Is Photography a Spiritual Exercise?

by Mary Doo

You are going to laugh, but these days many of the things I see or think about relate to photography.

I remember Maria Zorn - a legend to those of us who knew her work. After she retired, she gave away her equipment, including her Nikon 200mm micro lens, to make a clean break. Whoever inherited that lens inherited something beyond its physical value - as it had spent years in the hands of an extraordinary macro photographer, and that kind of history is priceless. And yet even without her Nikon, Maria said she couldn't stop composing wherever she went. She did not deny that this habit seemed like a compulsion.

Photography, over time, seems to shape the way we see and the way we find meaning in ordinary moments.

A few weeks ago, at my Cape Cod church's Bible study group, we watched a talk by Beth Moore on the theme of "Walking with God." I'll admit I always suspected her to be ultra-conservative, but her words were genuinely inspiring. She spoke about how God loved us long before we were aware of it, whether we recognize it or not, and whether or not we reciprocate His love.

This made me think about how we pray to communicate with God. We often come across requests for prayers and intercession on Facebook or elsewhere.

So, if prayer matters to so many of us, how do we make it more meaningful and effective - not as a theological debate, but as a sincere and practical concern - the same way a photographer might ask how to make better images?

I asked my pastor this question during a recent potluck gathering: "How can we make our prayers more effective?"

He thought about it and said something like this: The extent of effectiveness depends on how much we understand God's will. I then asked, "How do we understand that?"

He responded that the most complete theological answer comes from reading the Bible.

Seriously, it reminded me of the answer often given to photographers who ask about a camera function: "Please read the manual." Excellent advice, no doubt - but my crease-free and immaculate-looking manual is close to two inches thick!

Reading is, of course, essential. But so is practice. I believe we should be able to find "best practices" that can make our prayers more effective. So I did some research in this area and tried to connect the effectiveness criteria to photography.

No, I am not trying to convert or preach, so please relax.

Stillness



Many traditions point to stillness as the starting point of prayer - not merely silence, but an inner tranquility that makes us genuinely receptive. The Psalms often speak of waiting on God. Contemplative practices across many faiths, even yoga, begin meditation by calming the restless mind.

You might have heard Minor White's famous advice: "Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence."

I believe this means calming our inner distractions and giving the subject time to acknowledge our presence. It is nice to record what is there, but allowing our subject to reveal what else is there, as we quiet our heart and mind, is doubly meaningful.

Stillness is not emptiness. It is preparation.

Sincerity



Perhaps the most important quality in prayer is sincerity - speaking from the heart rather than repeating familiar words because they are expected. Most traditions emphasize that God is less interested in eloquence than in genuineness.The hymn "Search me, O God,and know my heart today…" has always moved me because of its earnestness.

In photography, authenticity matters more than theory or expensive equipment. Some of our most memorable images are not

the technically perfect ones, but the ones taken with genuine curiosity, sincerity, or sense of wonder. A slightly imperfect photograph made with real interest can resonate more deeply than something flawless but emotionally empty.

Clarity and Focus



Thoughtful prayer should be specific. Many traditions encourage people to say clearly what they are asking for, subject to God's will, of course, and to avoid vague requests - such as wanting everything to be better in every way without clear direction. Such requests rarely bring clarity.

As you know, in photography, when we try to include everything in one frame, the result is usually confusion. It is even worse when we don't focus on any one subject - unless we are doing intentional camera movement. Choosing one clear subject or purpose makes the image stronger. Also, instead of trying to photograph everything in the scene, you might focus on one mountain ridge, or even a single dried flower.

Sometimes focus is not seeing more. It is choosing less.

Patience, Trust, and Waiting



In prayer, answers do not always arrive on our schedule. Many people of faith speak of learning to trust the timing - continuing to show up even when nothing seems to be happening.

Perhaps the darkest phase of faith that may test one's trust is when a persistent prayer does not receive a visible answer. In a recent church retreat, the speaker mentioned Psalm 88, which is often recognized as the darkest chapter in the Psalms. It expresses a deep, raw despair toward God, who seemed unresponsive to his cries and pleas.

Yet there is a profound irony. The psalmist continued to turn to God. He believed that if God was powerful enough to have allowed his terrible situation, he must be powerful enough to change it.This reveals a stubborn faith - the trust that God's silence does not mean the absence of God.

Sometimes life seems to "clip" our joy. However, as photographers, we know that even in dark areas (other than those accidentally shot with the lens cap still on), there is often hidden detail that can be recovered if we look closely.We may need to denoise the image, but the information may still be there.

We cannot control the weather, the light, or the wildlife. But we can control our preparation, our presence, and our patience.

Reflection, Humility, and Adjustment



Prayer, practiced seriously, tends to produce reflection - an honest look at ourselves, our intentions, and where we may need to grow. Humility is not self-deprecation; it is the willingness to see clearly and adjust accordingly.

Photography offers the same discipline. Reviewing our images gives us honest feedback: the horizon was tilted. The sharpness was in the wrong place. The background was too busy. The composition was mediocre.

Over time, those small corrections accumulate into something real.

Intentionality and Action



Prayer is not a passive activity. Many traditions emphasize that sincere intention should be followed by deliberate action - that we are participants, not just recipients.

In photography, we may hope for good weather and beautiful light, but we still have to set the alarm clock. We may hope for wildlife to appear, but we still have to charge the batteries and bring the appropriate lenses and memory cards. We may dream of meaningful images, but we still have to learn our craft and show up again and again.

Action is what turns intention into reality. When the light is right and the moment is unfolding, unless we press the shutter, the image will never materialize.

Gratitude and Appreciation



Gratitude may be the most natural response to both prayer and photography - gratitude for the outcome, the chance to witness beauty, for the patience to wait, for the lessons learned from mistakes, and for the moments that arrive unexpectedly.

I still remember early sunrise moments in the Canadian Rockies. The mountaintops were crowned with morning light, sometimes looking as if they were on fire.There were times when the scenes felt almost unreal, especially when the reflections were perfectly still, like enormous paintings. I felt deeply grateful simply to be there.

Photography constantly reminds us that we did not create the light, design the clouds, or arrange the sunrise.We simply showed up to enjoy them.

Conclusion

Meaningful prayer and meaningful photography share many similarities. Both invite sincerity, clarity, patience, and humility, especially when nothing appears to be happening. We prepare, we wait, we adjust, and we do not give up.

Yet when we arrive with attention, patience, and a measure of humility, something remarkable may happen.

We are grateful.