

ENJOY, PONDER, LEND A HAND

Living *Eat, Pray, Love* in your own backyard

When author Elizabeth Gilbert left behind her everyday life to embark on an *Eat, Pray, Love* journey around the world, readers and moviegoers everywhere were inspired. And no wonder. Her excursions through Italy, Indonesia, and India allowed millions to vicariously savor the flavors of a different culture, the challenge of spiritual inquiry, and the fulfillment that comes from helping someone in need.

How we choose to satisfy our appetites—physical, spiritual, and emotional—defines our human experience. While settling into a routine is natural, the “comfort zone” most of us refer to with such affection can gradually begin to feel uncomfortable, even paralyzing. Trekking around the world is certainly one way to shake things up. But hundreds of opportunities await in our own communities for those who are willing to make a short-term commitment to change. If you’re a candidate for enjoying every meal, pondering the invisible, and lending a hand to others, here are some simple suggestions that just might change the way you experience daily life.

BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER





Focus on modifying only one appetite at a time.

◆ **Return to childhood favorites.** Maybe it was a chicken pot pie, a bowl of Lucky Charms, or a red Popsicle. As you enjoy the treats that brought you pleasure as a child, you'll find that memories are evoked by the foods that you associate with those years. Jot down the thoughts, feelings, and recollections that come to mind.

Eat dessert first. Despite what your mother may have told you, there really is no rule against this. Eat only dessert, if that's what you're hungry for. Have a piece of pie and a glass of milk for breakfast or scrambled eggs and bacon for dinner. Resist the urge to stick to the "rules" and, for a measured amount of time, eat just what you're hungry for.

Try something new. Cook an artichoke. Always wondered what spaghetti squash tasted like? Pick one up at the market, slice it in half, and bake it for dinner. Order an appetizer portion of escargot or share a buffalo steak. For some people, trying a new food is like jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. Why bother? But you may find that breaking through your routine barriers opens up a whole new world of taste sensations.

PONDER

If you're like more than 80% of the population, you pray on a regular basis. The Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com) surveyed a cross-section of the population and found that without being given a definition of "prayer," most of the respondents seemed to understand what prayer was and indicated it as part of their regular routine.

Kevin L. Ladd, associate professor of psychology at Indiana University South Bend, explains that prayer is a mechanism for fostering connectivity with the self (inward), with others (outward), and with the divine (upward), and that people pray in one of three ways—inward, upward, or outward.

During Phase Two, choose one or more of the following options to focus on and find out more about your spiritual self.

Close your eyes. If you find yourself at square one, closing your eyes may help you ease into meditation, spiritual practice, or prayer. If you're able to find a quiet space, even better. Noise and conversation distract when your goal is stillness and meditation. This first step toward introspection and inquiry may seem simple—maybe even counterintuitive—but by physically shutting out your

vision of the world, you're more able to ponder and imagine what is invisible to the eye.

Fast. In many religions, the discipline of fasting is practiced as a step toward introspection. The time typically spent planning, preparing, and eating meals may be devoted to yoga, meditation, silence, or reflection. To practice a modified fast, just omit an item or two from your diet—something that you would normally eat or drink during the course of the day. Each time you get an appetite for it, you'll be reminded of your intent to live more mindfully.

Say a word of gratitude before each meal. Whether it's a bowl of cereal, a sandwich, or a steak dinner, each meal you enjoy is the end product of the labor and effort of many individuals—farmers, truck drivers, factory workers, grocery store clerks, chefs, waiters, and family members. Whenever you sit down to eat, reflect with thanksgiving on the group of people who made your meal possible.

LEND A HAND

The last phase of this journey takes you beyond yourself as you reach out to others. Remain in the helping mindset as you go to and from work, mingle in the marketplace, and circulate among colleagues. A misconception about loving one's neighbor is that it's costly. Sometimes what the person next to you needs most is simply an attentive listener, a helping hand, or a compassionate touch.

Feed a hungry person. Giving a meal to someone who's hungry is a true act of love. It's as simple as preparing sack lunches with nonperishable food and bottles of juice or water and dropping them off at a soup kitchen or food bank.

Touch someone who is hurting. Touching is a way of literally "reaching out" to a person in pain. Tiffany Field, founder and director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami in Florida, has researched the healing properties of the human touch and found that it lowers the blood pressure and heart rate of individuals under stress. When you encounter a colleague in trouble or see a stranger in tears, a touch can help more than anything you could say.

Perform a "random act of kindness." Sweep the sidewalk in front of a neighbor's home or take their emptied garbage can back up their driveway. Pay the next person's fee at the tollbooth or drive-through. Drop some change into the canister to benefit charity. Though your good deed will go unsung and your donation won't be tax-deductible, you'll know you've made a difference. ☺

Freelance writer **Margaret Miller** enjoys, ponders, and lends a hand in El Paso, Texas.



RESOURCES

To further explore the pleasures of food

www.smittenkitchen.com

The delicious recipes on this cooking blog are only one of many reasons to pop in and subscribe. The artistic photographs that accompany each recipe will truly make your mouth water and inspire you to try something new.

To understand more about pondering the spiritual

In My Own Words by Mother Teresa (Gramercy, 1995)

This slim volume of photographs and quotations expresses the heart of a woman whom many believe embodied the heart of a saint. "Prayer does not demand that we interrupt our work," she wrote, "but that we continue working as if it were prayer."

To engage in your community

www.dosomething.org

Created for teens who want to make a difference, this website is packed with inspiring ideas about ways readers of all ages can be change agents. Whether you're passionate about animal welfare, education, HIV awareness, reducing poverty, or another social cause, you'll discover programs that can use your help, as well as information about obtaining funding to jump-start your project.