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“Punchy humor and unpretentious inquisitiveness combine in this absorbing memoir....A witty, inspiring read.” —*Publishers Weekly* Starred Review

“...sparkling and very funny....Anyone who has failed to live up to expectations, which means most everyone, will love this book.” —*Booklist* review

Flunking Sainthood:
**New Book Recounts Author’s Failed Quest for Holiness,
One Month at a Time**

Author and aspiring saint Jana Riess spent a year tackling twelve different spiritual practices in an effort to become more holy. Confident at the start—“Really, how hard could it be?”—she is dismayed as she flops at each one. Failure, however, is a valuable spiritual lesson, as she reveals in *Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor* (Paraclete Press, \$16.99, 11/1/11).

In her DIY holiness project, Riess attempts to master practices such as fixed-hour prayer, Sabbath-keeping, generosity, lectio divina, gratitude, and hospitality. Even the simplest one is a challenge. The Jesus Prayer, which is twelve words long and takes about four seconds to recite, prompts her to ask: “What kind of loser fails at the Jesus Prayer?”

Although there are lengths to which Riess is not willing to go—climbing to the top of a pole and living there ala Simeon the Stylite, or being devoured by lions like the early martyr Felicitas—she is open to magically bilocating, like St. Drogo, or hanging out a shingle as a miracle worker. She never does attain that level of saintly power, however, and often finds the pursuit of holiness frustrating and tedious.

Still, there are “occasional glimpses of quiet elation and tranquility,” even among the hunger pangs and crankiness caused by her February practice of fasting.

Falling short of perfection turns out to be an important step on the “painful road to humility.” It also allows a glimpse into her soul, Riess finds: “Every spiritual practice I’ve attempted has resulted in failure not because I didn’t adhere to the basic requirements of each experiment—I didn’t cheat on my fast or neglect to read the Gospel of Mark—but because the practices started pointing me to more profound issues below the surface that I couldn’t quite face.”

Originally, Riess set out to spend a year reading spiritual classics. A self-described overachiever, she added a corresponding monthly practice to supplement the reading. She finds herself impatient with some of the teachers she’s chosen, including Thérèse of Lisieux, the saint known as “the Little Flower,” and Brother Lawrence, whom she finds sanctimonious. Kicking off with Thérèse’s *The Story of a Soul*, she says “the book makes me want to strangle the Little Flower.”

But Thérèse’s message—that ordinary people can become saints too—is the crux of *Flunking Sainthood*. Holiness is a messy and difficult process, Riess finds, but a failed saint is still a saint: “I may have spent a year flunking sainthood, but along the way I’ve had unexpected epiphanies and wild glimpses of the holy I would never have experienced without these crazy practices. I claim that S-word [saint] for myself even with all my let-downs.”

Riess’s year of attempting sainthood ends with an unexpected test. She receives a phone call informing her that her father—who had abandoned the family 26 years before—is dying. Going to Mobile, Alabama, to be at his side shows her that she has learned something from those failed spiritual practices after all: “They helped to form me into the kind of person who could go to the bedside of someone who had harmed me and be able to say, ‘I forgive you, Dad. Go in peace.’”

“It’s the act of loving that marks the true saint, and I was able to love my dad, there at the end of his life,” she reflects.

About the Author

Jana Riess is the author or editor of nine books, including *What Would Buffy Do?*. Although she is a spiritual failure and was never able to climb the rope in gym class, she has a doctorate from Columbia University and has worked in the publishing industry for over a decade. She blogs at <http://blog.beliefnet.com/flunkingsainthood/>.

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