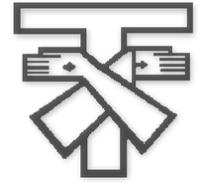




STRETCHING

by Jane DeRose-Bamman, OFS



How willing am I to do God's will? If I pray or say God's will be done – do I mean it? Of course, that is what the Franciscan journey is all about – recognizing God is in control.

In many ways, trusting in God's will is like stretching. If you've ever had a pulled muscle, you know the importance of stretching before exercising. Tight or taut muscles can be loosened up by slow steady stretches or easy repetitive motions to warm-up the muscles. It's amazing how much additional length you can get by stretching those muscles – back, legs, arms. It's worth it to take the time to stretch so one can avoid dealing with the pain.

This lesson can be applied to our prayer lives. We need to experience a form of stretching to prepare us for various struggles that may find their way into our lives. This is what I've come to think of as ***spiritual*** stretching.

You have an encounter that challenges you; for example:

1. Someone cuts you off in traffic or at the grocery store.
2. A fraternity brother or sister takes an opposite political position than you.
3. A family member or coworker disrespects you.
4. You, a family member or friend is very sick.

How do you respond? What does it take to respond gracefully and lovingly if any response is needed? Can we allow ourselves to be stretched a bit with each encounter?

As a recovering perfectionist, although I have been professed for more than 24 years, my spiritual stretching or limberness has varied throughout the years. Physically, I've never been able to bend over and touch my toes without bending my knees. Spiritually, I continue to work on allowing God to lead.

One area where I have experienced spiritual stretching is in response to nominations to serve on OFS fraternity councils. I have been a nominee many times. But I haven't always had the "God's will be done" attitude or "a ready and willing spirit"¹. In fact, there were times when I said no, or made it known ahead of time, that I didn't have time to serve. I didn't even pray about it before I responded. I just knew that if my name were to be placed on the ballot I would be elected. (Some humility, eh?) My time was filled – working full-time, building a relationship with my husband, who wasn't a Franciscan, and participating in other interests (*e.g.*, tennis, volunteer activities). So I took matters into my own hands – not accepting the nomination or accepting it while grumbling about all the other things I had to do. Well, God worked on my humility and trust – for in some of those elections I wasn't elected!² Wonderful examples of the reality that God ***IS*** in control of the elections too – no matter how good a candidate I thought I was. As I stretched – spiritually – I came to understand that God knew that I was not ready and was perhaps "not qualified" to serve.

Praying, and allowing God to work through prayer time can transform us from a babbling shallow stream to a calm deep body of water. These days, when I get ready to do something – I'm getting better at saying or thinking, "Okay God, it's your lead." I'm getting better at stretching to allow time for God to lead my responses instead of allowing my initial reactions to be the first thing out of my mouth.

If God hasn't given up on me yet, then I certainly want to keep trying and will put the necessary time into the stretching. Maybe someday I'll be able to touch my toes without bending my knees... spiritually speaking.

¹ OFS Rule Article 21

² My name had been on the ballot as a nominee for a National Executive Council position for elections held in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. For five of those elections, I wasn't elected. It began to feel like "Always a nominee and never an executive council member." Surprisingly, I was elected in October 2018,