

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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## **UNIT THREE** **SESSION FOUR:** **The person as feeling**



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First printing 2000, Second printing 2001, Third printing 2002, Fourth printing 2003

Fifth printing 2004, Sixth printing 2005, Seventh printing 2006, Eighth printing 2007

Ninth printing 2008

*The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised.*<sup>1</sup>



*Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me but I was not with you. They kept me far from you, those fair things which, if they were not in you, would not exist at all. You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shone upon me, and you have put my blindness to flight! You have sent forth fragrance, and I have drawn in my breath, and I pant after you. I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst after you. You have touched me, and I have burned for your peace.*<sup>2</sup>



*FEU: Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob, non des philosophes et savants. Certitude. Certitude. Sentiment. Joie. Paix.*<sup>3</sup>



*Yahweh passed before (Moses) and proclaimed, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness; for thousands he maintains his kindness, forgives faults, transgression, sin; ....'*<sup>4</sup>



*Making a whip out of some cord, he drove them all out of the Temple, cattle and sheep as well, scattered the money-changers' coins, knocked their tables over ...'*<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, 1125<sup>b</sup> 26-32, W D Ross, Oxford University Press, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, 27(38).

<sup>3</sup> "FIRE: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace." A note found stitched to the coat of Blaise Pascal after he died in 1662. This same thinking is echoed in Pascal's well-known statement: "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing; we feel it in many things." (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, JM Dent & Sons, 1973, 224.) Also: "It is the heart, not reason which experiences God. This then is faith: God perceived by the heart and not by reason." (Op cit, 225.)

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> John 2:13-17. The three synoptic Gospels tell the same story, though not as detailed as John and not at the beginning but near the end of Jesus' ministry – see Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:11, 15-17; Luke 19:45-46.

## ***THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES***

***\* Feeling/emotion is a spontaneous reaction to a stimulus; it tends to manifest itself in a movement of the whole person.***

***\* Feeling/emotion, in and of itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad, it just is.***

***\* Feeling/emotion is a crucial part of the life formation process – whether it serves us well or ill depends, for the most part, on how we respond to it.***



### **Our feelings<sup>6</sup> in daily living**

The *Weekend Australian* a few years ago carried a little essay entitled “Try a little sadness”. It began as follows:

*We’ve forgotten the value of sadness. We don’t pause for it anymore. When we come across someone who is sad, we try to distract them or, worse, tell them to cheer up and get on with it. We do this as much for our own comfort as for theirs. But we are misguided, says Dr Robert McNeilly, a general practitioner who has been teaching counselling approaches to health professionals for the past 15 years. He believes sadness is a gateway to peace and that people can benefit from being left alone to experience their sadness fully.<sup>7</sup>*

Feelings in daily living open us – potentially at least – to depth, colour, richness, vitality and the uniqueness of who we are. Feelings can connect us with ourselves even as they connect us to the world of other people, events and things. They do this in ways that no other powers can. And our feelings can connect us in ways that distinguish us as original, this person with this unique history, rather than that person with a different history. Our feelings are probably the deepest and most significant expressions of our individuality and originality as human beings.

Feelings accompany our thinking, willing, remembering, anticipating and imagining. Through our feelings we know that the landscape of life is not just flat but full of mountains and valleys, plains and ocean depths, splendid heights, dark abysses and plateaus. Feelings enable us to be moved with delight and smitten with pain;<sup>8</sup> feelings – rather than thoughts – enable us to be with others in empathy and

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<sup>6</sup> The word “feeling” is used interchangeably with the word “emotion” throughout this discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Margo, “Try a Little Sadness: Beyond the Emotions Associated with Loss There Can Be Peace”, *Weekend Australian*, November 13-14, 1999, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of feelings: They can dispose us to great pain and in doing so enable us to be deeply human. This is an important theme in Les Murray’s epic poem, *Fredy*

compassion. Our most enjoyable and most wonderful moments are so – at least in part – because of our feelings. Even when we are in raptures over some pure idea or intellectual insight, it is our feelings that constitute the rapture. Feelings are also, as a matter of fact, the basis on which most people make life-changing decisions. Very few of us change direction in life on the basis of ideas or principles, we generally do it because of some impetus from our feelings – generally feelings that prompt withdrawal (eg dissatisfaction or fear or humiliation or pain) or feelings that prompt attraction (eg physical pleasure, spiritual longing, compassion).<sup>9</sup>

One of the fictions we have inherited from modernity is that rationality is the best way to seek out the truth and order our lives. Is it perhaps possible that we are in fact able to seek out and grasp the deeper truths of living more effectively through our feelings than through rationality? We would, of course, do well to foster all those human faculties that enable us to encounter what is true and good and beautiful and unifying in life.

Think of daily living *without* feelings. What would a person be like if he or she lived – more or less – without feeling? (Let us assume for the moment that such a horrible condition were possible.) Could such a person have a creative and life-giving relationship? The psychologist Abraham Maslow describes this tragic picture when he talks of neurosis:

*I had not realised that in most neuroses, and in many other disturbances as well, the inner signals become weak or disappear entirely (as in the severely obsessional person) and/or are not 'heard' or cannot be heard. At the extreme we have the experientially empty person, the zombie, one with empty insides. Recovering the self must, as a sine qua non, entail the recovery of the ability to have and to cognize these inner signals, to know what and whom one likes and dislikes, what is enjoyable and what is not, when to eat and when not to, when to sleep, when to urinate, when to rest. The experientially empty person, lacking these directives from within, these voices of the real self, must turn to outer cues for guidance, for instance eating when the clock tells him to, rather than obeying his appetite (he has none). He guides himself by clocks, rules, calendars, schedules, agenda, and by hints and cues from other people.<sup>10</sup>*

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*Neptune*. We also saw that it is the doorway for Henry James' character, John Marcher, in *The Beast in the Jungle*, to begin a journey that might just give him back his life, or part of it.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Handy makes a useful observation about the way businesses are run. He says that very few managers have the foresight to see that the time to make changes is well before you start to feel the signs of crisis. Handy speaks of "the sigmoid curve" – from the Greek symbol sigma, "ς" – as a way to plot the life of a business. He argues that the time to make the necessary, and often painful, changes is when the business is on the ascendancy. That is precisely when people are unwilling to change. Most people wait until the business has peaked and is in fact in decline and therefore bringing pressure to bear that the managers are willing to consider the changes. See Charles Handy's *The Empty Raincoat*.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Viking, 1971, 33. We should also note that some "normal" people have very flat emotional responses and this can make

## A closer look at feelings<sup>11</sup>

We can distinguish three broad categories of feelings, both in terms of the genesis of those feelings as well as the experience of those feelings.

- a. Physiological feelings,
- b. Psychological feelings and
- c. Spiritual feelings.

### a. Physiological feelings

The most basic feelings are those primitive bodily impulses, such as feeling hungry or thirsty, feeling sexual attraction or revulsion, feeling bodily pain or pleasure, feeling tired or rested, feeling physically sick or well and so on. Such experiences of feelings are rightly considered as biological functions and manifestations. However, if we maintain our perception of the human person as a *whole* we must also recognize that they are part of a much more complex human reality. For example:

- we can thoughtfully make decisions and develop habits that affect the way we experience these bodily feelings;
- we can ask whether this or that end towards which the bodily feeling seems to be urging us is in accord with our deepest aspirations;
- we can influence our bodily feelings – more or less – by our thinking, our willing, our remembering, our anticipating and our imagining.

We are also aware that a life lived in total submission to bodily impulses would be a hollow and tragic life, a trapped existence. In a mysterious sort of way, these bodily feelings awaken us to deeper feelings and more complex human realities.

### b. Psychological feelings

What about feelings such as anger and fear, feelings of anxiety and depression? We do experience them as having a strong bodily dimension, yet they also seem to point to something more than merely bodily feelings. Again, these feelings must be considered as an intimate part of our humanity. They are feelings that are likely to

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relationships painful. Such flat responses might pertain to a certain personality type and therefore must be respected.

<sup>11</sup> It is not our intention here to give strict definitions but rather to prompt thoughtful reflection. Thus, we might ask of an experience we call a “feeling confused” or “feeling love”, whether these are rightly called “feelings”. And it may be difficult to discern whether a feeling in the concrete reality rightly belongs to the bodily, the psychological or the spiritual. These are issues that are left aside.

emerge, not from bodily stimulus but from some sort of *psychological* stimulus. Thus,

- someone aggressively cuts in before me in the traffic and I feel angry, or
- someone humiliates me and I feel depressed, or
- I am facing a difficult meeting and I feel anxious, and so on, or
- I have just retired from work and I feel bored and agitated, or
- I have achieved what I want to achieve in my career and feel vaguely restless.

In other words, these kinds of feelings seem to be more closely allied with the intra-formative powers of thinking, willing, remembering, anticipating and imagining. They will of course be accompanied by some sort of bodily manifestations and therefore bodily-based feelings, like quickening pulse rate or tightening of muscles or grinding of teeth or sagging of the shoulders or headaches and so on.

Again, as with those more obviously bodily impulses, we are aware that we can – indeed must – exercise some facilitative control of such feelings. We can deliberately promote ways of thinking and choosing, remembering and anticipating and imagining, for example, that will influence the way we feel about things. Obviously, if such feelings get totally out of control they can be extremely destructive.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, such feelings can evoke energy for the task or present us with remarkable opportunities for growth. As such, psychological feelings can be life signals for constructive and creative life changes.

### c. Spiritual feelings

There does, however, seem to be a third and deeper category of feelings. We use expressions such as “cut to the quick,” “soul destroying” and “pain of spirit.” And we can feel incomplete and full of longing. Philosophers speak of “existential anxiety” and “existential guilt.” Some of the feelings we have named above as psychological feelings may, in fact, be more properly rooted in this region of the spirit. Thus, for example, depression may be indicative of a chemical imbalance or it may be a reaction to some psychological stimulus or it may be a reaction to a deeper spiritual conflict.

Such “spiritual” feelings must surely be within the range of normal human experience, given the fact that we are, at core, spiritual beings. It is reasonable to expect that spiritual core to manifest itself with an array of feelings too. Recall that beautiful observation by Martin Heidegger:

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<sup>12</sup> Clearly there may be situations or experiences where our feelings do get out of control. For example, if we are struck with the feeling of depression, we cannot just get rid of it. But we can make choices in regard to the depression and assume an attitude towards it so that *we*, rather than the depression, maintain the initiative in our lives. Such experiences may be extremely trying, even somewhat debilitating.

*University philosophers will never understand what Novalis said: 'Philosophy is, strictly speaking a homesickness'. It is not a discipline that can be learned ... He who does not know what homesickness is, cannot philosophise if - and because - we do not feel at home anywhere, because we are unceasingly being pushed up against Being, against that because we feel at home nowhere except on the way to the total and essential. We are without a native land and are restlessness itself, living restlessness; it is because of this that it is necessary for us to philosophise. ... And we are not allowed to let it pass away, to comfort ourselves in an illusion about totality and a satisfactory infinitude. We must not only bear this restlessness in us but accentuate it.... only then are we in a position to be 'gripped'. And when we thus make ourselves 'grippable', by handing ourselves over to reality, our homesickness makes us into human beings.*<sup>13</sup>

We might name the three regions or categories of feeling the *physiological/bodily*, the *psychological* and the *spiritual*. Yet these categories do not exist in watertight compartments but interact and overlap and are constantly affecting each other. We have all had the experience of feeling intense bodily pain that in turn causes psychological distress of one kind or another and maybe even prevents us being aware of our deeper spiritual feelings for the time being. It is also possible for the flow to feed back the other way – the spiritual feelings may be so intense, for example, that they allow us to endure psychological and bodily feelings that might otherwise destroy us. And deep movements of the human spirit have been known to send individuals into a trance or a form of paralysis.<sup>14</sup>

The best of the human tradition suggests that one of the major tasks in a healthy life formation process is instituting some kind of discipline in regard to all these feelings.<sup>15</sup> They do not automatically harmonize and work to our good. They tend rather to seek their own specific ends – especially the bodily feelings.

The best of the human tradition also would suggest that the place to start the discipline is with the bodily impulses. This discipline of the bodily impulses is not for its own sake. The very word discipline implies a process whereby we make disciples of our energies. The discipline is pursued to harness our energies and enable the achievement of our best possibilities.

The discipline is also pursued so that we might eventually become aware of those deeper spiritual feelings that are a guide to what we actually *want* in life as distinct from what we might *like*. The spiritual level is the level at which we will eventually be *drawn by delight* towards our proper end. It is there we will actually

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger cited in A. Naess, *Four Modern Philosophers*, University of Chicago Press, 1967, 174. This was cited in the Snippets for Meditation, Unit One, Session One.

<sup>14</sup> Hysteria may present itself in this way. But to dismiss all such experiences as mere hysteria is facile.

<sup>15</sup> The word “discipline” is used in the sense of “make disciple of”.

*feel* what it is we really *want*. We could say that, ultimately, the life formation process is one of waking up to the deepest feelings of our beings and releasing them to seek out their proper end and draw us more deeply into what we are. Therefore we speak of formation as liberation.

### **The mercurial quality of feelings**

In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a saying: If you think you feel like a drink, ask yourself if you are angry, sad or lonely. What presents as “I feel thirsty,” might actually be, “I feel lonely” or “I feel angry.” Feelings are not always easily read or understood or connected to their proper objects. We have all met people who suffer from past hurts and constantly direct the feelings provoked by those past hurts to current people, events and things. For example:

- the young man who is angry with people in authority when the proper object of his anger is his father;
- the person who has serious unresolved conflicts from childhood gets heavily involved in social justice and is constantly and inordinately angry at “the oppressors;”
- the person who took on an anxious “rescuing role” in the family as a child because mother was too sick, and he or she constantly finds himself or herself anxiously “rescuing” people as an adult;
- the person who carries unaddressed sadness from some past event(s) and is consequently constantly angry or depressed or both;
- the person who suffered from lack of affirmation as a child and has become a workaholic or an alcoholic or drug addicted.<sup>16</sup>

Individuals might also be experiencing feelings without knowing they are experiencing those feelings. Perhaps the two most likely candidates for this kind of repression<sup>17</sup> are anger and the pleasures associated with sexuality. Thus, in a strictly religious household, an atmosphere might develop in which the child learns that it is “not right” to get angry and “not nice” or “not good” to be relaxed with one’s body and its functions. It might take such people – especially if they are intellectually gifted and conscientious about what is right – many years to get in touch with and work through those feelings that have been held in check below the surface. The tragedy of this kind of situation of course, is that such repression both denies that person – and his or her intimates – much of the freedom and joy of

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Guest’s novel, *Ordinary People* – made into a film by Robert Redford – is a fine example of unaddressed feelings and the consequences of that.

<sup>17</sup> In this discussion we use the word *repression* to describe that intraformative act by which we keep a feeling or feelings out of focal consciousness. We do not realize we are doing it. The word *suppression* is used to describe a similar intraformative process, but we are aware we are doing it.

living, and probably ensures a certain amount of confusion – in motivation for behaviours, in communication, in the sense of self-identity, in feelings about what one actually wants in life.<sup>18</sup>

Some individuals might also be experiencing one feeling at an infra-conscious level, and the opposite feeling at a focally conscious level.<sup>19</sup> Again this sort of thing is likely to be the result of deformative messages about feelings and behaviour learned at an early stage. It may occur because we feel unable to face our true feelings and the possible consequences. This kind of psychological conflict – like all significant psychological conflicts – will, sooner or later manifest itself in bodily impulses and feelings. For example:

*I may be pursuing a career because my parents badly want that; I am aware that I enjoy this work and tell everybody so; I am also aware that I get frequent debilitating headaches and am inordinately tired after a days work or that I work compulsively or am frequently short tempered; I then come to realise that I do not enjoy this but actually hate it but I was not able to face that initially.*

### **Dealing well with our feelings**

Our feelings are great servants, terrible masters. Since we can only exercise facilitative control – never mastery – over our feelings, it seems important that we reflect on just how feelings are to be integrated into the life formation process as servants, giving colour, vitality and particularity, enriching our experiences and our relationships. What follows are some suggestions for a formative approach to our feelings:

- It may be helpful first of all to recall the life formation context we have developed within this course:

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<sup>18</sup> In the face of such experiences, many then assumed – quite wrongly – that the best way to rear children and behave generally, is to give full and unbridled expression to any feelings. That, it is reckoned, will lead to a full and enjoyable life, free of neurosis. The tragedy of this approach is that the person then runs a very serious risk of becoming the victim of his or her feelings, trapped by impulses that can be very destructive. He or she will undoubtedly become very self-centred, needing others to attend to them in one way or another all the time. We might also again emphasize the interconnectedness of our lives – if one part is out of control, that is bound to affect the rest of our lives. Thus, if our yearning for pleasure has been repressed, this is likely to flow over into the whole of our feelings and have some kind of deformative effects; if our yearning for pleasure has been constantly satiated, that too is likely to flow over into the whole of our feelings and have some kind of deformative effects. Again, the person as feeling is also the person as thinking, willing, remembering, anticipating and imagining. Perhaps the intraformative power most likely to suffer when our feeling dimension runs away with us is our willing. Hence, individuals get caught in trap of the willful/will-less (false) option.

<sup>19</sup> Freud called this *reaction formation*.

- Life is ultimately a mystery to be lived not a problem to be solved. The centre of gravity is not ego but the Great Mystery. The primary moving force is that Mystery, not our will power. This ought to evoke a willingness rather than a wilfulness, facilitation rather than imposition, participation rather than manipulation, graced emergence rather than ego mastery; we have to live with a lot that we neither understand nor control; indeed, we may have to live with things that are just “not fair”;
- We should always reflect on our life formation process within the context of the Transcendent to avoid deformative introspection – that is, we foster a gentle and honest self-accompaniment, knowing ourselves to be part of the wider mystery of formation which, in turn, is an expression of the Great Mystery beyond that mystery;
- Living is a constant giving and receiving, a mutuality – we must get beyond the common misunderstanding of our culture that life is about being a “master” and avoiding being a “victim”; life is rather an ongoing conversation, a mutuality in trust;
- The metaphor of “the structural self”<sup>20</sup> reminds us of the dimensions of our living – the bodily dimension with its impulses, the social-historical dimension with its pulsations, the functional dimension with its ambitions and the transcendent dimension with its aspirations; it is the latter – the transcendent aspirations – by which we must ultimately guide our living, at the same time always respectfully listening to and giving a rightful place to the other dimensions and their manifestations;
- The full field of formation needs to be recognised – we are not isolated, free-floating individuals, but inter-connected and interdependent parts of a greater whole; this will be manifest in our experience in many ways – eg feelings;
- The first rule must be: Listen! Listen without judgement. Pay attention to what is happening; we must learn to listen honestly and effectively to all levels of our experience; this is *life* speaking and we would do well to listen, even if we would rather flee;<sup>21</sup>
- The second rule is to assume that every feeling has something positive to contribute to my life – thus any feeling is seen to be a sort of “angel of light,” even if some feelings sometimes look more like “devils” than “angels”; they are *all* bearers of wisdom and have great potential to open up the deeper reaches of our lives; our feelings are friends, not enemies; by adopting this attitude we will also develop an intra-formative environment of hospitality rather than hostility;
- The third rule is that feelings are to serve us, not we them; it helps, in moments of strong feeling to remember this and deliberately choose an attitude to the feeling – keep the initiative; when the feeling takes the initiative away from us,

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<sup>20</sup> See Unit Two, Session Two of this course.

<sup>21</sup> The former Secretary General of the UN puts it nicely: “Let me read with open eyes the book my days are writing -- and learn.” (Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Trans. Leif Sjoberg and W. H. Auden, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 131)

we must gently reclaim it by choosing to address it as potential for growth; asking “open questions” of the feeling and generally pursuing a gentle but deliberate conversation with the feeling can help to maintain the initiative;<sup>22</sup>

- Fourth rule is to allow others to be part of our living through our feelings – this may involve the ordinary business of talking over a cup of coffee or more serious discussion of a distressing event or it may involve seeking professional help in certain circumstances; the honest sharing of feelings can both liberate us and promote truthful and life-giving relationships with others;
- Fifth rule is to foster a generally healthy lifestyle – we are *whole* beings and whatever touches one dimension touches another; good diet and exercise, adequate leisure and social interaction, good work and time for hobbies etc, can contribute immensely to maintaining a life in which our feeling do genuinely serve us well and enable us to connect in a lively and life-giving way with people, events and things; pepper your life with things you find satisfying, enriching or simply enjoy!



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<sup>22</sup> See “The ANS Technique.”

## **CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

*\* Feelings at all levels – bodily, psychological and spiritual – have an essential place in the Christian life.*

*\* Spiritual feelings, in particular, have a crucial role to play as they form a central part of the energy that moves us along our pilgrim way.*



### **Feelings in the Bible**

Coming into the twentieth century, our perceptions of Jesus' disciples seemed to have more in common with the traditions of the ancient Greek Stoics, or the rationalism of the Enlightenment, than with Jesus and His ancestors.<sup>23</sup> We seem to have lost touch with the authentic biblical tradition. Consider the following descriptions in the Bible and ask yourself if there are many modern equivalents in the community of the baptised as you know it:

- Abraham and Sarah when they answer the call of the Lord (cf Gen 12) or
- David when he “danced, whirling around before Yahweh with all his might” (cf 2Sam 6:14) or
- David when he sinned gravely and repented (cf 2Sam 12:13) or
- Ruth and Naomi in their fidelity and vulnerability (cf The Book of Ruth) or
- Mary Magdalene when she anointed the Lord's feet (cf Jn 12:1-11) and when she asked “the gardener” where they had taken her man (cf Jn 20:11-18) or
- Peter when he got out of the boat (cf Mt 14:22-33), when he wept in remorse (cf Mt 16:69-75) or
- Jesus when he withdrew to the desert (cf Lk 4:1-13), when he wept over Jerusalem (cf Lk 13:34-35), when he drove the money-changers from the temple (cf Lk 19:45-46), when he sweated blood in the garden (Lk 22:44).

Language is often a pointer to how people experience themselves and their relationships. The language used in both the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures to name what we generally call in English “pity” or “compassion,” is very revealing. The English translations generally do not do justice to what is being said. That is in large measure because what is being said lies outside our range of experience for the most part.

Consider the story in the First Book of the Kings in which Solomon is asked to adjudicate between two women claiming the one infant (cf 1Kg 3:16-28). One of those women had accidentally rolled on her baby and smothered it in the night. She

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<sup>23</sup> See Michael Whelan, “Introduction” in *Living Strings: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality*, E J Dwyer, 1994, 13-21.

then claimed the other baby. How does Solomon sort this matter out? He threatens to cut the living baby in two! On the face of it, this seems an awfully brutal and feelingless thing to even suggest. In fact it demonstrates a deep sensibility in Solomon. Listen to the way the story proceeds in the light of Solomon's suggestion:

*Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it.*<sup>24</sup>

The Hebrew word translated as *bowels* is *r<sup>e</sup>ch<sup>e</sup>m*. It comes from the word for *womb*, or more generally that part of a woman's body which nurtures new life into being. It carries with it all the connotations of the passionate, even non-rational, attachment a mother typically has for the child of her womb. And it is applied, without apology, embarrassment or qualification to Yahweh.<sup>25</sup>

An equivalent is found in the New Testament Greek word *splagchnizesthai*.<sup>26</sup> It comes from the root word *splagchna* – referring to the “noble viscera”, the heart, lungs, liver and intestines – and means *to be moved with compassion*. In the New Testament the word is never used outside the Synoptic Gospels and is always used directly of Jesus himself, except on three occasions where it is used by Him in parables. Thus, it is used to describe Jesus' when He saw the crowd like sheep without a shepherd (cf Mt 9:36), when He saw them hungry, having followed Him out into the desert (cf Mt 14:14), when he met the leper (Mt 1:41), when He met the two blind men (Mt 20:34), when he met the widow at Nain going to bury her only son (Lk 7:13) and in response to the appeal of the man with the epileptic son (Mk 9:22).

The Greeks would never use this term of the gods. The very suggestion would be absurd. Yet this is the way the early Church describes Jesus. For us to translate the word as “pity” or even “compassion” hardly captures the depth of sensibility and feeling contained in the Greek word. “He was moved in His guts” might come a little closer.

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<sup>24</sup> 1Kg 3:26. This translation is from the King James Version. It is used because it seems to bring us closer to what the Hebrew says. Compare it with the New Jerusalem Bible: “At this the woman who was the mother of the living child addressed the king, for *she felt acutely for her son ...*”

<sup>25</sup> See for example: Ex 33:19 – where it is used twice and the New JB translates it as *gracious* in the first instance and *pity* in the second; the KJV uses *gracious* and *mercy*; Ex 34:6 – where the New JB translates it as *tenderness* and the KJV as *merciful*; Is 49:15 – where the New JB translates it as *pity* and the KJV as *compassion*. The use of *raham* – that instinctive passion for one's own – is complemented by *hesed* – that thoughtful and deliberate commitment of loving kindness. The Prophet Hosea is perhaps the best example of this.

<sup>26</sup> See William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, SCM Press, 1955/64, 276-280.

## Feelings in the Christian tradition

The authentic Christian tradition is extremely rich and diverse. For example, the great St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) represents a highly *affective* expression of spirituality.<sup>27</sup> Bernard writes with great feeling. In a similar vein we could mention St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), St John of the Cross (1542-1591) and St Francis de Sales (1567-1622). Typically the women writers of the tradition kept this affective dimension alive – women like Mechtilde of Magdeburg (1210-1297), St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), Julian of Norwich (1342-1423), St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897). We could even say that all the great guides of the tradition manifested deep feelings. They were people of passion. Thus a man like John Cassian (360-435), trained in the severity of desert spirituality, a man who established monasteries in France in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, could write:

*The vital force of the soul does not allow it to rest without some feeling of desire or fear, of joy or of sadness: we must then give it the right occupation. We desire to drive from our heart the lusts of the flesh: let us unrestrainedly make room for spiritual joys. Let us not imagine that we can in any way master or banish the desire of present things unless, in place of these tendencies which we desire to cut off, we place good ones.*<sup>28</sup>

And St Augustine (354-430), no stranger to passionate feelings, writes:

*Love cannot be idle. What is it that moves absolutely any man, even to do evil, if it is not love? Show me a love that is idle and doing nothing. Scandals, adulteries, crimes, murders, every kind of excess, are they not the work of love? Cleanse your love, then. Divert into the garden the water that was running down the drain. Am I telling you not to love anything? Far from it! If you do not love anything you will be dolts, dead men, despicable creatures. Love, by all means, but take care what it is you love.*<sup>29</sup>

Although we could hardly say that the spirituality of the Desert Fathers or St Augustine or St Gregory the Great was generally *affective*, their spiritual writings are certainly not devoid of feeling. These are patently passionate people! However, it would be fair to say that the feelings they paid most positive regard to were those of the spiritual order – especially the feelings associated with *compunction*. The Australian Cistercian monk, Michael Casey sums up the notion of compunction as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*.

<sup>28</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences*, 12:5.

<sup>29</sup> St Augustine, *Sermon II on the Psalms*, 31:5.

*The world of compunction is the world of sensibility to God. We allow God to act upon us not only by the medium of ideas but also through our feelings. Imagine how artificial a relationship between two persons would be if it involved only ideas: no sight or sound or touches. How difficult it would be, in those circumstances, to become passionate. Such a relationship would be so rarefied and abstract that it would lack reality – unless a different game was being played at the level of the unconscious. It is emotion that bonds us with other persons. And so, we cannot relate to God feeling nothing. On the contrary, our feelings can be indicators of God’s action. Certainly there is scope for discernment and common sense, but it seems to me better to be a little mistaken in the diagnosis of the source of feeling than to attempt to live a spiritual life of substantial feelinglessness. In the providence of God, even our errors can sometimes be useful. The monastic linkage of lectio divina and compunction is a reminder that there is more involved in sacred reading than intellectual stimulation.*<sup>30</sup>

There is a more *intellectual* expression in the authentic tradition however. People who represent the more intellectual tradition would include Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5<sup>th</sup> century), Richard of St Victor (d 1173), St Bonaventure (1217-1274), and St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). But there was also in St Thomas Aquinas, for example, a profound appreciation of the feelings. In fact, it is said that he regarded all he had written as “straw” compared with what he had experienced of God. There is, in other words, a deep mystical knowing that is very much imbued with those deeper spiritual feelings and it does not submit to the ordinary expressions of human communication.<sup>31</sup>



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<sup>30</sup> Michael Casey, *The Art of Sacred Reading*, Dove, 1995, 31.

<sup>31</sup> We should also note that in the history of Christianity there abound examples of feelings which have taken people over the edge. See for example Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion*, Oxford University, 1950/162.

## Snippets for meditation

(1) *”Things that are found in the soul are of three kinds – passions, faculties, states of character. Virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general, the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties, the things by which we are said to be capable of feeling these, eg of becoming angry, or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with respect to the passions, eg with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions.*

*“Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so-called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised or blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed.*

*“Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way.*

*“For these reasons also they are not faculties; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity for feeling the passions; again we have the faculties by nature, but we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoke of this before (see 1103<sup>a</sup> 18-1103<sup>b</sup> 2).*

*“If then the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character.”<sup>32</sup>*



(2) *”For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.”<sup>33</sup>*



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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, 1105<sup>b</sup> 20-1106<sup>a</sup> 10, W D Ross, Oxford University Press, 1925.

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *op cit*, Book II, 1106<sup>b</sup> 30.

(3) *"Virtue then is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, ie the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate."*<sup>34</sup>



(4) *"Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret."*<sup>35</sup>



(5) *"At the sight of her tears and those of the Jews who followed her, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, 'Where have you put him?' ... Jesus wept."*<sup>36</sup>



(6) *"The Lord delights in his people."*<sup>37</sup>



(7) *"(Prayer) is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but a gift of God's grace. ... Once (you) have tasted this food, (you) are set alight by an eternal desire for the Lord, the fiercest of fires lighting up (your) soul."*<sup>38</sup>



(8) *"The achievement of freedom from fear is a lifetime undertaking, one that can never be wholly completed. When under heavy attack, acute illness, or in other conditions of serious insecurity, we shall all react to this emotion -- well or badly, as the case may be. Only the self-deceived will claim perfect freedom from fear."*<sup>39</sup>



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<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *op cit*, Book II, 1107<sup>a</sup>.1-5.

<sup>35</sup> Horace, *Epistles*, I, X, 24. ("Though you drive nature out with a pitchfork, she will still find her way back.")

<sup>36</sup> John 11:33-35.

<sup>37</sup> Psalm 149:4.

<sup>38</sup> St. John Chrysostom (347-407) – cited in the *Office of Readings*, Friday After Ash Wednesday.

<sup>39</sup> *The A.A. Way of Life; A Reader by Bill*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1967, 263.

(9) *“He who has a heartfelt love for God is known by him. For a person grows in the love of God in the measure in which he takes that love into his inmost soul. Which is why, afterwards, such a one passionately longs for the illumination of knowledge to the point of feeling in his very bones, no longer aware of himself but wholly transformed by the love of God. Such a one is in this life without being in it. He still lives in his own body but unceasingly goes out to God through love by the very momentum of his soul. Henceforward, his heart burning with the fire of love, he adheres to God with a sort of irresistible desire, as if quite torn away from the love of self by the love of God.”*<sup>40</sup>



(10) *WHETHER THERE IS ENJOYMENT IN BITTERNESS*

*This afternoon let me  
Be a sad person. Am I not  
Permitted (like other men)  
To be sick of myself?*

*Am I not allowed to be hollow,  
Or fall in he hole  
Or break my bones (within me)  
In the trap set by my own  
Lie to myself? O my friend,  
I too must sin and sin.*

*I too must hurt other people and  
(Since I am no exception)  
I must be hated by them.*

*Do not forbid me, therefore,  
To taste the same bitter poison,  
And drink the gall that love  
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.*

*Do not forbid me (once again) to be  
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,*

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<sup>40</sup> Diadochus of Photike (d 468) - *Office of Readings*, Week 2 of Ordinary Time, Friday. St John of Damascus (657-749) is a little more abstract but points in the same direction when he writes: “Prayer is the ascent of the mind to God, the request for fitting things from God”. (Cited by Aelred Squire, *op cit*, 144.) St Benedict says little about prayer as such; what he does say must be read in the context of the monk’s primary focus of seeking God. Thus Benedict says: “Listen readily to holy reading and devote yourself often to prayer”. (*Rule*, 4:55-56.)

*Wishing I could die.  
While life and death  
Are killing one another in my flesh,  
Leave me in peace. I can enjoy,  
Even as other men, this agony.*

*Only (whoever you may be)  
Pray for my soul. Speak my name  
To Him, for in my bitterness  
I hardly speak to Him: ad He  
While he is busy killing me  
Refuses to listen.<sup>41</sup>*



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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Merton, 1957, from *The Strange Islands*.

## Suggestions for further study

- Baars, Conrad, *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*, Logos International, 1979.
- Cinema  
*The Subject was Roses* (1968) (Dir: Ulu Grosbard, with Patricia Neal)  
*The Glass Menagerie* (1973) (Dir: Anthony Harvey, with Katherine Hepburn) There is also a 1950 version of the same Tennessee Williams play.  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) (Dir: Milos Foreman with Jack Nicholson)  
*The Great Santini* (1979) (Dir: Lewis John Carlino with Robert Duvall)  
*Ordinary People* (1980) (Dir: Robert Redford with Donald Sutherland and Mary Tyler Moore)
- Gaylin, Willard, *Feelings: Our Vital Signs*, Harper & Row, 1979.  
Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*, Bloomsbury, 1996.
- Knox, Ronald, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion*, Oxford Univeristy, 1950/162.
- Tugwell, Simon, *Prayer, Volume II: Prayer in Practice*, Veritas Publications, 1974/1984 – especially Chapter 5, “Feelings in Prayer”.
- Van Kaam, Adrian, *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*, Dimension Books, 1974.
- Whitehead, James and Evelyn, *Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of Negative Emotions*, Crossroads, 1994.



## Suggested exercises

1. Several times this week, as you go about your business, ask yourself gently the open question: “What am I feeling now?” Listen. Let the feelings speak for themselves. You might find it helpful to engage the feelings in a dialogue by asking open questions – eg What is this like? Does it remind me of anything? Is there any image or memory that it reminds me of? How does it name itself? Is it more a bodily or a psychological or a spiritual feeling?
2. See if you can detect the difference in your life between what you *like* and what you *want*. The latter is a manifestation of your very being, pointing towards your authentic fulfilment as a whole person. The former is a manifestation of a bodily or psychological feeling which may be significant but it points more towards the satisfaction of a particular bodily or psychological need. You might find it useful to simply ask the question and listen. Do you hear any conflict between the two?
3. What has been your experience of feelings in the way you were brought up in the family? What effect has this had on your life?

