

# *Seventeen Steps to Staying Spiritually Alive for the Long Haul*

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Notes for a presentation at the November 2006 retreat for peacemaking chair/enablers and staff

**Introduction.** Theologian Joseph Sittler has written that "...we are by nature created to envision more than we can accomplish, to long for that which is beyond our possibilities...This restlessness may make us want to throw in the towel – or pull up our socks. You can play it either way. You can either be creatively restless, as before the unknowable, or you can simply collapse into futility." Here are some ways to be "creatively restless," to stay spiritually alive for the long haul.

1. **Stay focused on your vision.** An earlier peacemaking mailing reminds us: "Let yourself be overcome by a vision of the world that God intends, rather than guilt about the world that is." Remember: "impossible only means that it hasn't happened yet." How do we stay focused? For myself, there are some biblical phrases I repeat almost every day...about children no longer dying in infancy, everyone living out a full life span, nations beating swords into plows, the earth being full of the knowledge of God as waters cover the sea. Such phrases from the biblical vision mediate to me a reality that is more real than what currently merely is.
2. **Remember: the peacemaking calling is a gift, not a burden.** Harry Fagan, a Catholic community organizer, put it like this: "So many people I know think it's treasonous to smile. What you want to communicate is: We are very fortunate to be able to link up our lives with these great meanings. We need to have a great time. Nothing is worse than a dull do-gooder." Wisdom from the Internet: "It's all right to sit on your pity pot every now and again. Just be sure to flush when you're done."
3. **Never lose your sense of outrage.** No, this isn't a contradiction. "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." Evil is real, and cannot be pawned off onto cosmic powers or rationalized as inevitable. We need a moral clarity that sees some things are just plain wrong and must stop...child abuse, sexual slavery, starvation, terrorism, and war.
4. **Take time to visit yourself—regularly.** A European guest of U.S. peacemakers, his schedule crammed to overflowing, said, "we cannot live this way in the name of peace." We need to heed the Zen saying: "don't just do something – stand there."
5. **Surround yourself with friends and colleagues.** The fastest way to run out of steam is to operate as a lone wolf. Every committee should be to the fullest degree possible a community. Love your enemies, but work with those you can work with.
6. **Do something.** (Yes, this appears to contradict the Zen saying! It's a paradox.) The fastest way to break through the sense of helplessness and hopelessness is to act, in however modest a way. Gandhi got it right: "Anything you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."
7. **Celebrate small successes.** A longtime anti-hunger activist, asked how he avoided burnout, said: "You need two things: a vision, and the ability to celebrate incremental victories."
8. **Always remember the difference between witnessing and persuading.** It is a terrible burden to suppose that we must convert everyone to our truth. A witness simply says: "Here is what I see, what I experience, what I hope and work for." That gives the other permission to say what she sees, experiences, hopes and works for. In that encounter, change may happen. To say it theologically: the Holy Spirit changes hearts and minds; we do not. That is a liberating realization.

9. ***Find one area of peace-justice work to become expert in.*** We may have a comprehensive Vision, but it takes many of us to know enough to enter the public arena in a way that can help plow that vision into the soil of historical reality. Reinhold Niebuhr's words are never outdated "Consecrated ignorance is still ignorance." What will yours area of expertise be—domestic violence or torture or U.S. policy toward Colombia?
10. ***Never doubt that people and societies can and do change.***
11. ***Play, laugh and celebrate.*** Essayist and children's author E.B. White wrote: "When I wake up in the morning, I'm torn between my desire to *save* the world and *savor* the world. It makes it very hard to plan the day!" We need to take both seriously.
12. ***Listen for theological wisdom outside the church.*** Dancers, dramatists, artists, or scientists—all may see reality in a way that both illuminates and challenges our visions. In a recent *New York Times* review, Brian Kulick, stage director, commented: "You need Shakespeare and Chekhov every 15 minutes of your life because every 15 minutes of our lives we forget we're human beings. Shakespeare and Chekhov grab you by the lapels and say, 'You idiot! You're living! Living your life!' We need that every 15 minutes... To me, the core of theater and religion is the same. How do you stay in a perpetual state of wonder?"
13. ***Trust that God is in the rapids as well as the rocks.*** We tend to think of faith as refuge rather than risk, to value continuity more than change. We witness in a fast-changing world, politically, economically, and theologically. Joseph Sittler: lest the theologian be a mere "hod carrier for a closed tradition, she must look her day full in the face, participate in the joyous thud of ideas in collision, and share in her day's vitalities and torments." Bill Coffin: "I feel strongly that Oliver Wendell Holmes was right. Not to share in the activity and passion of your time is to count as not having lived. I don't claim virtue. I claim a low level of boredom."
14. ***Enter empathetically into someone else's religious tradition.*** In Barbara Brown Taylor's words: "In a world flooded with information, it is important to change channels from time to time, if only to remember that the truth is larger than any one telling of it." Open-ended dialogue between the world's great religious traditions is an absolute *must* for our time.
15. ***Stay rooted in the Mystery.*** How do you keep alive the sense of the incomprehensible Mystery in which we all live and die? A 4th century desert monk, Gregory of Nyssa, reminds us: "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything."
16. ***Remember where you fit in the scheme of things.*** A rabbi once said that we should each carry two pieces of paper in two pockets—one says, 'I am the child of a King' and the other, 'I am dust and ashes.'
17. ***Work and trust.*** A woman at retreat in Arizona told of a tough time in her life when she was snowed in at a mountain cabin. To fight off despair, she sat out on the ice-covered steps, chipping away with the only tool she had, a kitchen spoon, as I recall. After a few discouraging efforts, she retreated indoors. When she came back out later, she found that the winter sun had widened the little crack in the ice she had made, so she worked some more. And so the day went, outside to chip awhile, then back into the warmth. "Peacemaking is like that," she said, "chipping and waiting, chipping and waiting."