms of your life. This will probably take repeated attempts and experimentation.
3. Embracing how God made you also means you need to resist the temptation to envy somebody else's pathway.

And beware of the temptation to judge somebody else's pathway.

I know of a contemplative man who is married to a relational woman, who doesn't spend nearly as much time in solitude or quiet prayer as he does. It is easy for him to assume an air of superiority: "How come you can't get your prayer life together? Why don't you go at prayer as long and hard as I do?"

But of course, the greatest single gift we can pray for is love. And when it comes to love, she beats him on every lap around the track. No pathway is superior to any other.

4. We also need to pay attention to those pathways that may not come naturally to us. It is important that we have some involvement in each of the pathways. No one can ignore their *intellectual* life or opt out of *worship*.

And each of us has a few temptations that will mean there are pathways we particularly need to be stretched in.

For instance, you might be tempted to think, "No wonder I don't like to be alone. I'm a relational type. Now I'm off the hook for solitude—I don't have to do that at all!"

Not a good idea. Because one of the temptations of relational types is to be overly influenced by others. Solitude is an important stretching experience. It may never come naturally to you. But it will help you to keep from living as a chameleon.

CLOSING

God is closer than you think. One of the greatest dimensions of this truth is that God wants to have a relationship with you that is unlike his relationship with any other being in all creation.

One grandmother put it like this. When anyone asked her which of her six children she loved the most, she said "love for your children doesn't work that way." She said "it's as if when each child is born, another little room gets added to your heart. And no one else occupies that room. It doesn't have to be bigger or better than any other room. It's just theirs."

"In my Father's house are many rooms," Jesus said. One of them was added on when you became his child. That one is yours, and no one else can ever occupy it. It is secret to you and him. It's your own private Sistine Chapel. It is furnished by every moment of intimacy and wonder and togetherness shared by you and your Father.

Let's learn to hear God in "our" way.