

Beginning the 11th Step Practice of Quiet Time

by Fr. Bill Wigmore

In the 11th Step, we are directed to improve our “conscious contact with God” through the practice of prayer and meditation. For nearly 20 years, I’m sad to report that the real meaning of “conscious contact” had always eluded me. Like many recovering addicts, I would start off my day with a short prayer to stay clean and sober and perhaps read a bit from the Twenty Four Hour Book; but “conscious contact?” with God? What were those two, very strange and foreign words all about?

Then a man named Earl Husband, an AA archivist in Oklahoma City, opened a vital spiritual door for me. He shared a piece of Oxford Group literature on prayer and meditation titled “Listening to God.” The little pamphlet had circulated in Akron, Ohio in the mid 1930’s and there was every reason to believe it had been used by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob as they themselves tried their hands at the mysterious art of meditation and prayer. As I read more and more about the Oxford Group and about early AA prayer practices, I was struck by how central was the conscious contact idea in bringing about the spiritual awakening every alcoholic so desperately needs to find. As Dr. Bob and the Good Old-timers points out on page 136: “Receiving direct guidance from God through the practice of Quiet Time formed the heart of Oxford Group practices. Early AA members believed Quiet Time to be absolutely indispensable for staying sober. “The A.A. members of that time did not consider meetings necessary to maintain sobriety. They were simply desirable. Morning devotion and quiet time, however, were musts.” (I hope you won’t read this as saying meetings aren’t important – it’s saying meetings are very helpful - but meetings alone won’t bring about the much needed change; a personal and conscious contact with God will.)

Over the last 16 years, I’ve done my best to learn more about these 11th Step practices and to put them to work however falteringly in my life. The practice has dramatically changed my life and I’ve watched it do the same for countless others as well. I hope you’ll email me for a free copy of the original pamphlet, but what follows are a few guidelines that have worked for me over the years and may prove helpful to you as you begin your own journey of change by Listening to God.

Preparation:

- Commit to practicing Quiet Time for a minimum of 10 to 20 minutes daily for 30 days.
- Practice it each morning. (Get up earlier if need be.) If for any reason you miss one morning, simply begin counting the 30-day period again.
- Choose a sacred space - a quiet place where you will be alone. It should be comfortable and inviting. Reserve it only for prayer, if at all possible.
- Buy a notebook to write down your thoughts - have it ready when you begin.

Begin:

- Sit in an upright posture. Remember into whose Presence you are entering.
- Read: (this is optional – read a passage from scripture or from the Big Book.
- Breathe in and out deeply 2 or 3 times- let go of all tension and worry with each outward breath. (Add any other relaxation techniques you may find helpful)
- Write a question. It can be general or specific. If you have a problem that is troubling you or one on which you need God’s guidance, write it out and ask him. (Example: God, what do I need to do to get clean & sober? Father, what keeps me from knowing you? My Creator, what do you want me to know about our relationship? Lord, where am I being resentful, selfish, dishonest, or afraid? God, what would you have me do about _____?)
- Speak aloud in your mind a phrase that clearly marks the beginning of your Quiet Time with God: A favorite of many Oxford Group members and early AA’s was: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”
- Listen for God’s Voice, with your pen & notebook in hand. If the connection is not immediate, and words do not come, use your active imagination, especially in the beginning when first making conscious contact: If God were to speak to me this is what he might say: _____
- Write the words that come to mind. Do not edit. Only listen and write. If words come that you think are not from God write those thoughts down anyway. (Put them in brackets if you like and try to re-focus on listening for God’s Voice. In time, you will come to distinguish his Voice more clearly.)
- If you get stuck, write your own name or write, “My child” or some other term of endearment that God might use when speaking to you. (This technique sometimes helps get us back into the listening mode.)
- Some of us write what God says with our non-dominant hand.
- Stop writing when it becomes strained or when it feels right to end.
- Close by saying Thank you to God and spending a few minutes together with him in silence. Feel the closeness.

If the above seems too complex at first, then try simply looking at the day ahead. If something is coming up that day that is troubling, ask for guidance on what you should do. The Big Book says: “In thinking about our day we may face indecision. We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don’t struggle. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while.”

- Share your writings weekly with a prayer partner (i.e. another individual who is practicing Quiet Time). You may find their writings have some particular spiritual meaning for you.
- Act on the guidance if what you are guided to do passes the test of being: Honest, Pure, Unselfish and Loving.

The Big Book says: “What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind. Being still inexperienced and having just made conscious contact with God, it is not probable that we are going to be inspired at all times. We might pay for this presumption in all sorts of absurd actions and ideas.

Nevertheless, we find that our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. We will come to rely upon it.”

- **Finger Tip Guidance:** When they couldn't write, early AA's would put their thumb and index finger together and listen for God's Voice. This practice helped them re-establish their connection. Again, the Big Book says: "As we go through the day we pause when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day 'Thy will be done.' We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or foolish decisions. We become more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up energy foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves. It works – it really does."

Sometimes people will ask me, "How do you know it's God's Voice you're hearing? How do you know it's not you?" My answer is I really don't know - and in the end, it really doesn't matter. If it's me, it's the best part of me I've ever found. More has been revealed!

About the Author

Fr. Bill Wigmore is CEO of Austin Recovery. A complete copy of this series is available at <http://www.austinrecovery.org/articles/thefaithcorner.asp>. Send comments, questions and treatment scholarship donations to:

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