



Death by Suburb

[How to keep the suburbs from killing your soul]

Study 5

of an 8 Week Study

The Environmental TOXIN:

I NEED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITH MY LIFE

The Spiritual PRACTICE:

PURSUING ACTION, NOT RESULTS

Introduction

I'm a starter. I start things. I have tremendous energy for launching new projects. And I'm learning, often through pain, that it's also important to finish things. As I write, I'm looking at an unpainted area under a bay window in our family room. I got most of the room painted, but not all of it. That's because I still need to sand some drywall mud before I can finish painting. So the room is in an unfinished state.

Likewise, serving others is quite easy to start doing. It's agonizing to stay with it once it becomes tedious or hard. That's when some of our true motivations surface. Perhaps my service wasn't really about others; maybe it was about my being in love with the idea of serving others. Maybe it was all about my need for feeling significant.

To make progress spiritually, means moving from serving only out of a sense of purpose or sense of significance (what's in it for me) to simple obedience to what God is calling me to do. A Shirker is someone who fails to engage Reality. Someone who stays inside the Religious Bubble of Bible studies, of church programs, of a Christian Everything. This person fails to engage the real world

.—Dave Goetz

Reading the Chapter

This study is based on Chapter 6 of Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing the Soul. Chapter 6 explains the toxin as well as the key spiritual practice. Read the chapter before completing the study.

Understanding Your 'Burb

After a broken engagement in Colorado when I was in my mid-twenties, I moved back to North Dakota for about eight months. I was troubled on many levels, but especially as it related to my life's direction. I felt adrift. I remember walking at dusk around the oval-shaped drive on the North Dakota State Capitol grounds, praying, begging God to use me at any cost. I wanted my life to count for something.



So much of the first half of life is about the development of the self, even though we may use language that is heroic or that sounds spiritual: "I want my life to matter for God." That is especially true in the Protestant tradition in which I grew up and still, for the most part, inhabit.

1. List some of the typical ways that you see your acquaintances, friends, and family create meaning and find purpose in their lives.

- a. Through public recognition or acceptance.
- b. Through the pursuit of religious activities or programs.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.
- j.

2. One key concept of the religious tradition in which I grew up is the notion of spiritual gifts. That is, God has given each person of faith a set of spiritual gifts for Christian service. Do you believe you know what your spiritual gifts are? If so, what are they and how are you using them?

How do you think your spiritual gifts or abilities fit with God's purposes for your life?



Discovering Biblical Spirituality

What makes a Shirker a Shirker is the relentless, unreflective pursuit of personal significance or purpose in the second half of life, even if it relates to spiritual matters. Discovering one's gifts for service to God and finding one's sense of purpose are important milestones on the journey to God. Yet, the deeper life is not about me and my gifts. The deeper life goes beyond that, or through that, to a much different place.

In *Everything Belongs*, Franciscan Richard Rohr writes, "You have to develop an ego before you can let go of it. Perhaps that is why Jesus just *lived* thirty years before he started talking." We know little of Jesus' life until the beginning of his earthly ministry.

Rohr is not talking about "ego" as sinful pride (obviously, since Jesus did not sin), but about a sense of self, a sense of identity. Jesus, who was both fully God and fully human, developed a normal and healthy sense of self as he matured. But Jesus went beyond that to a deeper spirituality—to where he willingly sacrificed his life for the sins of the world. He was obedient to the will of the Father, obedient unto death.

Near the end of his life, the apostle Paul wrote, "As for me, my life has already been poured out as a drink offering to God" (2 Tim. 4:6, NLT). The image of being poured out captures the notion of true service. It's not about my sense of feeling good about my calling or my service. It's about obedience to God's call on my life to engage the suffering of this world.

1. List some of the lifestyle differences between a Shirker and someone who is pursuing God through a life of simple obedience.

How does the Shirker Lifestyle affect even, or especially, those who serve God as pastors or missionaries?

How do the programs of your church sometimes inadvertently contribute to the Shirker Lifestyle?

2. The way out of the Shirker Lifestyle, where everything is about me and my needs and my religious self-fulfillment, is, often, to simply open my eyes to the suffering right in front of me.

As you look at your lifestyle and schedule, if you bumped into someone in immediate need, would you have time for him or her?



What would you need to give up to be open to serving God wherever he calls you? What are the things that keep us from that?

Describe a time when you sensed God's call to serve someone in desperate need. What did you do? What happened as a result?

3. Where are you finding service to God difficult, if not impossible?

- a. In loving a difficult spouse ...
- b. With an aging parent ...
- c. With a chronically needy friend or acquaintance ...
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.

4. The practice for overcoming the Shirker Lifestyle is the pursuit of action, without thought for results. What have you learned about God when you've served someone with no visible results? What did you learn about yourself?



Spiritual Exercises

Spirituality without social justice is narcissism. And I don't think we need anymore self-absorbed narcissists whose sole mission in life is the success of their children or the acquisition of the next immortality symbol. There's enough of those folks, especially among those who think of themselves as Christians. True Christian spirituality is about emptying ourselves into the suffering of this world. To pursue truth, justice, and righteousness in this world is a significant part of what it means to know God.

Group Activity: Initiate a time of quiet reflection and have your discussion leader ask a series of questions:

1. How is your lifestyle avoiding the real world? What is the real world to you?
2. What would it take for you to engage more fully with the suffering of this world?
3. Think about one person who needs you to engage them in their suffering, even if it means only a listening ear?
4. What could your study group do to enter into the suffering of the world?

Quote to Live by

"There is refined spiritual ambition in unduly pursuing spiritual gifts. [The apostle] Paul speaks of a better way. "Love does not seek her own." How will you go on to maturity if you are always seeking the consolation of feeling the presence of God?"

—FRANCOIS FENELON, *THE SEEKING HEART*

A Final Word from James

"Pure and lasting religion in the sight of God our Father means we must care for orphans and widows in their troubles, and refuse to let the world corrupt us."

—JAMES 1:27 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)