

Cultivate

This is the final teaching in *The Quest for Thin Places* series based on Dana Hicks' book of the same name.

Life is hard. No matter who you are, there are bumps and hits and bruises along the way. And my advice is to prepare yourself because football lessons teach us that success and achievement come from overcoming adversity and that team accomplishment far exceeds anyone's individual goals. To be successful at anything, the truth is you don't have to be special. You just have to be what most people aren't: consistent, determined, and willing to work for it. No shortcuts. – Tom Brady, Hall of Fame Induction Speech, June 12, 2024.

The only thing that endures over time is the 'Law of the Farm.' You must prepare the ground, plant the seed, cultivate, and water if you expect to reap the harvest." – Stephen Covey (Author and management consultant, from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.)

Questions:

*What's one thing you have cultivated in your life?
What was involved in the process?*

Matthew 13:1-9 (CEB):

That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

He said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

Questions:

*How would you describe the soil for your faith?
What was the "faith soil" you did not choose?
What "faith soil" have you chosen since?
Why do you want to cultivate your faith?
Why, why, why, why?*

Disciple: "Is there anything that I can do to make myself enlightened?"

Zen Master: "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."

Disciple: "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?"

Zen Master: "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

– Anthony de Mello (Indian Jesuit priest and psychotherapist)

Sometimes neurology makes sense, in part, of spiritual experiences. The Reticular Activating System (RAS) is part of the human brainstem. It's job is to filter out unnecessary information so the most important stuff gets through... We often see and hear what we are looking for, not all of what is actually there.

Another part of the RAS is seeking information that validates our beliefs. If you think that people are basically selfish, greedy, and out for themselves, you will notice evidence everywhere that reinforces that

belief. If you believe people are generally kind and generous, you will find proof of that, too. There is plenty of evidence for either of these beliefs, but your RAS finds evidence to reinforce what you have chosen to believe. This can be dangerous when the RAS traps us into biases or stereotypes and doesn't allow us to see another perspective (247-248). – Dana Hicks

True: have a Reticular Activating System.

Also true: There is a loving, nudging, wooing Presence that points all toward shalom.

Eugene Peterson, who wrote and thought from a Christian framework, would tuck his young son into bed every night and recite a short set of beliefs that he believed was essential. Eugene hoped to activate his son's RAS to become like his lens of seeing the world. He would repeat, "God loves you. God is on your side. God is pursuing you. God is relentless" (249).

Faith Cultivation and American Can-Do Spirit. Are you aware of how US culture of achievement has shaped you? I'm only beginning to really appreciate how Capitalism has radically shaped how I think about everything. There is an underlying pressure to succeed, to perform, to not suck that pervades all we do, including our spirituality. On the one hand, cultivating spirituality requires some effort on our part. On the other hand, as the Zen Master noted, we can't conjure up God moments at will or from trying hard enough.

Tom Brady's speech may inspire people to do more reps and eat a very controlled diet in an effort to succeed where others fail, but there is a very real limit to his logic. If I try really hard and do everything he did, I will still never, ever become an NFL quarterback. There is just more involved than will and determination. And it takes more than an individual to do anything. Anything! You cannot survive solely on your own. Everything we are is built from community effort, not just our own. Let that humble our American Spirit a bit as is appropriate, reminding us that we live in community, need each other, and should be grateful to be alive in such a complex system.

Dana Hicks noted that Jesus' temptations weren't just about power, greed, and coercing God to do his will, thus becoming God over God. There was an immediacy with the temptations – do the requested action and receive immediate results. That's not how most of life works. The lasting things of life that make life worth living take time to cultivate. Sorry, fast food Americans, this can't be rushed.

Expectations and evaluations. Carol Dweck's research helped unlock academic potential. For kids who were struggling, instead of giving them failing grades or even poor grades, their teachers simply wrote "Not Yet" on their papers or exams. This changed the perspective of the students to being learning focused rather than grade focused. Poor, low performing schools became high performing schools in a short amount of time. We are hard wired to be achievement focused rather than process focused. The truth about faith is that we never "arrive" – we are always in process. Knowing that gives us the freedom to experience different seasons of our faith without feeling like we're failing or we're wrong – we just are.

Questions:

*What is Shalom nudging you toward today?
How might you continue cultivating your faith
so that you may be awake for sunrises to come?*

Not Yet. Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. (New York: Random House, 2006) is a great introduction to Dr. Dweck's research. Her compelling TED talk on growth has almost 6 million views: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_X0mgOOSpLU&t=560s&ab_channel=TED

Unless otherwise indicated, all references can be found in Dana Hicks' book, [*The Quest for Thin Places: How to Find Spirituality after Deconstruction*](#).