

Rule of Life: Developing a Breathing Practice

Do or don't do; there is no try.

Yoda

I don't remember my parents ever teaching me to breathe. Somehow it came naturally to me. It's a good thing too, because there's no time. Breathing needs to start first, before we learn to speak, use the toilet, use a knife and fork, read, or ride a bicycle. Breathing comes early, from the first moments after a baby is born.

All the rest of it needs to be learned. So while I don't recall breathing lessons, I do recall lessons in learning to ride a bike. Dad was the teacher, and I had training wheels. We'd go outside, and I'd pedal around a bit, getting comfortable with the notion of sitting on this thin contraption, this interplay of rubber, steel, and plastic (the plastic was for the streamers that flowed out of the handlebars). Several days were devoted to simply learning to exert force; first one leg, then the other. Then I learned to steer by turning the handlebars to the left and then the right, staying on the machine rather than on the ground. These skills are not easily learned, even with training wheels. Perhaps you've forgotten how difficult, how complex the whole endeavor is because you've become a regular pedaler; you've mastered the art. But back in the day, even the rudimentary skills were challenging.

The vast majority of us who read this book have learned to ride a bike, but we probably never learned the breathing disciplines, which constitute what the church has often called a *rule of life*. We have already addressed some of the many reasons for this. And we've also discovered that diagnosing why we don't do something is never quite enough because unless diagnosis moves beyond itself to prescribe a solution to the problem, all we have is blame. "I don't ride my bike because my dad was too busy to teach me...because we were too poor...because I fell once or twice or ten times...because it's hard to learn." You can fill in the blank with any number of things.

Great. You can articulate why you don't. But so far you've only provided a reason why you didn't ride your bike in the past, right up until this present moment. But let's say that you're standing in front of the bicycle you never learned to ride. Gas is \$12 a gallon. Or your doctor has told you that your heart is getting clogged with bacon fat and you need to exercise. You're seeing the need to make a change, and you're pondering taking up bike riding. All the reasons you didn't ride yesterday are now irrelevant. Those failures, phobias, and family of origin issues, real as they are, don't change the fact that today you can make a choice to get on the bicycle and learn to ride it. And either you will or you won't.

Developing our rule of life begins with seeing the need for one. The need has perhaps been hard to see in our culture because we've placed a huge premium on believing the right information, thinking that somehow giving intellectual assent to certain statements constitutes belief. Jesus doesn't see it that way. He ties belief to our practices, to what we actually do.

And I don't know about you, but when I hold my practices up against the vision Jesus cast of what constitutes right living, I find myself falling short continually.

That's because His vision is considerably different from prevailing visions of both religious and secular cultures. His vision includes loving our enemies, praying for those who are mistreating us, living generously, caring for the least of these, breaking down social barriers, throwing parties for people who have nowhere to go, and so much more that is contrary to our consumerism, individualism, racism, isolationism, and any other "ism" that so easily seduces us away from God's purposes. When I begin to understand my calling, I see two things: (1) I'm not yet fulfilling it, and (2) I can't fulfill it alone. If you can at least see these two things, thank God for where you're standing. You've been delivered from self-righteousness and pride, and you are ready for transformative adventure available only to humble people. Let the adventure begin!

If I buy into Jesus' vision and admit my need for His strength and guidance (two very big ifs, by the way), I'm motivated to learn how to ride. I may have tried and failed in the past, but now, seeing through a different lens, I realize I'm at a crossroads, where either I'll learn the new skills needed or I won't. Yoda was right. There is no try. My faith is not a set of beliefs divorced from living. My faith is the continual interplay of believing and living, learning to integrate the two so that I am able to fulfill my destiny as an artisan of hope. And this requires the development of practices that have contributed to that goal throughout history. They are the breathing practices described in this book, given shape by a rule of life.

We may recoil at the notion of developing a set of practices and commitments as a means of giving expression to our life in Christ. The very word *rule* smacks of all that we thought we had escaped by finding liberty in Christ, or if not liberty in Christ, at least liberty, the freedom to wake up each morning and order our day according to the need or desire of the moment. Why should we force ourselves into some regimen of practices? If we feel the need to sleep in, let's sleep in; no need for a rule of life to wake us up. We've all known people who were addicted to rules. They're not at the top of your guest list when you're throwing a party.

We can make two important observations here. The first is that you already have a rule of life. Maybe you live by your appetites, so that sex, food, sleep, exercise, the acquisition of money or clothes, or some other need or desire predominates how you order things. Maybe your commitment to avoiding pain predominates, and so you sleep too much, eat too much, read too little, watch too much TV, and don't even realize how far you are from God's best. Perhaps you're living for the acquisition of power, for your family, or for the approval of your parents, spouse, or friends. Certainly, more than one value can shape your decisions. But values they are, and they shape you, directing your choices. You have a rule of life. The question is, do I want to be governed by my present value system, or would I rather be more deeply infused with the mind and heart of Christ? It's not a trick question. There's one right answer.

The second observation is simply this: Jesus went to parties, loved parties, was invited to parties. Apparently, His commitment to doing the will of God didn't result in His becoming a bore. The rule of life about which we're speaking is not an invitation to self-imposed asceticism, suffering, and the negation of all that is good and beautiful in the world. Rather,

gaining the mind and heart of Christ allows us to increasingly manifest the life and character of the One who knew how to live fully, embracing mourning and laughter, feasting and fasting, serving and celebrating. The only One who does it right is available to shape our hearts. Why not learn from the best?

Best Learned with Others

I find it interesting that a child's first solo journey on a bicycle, even if only for a few dozen feet, is one of those markers, not only in her life but also in the lives of her parents. "Suzie just rode her bike alone!" one parent runs into the house and shouts to the other. Perhaps the whole scene is captured on video and uploaded to YouTube for the whole world to see—especially the parents' friends and relatives. Up until that moment, the learning to ride was something that required help, required a teacher, a mentor, a friend.

"You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:1-2). Thus did Paul remind Timothy that faith is much more than a set of propositions one signs off on, as if you were reading an employee handbook and then signing your initials to say you agree. It's more like riding a bike; if you're to live it effectively, you will have to intentionally develop certain skills, skills which are best learned in the context of relationship.

Perhaps you've heard of the self-help movement. Born in a culture of fierce independence and individualism, this movement posits that there are few things in life that you can't learn on your own with just the input of a book, Web site, podcast, or DVD. In this information age, there's no shortage of data. Simply go out and get the facts, teach yourself, and get on with it.

This seems adequate for some things, but it's never the best way to learn how to live the Christian life. And it is always unacceptable when it comes to the things that matter most. I want to know that my surgeon didn't learn surgery through an online course or that my mountain guide didn't learn her skills from *The Idiot's Guide to Climbing Mount Everest*. Most things are best passed down through the flesh rather than a book.

This is certainly the case when it comes to the development of a rule of life. The Celtic church, which existed in Ireland and Scotland, was not controlled by the Roman Empire as was the rest of Great Britain, and it developed its own unique ways of embodying the faith. One of its essential practices was to establish a relationship with someone who would function as a confidant, resource, and support in the development of the faith life. This tradition called such a person a *soul friend*, and it was said that a Christian without a soul friend was like a body without a head.

Jesus would agree. He called His disciples not simply to impart information but to be with them. It's good to spend time with someone who is a bit further down the road, who already knows how to ride, because that's the kind of person who can listen to you, watch you, offer specific responses to your particular situation, and even show you how it is to be done.

In our individualism, we're tempted to skip this step. "We don't need anybody but Jesus!" we shout. True enough. But the real question is this: How do we hear from Jesus? Through His Word, certainly. But Jesus has a body here on earth right now, made up of people who are committed to making the invisible God visible through words and actions. When we look for Jesus, we see Him not only in the Bible; we also see Him in His followers, who are His hands and voice on earth today.

Of course, skipping any human intermediaries and always going directly to the Bible has many advantages. I'm able to bypass all the untidiness of human relationships, the complexities of communication, the disappointments of misunderstandings, the need for discernment when sifting through counsel. I'm relieved of all of that. I'll just go straight to Jesus. The trouble is that Jesus expresses His life not only through His Word but also through His body. This body of His, called the church, is intended to be an interrelated community, and so my attempts at developing a rule of life all by myself will invariably create a mutation that falls far short of what God has in mind. In other words, I don't have what it takes to live the Christian life in isolation. I'm called to a community of interdependency.

I have a friend who is committed to living out his rule of life as a means of growing in Christ. We meet regularly. I've shared my intentions with him regarding the various breathing practices in this book, and when we're together we pray, share about our lives, and gauge progress in our spiritual practices. These are valuable times as he is able to offer specific encouragement, counsel, and resources for the issues I face. Whether you become part of a group of people committed to developing a rule of life or you meet with one other person, it is far better, if possible, to learn to ride with others.

Training Wheels

We do well to address the gap that exists between what we say we believe and how we actually live. In other words, we need not only orthodoxy (correct beliefs) but also orthopraxy (correct practices). In a culture where prominence is achieved through intellectual advancement, we're tempted to conclude that the maturing of one's faith is merely a matter of accumulating information. In such a model, where emphasis is placed on content, little children may participate in clubs devoted solely to the memorization of Scripture, earning badges by reciting verses. At first glance, the merits of this system seem obvious. If I fill the minds of little children with Bible content, they will be more likely to order their lives according to God's Word rather than any of the many other prevailing options. We are, after all, transformed by the renewing of our minds.¹ All this is good to a point, but there are limits.

The problem with this paradigm is that Jesus' greatest antagonists were those who studied, memorized, dissected, debated, defended, and taught their Bible.² So Bible study apparently isn't enough. Jesus finishes His powerful Sermon on the Mount by declaring that the wise ones are those who not only hear the words of Jesus (or we might add by extension—study them, memorize them, teach them) but also *do* them. Those are the ones whose lives will be able to weather storms.

I think of Sophie Scholl, the young woman who was part of the movement known as the White Rose, a resistance work against the Nazis in World War II. I knew nothing about her or this movement until I watched the movie whose title bears her name. It remains one of the

most powerful films I've ever seen. These young people lived robust lives of faithfulness to Christ, standing against the tide of darkness sweeping through Europe. It cost them their lives. One of Sophie's companions wrote, "Belief is no simple thing. It demands constant strain and struggle. It has to be mastered over and over again. And to be a true Christian: that is the most difficult thing of all, because we are never, ever able to truly follow Christ—except perhaps through death."³

"No simple thing." Giving genuine expression to our faith is not a matter of mastering the content of a doctrinal statement, giving mental assent to it, and purposing to avoid the sins that are socially unfashionable at the moment. Rather, I'm called to be the very real presence of Christ Himself, bringing to bear all the resources of His life in every situation.

And this is why developing a rule of life is so valuable. The various inhaling and exhaling disciplines articulated in this book work together to create a healthy body, a body responsive to the Spirit of Christ, so that whatever is needed in a given moment might find expression, whether that be generosity, confrontation of injustice, care for creation, the loving of one's neighbor, or the holding up of a situation in prayer. If we're regularly developing the skills and resources that sensitize us to Christ's Spirit, we will be more responsive as He calls us to respond in all the varied circumstances of our lives.

A good way to begin practicing these things is to consider your breathing habits prayerfully and to make some commitments to express them in your life. This is exactly what is meant by developing a rule of life. As we prayerfully consider the disciplines to which we are invited, each one should establish practices that are hard enough to be challenging and lead to growth but not so daunting as to assure failure.

What does this mean practically? It means that I look at the breathing habits that I need to sustain life, and rather than just ponder them, I name my intentions to practice them. For example, I might look at hospitality and write down, "I will host a neighborhood party every three months," or "I will join a book club," or "I will tell my faith community that our spare bedroom is available for visitors." I'll do something similar with solitude. "I will rise 15 minutes earlier for time alone with God," or "I will spend one Saturday morning a month alone, journaling and praying." I prayerfully develop my unique commitments with the support of a friend or friends who share a commitment to breathing. I post mine on the bulletin board by my desk—a constant reminder of the commitments I intend to keep in the living out of my faith.

Contrary to what some might say, the development of a rule of life is neither a formulaic approach to Christianity nor legalism. It's not legalism because these practices are not a way of gaining acceptance from God or forgiveness for failures. Those things are already ours because of Christ's gifts of love to us and because of our acceptance of His invitation to join Him in participating in God's reign. Rather, the rule of life is simply the declaration of our intention to practice those disciplines that will result in the colors of hope being poured into the world.

You didn't practice pedaling as a way of gaining acceptance. Nor did it feel like a legalistic imposition. "Not again, Dad! I'm sick of pedaling. Can't I just ride my bike today without

worrying about pedaling?” Or maybe you’re sick of steering, or balance, or leaning when turning. Yes. Just dispense with whichever habits you don’t like, deeming them to be too heavy-handed, so you can get on with riding. I have a name for you: Scabby.

Why put your plans in writing? Why nail it to your bulletin board or magnetize it on your refrigerator? Think of the particular naming for each habit as training wheels. Until the habits of faith become second nature, having a reminder in front of us is helpful. We wake up in the morning and stumble to the kitchen, looking for the coffee grinder. Right there, above the beans, is our rule of life. Under “Word” it says, “I will read the online daily verse on my home page while the coffee is brewing.” There’s the paper waiting to be read. There’s my computer. This is my moment of truth. Remember the journey? Denny’s or the summit? Every journey is a million steps like this one. The reminder of my commitment is staring me in the face while I grind my beans. That isn’t legalism. The training wheels are intended to bring me freedom.

It’s important that none of the disciplines become legalistic structures, for such forms can tighten and become a noose that chokes all breath and life out of a person. That’s why we need to embrace the next reality with equal force.

Falling

I love watching babies learn to walk. The other night I was in a meeting, and two baby sisters were in the room. The younger of the two was just learning to walk. She would stand up and take a couple of faltering steps, and then her sister would sneak up from behind and give her a gentle yet forceful push, sort of like a nursery version of a football player whacking the guy who just caught the ball. The younger one would fall down, cry for about two seconds, and then get up. Then the whole thing would happen again and again and again. It was fun to watch. The little one kept getting up until the older sister grew tired of the pushing and got lost in a different diversion.

As the younger girl kept getting up and trying again, I watched and wondered what happens to us, that the day comes when some sort of failure leads to disengagement from activities? Why do we become so careful? When do our egos, our bodies, and our lives become so brittle and fragile that one loss, one failure in an area causes us to quit trying? We get hurt in relationships and purpose to stay alone. A church lets us down, and we drop out of the community of faith. We fall in a crevasse and decide to never walk on a glacier again. We lose in a risky investment and lock our money away in a bank or under a mattress forever.

Why are we surprised that we have failed and made mistakes? The Bible says that “we all stumble in many ways.”⁴ That’s the reality of it. So failure shouldn’t be such a big deal. It also says that we will never be fruitful without risk, and if you know anything about investing, you know that the guy who parlayed one talent into five almost certainly suffered losses in the process of achieving gain. On the other hand, the one who was afraid of failing did nothing. Safe? Predictable? Yes. And he was also the one who received a scathing indictment from Jesus.⁵

We achieve maturity through trying and failing. The hockey great Wayne Gretzky said it well: You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take. When it comes to the breathing habits so

vital to our faith life, many of us take a few shots, miss some of them, and then quit. But this is where Jesus' invitation for us to have faith like a child once again becomes so vital for us. Children who are learning to ride a bike don't quit trying when they fall. They get up again and again, hundreds of times, until they become riders.

A strong force is pulling me down, inviting me to fail. That force is called the flesh, and I'm told in the Bible that it is my ever-present invitation to failure and to something far worse: a disengagement from even trying. I've given in more times than I can count, choosing isolation over hospitality, anxiety over the rest of prayer, selfish indulgence over kingdom generosity. Oh well. Today is a new day. God made it. I'm alive. It's another chance to get it right. Paul said it this way:

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on (Philippians 3:12-14).

Balance

I met with a friend this past summer in Colorado who has more experience with a rule of life than I do. I wanted to talk about how my breathing habits were developing. I told him that I was discouraged because I had too many things to learn and because trying to develop all of these things at the same time was too complex. To use the bicycle analogy, I always seemed to be leaning too far one way (toward the inhaling practices at the expense of exhaling), and so I was often falling down. He provided some much-needed objectivity by helping me see that different elements prevail in different seasons and that what constitutes balance is unique for each person. One is built to lean more naturally toward exhaling. Don't let the realities of temperament, tendencies, gifts, and seasons become the basis for some false shame or condemnation, some sense of not measuring up. And don't let those things become license for neglecting the disciplines needed for maturity either.

I don't need to learn everything at the same time, and that is both comforting and liberating. When we lived in the mountains, hospitality and Bible study were my main breathing elements. Most of my days during that season consisted of studying or teaching the Bible, or spending time with guests in our home. Yes, there was prayer, time in creation, a nod to kingdom ethics and generosity, and even a little celebration once in a while. But largely, two elements dominated the landscape of our lives.

Today I still study and teach, and we occasionally open our home to guests, but those elements don't occupy the same space in my life anymore. Instead, prayer, intentional solitude, and generosity are in the forefront. As artisans of hope, we are continually adding colors to our palette through the development and refining of the various disciplines, and that will enable Christ to be seen more clearly. The colors we are developing at any given time are contingent on many factors. Parents with young children often don't study much, and they might laugh at any notion of solitude. But they're learning more about service than could be written in ten books, and those busy, blessed, tiring years will increase their capacity to serve during the rest of their lives.

That's how it works. God is shaping us, like a potter shapes clay, so that we become vessels able to pour out hope! Our responsibility is always to be mindful of the forces that are shaping our vessel so that we grow according to the flow of God in our lives, not against it.

Practice

Finding the balanced posture in these things is tricky. Some of us grew up in structures that forced these breathing habits on us, along with other habits like Lent and fasting and wearing choking neckties on Sunday mornings and sitting motionless in a large building with opaque windows. Living faithfully was reduced to developing these habits (especially the inhaling ones). Christianity became nothing more than doing a few things (go to church, read your Bible, give some money to the church) and avoiding a few other things (deny yourself some pleasures before Easter, don't eat certain meats on certain days, don't smoke or drink), as if these things had any power whatsoever to make you holy.⁶ The Christian culture imposed rules like this without explaining the larger context of our calling, and that's why many people walked away from the faith without looking back.

However, in many cases the pendulum of reaction has swung too far the other way. Seeing both the danger of rules and reality of our liberty in Christ, *authenticity* has become the word of the day. Afraid of empty form or ritual without reality, we've declared that we need do nothing, indeed should do nothing, unless the doing of it is authentic. We've seen marriages where people stay married but aren't in love anymore, and we're frightened that the same thing might happen to us, either in our human relationships or our relationship with God. We don't want to settle for anything less than the real deal, so we throw away any devotional guides that would call us to daily Bible reading or prayer, and we resist any commitments to practice inhaling and exhaling disciplines in some sort of systematic way, as if ritual invariably destroys relationship.

This, to put it mildly, is rubbish. I know this because I'm married to someone I love deeply and know well. Yet, in spite of both my love and my commitment, the past 28 years have included a day or two when I was disillusioned with being married, when I didn't feel like carrying out the responsibilities that fidelity and commitment require. But I'm glad to say I carried them out anyway, kept showing up at the supper table, kept coming home from the airport, kept offering words of encouragement. There have been other actions in my marriage as well, actions born out of frustration, anger, confession, fear, and disappointment. But to take such emotions or moments as signs that I should disengage from relationship, ostensibly because my love is no longer authentic, would have been very shortsighted. I'm glad I kept showing up even when it didn't feel natural or comfortable.

This human analogy offers a close parallel to our relationship with God. The breathing disciplines we're considering are the inward and outward expressions that are common among people who love God. Thus, if we truly love God, we should be intentional about doing them, even when we don't feel like it.

Challenge

There's a bike race near where I write called Ride 542—Mt. Baker Hill Climb. It's about 25 miles, 24 of which are uphill! Who does this? Just this past week I found out. My wife and I

were hiking in the Cascades when we came upon four women in their fifties who were out picking blueberries. When we stopped to talk with them, I learned that one of them had not only entered the race, but won—both for her own age category and the category below hers!

I didn't interview her and ask about her training techniques, but I'm fairly certain that she didn't learn to ride her bike the week before the race or the month before or the year before. People who win races like this one have been riding around more than a little bit for quite some time. They've developed such efficient habits of balance and breathing that they can ride uphill, nearly nonstop, gaining thousands of feet in elevation, with grace, strength, and beauty.

For those of us who stopped riding a long time ago, or who get on our bicycles only when our car battery is dead, feats such as these aren't even doable, let alone with grace and beauty. Such is the case as well for those who do or don't practice the habits of spiritual breathing. We needn't begin with any sort of hill climb. I fear that biographies of missionaries and famous Christians have the effect of discouraging most of us from even starting. This one was martyred in Central America. He rose at six each morning for prayer and journaling. That one moved to Hong Kong and worked with drug addicts. This one speaks four languages and runs a clinic in Indonesia. That one has a miraculous story about God's provision to build a school in India. Each story can either inspire or mock us. Taken wrong, they become challenges to ride our bikes uphill for 25 miles when we're still struggling to find the pedals and keep our balance.

Here we are, back down in the valley, going to school, trying to get out of debt, seeking to resolve a messy relationship or overcome an addiction. What do these hill climbers have to teach me? If I'm prone to comparison and the horrible vacillation between pride and self-condemnation that goes with it, I avoid their stories. They discourage me. But their stories aren't intended to shame or discourage; they're intended to inspire us to respond to God's call in *our* setting, *our* time, *our* lot in life.

A good friend of mine just died this past week. He was an associate pastor at our church for many years and had an uncanny ability to help people step up to new challenges and grow in their faith. He did this by inviting them to take a step just outside of their comfort zone. If they were new to a bicycle, he didn't invite them to the hill climb. But he would invite them to whatever was appropriate as their next step. My friend Ben writes about how this played out in his life:

[Scott] presided over our wedding. He taught me to make omelets. He gently pushed me into teaching Sunday school classes when I didn't feel quite ready (and I wasn't quite ready). It was those classes, not my graduate education or chemistry teaching assignments, that actually taught me how to teach. That's what I do every day now. At his prompting I taught the Psalms, a post-September 11 course with Kevin, and a History of Church and State course. I would not have done them without his prompting, or even known how to teach without his example. I wouldn't even be able to read the books I'm reading now without what he gave me.⁷

That's what this is about. We listen for the voice of God as He challenges us to take the next step, to ascend to the next level. When we go there, we won't remain comfortable for very long before we hear God's voice inviting us up higher still. As we respond, new challenges, new beauty, new adventures await us. And all the while, almost unbeknown to us, we're becoming more and more like Jesus.