

Advance praise for *Just Begin*:

“Maybe the best advice for those who want to weave spirituality into their lives—whether meditation, prayer, or anything else—is to *Just Begin*. In this work, subtitled *A Sourcebook of Spiritual Practices*, religious studies professor Dann E. Wigner introduces 40 different practices from Eastern and Western traditions—from mindfulness to music, yoga to the Lord’s Prayer. There are plenty of choices, if we can only begin.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Dann Wigner offers a contemporary updating of classic Christian practices that can help Jesus’ followers actually *live* the life he promised. Practicing these exercises with the flexibility Wigner suggests leads toward the ‘union with God’ that *is* the Jesus life. Quoting Merton, Wigner reminds us that we’re all *beginners* who must begin every day *doing* what helps us *become* who we want to be tomorrow.”

—Dr. Fred Meeks, Emeritus Professor of Religion,
Wayland Baptist Seminary

“In a world in which, as Dann Wigner puts it, ‘motion is our default setting,’ pausing to engage in spiritual practices can seem like an impossible task. Yet God desires relationship and promises to meet us as we are. With *Just Begin*, Dann Wigner deconstructs twenty-five spiritual practices into a ‘how-to guide,’ lowering the hurdle for beginners by describing each practice in simple language appropriate for people of all ages. Wigner even anticipates common questions of beginners. Spiritual directors, Christian educators, school chaplains, and anyone leading a community of faith will want to have at least two copies—one to have and one to lend. *Just Begin* is a welcomed addition to any library of books about spiritual practices. As Wigner invites his readers, find the one or ones that resonate with you and ‘just begin.’”

—Jenifer C. Gamber, Assistant to the Rector and Day School Chaplain
at St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.

“Dann Wigner’s insights as a religious studies scholar who practices what he preaches make *Just Begin* an essential guide for opening up centuries’ worth of spiritual practices for those seeking wisdom in the present day. This book has just the right blend of gentle guidance and practical advice for the next steps on your spiritual journey.”

—Gladys Ganiel, Queens University Belfast, Ireland

“*Just Begin* is author Dann Wigner’s admonition to those who ponder adding a spiritual discipline to their daily schedules. *Just Begin* is written as a resource. Dr. Wigner has found just the right approach to surveying the spiritual disciplines. The book is full of wit, wisdom, and wonder. I anticipate using it as a teaching tool and as a personal reference in my daily practice.”

—The Rev. Pat Russell, Spiritual Director

“Ready to live more fully? Dann Wigner’s book, *Just Begin: A Sourcebook of Spiritual Practices*, opens doors to deeper intimacy with oneself, others, and God. This book is beautifully balanced, includes a wide range of spiritual practices, and encourages readers to adapt these to their own preferences. The greatest quality of Dann’s book is its accessibility and value to all of us in our various stages of spiritual development. So let’s get this treasure and just begin!”

—The Rev. Dr. Madoc Thomas, pastor of New Home
United Methodist Church, Lubbock, Texas

“*Just Begin* is about discovery, meaning, and grace. Through a variety of spiritual practices, you are invited into stillness and quiet. In these open spaces of time and rhythm, you can listen to your soul and encounter the whisper of God. For this contemplative person, the book was an amazing guide to options that invite one to go deeper and to just ‘be’ in the presence of our God!”

—Cookie Cantwell, Youth Ministries Coordinator, St. James Parish,
Wilmington, North Carolina

Just Begin

A Sourcebook of Spiritual Practices

Dann E. Wigner



Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction ix

SECTION 1: MEDITATING / 1

1. The Jesus Prayer 3

2. The Lord's Prayer 8

3. *Lectio Divina* 12

4. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola 21

5. Reframing 34

6. Observing 38

7. Journaling 42

SECTION 2: LISTENING / 49

8. Centering Prayer 51

9. Clarity 57

10. Loving-Kindness Reflection 60

11. Letting Go 65

SECTION 3: BEING / 69

12. Practicing the Presence of God 71

13. Sitting Meditation 77

14. Stargazing 82

15. Nonjudging 86

SECTION 4: SENSING / 91

16. The Rosary 93
17. Praying with Icons. 98
18. Body Scan. 102
19. Mindful Eating 107
20. Drumbeat 111
21. Fasting. 115
22. Labyrinths 120
23. Pilgrimage 124

SECTION 5: EMBODYING / 129

24. Body Flow: Pilates with Mindfulness. 131
25. Body Flow: Yoga with Centering Prayer 168

Conclusion 197
Resources for Further Study 201

Introduction

The greatest adventure is always right in front of us—in the realization that there is far more to the universe than what we see with our own two eyes. But how will we live into that adventure? That’s where spiritual practices give us a place to begin.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

What you are holding in your hands is not a novel, textbook, manual, or an answer to all of life’s problems. This book is a sourcebook of spiritual practices. In the following pages, I will briefly introduce many practices to you. These introductions have one singular point: to begin. I am giving you enough information to begin to use each practice; what you do with each practice from that point is entirely up to you. Feel free to skip practices or entire chapters that do not appeal to you. Think of this book a bit like a dictionary or encyclopedia. It’s not necessary to read straight through; rather, use it as needed.

HOW IS THIS BOOK SET UP?

Since this book is a practical tool, you’ll find that each chapter’s layout is remarkably similar. Each chapter has five parts: (1) some brief background to the practice, (2) a step-by-step method to begin the practice, (3) many variations of the practice, (4) common questions and troubleshooting, and (5) some potential journaling prompts or discussion questions. The chapters themselves are arranged in sections that focus on basic areas of human experience in which the differing practices fit.

The first section is concerned with practices of meditating or concentrating deeply. On the basis of concentration, I then move to practices of contemplating or listening. These spiritual practices are helpful for quieting our minds of internal chatter and distraction. From the standpoint of listening, the third section of being is where I will introduce you to

several practices that encourage us simply to be present wherever we are right now. That goal can be harder than you think. If you don't believe me, then try some of the practices from that section. Fourth, I draw together skills from meditating, listening, and being to the world around us through the language of sensing, specifically using our five senses to engage our world spiritually. Finally, I deal with practices of embodying which I have grouped together into several body "flows" with which you can experiment. Within this framework, I encourage you to remember a couple of important disclaimers.

Do not limit yourself by following the steps of each practice to the letter. I've provided steps so that you have somewhere to start. Please feel free to modify them to suit your individual needs and tastes. Second, the spiritual life and walking with God is not a series of steps. While a plan helps you to get started, God will often work outside the bounds of any practice detailed in these pages. Be open to the unpredictable. Third, if you are experimenting with a new type of practice, then try at least a few variations to see if that practice resonates with you. And don't feel bad that they don't all offer what you need spiritually. There are many practices in these pages that do not speak much to me personally. That's okay; variety is the spice of life after all. When you do find a practice or set of practices that connect with you, go ahead and seek out the additional resources that I have noted. These books are specifically chosen to go further in depth into the theory and implementation of each practice.

WHY THIS BOOK?

At this early point, you might already be thinking, "Why another book on spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines? What makes this one special?" There are quite a few books out there. Most of these books focus on a few practices, at most ten to twelve. These practices are typically considered in great depth and often are organized around a central theme. In my experience, these books are often imposing and confusing. The average person leaves them with bewilderment or a sense of self-defeat in not attaining to the level of "true" spirituality. I seek to offer an alternative to that mentality. Adapt. Experiment. TRY. If you don't connect with a particular practice, do not feel defeated, simply feel human. This sourcebook is intended to be a reference tool for you, the person interested in prayer and spirituality,

so you can add new methods and exercises to your mystical “toolbox” to enrich your spiritual life. And, like a toolbox, if you find that a particular screwdriver, hammer, or ratchet doesn’t suit your needs, then there is no problem with finding a different one—the right tool for the right job.

WHAT ABOUT ME?

One of the major reasons that I wanted to write this book for you is that I’m also writing it to me. I am not a “mystic” or “contemplative,” and my life experiences have been fairly average. Yet I believe there is more to this world than we dare to think. Spiritual practices are a way to commit to that type of belief for me. In my own quest, I have studied and taught contemplative Christianity on academic and congregational levels, but—and I can’t stress this enough—I know these practices as one who continually practices them—tweaking, refining, adapting, experimenting, learning, beginning again and again. I am a firm adherent to the perspective of which Thomas Merton articulated, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life.”¹

So, let’s begin . . .

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1971), 37.

Section 1

MEDITATING

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

In Christian history, if you wanted to think very deeply about God, a scripture passage, the universe, or other related subjects, then you would be talking about meditation or concentration. In fact, you can still find many books by holy men and women filled with statements and observations intended to encourage thought and reflection which are entitled “Meditations.” If, however, you are thinking of meditation as a way to empty your mind of thoughts, then you will want to consult the section on being later in this book.

Many of the practices in this opening section easily fall under the moniker of concentration or repetition. I want to start here because I want us to start with the most familiar actions for any of us. We’ve all had to memorize or concentrate at one time or another in our lives. So, in that spirit, we’ll take a look at the basics of getting started with some very traditional Christian practices: the Jesus Prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, *lectio divina*, and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Also, we’ll investigate some potentially less familiar practices: reframing, observing, and journaling. These practices interact and arise from the traditions of mindfulness meditation. While we will look at mindfulness more in depth in the section on practices of being, I would like to introduce this way of spirituality briefly at this point.

Mindfulness arises from several mystical practices associated with the religions of the East. According to Susan Kaiser Greenland, in *Mindful Games*, “The word *mindfulness* comes from the ancient languages Sanskrit

and Pali, in which it is defined as ‘remembering’—as in remembering the object of our attention.”¹ So we can see that mindfulness is closer to the Christian meaning of meditation than it might appear on the surface. While remembering, concentrating, or repeating may not be the most alluring activities when we think of spiritual practice, they are the foundation of all other practices. So let’s get ready and stretch our concentration “muscles” as we begin.

1. Susan Kaiser Greenland, *Mindful Games: Sharing Mindfulness and Meditation with Children, Teens, and Families* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016), 53.

1

The Jesus Prayer

BRIEF BACKGROUND

The Jesus Prayer originated in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. While this practice has a long history, it is tied to the practices of early desert hermits, or *hesychasts*, in Egypt. In simplest terms, the Jesus Prayer as a practice is the activity of repeating over and over the prayer, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” or some close variant of these words. The purpose behind these repetitions may be driving out distracting thoughts or concentrating on the mercy of God. The number of repetitions varies greatly among practitioners, with some monastic adherents attempting to repeat this prayer mentally in a never-ending manner. This prayer can also be coupled in the Eastern Orthodox tradition with use of a prayer rope, similar to rosary beads, in which the person praying keeps count of the number of prayers by making or counting the number of knots in the rope.

HOW TO PRACTICE

This practice is one of the simplest disciplines to begin, and it allows for endless variations.

1. Recite mentally or verbally, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
2. Repeat.
3. Repeat.
4. Repeat.

There are no exact instructions for the exact number of times to recite this prayer or even how to do so in a specific way. When using the Jesus Prayer, you are trying to imprint Jesus Christ on your deepest thought patterns. The *hesychasts* considered this prayer as the path to literal adherence to St.

Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). You might like to jump right in, but if you are like me, you might want a few practical suggestions on how to implement this practice.

VARIATIONS

Synchronize with Your Breath

Try reciting a single phrase as you breathe in, then another while you breathe out. For example, "Jesus Christ," [breathe in] "Son of God," [breathe out] "have mercy on me," [breathe in] "a sinner" [breathe out]. You can vary this method even further. Try using only one word between breaths, or recite the entire prayer as you breathe deeply in or out.

Different Words

If you consult some of the resources on the Jesus Prayer that I suggest, you'll notice that the exact words do vary a bit. For instance, try, "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on me." You might also try varying your request. Instead of mercy, what else might you ask for? Grace? Hope? Patience? Peace?

Mechanical Recitation

While I would not recommend this variation as your go-to method for the Jesus Prayer, think about simply reciting the words in your mind for a designated period of half an hour or hour. Do not take out any time set aside for the purpose of prayer. Just see what it's like to have those recurring words pounding into your subconscious mind again and again like a jackhammer.

Word Meanings

Ruminate on the meaning of each word. "Jesus." What does that mean? "Christ." What does that mean? "Son." What does that mean? You can also use this variation with association by focusing on what other words come to mind as you repeat each word of the Jesus Prayer.

Syllables

Break up your recitation to linger on specific syllables. Is that more distracting? Does it require more attention? Is there any meaning left when we break the words down into their constituent sounds? What might that teach us?

Attitudes

Rather than varying the words, come at the recitation of words from different attitudes. Begin with the difference in saying the prayer between the Pharisee and tax collector (see Luke 18:9–14). How did you feel different when saying those words from different perspectives? How about different emotional states? Can you say the Jesus Prayer equally sincerely in a state of joy as in a state of abject demoralization? Journaling might be particularly useful here to help you differentiate among reactions.

Switch

Imagine the prayer from Jesus' perspective, praying for you (see John 17). Try, "Father in heaven, have mercy on [your name], for I love them." What does it feel like to have Jesus pronounce your name?

Back to Breath

As you breathe this prayer in and out, imagine that you are filled with the light and love of God as you inhale. Then imagine that all guilt, worry, and trouble flow out of you as you exhale.

Truthfully, the sky's the limit when it comes to variations of this practice. What are some other possibilities? What do you wish you could change about the prayer? Why not change it?

COMMON QUESTIONS

Q: What if I've never practiced this type of prayer before?

A: First of all, go easy on yourself. Don't expect too much out of the practice until you get used to the "mechanics" of it. Also, realize that this type of prayer practice has results that are seen more in your attitude throughout the day rather than during the practice itself.

Q: What if I don't feel anything?

A: This is a common question that applies to almost any practice. Please rest assured that these practices are not about certain feelings. Feelings come and go. At times, you may have very intense feelings while praying the Jesus Prayer. At other times, you might not feel anything special at all. That's okay. Feelings will vary from time to time and from person to person. Find your own rhythm.

Q: Is there any relative difference between the effectiveness of saying the Jesus Prayer aloud versus saying it silently?

A: Not really. Speaking the prayer aloud often helps to focus your attention. Of course, there are some obvious circumstances in which you would not want to verbalize the prayer like walking down a crowded street or riding the bus, but there is no “spiritual” difference in verbalizing or not verbalizing the prayer.

Q: Are particular postures or gestures necessary when using the Jesus Prayer?

A: No, this prayer is very versatile. You can pray it kneeling, seated, prostrated, standing, walking, or even running. You can combine the prayer with the sign of the cross or even some of the yoga postures suggested in chapter 25.

Q: Do you need to have or make an Eastern Orthodox prayer rope to use with the Jesus Prayer?

A: While a prayer rope it is not essential, it is a very effective tool for keeping your hands focused in a complementary way to your mind as you repeat the Jesus Prayer. Rosary beads can also be used in the same way.

Q: Is the Jesus Prayer “magic”?

A: No, there is no ethereal “power” in the words themselves. Additionally, the mere repetition of the words does not guarantee some obligation on the part of God, like a “magic spell” is intended to produce. The Jesus Prayer is chiefly effective to change you, not God. God always wants to show mercy; we are just not always willing to seek and accept it.

Q: Is the Jesus Prayer a mantra?

A: If the Jesus Prayer had to be compared to another type of repetitive meditative practice, then a mantra would be the closest analog. However, they are not quite the same. The intended purpose of a mantra is to use the act of repetition itself to drive thoughts out of the practitioner’s mind—to empty your thoughts. The Jesus Prayer works in the opposite direction. You are seeking to fill your mind with a constant awareness of Christ. While that process would also drive out spurious thoughts, the balance of emphasis has shifted.

Q: Is the Jesus Prayer an example of self-hypnosis or autosuggestion?

A: Much like the previous question, there are some points of contact between self-hypnosis and the Jesus Prayer. Both the psychological practice of self-hypnosis and the Jesus Prayer are focused on imprinting a particular thought pattern on the practitioner. However, you are

entirely conscious when using the Jesus Prayer. You are not trying to engage your subconscious mind in the Jesus Prayer. So while self-hypnosis or autosuggestion is seeking to change a participant, the Jesus Prayer is a reminder about a commitment to change, that is, a commitment to seek and accept God's mercy.

Q: The Jesus Prayer seems very sin-focused. What if I don't feel the need to focus on sin in that way?

A: You might try a variant of the Jesus Prayer that focuses on a different aspect of God's action or nature like hope or love. Also, you might try conceiving of sin in terms of your "struggles" or "problems" rather than in terms of "transgressions" or even "temptations."

Q: Are there any circumstances in which the Jesus Prayer might be counterproductive?

A: Yes, if you suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), then you might try a different prayer practice. The repetitive nature of the Jesus Prayer could reinforce OCD and detract from the good purposes of the practice itself.

Q: How similar is the Jesus Prayer to the Ave Maria ("Hail Mary") prayer which is used with the Catholic Rosary?

A: Both Eastern Orthodox prayer ropes and Catholic rosary beads are used in similar ways. While these two prayers are not exactly interchangeable, they are used in an analogous way. There is no problem at all if you wish to use the "Hail Mary" with a prayer rope or the Jesus Prayer with rosary beads.

POTENTIAL JOURNALING PROMPTS OR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What positive experiences did you have while practicing this practice?
2. What negative experiences did you have while practicing this practice?
3. How did you adapt this structure to your situation?
4. How did you meet God in this practice?
5. How did the repetitive nature of this practice impact you?
6. How did the Jesus Prayer encourage you to think about mercy this week?
7. How did the physical act of using a prayer rope (if you did so) help you to pray this week?