



Reclaiming a Positive Sense of Discipline

Tom Reid, Consultant, Mediator, Coach

The Reid Group

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What thoughts, feelings or images come to mind when you hear the word discipline? Are they mostly positive, negative or a mix?

For many of us the word “discipline” carries primarily mixed or negative connotations. It certainly did for me as I was growing up. Discipline seemed something imposed upon me by others. I thought of discipline in terms of a dominating slave driver—all hard work and no play. Then, for my sophomore year at Notre Dame I went to Innsbruck, Austria. This was the first time I was away from family for an extended period of time and, in many ways, the first time I had time for leisure, quiet and reflection.

When I came back to Notre Dame, my studies took on a new meaning. I had been majoring in sociology for no other purpose than to get a degree; indeed, I was in college mainly because people told me I should get an education. My images of success consisted of being an athlete or a movie star or making a lot of money. By these standards, I knew that I would never be a success so I had resigned myself to living a “mediocre” life.

But then as I studied the lives of Gandhi and Jung and looked anew at the life of Jesus, I was inspired by the commitment with which they lived their lives, following their own destinies. Their life stories called me to a fullness of life, a potential to develop to the fullest of what it meant to be me.

This was a time when studies, particularly reading, started to become more important to me. For the first time I was reading things that spoke to me and my life and was reading things I was drawn to read, rather than simply because I had been assigned to read. One night, a friend came into my room, looking at my bookcase. He picked up a book and asked if I had read it. Yes, I said. And this one? he asked. Part of it, I answered. And this one? No, not yet. And this one? This one? No, I admitted. Well, what do you do—collect them or read them? he asked.

I realized then that I was not going to be able to tip that bookcase over and just pour the knowledge into my brain. I needed to put in some time and effort—in other words, I needed discipline—if I was going to develop and realize my potential.

George Maloney, in his article “Asceticism Today: Following Jesus in the Real World,” points out that in the Christian tradition, there was, originally, a close relationship

between the words mysticism and asceticism. "Mysticism" was defined as the growing experience of union with God in the life of a Christian. "Asceticism" is the collection of practices or disciplines that enable the Christian to reach that goal. The practice of discipline is necessary to foster the union with God sought by the Christian mystic.

Maloney describes discipline as the means to overcome the obstacles that prevent us from reaching the ultimate goal: growing experience of God and growing unity with God, neighbor and self.

Discipline has, he says, a negative side in that it addresses "removing all that hinders one's ability to love," but it also has a positive side, emphasizing "consistent striving to gain virtues and graces that develop a Christian spirit of love."

In other words, discipline involves both "taking away" and "adding to." Discipline helps us to pare down the excesses in our lives that get in the way of our union with God, and also to hone those practices that strengthen our connection to God, neighbor, self and all creation.

Where are you called in your life to die to something, and where are you called to new life?

This Paschal theme of dying and rising was a remote abstraction to me until the time of my father's dying when I began to experience the connection between death and new life. We experience this connection in the rhythm of nature, moving out of winter and into spring. It is a connection made incarnate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As followers of Christ, we are called to see this pattern in our own lives.

What does all this mean in practical terms? How can we develop a sense of discipline in our lives today? We might begin with a consideration of the whole person as a physical, intellectual, emotional, relational and active being. Where in all of these areas are we being called to leave old patterns and to grow or be born into new ways? For example, do I take time for regular exercise; do I make time to read; do I take time to reflect on how I am doing in my relationships with myself, friends, family, colleagues, with those most in need?

There are many ways to incorporate discipline into daily life. Watching our diet is one familiar to many, but there are also the discipline of making time for regular prayer, the discipline of keeping a journal, the discipline of making time for reading and reflection, the discipline of being charitable, the discipline of listening, being patient, being loving and caring in one's activities and relationships. All of these can strengthen and nourish our spiritual unfolding.

Many people are becoming reacquainted with the discipline of fasting, and this is one which you, either alone or with friends, might want to try. A 24-hour fast periodically can be a wonderfully enriching experience. And don't restrict the notion of fasting to food. It can apply more broadly to any appetite, anything that is "too much" in your life

that needs a more gentle, responsible control: too much negative thinking, too much talking, too much gossip, too much busyness, too much work.

Reclaiming a positive sense of discipline and giving it its proper place in our striving to live a Christian life can strengthen our union with God, with our neighbors, ourselves and all creation.