

Restore
Your *Joyful*
Heart

Revitalizing Prayers
and Practices for Parents
and Caregivers

ALLIE JOHNSTON



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*A joyful heart is the
health of the body,
but a depressed spirit
dries up the bones.*

PROVERBS 17:22

The word “health” has its roots in the old English *hælp*, meaning wholeness and being well. The recent emphasis on “preventative medicine”—a proactive approach to patient care—affirms the need for adopting healthy habits in order to prevent disease and infirmity. This holistic sense applies not only to the body, but also to the mind, heart, and soul. Taking care of our physical, emotional, intellectual, and emotional needs is vital to a practice of well-being.

It should go without saying that well-being is essential for everyone, especially parents. Even so, the demands on one’s time and energy can easily pull us away from safeguarding our mental, emotional, and physical health. It is difficult to carry the Good News to others with dried bones and an ill-tempered spirit. Healthy practices not only lower the potential for exhaustion and burnout, but also restore the joyful heart that makes for authentic discipleship.

This booklet offers ideas tailored for parents. Each topic includes a short reflection, prayer, and a soul-feeder—a concrete suggestion for putting the idea into practice. Let each one bring you a deeper sense of well-being so that you can parent with the best of what you have to share with others.

Put on Your Mask First

Some years ago, I worked for a catechetical publisher and frequently traveled for the job. I used to wonder who needed to hear the inevitable airline announcement, “Please put on your own mask before assisting others.” Now that I am a mother I know exactly whom this announcement is for: parents! Today I rarely travel, and you will much more likely find me at home surrounded by little ones in the important role of parent. But, for me, the “put on your mask first” message is more relevant than ever. It’s one that resonates both on and off the plane and perhaps even more acutely in a pandemic and post-pandemic age. There are so many situations I find myself in as a parent, rushing to put the proverbial mask on my children before I’ve even considered my own. To borrow another overused metaphor about the empty vessel that cannot fill a cup, it is perennially true that if you’re running on empty as a parent, then nobody benefits. I’ve learned that “putting on my mask first” takes only a moment and makes me better equipped to pour myself out to others, especially my family. It took a bit of practice and a shift in mindset to get accustomed to the process, but it can be applied in both emergencies and everyday situations. The mask could represent many things (including an actual mask), but it might well also be taking a few minutes for myself, stopping to eat, reading a book, or the other simple self-care suggestions on the following pages. What could this mask represent for you?

SOUL-FEEDER

Self-care is personal and may mean something different for each parent. What does it mean to you? Develop a definition that you will use as a standard. Reflect on your current level of self-care and your own self-care goal using your definition.

God, you care for me with a parental love. Help me to remember and reflect this care in my caring efforts for myself and others.

Start a Journal

A few years ago, my sister gave me a journal that includes a single line for each day. When my first daughter was born, the idea of keeping up a journal seemed overwhelming, but this friendly book was a manageable way for me to record just a note or daily thought. I'm so glad that I used it, because—many years and three kids later—each completed page reveals a small but special collection of memories of my early days and years of motherhood. I keep the little blue journal and a pen in the top drawer so I can write it in before bed each night, or as often as I can.

There are so many options for journaling today. One needn't have a traditional bound book to start or keep a journal. Digital journals take different approaches to support journaling habits and are easily accessible on a personal device so they can be used whenever it's convenient. Some are simple text applications, but many others allow for the addition of media or art. Paper journals are also readily available and can be customized in many ways. Even something as simple as a lined notebook or the built-in rudimentary notes application on a smartphone can do the job as a journal.

What might you use to record your thoughts and goals? Which process or method would be most effective for you? Which is most creative or fun? Which is most fulfilling?

SOUL-FEEDER

Start a small journal or other way to record your thoughts to support your self-care efforts. Choose a method that is most helpful for you. Begin by noting some things that would “fill your vessel” as a person and as a parent. Categorize them. Which seem attainable in your everyday life, and which would you need to work toward? Prioritize one or two to keep in your mind and heart as self-care goals for the day or the week.

God, thank you for your love, which fills me with purpose and strength.

Have a Good Morning

Saint Edith Stein said, “The first hour of your morning belongs to God. Tackle the day’s work that he charges you with, and he will give you the power to accomplish it.” Depending on your stage of parenting, an hour of your morning might be a tall order. My own active eighteen-month-old son is truly difficult to look away from for even a split second, and he is often the first one awake in the house. I swoop into his nursery as quickly as possible before his sweet, loud voice wakes his sisters. But I’ve found that if I’m able to wake up before my children, even a few reflective, meditative moments of listening and breathing can have a profound effect on the entire day. If I don’t succeed in this endeavor, I try to accomplish it over my morning coffee while the baby plays with toys. Setting aside the available moments of your early morning before taking on your many roles can set the tone as you “tackle the day’s work.”

Consider your own unique morning routine. Are there some moments you can give to God and set the tone for your day? When might you take these moments? How will you use them?

SOUL-FEEDER

In your self-care journal, sketch out your typical morning schedule. Be as detailed as possible, and look in admiration at what you accomplish each morning. Then, build in some moments you might dedicate to following the advice of Saint Edith Stein. Try it this week.

Good morning, God! Help me center my day on the work you charge me with and to accomplish it with love and purpose.

Get Lost or Found in Nature

There are several acres of woods behind our house, and during the past year I've taken my kids on a morning nature walk along the trails running through them. The routine and the paths have become familiar: we know well where the trails lead and intersect and the few familiar faces we might meet along the way. But we *always* discover something new—a field of wild daisies, brilliantly red-berried trees, a mysterious fairy house, a red tail hawk's nest. Often, it's one of the children who notices, and I challenge myself to experience our walks through their wondering eyes. Sometimes I'm tempted to skip the walk if I'm running behind schedule or the kitchen is a disaster. But I never regret going and am always glad we got outside.

There are well-documented physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits to being outdoors. Getting outside is known to elevate your mood, even if it's sometimes hard to get out of the door wrangling kids or leaving a messy house and unfinished tasks. It's also known to boost your immune system and your energy, which we know all parents can benefit from. In all seasons and in all types of weather, time spent outside can be restorative. Visiting a new place can be exhilarating, but if you're open, you can be awestruck and invigorated by God's creation in your own backyard. Build in time each day to be in nature, whether it's a new-to-you locale on a warm sunny day or just out the back door to splash in a puddle.

SOUL-FEEDER

Bring something green into your home or your garden. Whether you purchase a seedling or potted flower, or grow a plant or a garden from seed, tending to it will remind you of God's creation and nature's benefits. Keep it simple so it's not something that adds more responsibility to your life, and share it with your family.

God, thank you for the beautiful and invigorating gifts of your creation that fill me with energy and restore me.