

FINDING YOUR ZONE  
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(Acts 2:42-47 NRSV) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. {43} Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. {44} All who believed were together and had all things in common; {45} they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. {46} Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, {47} praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

(Acts 2:42-47 The MESSAGE)

They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

On Saturday, Nancy and I will board a plane, assuming American Airlines has their MD80's flying again, and will take off for Boston, MA. We are going to Boston, because on Monday Nancy will be running in her first Boston Marathon. To compete in the Boston Marathon you must qualify with a fast enough time for your age group. Nancy successfully qualified when she ran the Chicago marathon in 3:55 minutes. And most marathon runners would tell you that qualifying for Boston, and running in Boston is one of the ultimate experiences of being one of these crazy few.

Now in case you are not familiar with marathons — a marathon is a race of 26.2 miles. I cannot even imagine what it must be like to run 26.2 miles — I can't imagine what it is like to run 2 miles anymore! But some people not only can do it — they love it.

WHY?

Because they are able to enter THE ZONE.

It is truly an extraordinary place.

Virtually every sport has its ZONE.

In baseball, when you enter the Zone in the batter's box, you have no trouble getting a hit, because the baseball looks as big as a watermelon. DEREK Lee of the Cubs has been in the zone this spring! When a pitcher enters the zone, the strike zone seems as large as the side of a barn!

In basketball, you're in the Zone at the foul line when the basket looks like a hula hoop. In golf, every swing is effortless and every ball flies straight and true. I have never found the zone in golf!

According to college coaching legend Dean Smith, the Zone is "where time stands still and performance is exquisite." Think of Michael Jordan leading the Bulls to six NBA championships. Tiger Woods swinging a club so well that he once held all four "majors" simultaneously. Lance Armstrong winning a record-setting sixth Tour de France. All of these athletes have found this magical place of optimal performance, also known as the Sweet Spot, the Flow or the Effortless Present.

All of these phrases describe a sporting phenomenon, but they're also descriptive of a spiritual zone we can experience when the conditions are right.

In today's passage from Acts, the early church has clearly found the sweet spot of Christian living.

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"Awe came upon everyone," says Luke, the author of Acts, "because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

But just what exactly is this place, and how do we get there? That is what I want to know!

Richard Keefe, explores this phenomenon in a book called *On the Sweet Spot: Stalking the Effortless Present*. He describes the Zone as a state of mind and body in which action and reaction seem to happen automatically, a state that people can enter while hitting a ball, playing a musical instrument, or even typing on a word processor.

Brain-imaging studies show that: professional piano players don't actually think about hitting the keys on the piano; instead, their brain neurons fire in areas associated with mechanical motion rather than consciousness.

Great players — whether they are on the piano or on the basketball court — don't have to think about what they are doing. They just do it.

Of course, no one can pick up a golf club for the first time and hit below par. Perfect practice makes perfect performance, which is why professionals build routine and repetition into their highly disciplined daily lives. "This is how the adage 'practice makes perfect' really works," writes Keefe in his book. "The more you do something, the more the brain changes to devote its energy to that function." The more you practice, the more you are training your brain neurons to fire in a way that creates flawless mechanical motion.

Visualization can help as well.

Simply imagining yourself doing something can light up the areas of the brain you'll need to accomplish what you have in mind.

A pro golfer will mentally play a round, shot by shot, before stepping on to the first tee.

A major-league pitcher will reflect on his strategy for each hitter, inning by inning, before he arrives at the ballpark.

Jon Scher a senior editor at ESPN writes:

"By doing so, he's warming up his neural pathways before he warms up his arm, increasing the likelihood that he'll wind up in the effortless present."

The Effortless Present is a zone of automatic action, reached by *practice and visualization*. It takes us beyond stress and self-doubt to an experience of truly optimal performance.

So what does THE ZONE look like for those of us on this journey?

We're in the Effortless Present when the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control — continue to have a larger place in our life (Galatians 5:22-23).

We're in the Effortless Present when we're abiding in him and he in us (John 15:5).

We're in the Effortless Present when we have joy and peace in spite of adversity and suffering.

We're in the Effortless Present when we're supporting our "faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

We're in the Effortless Present when we're able to turn the other cheek, when we're able to forgive 70 times 7 and when we're able to turn away from temptation.

We're in the Effortless Present when we are serving God with our spiritual gifts and passion.

We're in the Effortless Present when we are sharing the Good News with others.

We're in the Effortless Present when our only business, as Brother Lawrence puts it in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, is "to love and delight ourselves in God."

We're in the Effortless Present when love flows out from us to others as freely as water from a tap.

I can hear you already saying:

"In other words, I'm in THE ZONE — the Effortless Present when I'm — like — perfect."

Well, yeah.

But don't forget, the Effortless Present doesn't happen very often. Not for Derek Lee, Tiger Wood, or Kobe Bryant. And not for you.

However, there are disciplines that create the possibility that you, too, every once in a while, will get in THE ZONE, find the Sweet Spot, experience the Effortless Present that the apostle Paul calls, "walking in the Spirit."

Those disciplines are visualization and practice.

*Visualization.*

I don't know if you noticed, but the apostles and the early Christians spent a lot of time in prayer.

It is in prayer that we're able to express our longing for a deeper walk with God. We're able to "picture" what kind of experience we want and hope for during the day ahead.

Morning prayer helps us set the tone for the entire day.

Evening prayer allows us to express thanks, and "review the film" as it were, to look for spots where we stepped out of, or away from the zone. It allows us to consider why what worked, worked, and what didn't work, didn't work.

*Practice.*

They "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The word "devoted" is a rather long, compound Greek word. It means to "be strong toward." No one finds the Effortless Present without being "strong toward" something. If it's golf, you have to be dragged away from the practice range. If it's basketball, you're shooting hoops at midnight.

The early Christians were "strong toward" certain things, namely, the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer."

In other words, they were people of the Word and people of Community.

They knew that to find THE ZONE, they would need to learn the fundamentals. The apostles were their coaches. And they were "strong toward" their teaching. Couldn't get enough of it.

Which is strange all the way around, because the apostles as disciples in the gospels were not really known for their clarity of thought and the richness of their vision. They didn't get it most of the time. They seldom had ears to hear what the Spirit was saying to them.

But the resurrection and Pentecost changed all that. Now they taught with authority. The pieces had all come together. And the early Christians couldn't get enough of what they had to share. They were people of the Word — unabashedly and without apology.

And they were people of Community. They hung out together, which no

doubt was a source of strength, courage and support. They ate in each other's homes. They sold their possessions and shared with each other. How amazing and strong is that!

They knew that to find THE ZONE, they would need support from the community. So they ate together, prayed together, studied together, and no doubt began to observe the sacraments together.

The result was that the church experienced phenomenal growth — as would any church that had Christians in this kind of a zone.

The problem is, of course, getting to a place where we can experience this kind of spiritual skill.

It's not easy.

But it might be helpful to remember the Effortless Present is a Spirit-generated state of mind and soul. It's not about us "trying" to be better any more than Yo-Yo Ma tries to remember where fingers and bow combine to strike a D on the cello.

It's the music, it's the practice, it's the Spirit. It all comes together. When a person is walking in the Spirit, he or she doesn't "think" about how the love comes, how the joy comes, how the service comes.

It's just there, because the Spirit is within us, empowering us and moving us with ease toward this spiritual level of life in which practicing God's presence, experiencing God's power, just seems to come naturally.

Practice and visualize. Then ask the Spirit of God to take over.

It's effortless.

OK, maybe its not effortless, but on the 21<sup>st</sup>, as Nancy is running up heartbreak hill at mile 21 of the Boston Marathon — she will be able to do it — because she has already climbed it — in her mind and because of all the practice that she has put in!