

## ADHD and Spirituality

**WE'D LOVE TO SPARK A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE SPIRITUAL SIDE** of living with ADHD. At this reflective and hopeful time of year, we begin with some personal experiences submitted by readers. Please share your stories with us and continue the discussion, whatever your faith, religious tradition, or practice.

### QUIET TIME

#### **Steve Gundy**

I was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult. Before that diagnosis, I believed that God was not happy with me. I kept falling short of all I thought God required of me despite my best efforts to please him. I judged myself for that, beating myself up for a long time. My experience was private suffering in a hopeless situation. I was convinced that I was alone and on my own.

My church trained me to know what I believe and why I believed it. Specifically, the spiritual disciplines were a big deal. Disciplines like Bible study and prayer were packaged up and delivered in a generic, standardized form known as "quiet time." Quiet time was the method used for connecting intimately with God.

But then, quiet time collided with reality. It went something like this.

Here I am in a quiet room ready to start praying. My mind starts racing. Now, I'm thinking about what I have to get done. *What time is that meeting today? Wait a minute, where is my prayer list? Oh yeah, I never made a prayer list. It's my pen I'm looking for. Hey, you are supposed to be praying! What was I supposed to be praying about?*

I found it excruciating trying to focus in a quiet place. Prayer was an experience of constant ping-ponging everywhere in my mind only to realize I had not prayed about anything I intended when I started. I thought, "God, if you are here, then I must be on the other side of the universe!" I was not connecting intimately with God. I thought over and over about my distracted thoughts during my prayer time. I asked, "What's wrong with me?" Over time, I concluded I was broken. There was no way I could have an intimate connection with God and that negativity affected my perception of myself.

My perspective changed the day I realized

there was a connection between my distracted thoughts during my prayer time and my ADHD diagnosis. The more I got to know how ADHD showed up in my life, the more I started trying different things to help me focus. During that process I discovered that writing my prayers in a journal and then reading the prayers out loud created the focus and energy I needed for my prayer time. In fact, I started applying journaling to my experience in church when my pastor delivered his sermon. Instead of my mind wandering, it was engaged when I journaled my thoughts.

Instead of looking for quiet places, I started playing with stimulating experiences that made my time with God come alive. That ignited my passion for an ongoing conversation with God that goes anywhere my creative mind is going, especially when I'm journaling. Now, I'm acting more consistently with the way God made me. I know I'm not alone!

### DEALING WITH PRAYER

#### **DISTRACTION**

#### **A CHADD member**

ADHD is a two-edged sword when it comes to prayer.

When I am in a more formal and structured prayer environment, my ADHD can be a problem. During Mass and the homily I can be easily distracted. My eyes are the big problem. *Oh there is Rob... we ought to go to brunch after Mass. I see birds flying by the church window—wooh, that is a pretty bird outside. I don't see any altar servers from where I am sitting. Are the servers there? Does the priest need help? I see the hymnal and start to think, on what page is the next hymn?* This can go on during the entire service.

My solution is to reduce the stimuli. I close my eyes, not to appear to be holy or pious, but just to cut back on the other senses and focus



on my hearing sense. I find when I do that I can concentrate on what is happening just through the words that I hear, and my mind does not wander off so frequently. It's not a perfect solution, but it helps.

On the other hand, ADHD can be helpful in meditative prayer. One particular form of meditative prayer is called *lectio divinia*. This is a form of prayer going back to at least the second century AD. You read the Bible, and when a particular word or phrase catches your attention, you stop reading and reflect on what you have just read. This can take a moment or much longer. The idea is to be open to the leadings of the Holy Spirit to teach you. For person with ADHD, this comes naturally and is one of those few times that we are actually encouraged to let our minds wonder. For a person who does not have ADD, this type of prayer is much more difficult because they are focused on the next word or thought and not inclined to stop and wonder.

Catholics pray the rosary. To many it seems like just a repetitive prayer droning on and on, but the rosary is really a series of meditations. There are four series of mysteries on which to meditate, one of which is the Sorrowful Mysteries. The first of these

mysteries is the Agony in the Garden. When someone is praying this mystery he says ten Hail Marys and simultaneously meditates on the event of the agony. *What was Jesus thinking? What was he praying about? What were the Apostles doing?* One part of the brain is saying the Hail Mary while the other half of the brain is in meditation. I think that this is the perfect type of prayer for someone with ADHD because both halves of the brain are occupied with activity, leaving little or no room for distractions.

Try it, you might like it.

#### **AN UNDERSTANDING CHURCH**

##### **A CHADD member**

Parents of children with ADHD really enjoy the best, most relaxed time at church when the kindergartners through fifth graders leave for their own children's readings. You can almost hear a sigh of relief that, at least for the readings and homily, the parents are able to pay attention to something other than wiggly little ones.

Boredom with sitting quietly for a whole hour really sets in when the children hit sixth grade. Fortunately, at my church, sixth graders are eligible to be altar servers and ushers.

My daughter was first on line to sign up as a server as soon as she reached that milestone. In high school, some of the young adults help with the readings for the little ones and some serve as greeters; others can leave a little early if they volunteer to help set up for the after service hospitality.

It helps to find a church that is understanding of all children's needs, but especially those who may find church services a "penance."

#### **OPPOSITIONALITY IN THE PEW**

##### **A CHADD member**

We attended church every Sunday as a family. My daughter has difficulty regulating her moods and my son has academic struggles. Situations that required sitting still and listening for a long period of time was a huge challenge for both of them, albeit for different reasons.

As part of the service, congregants extend a sign of peace to nearby pewmates. For family and close friends, warm hugs and quick kisses are exchanged. For acquaintances and others nearby, it is usually a handshake and the words, "Peace be with you." The atmosphere is one of peace and good will.

Going along with the program can be dif-



THINKSTOCK

ficult for an eleven-year-old girl who is prone to oppositionality. This atmosphere of congeniality often put my daughter in a stormy mood. One time after the sign of peace, when the congregation becomes quiet and solemn, I leaned over to ask her to stop making a repetitive noise with her shoe. In the loudest stage whisper I've ever heard, she said, "Shut up!" I was horrified! My mother's friend from the choir was sitting behind us, the entire church had just wished each other peace... plus, I'm

her mother and this was beyond disrespectful.

I would love to tell you I handled this situation expertly. But I didn't. I cried on the way home and then called my sister to vent. But I really handled it pretty ineffectively. It was lost on me at that time that this was a symptom of a bigger problem. And big problems call for complex solutions. If I could re-do my daughter's childhood, I really would really listen when experts say multimodal treatment, and not just

go with the parts my insurance covered or send her to her best friend's counselor.

Eventually, my daughter became interested in a youth group at a nearby church. Her life and her spiritual journey jiggled and jagged. Now that she is a young adult, I have faith that she will find what works for her.

### **SLOW PREACHING**

**Steve Peer**

When I was growing up, my minister was a slow talker—slower than the typical 110 to 150 words per minute. The trouble is that most of us can process language at three to five times that speed. What would I do with all that leftover processing capacity? Of course, my mind would wander away from the topic.

This is the reason some podcasts also offer a double-speed version, by the way. With the brain more fully engaged, comprehension actually increases.

Back at church, no such podcast was available. So I'd always have a Bible in hand. Having visual redundancy of the spoken sermon allowed me to engage two senses. And if I did wander, it was usually by reading ahead, so I remained connected to the topic. **A**