KEEP THE FIRE BURNING

Will Penner

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for May 9–15, 2016.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“Some of my favorite things to do with young people are mission trips, retreats, and camps because I get to see transformative moments happen. What an incredible blessing! I’ve also been disappointed in many of them and in myself as well for not continuing to stoke the fires and to keep them burning in ordinary daily life. I am sure that God is calling us to live our lives of faith not only on the mountaintops but also in the valleys. To do so with fidelity requires delaying gratification, which is rarely easy or natural.” —Will

MEET THE WRITER

Dr. Will Penner has been in ministry with young people for more than two decades in Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, in public and private schools, and as a popular speaker at youth retreats, camps, and conferences. He has served as the editor of both leading professional journals of youth ministry and has authored or edited numerous youth ministry curricula and books, the latest of which is It Happens: True Tales from the Trenches of Youth Ministry (http://www.amazon.com/It-Happens-Tales-Trenches-Ministry/dp/1937734048). But most important, he is the husband of his amazing wife, Christine, and the father of five fantastic children ranging in age from seven to twenty-four.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

• Oreos, marshmallows, and pretzels—or other treats (see “Checking In”)

PLUGGED IN

• Here’s a little snippet to show as the youth walk into the room—“How to Build a Campfire: Arranging Wood for a Campfire” (http://youtu.be/niHEMszTMBU).

CHECKING IN

What many psychologists now refer to as the “Marshmallow Test” was a 1960 Stanford University study of delayed gratification: the ability to wait to obtain something a person wants. Four- to six-year-olds were led into a room, where a treat of their choice (Oreo, marshmallow, or
pretzel) was placed on a table, by a chair. The children were given the choice to eat the treat immediately or to wait fifteen minutes without giving in to the temptation and then to be rewarded with a second one. One researcher observed that some children “cover their eyes with their hands or turn around so that they can’t see the tray, others start kicking the desk, or tug on their pigtails, or stroke the marshmallow as if it were a tiny stuffed animal” while others would simply eat the treat as soon as the researchers left.

Consider conducting a similar experiment with your group. You may need to use donuts (or perhaps half a donut?), muffins, or some other treat. It would be interesting to have them perform the experiment as you talk about the original one and begin the lesson; see if they can wait until the end of the lesson before eating their treat.

**EXPLORING THE WORD**

**Scripture: Genesis 29:20–28**

Jacob fell in love with a woman, but her father made him work for seven years to win her hand in marriage. His passion for Rachel probably waxed and waned during the seven years, but he faithfully lived up to his end of the bargain. In fact, even when his father-in-law tricked him into first marrying Leah, the older daughter, Jacob trudged on for another seven years to marry the woman he truly loved.

Contrast that with our “I want what I want when I want it exactly the way I want it” culture. Most of us can’t even put off a text message or a video game to get our homework done first, much less make a fourteen-year commitment to serving someone else. Yet one of the many ways God seems to mold our characters is to make us wait to get what we want as we exercise our faith muscles.

Tending a fire is a lot like exercising our faith muscles. Getting a fire started is fairly easy; the material used for kindling isn’t all that substantial. In fact, according to Cassius, “Those that with haste will make a mighty fire begin it with weak straws” (William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*; Act 1, Scene 3).

A lot of ministry events, especially those geared toward youth and especially big venue events, are all about igniting an emotional fire based on shallow spirituality. They may be good ways to get some people fired up about their faith. All of us could use an infusion of emotional passion in our spiritual journeys, but we shouldn’t misunderstand those times as the “real” spiritual part of our lives. Our true spiritual fruit blossoms in the ordinary and mundane.

Invite group members to discuss:

- **At what times is it most difficult to keep a spiritual fire burning brightly?**
- **Why is it so hard to keep trudging through those times when it might be easier to find instant gratification in some other way?**
- **How can we remind ourselves that the bigger logs in our spiritual fires may take longer to catch, but they’ll also burn longer than the easy-to-spark kindling?**

(Be sure to reward the youth who were able to avoid the treat temptations by giving them a second one.)
SHARING IN PRAYER
Invite the youth to pray with you:

   Gracious Lord, thank you for providing all that we will ever need. Help us to recognize the importance of continuing to be faithful disciples even when we don’t feel like it. Please help us to stoke the embers of faith within ourselves that will build long-term faith rather than faith for the short term that catches quickly, burns brightly, and fizzles out. We want to be your disciples for the long haul. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

TAKING IT FURTHER
Read through Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ transfiguration (9:28–36). Imagine the disciples’ fascination with the event, their burning faith, and their subsequent disappointment when Jesus was alone and they had to leave. The term “mountaintop experience” comes from the story of the transfiguration. Continue reading to see what Jesus and the disciples accomplished after the transfiguration, and apply what you learn to your own life. In what ways would God use you in the routine of your life this week?

— from devozine In the Habit (May/June 2016). Copyright © 2016 by The Upper Room®. All rights reserved.