Spiritual Fitness

Cultivating spiritual fitness
by Maj Scott Stephan

We've all heard leaders talk about the "whole Marine" concept: mental, physical, and spiritual fitness. Recently, I heard a well-known general officer speak on the subject. The conversation went smoothly as he talked about mental and physical fitness, but when he got to spiritual fitness, the conversation hit the rocks. The general made a comment to the effect of, "Spiritual reps [repetitions] are just as important as mental and physical fitness." A member of the audience asked, "Sir, how do you get your spiritual reps?" The general couldn't answer the question. There was an awkward silence, and he moved on to the next question.

The experience prompted me to think about how I would answer the same question. I wrote down my thoughts for my own benefit and share them here in the hope that they will prompt others to do the same. My conclusion is that spiritual fitness is something we can deliberately cultivate, just like mental and physical health. We can build spiritual fitness by identifying our beliefs and putting those principles into action.

Spiritual fitness helps reinforce physical and mental toughness. (Photo by LCpl Yasmin Perez.)

Step 1: What Do You Believe?

The first step toward spiritual fitness is to determine what you believe. "Believe" simply means having confidence or faith in the truth of something.[1] For some of us, our core beliefs are religious. Others believe in family values, being an American, or something else altogether. We all believe in something, even if you've never thought about it in those terms.

Can you take out a sheet of paper and write down every principle on which your life is based? Try it. This simple act of self-reflection will challenge you to explain what you think life is all about and where you think it is going.

The good news for Marines is that we belong to an organization with established mental and spiritual values. *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*, describes the Service's core values: honor, courage, and commitment.[2] The Marine Corps also has a code of ethics, or a way of putting our values into action—the leadership traits and principles. Taken together, our core values and ethical code define what it means to be a Marine and provide a common base upon which to build spiritual fitness in all Marines. They can also augment your personal beliefs. While a Marine could find that his personal beliefs conflict with the Service's values, the two will be mutually reinforcing more often than not.[3]

Step 2: Practice

The second step is to practice the things you wrote down in step one.

If you said that your religious beliefs are important, then be active in your religious community. Every base has a religious ministries program to meet the needs of servicemembers, regardless of faith background. If you believe in family, what are you doing to prove it? Are you as committed at home as you are to work? The same question can be applied to any core belief.

Improving spiritual fitness requires deliberate effort. We improve physical ability by training our muscles. We build mental capability through education. Building spiritual fitness requires the same kind of hard work. If you don't exercise, your muscles atrophy. If you don't practice your beliefs, your spiritual strength diminishes.

Thoughts for Leaders

The Marine Corps expects unit lead-

ers to build their Marines' mental and physical abilities. Spiritual fitness should be no different. But how do you do that? We lead others to spiritual fitness by setting the example, guiding them through the process, and tying moral principles into everyday activities.

Setting a positive example is the most powerful way to influence Marines. Live in a way that reflects your beliefs. Contrary to urban legend, it is not illegal or unprofessional to talk about your personal beliefs. This does not, however, mean forcing your views on someone else—we all swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution, which includes protecting the rights of our fellow citizens. Demonstrating spiritual strength will communicate the professional importance of the subject to your Marines.

Second, leaders can shepherd Marines through a process of exploring their personal beliefs and mentoring them in applying those values. Many Marines have never thought through this before, and fewer have actually written it down on paper. Lead discussions about the Service's core values and professional ethic. Run ethical decision games where Marines have to make tough choices and justify their actions based on their personal and professional beliefs. Put Marines in fictitious situations where their beliefs may conflict. The scenarios don't have to be about making good decisions while on liberty. Think about the hard choices you had to make in combat, or find an older Marine who you respect and ask for help in developing operational examples.

Finally, leaders can tie moral principles into everyday activities. How many times have you attended, or given, a mandatory brief focused on the negatives (e.g., don't drink and drive, don't hang out at the wrong locations, don't fry a turkey in your garage, etc.)? How about using personal and collective beliefs to talk about what Marines *do*? Marines respect and take care of each other, honor their vows, and support the Constitution—that's why a Marine volunteers to be a designated driver, encourages his friends to do the right thing, or intervenes in a situation that

NCO Creed

I am the backbone of the United States Marine Corps, I am a Marine Noncommissioned Officer. I serve as part of the vital link between my commander (and all officers) and enlisted Marines. I will never forget who I am or what I represent. I will challenge myself to the limit and be ever attentive to duty. I am now, more than ever, committed to excellence in all that I do, so that I can set the proper example for other Marines. I will demand of myself all the energy, knowledge and skills I possess, so that I can instill confidence in those I teach. I will constantly strive to perfect my own skills and to become a good leader. Above all I will be truthful in all I say or do. My integrity shall be impeccable as my appearance. I will be honest with myself, with those under my charge and with my superiors. I pledge to do my best to incorporate all the leadership traits into my character. For such is the heritage I have received from that long, illustrious line of professionals who have worn the bloodstripe so proudly before me. I must give the very best I have for my Marines, my Corps and my Country for though today I instruct and supervise in peace, tomorrow, I may lead in war.

The NCO Creed is one of the starting points when examining or exploring personal and professional beliefs. (The NCO creed was recently revised in February 2006 under NAVMC 1500.58, Marine Corps Mentoring Program Guidebook. The current version is above.)

could lead to hazing or sexual harassment. Will a Marine act differently if he has to talk about how his personal beliefs influence his life? There are no guarantees, but there is plenty of research to indicate calling people up to a higher standard is more powerful than threats of punishment. After all, nobody joined the Marine Corps because it sounded easy. And, yes, you can still check the box that you completed the mandatory brief.

Conclusion

As I think about my own spiritual beliefs, there are some that I am faithful to and others that I am still working on. That's okay. The point is to wrestle with what life is about and work toward

aligning our behavior with our beliefs. Doing the hard work builds spiritual strength to complete the whole Marine.

Notes

1. The following definitions are available at dictionary.com:
- Mental (adjective): of or relating to the mind.
- Physical (adjective): of or relating to the body.
- Spiritual (adjective): of or relating to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature.
- Fitness (noun): health.
- Belief (noun): something believed; an opinion or conviction.
- Believe (verb): to have confidence or faith in the truth of something.

• Character (noun): the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing.

• Ethic (noun): the body of moral principles or values governing or distinctive of a particular culture or group.

• Principle (noun): an accepted or professed rule of action or conduct.

• Values (noun): relative worth, merit, or importance. For the purpose of this discussion, "values" refers to an important idea or character trait. For example, the Marine Corps' core values are honor, courage, and commitment.

• Moral (adjective): of, relating to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong; ethical. For example, "moral behavior."

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines,* (Washington, DC: August 2014). *Leading Marines,* originally published as *MCWP 6-11,* was updated in 2014 with vignettes from Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM to improve accessibility for the current generation of Marines.

3. There are a number of easily-accessible references to help Marines work through the process of exploring personal and professional beliefs. *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*; *MCTP 6-10A, Sustaining the Transformation*; and *MCTP 6-10B, Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders* are good starting points for all Marines. In addition, the "Oath of Enlistment" and the "NCO's Creed" are excellent additions. If you can live up to the standards laid out in those two documents, you will be an exceptional Marine and human being. For officers, the "Oath of Office" and the *Armed Forces Officer,* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2006), are concise and powerful articulations of what it means to hold special trust and confidence. Finally, the Declaration of Independence and Constitution lay out core American values.

>*Editor's Note: For more information on the Commandant's views on spiritual fitness and its importance, see Headquarters Marine Corps,* ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness, *(Washington, DC: October 2016), available at http://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/962784/spiritual-fitness/.*

USMC

Quote to Ponder:

"... Every night of my life, I pray to God to take from my heart all thought of self or personal advancement, and to make me able to do my full duty as a man and as a General towards my men and my country."

—Gen John A. Lejeune, *The Reminicsences of a Marine*