

Fifty Ways to Nourish Your Soul

Rosemary Cunningham

Making matters of the spirit part of everyday life

"What would you do if you knew the world was coming to an end?" I was first asked that question back in the 1970s when I was on the road with a dance company, passing time before a flight. The choreographer said, "I would dance until I died." Dance away his life! Meanwhile, as stage manager, I thought — but didn't say — that I would sink into total terror and panic. I couldn't grasp how anyone could answer otherwise.

On September 11, when it felt like the world was coming to an end, I discovered my real answer. As I moved about my workplace numb from the news downtown, knowing that a friend was most certainly in one of the World Trade towers, a voice inside kept saying, "Go to the river." In recent years the Hudson River has become my place and my practice. It began one hot summer afternoon as a friend and I sat on an old wooden dock during one of those moments that truly matter. I asked him to name the place, but his first response, "Dock A, 79th Street Boat Basin," didn't convey the feeling. So I asked again. He answered, "Cape Grace." Bingo!

I began to go to the river on weekends to watch the sunset. I noticed that each was unique. I saw gulls dip, swirl, and glide with ease. I saw ducks appear to work hard to fly, but float and paddle playfully in the water. I saw a thunderstorm come down the river and the small sailboats in its path cease to rock, and for the first time I experienced the power of stillness.

One day it occurred to me that the loving force that had made the glorious sunset had made me, too. This deep sense of connection made me cry for joy. I started going to the river on weekdays, no matter what the weather. Against the railing on a cold winter day, I huddled in my down coat feeling that God was there, arms around me. I was jobless and almost broke. But no matter what happened, I would always have this place. I could always come here.

I began naming the places at the river's edge. Fear Rocks marks the place where a friend and I each dropped a rock in the river to symbolize letting go of our fear. The Point of Despair is where I stood as I felt the depths of my self-doubt. Courage Place marks a moment when I realized I had the courage to express my heart fully and appropriately — no matter the result. As the river changed, so did my life. A wonderful job, where gentle people and enthusiastic preschoolers surround me, came my way. Last January, the day after my birthday, I noticed that a new pier south of the boat basin had opened. Its graceful sweep takes me out to what feels like the middle of the river. I call it Cape Faith.

On September 11, I walked the river path. Three years of sunsets, tears, joy, prayers, fireworks, hugs, smiles, friends, kisses, solitude, and moments with God came flooding back. I stood at the Point of Despair, knowing I had been comforted in this place time and time again. So much changed on September 11. This had not. A friend of mine likes to say, "The solution is simple and spiritual, and has nothing to do with the problem." That's what the river is for me. It's what all fifty ways to nourish your soul have in common. That's why, when the editors asked me to help organize the wonderful collection of practices their readers had submitted, I jumped at the chance.

1. See the world through your pet's eyes

I make pet visits to the local hospital with my golden retriever, Dakota. My schedule has us visiting oncology patients and their families. Dakota's schedule has us visiting everyone. We greet all the housekeeping staff, the people outside the hospital in the smoking area, the office staff, hospital volunteers, and anyone else he sees. When I'm with Dakota, I "see" and talk to many more people than when I'm alone. It's my goal in life to "see" everyone — as he does — even when he's not with me. — Susan H. Skinner, Iowa

2. Create your own prayer book

I use a black-paper spiral notebook and cut-out pictures from nature magazines of peaceful scenes and create my own inspirational prayer book. When I come across a wonderful quotation or a prayer I like, I copy it into my book with silver, gold, or "milky-gel" colored pens and paste a nature scene across from it. Just leafing through my personal prayer book calms me and gives me courage to face my day. — R. Jane Williams, Pennsylvania

3. Sit quietly in a room alone

Whenever I feel down and out, I shut myself in a room and sit quietly and meditate. I think of all I have to be grateful for; sometimes I think about something charming or funny my kids have said recently so that I smile, and sometimes I just close my eyes, breathe deeply, and let myself be. — Abha Iyengar, India

4. Create beauty at work

I have recently begun providing fresh flower arrangements for the reception area at my workplace. The weekly ritual of choosing the vessel, shopping for flowers, and slowly and mindfully creating a work of beauty has become an integral part of my soul nourishment. It provides an outlet for my creativity, centers me, and is something I really look forward to. — Jill Sheeler-Shenk, California

5. Breathe!

Relaxation breathing can calm, de-stress, focus, and relax me in several breaths. It's free and the results are immediate. No planning or equipment is required. It is such a simple thing that provides big benefits and rewards. — Vicki L. Dury, Massachusetts

6. Carry your spirit in your pocket

Over a couple of years, I have collected small, smooth river rocks the size of large marbles. I have written positive yet reflective words on each one with "paint pens," such as love, laugh, compassion, delight, etc. I keep these rocks in a small velvet bag. Each morning I draw one out and put it in my pocket where my hand finds it often. It becomes my daily spirit word with which I can bless myself and pass the blessing on to other souls without their even being aware. P.S. These make a great gift for a soul friend. — Mary Therese Breuning, Washington State

7. Simply swim

Swimming. The fluidity of my body connecting with the water and the meditative motion of each stroke connect me with the divine. In the summer, I swim in the ocean. I am then reminded of being part of something so vast and unknown yet feeling so much a part of the universe, as if I really matter in that space.— Celia Grand, Maine

8. Harmonize with the kids

Children's music and Christmas music always feed my soul and take me to a place of gentle innocence and happiness. On stressful days and in rush-hour traffic, I give my soul flight when I tune in to my favorite songs. Sometimes the children and I sing along and it always makes us smile and act silly.— LeAnn Malecha, Illinois

9. Light a family candle

Last year for the holidays, my wife and I packed a box with special foods, one gift for each person, a tape of our favorite holiday music, and a candle with a cranberry-orange-cinnamon scent. We sent the box to my family in Florida, with instructions to light the candle as they enjoyed the contents. We lit a similar candle as we opened their gifts to us. Each day now at mealtimes, we light the family candle and include our family in our prayers.— Chuck Goodman, California

10. Live in the middle

I carry two little strips of paper, one in my left pocket and one in my right. My rabbi gave them to me around the time of Yom Kippur. On one is written, "For my sake was the universe created"; on the other, "I am but dust." Somehow I manage to stay in the middle.—Gale Maleskey

11. Go treasure hunting

When my husband was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, I was devastated. My morning walks became a litany of self-pity and fear. One morning I discovered a small blue flower

peeking up from behind a rock. It was simple in its beauty. I found myself smiling. Now every morning, I go treasure hunting. I always find something to inspire me: a puffy cloud, a smiling face, the color of the trees, a scurrying squirrel. Nothing out of the ordinary yet God's handiwork. Miraculously, amid pain one can find some modicum of peace.— Celia L. Marszal, New York

12. Pray for someone else

Whenever I feel discouraged and think nothing could be right in my life, I try to find a quiet place to sit and write down a prayer for someone I know who needs a loving thought. Composing the words of the prayer helps align my soul with the loving Presence I need at the moment and reminds me that I am not alone in the universe, that no matter how I feel, I am truly loved and blessed.— Elizabeth Simons, Missouri

13. Let spirit rock you to sleep

Since I've passed 50, I often wake up in the middle of the night. Instead of tossing about while chewing guilty thoughts or solving other people's problems, I now get up and move to the living room, where I read and reflect on one or two pages of a spiritual reading. This replaces the daytime meditation I've never been able to do and sends me back to sleep with a peaceful mind. Our cat usually joins me.— Richard Lalonde, Canada

14. Connect

Whenever I feel the need to remember that I am a child of God, I call friends or acquaintances and ask how they are. This simple act reminds me that a word or deed — however inconsequential — sends the powerful message that God is all Love, and each time we share that Love with another person with a word or smile, we create a powerful force in the world that combats fear and loneliness.— Elizabeth Simons, Missouri

15. Plant a forest... in your office

I have planted a forest in my office! I placed a plastic sheet on the carpet and on it put three tree stumps (18" high and 15" across). Cedar chips are sprinkled all around the stumps like ground cover. On the left stump a plant resides, in the middle is a copy of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and on the right side is a fountain. Above the stumps is a tapestry with the phrase "Ingredients for a Happy Classroom" in the center. Around the perimeter are words and symbols highlighting those ingredients: Humor, Friendship, Kindness, Curiosity, Respect, Patience, Praise, and Recess.— Sean Kelly, Canada

16. Stand soul to soul with nature

I try to find time every day to walk barefoot on the earth, even if it's just standing outside my door in the rain for a moment. I focus on the skin of my feet touching the skin of the earth — my body connecting with the body of the earth, allowing energy to flow back and forth between us. I used to think the sense of peace I experience was a gift from the earth to me, but I've heard (through the "souls" of my feet, of course!) that it's a gift we give each other — that my mindful presence and bare feet are a healing gift to the earth as her grounding presence is a gift to me.— Patti Rieser, North Carolina

17. Look into your eyes

When I awake every morning I look in the mirror before washing my face. Tenderly looking into my own eyes, I cross my hands over my heart and say to the familiar face, "How can I remember to be more loving, juicy, and joyful with you today?" It sets the intention for the hours ahead and keeps me focused on what is truly important.— Sylvia Cohen, New York

18. Relish the moment

As a full-time working mother of two children under five, my soul-nourishing moments are captured in quick-as-sound-bite opportunities. I make it a practice to stop and absorb the beauty God provides in such abundance: the crisp air of a new fall day, a band of swans twittering as they swarm above the trees, warm sun embracing cool skin, squirrels bickering over a corn-cob, the stars and planets on a clear, bright night.— Laura Erickson, North Dakota

19. Welcome the day

Each morning before I dive into the hectic activities at work, I stop at a particularly beautiful place high up on the red rocks surrounding my town. I breathe in and out deliberately and consciously, aware of my connection to Great Spirit, the true reality in all life, and within me. Sometimes I say a more formal prayer. Sometimes I shout joyously for a new day of life, like no other day before it or to come. I do what feels right for me that day. Then I come down from the mountain and go to work.— Jerome Thailing, Arizona

20. Sense the love that surrounds you

When I awake in the early morning to the scent of my wife, the sounds of the birds, and the hush of the leaves in the trees, I am reminded how love from within me and from outside me guides me to a place of peace.— Ben Fowler, Maine

21. Share your abundance

When I'm feeling disconnected from myself, I gravitate to the kitchen. Comparing inspiring recipes to available ingredients gets me back in touch, and I begin to hum old hymns as the cooking process begins. I make lots of two or three different dishes, enough for my family and a few neighbors who may be more stressed out than I am. Then I call and say I'll deliver or they can pick up something hot and savory in time for dinner. Amen! We're cookin'!— Colleen Myers

22. Surrender to the rhythm

Once a week I meet with friends to drum, which loosens up all sorts of insights for all of us. I go to a conventional church in our rural area, but consider Tuesday-morning drumming to be my real church. It is one time during the week when I can believe I live in a sane world.— Laurie Petersen, New York

23. Appreciate loved ones

Whenever I hear my daughter sing or my son laugh, I stop and thank God for my children, their safety, and God's guidance to me and their father for raising them. I remember that soon I'll be looking back on these days, perhaps with longing, and that I must treat my children as dear guests who are about to leave.— Ellen M. Cosgrove, Maryland

24. Pin-up pictures

On the back of our bedroom door I've collected a little rogues' gallery of mugshots of friends who have died, old pals whom I still love, who look at me as knowledgeably and encouragingly as they ever did, quietly urging me to die wisely. I feel connected still — and hope somehow I am. — Bill Cleary, Vermont

25. Sing out

After my mother died, I needed to clear out her closet. What got me through was the repetition of a hymn I sang. I am no singer, but those words had deep meaning for me at that time and whenever I hear it or read the passage in the Bible, memories flood back of how good God is.— Karen Kneidler, California

26. Slow down

When I begin to feel disconnected, I walk and type more slowly, and pay close attention to my task, rather than allowing my mind to whirl around. I practice deep gratefulness during those few moments, whether it is for the green pepper I'm cutting up, the shape of the clouds outside my car window, or the smell of the tea brewing.— Louise Monacelli, Michigan

27. Caress the cat

Stroking my cat several times a day has a calming and soothing effect on me. When she comes up to me, I stop what I'm doing to rub her silky coat and speak to her. She is my reality check, when the world gets crazy, and her soft purr reminds me that I am serenely blessed.— Carol Wilcox, Texas

28. Offer a blanket

St. Paul's Chapel, two blocks from Ground Zero, opened shortly after the World Trade Center attack as a place of rest and nourishment for the emergency workers. It has remained open around the clock through the efforts of a legion of volunteers. One very cold night, a volunteer — a guy about 6' 3"— told me that he had gone around and put blankets on people. I was so grateful to him for teaching me that. Haven't we all been almost asleep but too cold, not wanting to make the effort to get a blanket? And if someone covers you, aren't you in heaven? Later, as I followed his example, one sacred and tender moment followed another.— The Rev. Gwyneth MacKenzie Murphy, a St. Paul's Chapel volunteer

29. Change what you can

When the world seems chaotic and I feel myself falling into despair and helplessness, I remember something I do control: my personal environment. So the more frightening the news, the more nurturing I make my home: the bed is made, there are no dirty dishes in the sink or clean ones on the drain-board, the garbage goes out daily, clothes are hung up immediately, fragrant candles burn each evening, etc. If I can find peace at home, it stands to reason that I can send it like a beacon of light into the world.— Regina Leeds, California

30. Take care of your precious self

After my father died of colon cancer, I knew I needed to have a colonoscopy and be screened for colon cancer. It wasn't something I looked forward to. But when I thought of it as an act of self-nurture, I dreaded it less. It truly was an act of self-nurture because knowing that I'm cancer-free gives me a sense of relief every time I think of it.— Diane Dora, Iowa

31. Read what matters

I choose my reading carefully. I choose what will open my heart and open my mind — developments in science, the spirituality of many religions, health, nature, and philosophy. I read poetry, essays, and stories that open my eyes to wisdom and experience. If I can read on a garden bench in good weather or with a cup of tea beside a wide window in winter, then my soul is nourished indeed.— Bobbie Silk, Illinois

32. Feast on soul food

I spent years trying to feel better by using food. I have learned, instead of overeating, to feed my soul. I've created a CD of my favorite feel-good music to listen to when my spirit is in need. Taking a walk by the lake or in the woods fills me up. So does working in my garden or giving someone I love a phone call or email. By the way, I have lost over 40 pounds and kept it off for two years!— Teri Wiest

33. Seek perspective

I start my day from a "heavenly" perspective by visiting a website that posts photographs of the cosmos: <http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html>. Each day a different image or photograph is featured with an explanation written by a professional astronomer. When I gaze at the galaxies pictured there, at first I feel small and inconsequential. Then I begin to feel immensely privileged to be part of such a magnificent universe. My "problems" — really challenges and growth areas — seem manageable, and I'm eager to live my life to the fullest and to contribute something of significance to the lives of others.— Kathleen Hawkins, Texas

34. Maintain the sweet balance

Eat M&Ms! I could eat the whole bag, but to contain my consumption and nourish my soul I keep them in a box that says M&M and take only a few to remind me of Martha and Mary. I need to balance Mary's contemplation with Martha's action, so the balance is sweet without excess in either direction or in chocolate.— Sheila Otto, Ohio

35. Serenade your kitties

I have kitty cats and each has its own song with its name in it. Olio's song goes to the tune of "Baby Face": "O-lee-oooh. You are the cutest little O-lee-ooohh... You are my kitty and I love

you soo... O-lee-ohh..." So, every night when I go to bed I sing their songs. They come tiptoeing in from wherever they are. Pretty soon I feel little lumps of fur snuggling in until I'm surrounded by a purring cat-blanket and we all doze off into dreamland together.— Udana Power, California

36. Practice gratitude

Every night before retiring, I step outside on my back patio, reach up to the sky, and thank God and the universe for this day and this life. I also keep a gratitude journal and write down at least five things I am grateful for at the end of each day.— Karen Evans, Ohio

37. Bless your creditors

Instead of dreading paying my bills, I am grateful for all that those bills represent. I give thanks out loud as I write each check, for such blessings as electricity, heat, water, my mortgage, gasoline for the car, etc. I bless all the workers for those companies who provide those goods and services, and remember to be grateful for the money to pay those bills. Before I put them in the mail, I hold the envelopes in my hand one final time and send love and light out with them.— Leslie Hoy, Pennsylvania

38. Plant your own sunrise

I don't live close to the water as I once did, and I missed watching the sunrise behind Mt. Rainier and the sunset behind the Olympics across Puget Sound. I needed a new way to refresh my spirit daily with nature's blessings, so I started a patio garden with a San Diego hibiscus that has new blossoms every day. First thing in the morning I look at my "sunrise" of fresh flowers to start the day.— Melissa Johnstone Allinger, California

39. Catch the enthusiasm

I nourish my soul by watching my three-year-old daughter eat. When something she's eating is delicious, my heart actually quivers. Her enthusiasm for life and sustenance is contagious.— Viva Delgado, California

40. Carry a reminder

I have a small rock imprinted with the seven-circuit labyrinth. On days when I need a boost, I carry it in my pocket to remind me that life's path is often circular, and the center of my Being remains whether I am near to it or more on the fringe.— Peggy Babcock

41. Listen for God's whisper

Last year I was runner-up in a national contest for the world's busiest family. Every morning, though, I rise earlier than the others, make a cup of my favorite tea, light my candle, sit in front of the window that looks out over the pond and gardens and write down questions or thoughts that may be troubling me. I listen quietly for the answers and write them as well. It is in the stillness of daybreak where I feel God whispers to each of us.— Sue Hollihan, Canada

42. Allow others to pray for you

Chemotherapy has given me an unexpected gift. I find that I must go within and connect with my soul on a daily basis. It has brought me closer to myself. I am more aware of the rhythms of daily life. I am more reliant on my faith and spiritual practices. Every morning when I begin chemo, I say a prayer and light a candle. Many of my friends around the country do the same thing for me at the same time. Then, in the evening, I light my candle again, turn off the television, and turn on soothing music. I say another prayer and praise God for the day. Even if it was a very bad day, I praise God that I was here to experience it and perhaps help someone else.— Joli Spencier, California

43. Take advice from a holy man

Something I heard from an old Dakota Sioux holy man: Take a moment to relax after a busy day. Find a nice quiet place, close your eyes, and imagine a warm white light of God shining on you from the heavens. That will chase all negative thoughts and replace them with comfort, peace, and joy.— J.C. Pratt, Canada

44. Surrender your time

Friday is my Sabbath time of recreation. Slowly winding our pendulum clock on this day is one way I honor the sacred in ordinary time. My clock-winding prayer is the Psalm line "My time is in your hands, O God."— Roy Howard, Maryland

45. Look in the eyes of love

A friend designed and gave me a beautiful framed mirror only big enough for me to see my eyes. Each morning before I dress I look in the mirror and say an affirmation for the day, and every time I pass a window or mirror I meditate on the affirmation and know that God loves me.— Toni Hill, Pennsylvania

46. Go on a playdate

A good friend and I make time once or twice a month for a Girls' Night Out. It's never anything elaborate, perhaps some shopping, or an evening class (we took line dancing together last spring), and dinner at an inexpensive restaurant. Just a few hours to connect with each other, away from our family obligations, makes a world of difference!— Lisa Rubin, New York

47. Count your blessings

I have been going through a difficult separation from my husband. A friend asked me, "How do you do it?" I wrote out all the supports that keep me positive and focused on what matters most: the essential role of God in my life; my gratitude for life itself; my unconditional and immeasurable love for my daughter and thankfulness for her returned love; my comfort in simply knowing my father lives; thanks for the companionship of a few good friends whom I truly care about and whose lives are an eternal fascination for me; the belief that difficulties in life are challenges that can be understood, and once understood, go away; and finally, trust in the basic goodness of humankind. I put the list on my refrigerator for a daily reminder of these irreplaceable supports.— Susan Thompson-Hoffman, Maryland

48. Share your garden

Three years ago my husband and I purchased a vacant lot, and I planted it in the pattern of the Chartres labyrinth. (A walking meditation tool.) Surprisingly, my nourishment from this project came not in the form of walking the path myself, but in sharing it with others.— Christine Wolf, Hawaii

49. Whistle as you walk

As I walk down city streets or the corridors of my office building alone, I softly whistle whatever tune is in my head. It makes me happy and seems to make others smile.— Sharron Emmons, Connecticut

50. Reread these 50 ways...

...and think about your own!— Rosemary Cunningham, New York