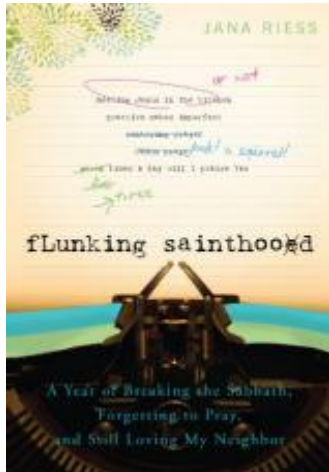


Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor

by Jana Riess



About the Book

This wry memoir tackles 12 different spiritual practices in a quest to become more saintly, including fasting, fixed-hour prayer, the Jesus Prayer, gratitude, Sabbath-keeping, and generosity. Although Riess begins with great plans for success ("Really, how hard could that be?" she asks blithely at the start of her saint-making year), she finds to her growing humiliation that she is failing --- not just at some of the practices, but at every single one. What emerges is a funny yet vulnerable story of the quest for spiritual perfection and the reality of spiritual failure, which turns out to be a valuable practice in and of itself.

Discussion Guide

Chapter 1. Which Practices?

This is a freebie chapter. There are no discussion questions. If you're the kind who wants extra credit, you can read a book by Thérèse of Lisieux and learn how to pronounce Lisieux. Hint: purse your lips like a fish.

Chapter 2. Fasting in the Desert

Have you ever had an experience where you received a dramatic or miraculous answer to prayer when you fasted?

If you answered no to that last question, do you feel like a total loser?

Which do you think is a more spiritual experience: fasting alone or in community? Why?

Chapter 3. Meeting Jesus in the Kitchen . . . Or Not

What is a household chore that you find meditative or spiritual?

You got nothin'?. Really? OK, do you *ever* do housework? Like, at all?

Were you surprised by the book's image of God as the universe's housekeeper? Does it make you want to pick up your socks more often, to give God a break?

Do you believe that the little chores we do to care for each other are really ways of showing love to God?

Chapter 4. Lectio Divination

Have you ever tried to read a particular book of the Bible slowly and carefully? If yes, what did you discover?

What is your favorite passage of Scripture and why? (Yes, Harry Potter counts as Scripture.)

Have you ever just opened the Bible and found an answer to a question or prayer you had? What was that experience like? And why don't those answers happen to more of us more often?

Chapter 5. Nixing Shoppertainment

If you were to do the simplicity experiment and 'ruthlessly eliminate' any activity from your life that wasn't essential, what would have to go? Which of those inessential things would you miss the most?

Do you think of yourself as the frugal type, like the author's husband, or a spender? Could you quit shopping cold-turkey for a month?

What is your personal vanity Waterloo --- that thing you are secretly proud of that doesn't point to God?

Chapter 6. Centering Prayer The Jesus Prayer Look, a Squirrel!

Are you capable of sitting still for twenty minutes in meditative silence without falling prey to Monkey Mind? (If you answered yes to this question, please email the author immediately with any how-to advice.)

Do you think our high-tech culture makes it more difficult to undertake contemplative prayer practices now than a generation ago? Why or why not?

Do you have any referral recommendations for dentists who a) are in-network, b) will knock patients out cold, and c) weren't raised in a barn?

Chapter 7. Unorthodox Sabbath

What do you do to observe a weekly Sabbath? If you never observe any kind of weekly break, go back three spaces. And then just sit there for a while.

Which Sabbath practice of the Orthodox Jews surprised you the most? Were there any specific aspects of the Orthodox Sabbath that you would like to try?

Do you think that it's harder for women to enjoy a real Sabbath than it is for men? Why or why not?

Chapter 8. Thanksgiving Every Day

Did you think the author was lame for flunking gratitude? Have *you* ever flunked gratitude?

Do you believe that people need to express gratitude in order to qualify for more blessings?

Just as a hint, the answer to the last question should be no. NOOOOOOO. So if we're not expressing gratitude in order to receive greater blessings, why *do* we? What's the point of being thankful?

Chapter 9. Benedictine Hospitality

Have you ever had an experience where someone made you feel totally and wonderfully welcome? What did that person do to make you feel so wanted?

Have you ever opened your home and your life to total strangers? What was that experience like?

Are there acceptable boundaries for hospitality, or should we welcome absolutely everyone, even mice and bedbugs?

Chapter 10. What Would Jesus Eat?

What do you think Jesus would say about vegetarianism? Do you have a moral problem with factory farming as it's practiced today?

That last question sounded really heavy. Softball question: What's your favorite childhood memory associated with meat? Did you feel as betrayed as the author did when she discovered that St. Francis was not really a vegetarian? Or are you more mature than the author? No, don't answer that. You probably are.

Chapter 11. Seven Five Three Times a Day Will I Praise You

Have you ever tried praying at fixed times of the day, like Jesus and the apostles? If so, how did that work out for you? If not, are you curious enough to try it?

How do you pray best? What makes you feel closer to God?

Do you feel more like Bettie, whose prayers resulted in miracles, or like Robert, whose prayers, um, didn't? If you're more like Robert, do you think that the lack of results is your fault, or just the way prayer usually works?

Chapter 12. Generosity

Did reading about the ways the world could be transformed if more people tithed ten percent of their income make you feel excited? Or just guilty, depressed, and in need of additional therapy?

Why do you think that wealthier people give proportionally less of their income to charity than poorer people?

How does generosity make you feel, either as the giver or as the recipient?

Do *you* think Hillary would have made a good president?

Bonus: Cholent recipe from Chapter 7

Note: This recipe is not compatible with chapter 10 (vegetarianism). The author cannot be held responsible for any painful cognitive dissonance that readers may experience.

To get this in the oven before the Sabbath, start it on the stovetop about 45 minutes before the candlelighting on Sabbath Eve. It will be delicious at lunchtime the next day.

Ingredients

3 onions, quartered
4 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 pounds chuck roast, cut into large chunks
1 cup dry kidney beans
1 cup dried pinto beans
1 cup pearl barley
5 large potatoes, peeled and cut up
boiling water to cover
2 (1 oz.) packages dry onion soup mix
2 tablespoons garlic powder
salt and pepper to taste

Directions

In a large oven-safe pot or roasting pan, sauté onions in oil over medium heat.

Add meat, and brown well on all sides.

Mix in beans; stir continuously until the beans start to shrivel. Stir in the barley. Add potatoes, and add just enough boiling water to cover the meat and potatoes. Mix in dry soup mix and garlic. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, lower heat, and simmer partially covered for 20 minutes on stovetop.

Preheat oven to 200 degrees F (95 degrees C). I promise it really will cook all the way through at 200 degrees.

Cover pot tightly, and place in preheated oven. Allow to cook overnight for at least 12 to 15 hours. Check periodically to make sure you have enough liquid to cover; add small amounts of water if needed. Do not stir; stirring will break up the chunks of potatoes.

Author Bio

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