

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT ONE **SESSION FIVE:** **The power to participate**



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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

Every human life-form is, by nature, both forming and able to receive formation. We call this potentiality for formation formability or form potency. It is one of the most basic capacities of human life, not simply one of the many qualities we may find in people. Formability is not an ability that a person has; it is an ability which one is. Without this potency to receive and give form, human life could no longer emerge as a human form and true humanity could no longer be possible.¹



The motive for (mindless killings/violence) does not seem to be hate but an unbearable sense of boredom and impotence and the need to experience that there is someone who will react, someone on whom one can make a dent, some deed that will make an end of the monotony of daily experience. Killing is one way of experiencing that one is and that we can produce an effect on another human being.²



Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.³



I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.⁴



¹ Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality, Volume I: Fundamental Formation*, Crossroad, 1983, 166.

² Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973, 251.

³ Psalm 127:1.

⁴ John. 12:24.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** Each human being is a potential or potency for participating in the formation mystery in a unique way.*

** Central to the life formation process is the task of gaining and maintaining a conviction of form potency.*



Recalling the idea of form

In the earlier session on Formation Mystery we reflected on the meaning of the idea of form. There we reflected that we may begin to understand the idea by thinking first of all of shape. But the idea of shape is a little too static. We need to include the idea of dynamism, implying that form is a manifestation or expression. We then went on to say that:

Form is a revealing of existence in a particular way at a particular moment in a particular place. It is the shape a being gives to Being here and now. Or, to put it another way, it is the concrete way Being is manifesting Itself here and now. It is this sense of expressing and manifesting Being in a particular, concrete way, here and now, that best describes the idea of “form” as we will be using the term.⁵

Further, we noted that the concept of form as applied to human beings – as in the expression, “human life formation” – has a special meaning:

Form takes on a special nuance and complexity of meaning when applied to human beings. it might be helpful to simply think of the different ways Being is manifest in and through your own life. For example, you have a certain external appearance that can be described as a “form” your life takes at this time. Deeper still, as you reflect back over the years, you could no doubt speak of the various stages you have gone through, with each stage having a discernible “form.” That “form” is made up, for example, of different ways of thinking and feeling, remembering and anticipating and, no doubt, these were accompanied by different external appearances. Still deeper, there is generally a more enduring shape or “form” to your life that is probably part nature and part nurture. All of which is manifesting some kind of originality,⁶ an emerging “form” that is utterly unique, utterly

⁵ See Session Two, “The Formation Mystery,” 3-4.

⁶ The English word, “original,” comes from the Latin word *oriri* meaning “to arise.” All healthy human life formation is an arising. For the Christian, we can relate this way of thinking to the

“you.” The various “forms” you present to the world are more or less contaminated by second hand characteristics, ways of thinking and feeling and acting and remembering and anticipating and speaking and so on that have been more or less given to you by family and culture and society or perhaps adopted by you as strategies and tactics for surviving.

Finally, we noted the dynamism of human formation implies liberation, an insight-out process of emergence and unfolding identity:

Human life formation is always a process of originality, of liberating the ultimate truth that you are, a true and unique expression of Being, one that has never existed before and will never exist again. The world awaits the coming to birth of this “form” in you. Your ultimate task in life is to liberate that “form.” That is your best gift to the world. And so we say that all human life formation:

- *is a work of liberation – the liberation of the person to be who she or he most deeply is;*
- *it endeavours to promote a process of emergence or unfolding of what is already given;*
- *it proceeds by way of facilitation rather than mastery;*
- *and it must constantly discern between true and false form in the interactions of living, resisting the latter, affirming and promoting the former.*

Our experience of participation

Consider the following experiences:

- You are frustrated;
- You ask someone a question or make a comment and are ignored or treated with contempt;
- You are faced with a task you do not think you can cope with;
- You see yet another particularly distressing situation on the TV and you cannot do anything about it;
- Someone lords it over you or treats you unfairly and you have no redress.

promise of resurrection. Recall John’s account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). The Christ Event is heard by each baptized person as a summons: “Come forth! Unbind her/him!” For the Christian, living is resurrection. Our daily encounter with Jesus Christ is an experience of growing into freedom, of coming forth from the graves we dig for ourselves. All healthy human life formation is original.

How do you feel in such experiences? What do you think about? What happens to your sense of yourself and other people? What is it like? What do you want to do in such circumstances? On the other hand, consider the following experiences:

- Your movement towards a set goal flows really well;
- You ask someone a question or make a comment and you are heard and taken seriously and your comment is appreciated;
- You accomplish a difficult task with a degree of excellence;
- You see someone suffering and you are able to do something about it;
- You work with someone who is a genuine team player and appreciates your talents and gifts;
- You are sincerely welcomed and affirmed by an individual or group.

How do you feel in this second set of experiences? What do you think about? What happens to your sense of yourself and other people? What is it like? What do you want to do in such circumstances?

At the heart of both sets of experiences something is happening with regard to our power to participate in the world. In the first set of experiences our attempts to participate are more or less obstructed, in the second set of experiences our attempts to participate are more or less facilitated. The second set of experiences is typically more acceptable, more enjoyable than the first set. This is not surprising, given that the power to be part of the giving and receiving that characterize the mystery of life, is an expression of who and what we are.⁷

Each of us can say “I am!” – or more definitely, “I am here!”. Each of us has the power to participate, to facilitate the expression of our human identity in a unique and communal form. I *am* a power to engage life in some way. More specifically, I *am* the power to engage life as *this* conscious and free person. Concretely, this is where my dignity as a person is honoured or dishonoured.

My particular life formation process in general, and my experience of the power to participate in particular, will have much in common with other human beings. Yet my life formation process, and my experience of the power to participate will also be, in a profound sense, unique to me. We may call this power to participate, *form potency* or *formability*. And it is manifest in every moment through my very existence. My unique and communal existence thus becomes a statement and a question to both myself and others:

- It is a statement in the sense that I am here, I ought to be taken into account, recognised as a human participant in the mystery, a factor in the equation of this or that moment;

⁷ We paint with a broad brush here. Obviously, there are times when frustration is unavoidable and where criticism – even confrontation – is warranted.

- I am a question, in the sense that my very existence asks for a response from me and from the world of people, events and things; in the response, my dignity as a human person may be more or less affirmed or negated.⁸

The blessing and the curse

This power to participate is a wonderful blessing. It lies at the very heart of my dignity as a human being. It enables me to play my part in the formation mystery. It also enables me to uniquely manifest the Great Mystery here and now, in this place at this moment in history. Herein lies my ultimate *raison d'être* as a creature.

Like every blessing, however, it carries a curse. It is not within the bounds of human possibility to give perfect expression to the form of my life. The form that I present to the world at any given moment is always, at best, a limited expression of who I most deeply am.⁹ The power to participate is a relative one. It demands qualities of life like compassion and humility and generosity and courage and humour to live within the boundaries of possibility and limitation, to live with the reality of falling short of what my nature presses to become. The *actuality* of my participation in the formation mystery will always be less than my *potency* for such participation.

Furthermore, this power to participate may be more or less significantly influenced by the forces at work in the formation fields throughout my life. Such forces may be especially significant when I am still young and more vulnerable. Early experiences that will typically have *deformative* effects on the development of my power to participate might include such things as:

- serious illness,
- inability of a parent to cope,
- confused and confusing communication patterns in the family,
- authoritarian parent(s),
- alcoholic parent(s),
- the death of a parent,
- repeated failure at functional tasks valued by significant others in my life,
- physical and/or emotional abuse,
- radical inconsistency and instability in the life situation.¹⁰

⁸ This is, in a nutshell, the basis of the Catholic moral tradition of “the natural law.” The United Nations’ 1948 Declaration of Human Rights is, in essence, grounded in this same “natural law.”

⁹ And we should not miss the bright side of this fact. There is always more possibility to my life, always the potential for more participation in the mystery of it all. This can be particularly encouraging when my life bottoms out! We generally only come to know our true potential in the light of the experience of our limits.

¹⁰ We could surmise that when anxiety is significantly mobilized in the child, he/she will react to allay that anxiety. The reaction might lead to some misuse of talents and therefore misplacement of energies, for sheer survival. Ironically, such a child might become a “high

Early experiences that will typically have *formative* effects on the development of my power to participate might include such things as:

- healthy tactile displays of affection,
- direct and honest communication,
- healthy emotional expressions,
- radical and positive consistency and stability in the life situation,
- play and leisure with parents,
- affirmation of (real) success at functional tasks valued by significant others,
- ability to deal honestly and effectively with conflict, and so on.¹¹

Consider, for example, the varying responses to my communicating – implicitly or explicitly – “I am here!”. Implicitly or explicitly, the response might be:

- “So what!” or
- “You’re not wanted/needed!” or
- “You’re a nuisance!” or
- “Not you again!”.

Think for a moment what it is like to be more or less “excluded,” in contrast to being more or less “included.” Think further of the various social mechanisms we use to either exclude or include people. The desire to belong is a significant part of fulfilling our felt need to participate. As an adult these responses may be more or less debilitating or simply hurtful. As a child they can be quite devastating.

On the other hand, the response might be – implicitly or explicitly:

- “Welcome!” or
- “It’s really good to see you!” or
- “Great, come and join us!” or
- “We’ve been looking forward to you joining us!”

achiever” and a “success” in life, while underneath there are haunting and nagging feelings of inadequacy – the form potency or power to participate has not been allowed to develop in a natural way, in accord with the actual possibilities, limits and needs of the individual and, as a consequence the individual must apply enormous will power to keep going. We will deal more explicitly with this important issue under the heading of “idealization” later in the course.

¹¹ To say that this or that will tend to be either a formative or deformative influence in the development of form potency does not remove the possibility that an individual might defy the odds. For example, someone might have a particular bad experience as a child but proceed very successful along a path of mature life formation. We should note, also, that sometimes people can *appear* to be proceeding happily and well but in fact be experiencing great inner turmoil and lack of confidence. With human beings, what seems is not always what is.

As an adult these responses might be more or less encouraging and affirming. For the child they can be literally life-giving or perhaps life-restoring.

Gaining and maintaining the conviction of form potency

It would be impossible to live if I was totally devoid of any sense that I was able to participate in the mystery. My ability to say “I am here!” and confidently follow that through, presupposes some *conviction* of form potency. Dogs and trees and clouds do not need to be convinced about their ability to participate. They just are.¹² Other living beings are also instinct-rich and can get along quite well on their instincts for the most part. Because we do not have their “advantage,” and because we are instinct-poor, our conviction, concerning our ability to participate, can be significantly enhanced or diminished.

Typically, early in life we gain and maintain that conviction through the experience of *faith, hope* and *love* in our environment:¹³

- Faith: When significant others have expressed, more or less consistently, *belief* in me, and communicate that realistically to me,¹⁴ I too tend to believe in myself;
- Hope: When significant others are more or less consistently *hopeful* about my future, and communicate that realistically to me, I too tend to be hopeful about that future;
- Love: When significant others reach out more or less consistently to me in *love*, and communicate that realistically to me, I too tend to regard myself and others similarly.

As a consequence, I am enabled to participate in life in a more or less affirming, hopeful and loving way and communicate that realistically to others.

¹² However, we do notice something comparable in animals and even plants. When they are well treated they typically thrive and when they are maltreated they often cower or wilt.

¹³ At the outset, no human being or group of human beings can ever develop such a wonderful environment that the child will experience uninterrupted faith, hope and love. Further, we should say that often enough, the environment that represents a diminished experience of faith, hope and love for the child, may or may not be anyone’s fault. We should also note that the presence or absence of this triad of faith, hope and love is going to have a lot to do with my developing a primordial option of either “abandonment to the mystery” or “abandonment by the mystery.”

¹⁴ There is a powerful scene in Ingmar Bergman’s film, *Autumn Sonata*, where the two women – mother and adult daughter – are engaged in an intense conversation. The daughter accuses the mother of leaving her to pursue her career as a concert pianist. The mother protests: “But I always took you in my arms and told you that I loved you!” The daughter shoots back: “But I could tell by the look in your eyes you didn’t.” If the love was actually there it was not realistically communicated.

If on the other hand, as a child, significant others have more or less consistently expressed lack of faith, hope and love in me – implicitly or explicitly – it would not be surprising if I developed some radical *doubts* about my ability to participate well in the giving and receiving of life. In other words, it would be entirely understandable that I would lack, in some measure, the *conviction* that I can participate in life.

As a consequence, because I cannot live without some more or less substantial conviction of the power to participate, I will endeavour to find that conviction elsewhere, other than in my being. Broadly speaking we can imagine two ways we might attempt to cope with this doubt that operates where conviction should operate. One way of coping is more or less positive, the other, more or less negative:¹⁵

- The more or less positive way: I may wilfully construct an identity for myself by winning the approval of significant others in my life. Thus, I may become very conscientious at school, or terribly responsible around the house or deeply pious. My success in constructing this identity might, then, give me the positive feedback I crave, thus reassuring me I am able, after all, to participate in life. This process, however, is likely to be driven by anxiety, to be largely unconscious and, in the end, to be successful only at great cost to the truth of who I am. It may also mask a lot of anger, self-hatred and guilt.¹⁶
- The more or less negative way: I may become chronically angry and rebellious, perhaps striking out violently at those around me, even those who have my best interests at heart. (See the second epigraph to these notes, by Erich Fromm.) I may, on the other hand, turn the anger and violence on myself and become chronically sick or self-destructive in my behaviour.

In either of the above ways, I may thus have significant difficulties in my relations with others, I may be aggressive or withdrawn, I may be inclined to despondency, even despair, I may become a workaholic and so on. The healthy power to participate, when more or less frustrated, can have deeply harmful effects on the individual and consequently on those who have anything to do with

¹⁵ There is irony here in using the words “positive” and “negative.” Both ways are in fact potentially very destructive. The first way can be understood as positive in the sense that it is likely to yield some good fruits for both the individual and society and, at least, avoid the violence and destruction that can often result from the second option.

¹⁶ It can be particularly tragic when you see someone embark on this more or less positive path but never achieve the recognition or affirmation they crave. In some especially nasty family situations, the child can be quite broken by their attempts to construct an acceptable identity before parents who seem incapable of recognizing anything good in the child. You get a sense of this, for example, in the story of Ned Kelly. See Peter Carey’s remarkable telling of that story.

that individual. Apart from the obvious, immediate human cost, the cost to society at large can be incalculable.

Typically, as adults we tend to thrive in situations where there is sincere and consistent affirmation and genuine care for and about us as unique persons. This affirmation and care may be shown in many ways, but there will always be certain qualities present, such as forgiveness, compassion, mercy, the willingness to spend time with the other, generosity and patience and so on. Consider the meaning of the English word “to appreciate.” The word has its roots in the Latin word *pretium* meaning “price.” It maintains this commercial connection when we talk about assets or property “appreciating” – that is, they increase in value (or “price”). To appreciate someone, is to prize them, to value them. In this more subtle human sense, it also carries the dynamic implication of building up or “increasing” the other. Think of your own experience of “appreciating a person.” What happens? Alternatively, what does it feel like to be appreciated?

In such a positive environment – in a culture of appreciation – we feel able to participate in the formation mystery through our work, families, social engagements and the challenges of daily living. We have energy for the demands of living. We are almost certainly more likely to want to get out of bed in the morning and turn up for the new day.

And the opposite also seems to be true. In a culture of depreciation, not too many of us can sustain our participation with energy. We simply do not feel like turning up. This is natural. It may also be interpreted as a sign of health: your being is crying out against what is in fact an unhealthy environment, a culture that erodes relationships and therefore quality of life.

We must also take account of *preformation* in this. It seems that some people, for example, are born with dispositions and temperaments that make them “fighters,” resilient and resourceful types. This can be evident even in the youngest of infants. It is as if these people will go on re-iterating “I am here!” against the stiffest opposition and the most deformative of environments. In fact, it seems that some people thrive only when there is stiff challenge or opposition. Yet others seem to wilt more easily in the face of opposition.

There is nothing simple or straightforward about the gaining and maintaining of form potency conviction – it shares in the complexity and ultimate incomprehensibility and uncontrollability of the formation mystery itself. Still, the general principles hold. A human community that appreciates the dignity and uniqueness of the person tends to be a more life-giving and desirable one than the human community that depreciates people. People will tend to be liberated and emerge as healthy relational beings and thrive rather than merely survive, if they are convinced of their validity and value as persons, convinced that they do have the ability to participate as who they are rather than as something they are not.

The right to participate is a given, it is grounded in my very being. The right to participate in life does not have to be earned.

People who have a weak form potency conviction, who perhaps experience the primordial option of “abandonment by the mystery” rather than “abandonment to the mystery,” will tend to be driven to prove themselves. Driven and compulsive behaviour is almost certainly a sign of anxiety about form potency. Instead of developing a conviction of form potency based on who I am, I try rather to manufacture a conviction of form potency that more often than not is quite alien to my being. In the first instance, being will be paramount, in the second instance doing and having will be paramount.¹⁷ The former is real, the latter is literally unreal. The latter will in fact exacerbate the very insecurity that gives birth to it.

Whether I realise it or not, when I live out of a fabricated form potency conviction, I live as if I have to earn the right to participate and therefore I am haunted by some illusory “other” who is going to bestow this power to participate. I invest much talent and time and energy in this fantastic project. It becomes my very life. This is a despairing life, even if it is deemed successful by the society in which I live.

Tactics and strategies

Hand in hand with both the positive and negative ways of coping with weakened form potency conviction indicated above, will be an array of tactics and strategies. These tactics and strategies will be developed by the individual more or less consciously, more or less unconsciously, more or less blatantly, more or less covertly.¹⁸ The person with a diminished conviction of his or her form potency needs these tactics and strategies to achieve what a healthy conviction of form potency would otherwise enable. Put simply, these tactics and strategies enable the individual to participate in life, even if that participation is more or less deformative.¹⁹

Thus, one person gets “sick,” another becomes aggressive, still another becomes a shrewd manipulator of the system while another pretends to be stupid,

¹⁷ It is probably fair comment to say that our culture tends to encourage people to find their form potency conviction in doing and having rather than being.

¹⁸ We will focus on strategies and tactics as more or less negative processes here. We do of course engage in many processes that could be called strategies or tactics that are positive. For example, if a member of a group is a manipulator, we may employ strategies and tactics of counter-manipulation. This is positive. What distinguishes it from the negative processes is that it is in service of relationships and what is real. In the instances we will focus on here the processes are more or less disguised forms of self-serving.

¹⁹ One way to understand these strategies and tactics is to distinguish those that are “compensatory” from those that are “defensive.” Compensatory behaviours might include excessive eating or drinking or getting sick. Defensive behaviours might include chronic anger or being contrasuggestible or argumentative or constantly cynical. In listening to your own behaviours, pay close attention to the feeling component. Ask yourself if you can hear anything in the feeling component that might suggest you are seeking some kind of compensation or if you are being defensive.

yet another strives for positions of power and status while another places great emphasis on acquiring material possessions, another becomes a seducer of people and another an aggressive misanthrope, another becomes terribly self-defensive or self-absorbed, another is compulsively and anxiously engaged in “loving” others, still another is constantly sarcastic and cynical, and so on.²⁰

We have all seen such behaviour and we have probably all done it too, at one time or another. But it is a dangerous game, because it diverts our attention from being who we are to being “someone,” from simply being to only seeming to be.²¹ It also tends to be destructive of healthy human relationships because it leads to confused, confusing and less than honest interchanges between people – we are engaging in processes that have hidden agendas all the time. The real agenda – unstated and probably unacknowledged and perhaps unrecognised – is the buttressing of my sense of form potency conviction. The apparent agenda might seem to be, for example, helping another person, working for the church, visiting someone who is sick and so on. The real agenda might in fact be self-preservation.

These tactics and strategies, developed to make up for diminished form potency conviction, are not easy to deal with, especially in those who are very talented and have spent many years developing them and have a vested interest in maintaining them. It generally takes both wisdom and courage to expose the pretence and superficiality of such behaviour and cut through to something more real. In the end, what must be dealt with is the underlying anxiety that fuels the process.

We do not have the time to pursue this matter fully. It is a most complex and difficult one. However, we could think further about the following points if we are going to challenge another person about their tactics and strategies:

- Firstly, good honest relationships, rather than ideas or principles or rules or “winning” or “point scoring” or anything else, should be primary in your mind as you proceed down this path of challenge;
- Secondly, if you would want to challenge destructive behaviors – ie the negative use of tactics and strategies – in the people and systems around you, you would be well advised to spend a good deal of effort being brutally honest with yourself, effectively attentive to the same propensities to game playing that you share with the rest of the human race; you too are a genius at self-deception;

²⁰ Could this help us understand why “charity” has gained such a bad name. For example, we use expressions such as “Cold as charity” or “I don’t want your charity”. It might also help us to understand why some people make a career of psychology and diagnosing others.

²¹ See Thomas Merton’s observation that “we are all shadowed by a false self” in the author’s *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 1961, 23-28.

- Thirdly, such a challenge is normally best made when it occurs within an established relationship of trust – the other person is more likely to feel assured that you are not pursuing some kind of ego-agenda yourself;
- Fourthly, you might do well to discern whether you are dealing with one person and his or her pathology or one person who happens to be a (disguised) symbol of a deeper group pathology;
- Fifthly, consider consulting with other members of the group and harnessing the power of the group in addressing this issue; it is difficult in the extreme to deal with a group when you are out on your own;
- Sixthly, you should be prepared to stay with this conversation when you have started it – and that might demand something significant of you;
- Seventhly, you may be vilified rather than thanked if you attempt this, so be prepared; some people have an enormous amount riding on these tactics and strategies; their whole identity may be at stake in this and your challenge may in fact be unmasking them and will therefore, in psychological terms, be like “killing” them; expect them to fight for survival.²²

The rage of impotence

When we are deprived of the power to participate in those situations where we have a deeply felt need to participate, the normal and healthy reaction is rage.²³ This may occur in families, work situations, class rooms, social contexts, an individual’s inability to gain useful employment, in the Church, and so on. The rage of impotence, in itself, is a healthy reaction. The circumstances that give rise to the rage and how we handle the rage – or do not handle the rage – may not be so healthy.

Every human system has its ways of rendering a member impotent. For example, we can use sarcasm and scorn, secrets and in-jokes, we can “lose files” and cut people out of the decision-making processes, spread rumours, threaten retrenchment or violence and so on. A moment’s reflection on various forms of oppression will reveal to us this rather sinister side to our human natures.

²² Consider the experience of “whistle-blowing.” It is normally a most stressful experience because it strikes at your own sense of belonging and your former potency conviction;

²³ Rage is a healthy gut reaction to frustration. There is no intention here to suggest that rage or anger are “bad.” Rage is a grace, a blessing for it mobilizes us to deal with some sort of obstacle. The problem is not the rage as such. The problem only arises if I react deformatively to the rage. We ought not forget the distinctively human possibilities implicit in freedom and consciousness – we can always choose an attitude. See Unit One, Session Three of this course. Transcendence always remains open to the human subject while there is freedom and consciousness. See also Unit One, Session Seven of this course. We might also note, in passing, that the inability to feel rage might be a sign that something is radically wrong – see for example Roll May’s “The Man Who Was Put in a Cage”.

Broadly speaking, if we are to stay in the system, we have only three possible (general) ways to respond or react when we are faced with the rage of impotence within ourselves:

- Firstly, we can *move forward*. That is, we can get on the front foot, call on the considerable energy that this rage releases, and create for ourselves, perhaps with the help of others, some more or less life-giving and realistic ways of dealing with the circumstances;²⁴ we can seek out some way, in other words, of participating in the system effectively and thus maintaining our form potency conviction; this is generally the best way to respond, assuming there is some value in remaining within the system;
- Secondly, we can *park in the system*. That is, we can develop strategies and tactics to side-step the obstacles, survive the frustration, live around that which might otherwise enrage us, do whatever we can to protect our own sanity without actually dealing with the source of the frustration itself or even engaging in constructive and life-giving ways with that system; we “park” in the system, as it were, perhaps feigning indifference, perhaps developing other avenues outside the system to invest our time and energy that are more life-giving; in some systems and circumstances this may be the best we can do; for example, those who live in totalitarian regimes may be faced with this dilemma;
- Thirdly – and generally most unhealthily for the individual and the system – we can *withdraw into ourselves*. That is, we can – consciously or unconsciously – refuse to face the rage, absorbing it, turning it in on ourselves, maybe pretending there is nothing wrong or simply pressing on regardless; this is a formula for despondency, depression and various forms of illness; in extreme circumstances this “solution” may lead to some very deformative outcomes.

Most people today will sooner or later encounter the rage of impotence in themselves and others as they endeavour to live and work within various systems.

²⁴ There are other – not so formative – variants of this *forward* movement. We might find ourselves attempting to deal with the situation by going *forward*, but our rage leads us to an aggression and harshness that is counter productive. For example, the child in the classroom who is utterly bored or frustrated might behave in a mischievous and disruptive way; a bored and frustrated young man might steal a car and commit a violent crime or simply deface a public building; a frustrated Catholic might take to attacking the Catholic clergy en masse, and so on. There may be some subtle and complex issues we would do well to address when we are confronted with this kind of behaviour. For example, while it is hardly desirable to see someone defacing a public building, it may make more sense to think of that action as a signal or a pointer to something amiss with the relationships or the system or the culture in which the person is living, rather than simply to blame and punish the individual perpetrator. We might wonder, also, about the causes of suicide: Is it possible that someone might commit suicide as an expression of the rage of impotence?

Our institutions and systems today are generally places of great stress and therefore places where many are likely to experience significant frustration. This also applies generally to the Christian churches. Many in religious life also find themselves experiencing this rage of impotence. For the sake of our sanity and the good of the people with whom we live and work, we must name it and deal deliberately and constructively with it.²⁵

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that life itself can be inherently disappointing and frustrating. You can, for example, see little children manifest the rage of impotence when they are discovering this truth. It may, in fact, be one of the most difficult lessons to learn and one of the most difficult experiences to negotiate well.²⁶

Identity and self-esteem

The practical and deep issues of identity and self-esteem are intimately related to the foregoing. Identity and self-esteem become problematic for us to the extent that we have diminished form potency conviction.

These issues should be addressed in terms of my actual participation in the formation mystery. For example, clarity of roles and expectations, being allowed to perform appropriate tasks with realistic support and feedback may enhance my conviction of form potency, especially in my earlier formative years. The expression of faith, hope and love includes incorporating people effectively, as they are able, in the work and tasks of the community. In other words, we become convinced of our ability to participate when we are in fact encouraged and helped to participate and realistically affirmed when we do participate. As a consequence, we will develop a solid sense of identity and self-esteem.

Children who are constantly forced into situations where they face defeat and failure, or are simply told, implicitly or explicitly, that they are failures, will probably tend to become uncertain about their form potency and thus doubtful

²⁵ Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a brilliant if, at times, disturbing portrayal of the uses and abuses of power. Milos Forman, in the film version of that book (1975), gives us a chilling insight into the rage of impotence experienced by the tragic Billy Bibbit and generated by the manipulative Nurse Ratched. It is also worth reflecting on the ways the various characters deal with the loss of power in that system.

²⁶ One author writes: "What upsets the smooth functioning of the pleasure instinct, and leads to all the psychogenic abnormalities which we are trying to investigate, is *disappointment*. According to what a child does about this, he grows up mentally healthy or ill." (Karin Stephen, *The Wish To Fall Ill*, Cambridge, 1960, 75, cited by William Lynch, *Images of Hope*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, 279) Simone Weil also has something pertinent to say on this: "If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, he will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures." (Simone Weil, "The Father's Silence" in G. Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, David McKay Co., 1977, 433) We might wonder, also, whether the advertising industry and certain sections of the film industry might set us up for despair by evoking bloated expectations of what life is supposed to be like?

about their identity and self-esteem. Similarly with adults. When society is unwilling, for example, to invite them into the workforce and employ them in some effective and appropriate way, they too tend to become uncertain about their ability to participate and thus doubtful about their identity and self-esteem. In extreme cases this may lead to profound depression and even despair.²⁷

In structuring our own lives as adults, it is important to be aware of these factors. Depression, despondency, discouragement and loss of energy can be the result of diminishing form potency conviction. This may, in turn, be the result of, for example, a difficult work situation or continually attempting to do work that is too demanding or we simply find the work without challenge. It may also be the result of something much deeper and more pervasive. We need to appraise the experience wisely so we can respond appropriately. Professional help may be indicated. We may find it helpful, however, in such situations, to try some of the following responses:

- set yourself do-able tasks – like getting out of bed, washing yourself, turning on the light, getting yourself something to eat – and *do* them;
- do not try and cope with the whole day, just the next moment – deal with life in manageable pieces; increase the level of challenge in those tasks as you are able – stretch yourself;
- accompany yourself reflectively in the humdrum tasks – like turning on a light switch, making a cup of coffee, washing your face; this allows you to connect with the concrete world of ordinary reality and that concrete ordinary reality is healing;²⁸
- deliberately seek out some things to do that give you joy, that delight you, even if it is only in some small way;
- deliberately reflect on all the things that you are doing at the moment, use Gendlin’s focusing method to get some kind of sense of how you experience them, and see if there might be some things you can and should cut out of your life, even if it is only for the time being;

²⁷ All of which reminds us of the awful human costs to the community of allowing – perhaps generating? – large numbers of people who are unemployed. The Editorial of *The Sydney Morning Herald* on March 29, 2000 reported that “the gap between the work-rich and the work-poor has grown since the early 1980s so that by mid-1999, 160,000 couples with dependent children had neither parent in paid work, and there were 280,000 jobless single parent households containing 860,000 children.” The consequences of this could be massive in terms of talent lost to the community, physical and mental sickness and ensuing medical costs, delinquent and criminal behavior and vandalism and ensuing costs of incarceration, repairs to buildings, employment of social workers and so on, to say nothing of the personal costs to those human beings who are deprived of a fruitful life because they have no conviction that they are able to participate in society.

²⁸ See “Growing in Self-Awareness: Some Practical Suggestions”, *Readings in Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 151; “Review of the Day: Video Replay”, *op cit*, 152-53; “Writing as an Aid to Living”, *op cit*, 154.

- be mindful of the transcendent horizons of each moment; every moment, every person event or thing is part of the mystery of formation which is an expression of the Great Mystery; your unfolding story is part of a much bigger story; think deliberately of that bigger Mystery beyond the immediate mystery that you currently experience as somewhat unattractive; situate your life in the larger context.

Ultimately, however, simply doing work and achieving tasks is not enough to maintain form potency conviction as we mature. It may get us through the early growth phases of our lives and it may help us through crises, but ultimately we need deeper sources of nourishment to maintain that conviction and the consequent sense of identity and self-esteem.

We need to experience ourselves as part of something bigger than our own ego-functional worlds. Living is more than completing tasks. We need to know ourselves as grounded in and expressive of the formation mystery itself, which mystery is an expression of the Great Mystery. It is from the formation mystery – and ultimately the Great Mystery – that we derive our deepest and most enduring sense of form potency conviction, identity and self-esteem. The more we are grounded there the more easily we will be able to live within a changing, even disintegrating world, the more effectively we will cope with frustration and silliness and even injustice.²⁹

We could say that the path of maturity is one of a shifting centre of gravity, from ego-centricity to mystery-centricity, from mastery to obedience, from wilfulness to graciousness. The mature adult finds his or her conviction of the power to participate in a growing relationship with the Great Mystery. Adults know that the journey home to oneself is a journey beyond oneself. Therein lies both the threat and the promise, the anxiety and the thrill of being human.



²⁹ This is not to suggest that we turn our backs on such things – especially injustice. It merely means that we will bring to such things a greater strength and ability to face them and deal with them more effectively than if we derive our form potency conviction from the affirmation of the systems in which we live and work.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** Each human being is a unique potential to give birth to Christ in the world.*

** My form potency conviction ultimately is found in and through submitting, as Jesus did, to the loving will of the Father.*



The goal of form potency conviction

The ability to participate in the mystery of formation is not an end in and of itself. I exist because God intended it. My being is an expression of the wisdom and love of the Great Mystery, that One revealed to our Fathers and Mothers in the faith as the God of history and the God of Jesus who is the Christ. The fulfilment of my being is the fulfilment of God's will in my regard. The truly original life – the “arising” life – is one in which I am being loved into freedom by God. The saint is one who has been substantially set free by God's love.

My form potency conviction is a potency or power to share in God's creative and liberating love for the world. It is derived from God's creative action and as such is an ability to cooperate in the development of the covenant of intimacy God intends for each of us. We might say the end or goal of form potency is communion – with the Mystery, with ourselves, with other people, with the events and things of the world.

Jesus who is the Christ is God-among-us, the Eternal Mystery enfleshed in time. In Him, with Him and through Him we are called to participate in the mystery of formation. That participation develops gradually and is increasingly a faithful expression of my nature as a child of God. When authentic, it proceeds from Christ and gives birth to the Christ Form in the world.

The moral life as epitomised in the life and teaching of Jesus, begins and ends with love. Only in love can my power to participate find a truly life-giving and liberating ground and purpose, a gracious and free expression. Human love is in fact the ultimate ground which allows us to love with the love of Christ Himself. In the context of the Christian life, the power to participate is in fact the power to love – or, more precisely, the power *to be in Love*. Literally that: *To be in Love*. The Love we are “in” is the very identity of God. Empowered by the Holy Spirit of God my human power to give and receive form progressively becomes the graced power of God's very own creative and redeeming Love – “I live now, not I, Christ lives in me.”³⁰

³⁰ Galatians 2:20.

Dying to live

Jesus said: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.”³¹ Jesus’ power to participate is grounded in, and finds its purpose in, the loving intentions of the Father. Jesus is able to say with the utmost authenticity: “I am!”³² Jesus is utterly authentic, utterly faithful to who He is. The expression His life takes at any given time is an authentic expression of who He is.³³ He does not seek applause, he has no need to prove Himself, he does not look to others to earn his rights to participate. He is not evasive or manipulative, he does not need to use tactics and strategies to buttress a diminished form potency conviction. He trusts in the Father and finds profound conviction in that. As a consequence, Jesus is one with his word. His words express his being. He speaks with authority, unlike the Scribes and the Pharisees.³⁴

Ultimately our form potency conviction must be grounded beyond ourselves. Like Jesus we must submit progressively but, in the end absolutely, to the will of the Father. This means going beyond mere ego-fulfilment.³⁵ Part of the human journey involves some measure of ego-strength. In fact, the stronger the ego the better. But in the end the ego must be transformed through dying. That is, we must abandon ourselves to the Mystery and find our conviction of form potency, not in what we are able to do or have in and of ourselves but in what God is able to be in and through us.

One of the enduring themes of Christian spirituality – and indeed the spirituality of the other great religious traditions – is detachment. Life involves both an active and a passive purification, whereby we are stripped of all that stands between us and our becoming who we most deeply are. The pretences, illusions and evasions – and all the strategies and tactics that attend these – must be stripped away from us. This stripping makes way for what is real and good and true and beautiful and unified in God.

We can of course either actively cooperate with this purgative process or resist it. If we want to grow towards the fullness of our humanity we have only one option in the end – that is to cooperate. We must die if we are to live.³⁶

³¹ Jn. 4:34.

³² Cf John. 8:58.

³³ This is worth an extended meditation. His authenticity did not consist in his ability to “fit in” nor his “appearance” nor his “cleanliness” or absence of blemishes or avoidance of confusion or depression or trouble. So what constituted his authenticity? And what might be the implications for my life and my call to authenticity?

³⁴ See Matthew 7:29.

³⁵ Ego is a functional characteristic. It may be thought of as the organizing centre of active lives. We depend on this organizing centre to solve problems and get jobs done. Ego is therefore about control and mastery. There is a dimension of our lives that calls for this mastery and control. Ultimately our lives call for surrender and obedience. Ego must cease being master and become servant.

³⁶ Cf Jn. 12:23-28.

One of the paradoxes of human maturation is that it is often our failures rather than our successes that bring us closer to the truth of who we are and therefore a well-grounded conviction of our power to participate.³⁷ That is also probably why it is often in our weakness and need that we are most open to give and receive love. Failure and the inability to master life confronts us with the truth that is always there: We live to the extent that we are willing to find the centre of gravity of our lives in the Mystery rather than in our egos.

Ego desperation can be a blessed moment, a moment of truth and liberation. Life may be understood as a shifting centre of gravity, a gradual movement from (ego) mastery to mystery.

In this, Jesus is “the Way”.³⁸ He is also the exemplar. If our lives are grounded in ego we are very vulnerable to that moment when ego cannot cope. That moment is always near at hand. Our taken-for-granted worlds always carry the rider: “Until further notice!” When we are grounded in the Mystery, we realise that there is nothing that should be done that cannot be done, and vice versa, nothing that cannot be done that should be done.³⁹ If it cannot be done than it should not be done.

This is why Christ is totally beyond the power of Pilate. Yes, they will kill Him. But, no, they have no ultimate power over Him. He is thoroughly grounded in the Real, the Real that sustains the formation mystery, and is available to all of us in any moment. We call it Grace. And Grace is another name for God’s presence. It is the Great Mystery, God, the one who set the bush alight in the desert and brought the people out of Egypt and forged an everlasting Covenant with them in the wilderness, the one who became enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth and cast aside the stone at the mouth of the tomb.

That Mystery is the only sure source of form potency conviction. It will cost us everything that in the end does not matter. It will give us everything that in the end does matter. The mature person finds his or her power to participate increasingly in that Mystery. For the Christian, this is our life in Christ.



³⁷ See 2Corinthians 12:10.

³⁸ Cf Jn. 14:6.

³⁹ “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“Spiritual formation cannot be forced, only prepared for. Hence its means cannot be those of conquest, but only of facilitation and preparation.”*⁴⁰



(2) *“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, 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.”*⁴¹



(3) *“Our human situation is one in which our powers and capacities, left to themselves, simply tend to run away with us. It is often assumed that it is only the so-called 'lower powers' that are envisaged in this picture of human inner disharmony. Augustine who was never more maligned in any other matter than this, was the last to believe any such thing. For him, the over-riding tendency to iniquity was that powerful substitute for sex which is the peculiar prerogative of the spiritually-minded, 'the desire to dominate' (cf St Augustine, City of God, 3:14; 14:15 & 28). In what he has to say of this form of libido as a perversion of authentic love, he thus contributes a shrewd personal insight to a tradition about the wounds of original sin which were normally characterized in the ordinary catechisms of more recent times as being darkness of the mind, weakness in the will, and lust in the appetites. This is simply to say that, as a result of original sin, it tends to be more difficult to grasp the truth, to act upon it when we see it, and to free ourselves of compulsive drives in the basic instincts of love and aggression. Any one of these facets of our total make-up acting automatically and, as it were, in the saddle, can pull us apart and make us less than the whole human being who is called to relationship with God and his fellows. For instance, someone who for fundamentally egocentric reasons has, as he would boast, 'a firm grip on himself', can become a monster of inhumanity and utterly incapable of the real love that many*

⁴⁰ Adrian van Kaam, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, I, 2 (1980), 303.

⁴¹ Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Viking, 1971, 33.

apparently weaker people are constantly and bravely pouring out. To recognize that the apparently strong can often be the really weak and blind, and the apparently weak sometimes the brave and genuinely far-seeing, is to see that, while the wounds of original sin are found in all of us, they take on, in each and all, an entirely individual force."⁴²



(4) *"We love out of leisure from self-concern, and we are always self-concerned unless we know that someone other than ourselves is prepared to maintain the significance of our being."*⁴³



(5) *"Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God; and that to thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love."*⁴⁴



(6) *"Then to all he said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it. What gain, then, is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost or ruined his very self?'"*⁴⁵



(7) *"Surely you know I have power to release you and power to crucify you?" Jesus replied, 'You would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above'."*⁴⁶



(8) *"It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and*

⁴² Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1973, 41-42.

⁴³ Shirley Sugerman, *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism*, Westminster Press, 54f.

⁴⁴ Psalm 62:11.

⁴⁵ Luke 9:23-26.

⁴⁶ John. 19:11.

heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."⁴⁷



(9) *"We hold this treasure in pots of earthenware, so that the immensity of the power is God's and not our own."*⁴⁸



(10) *"Only in freedom can human beings direct themselves towards goodness. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within the person."*⁴⁹



(11) *"The awful daring of a moment's surrender/ Which an age of prudence can never retract/ By this, and this only, we have existed."*⁵⁰



(12) *"Man seeks for drama and excitement; when he cannot get satisfaction on a higher level, he creates for himself the drama of destruction"*⁵¹



(13) *"We must get over the error that makes us think that a man's life takes place*

⁴⁷ 2Corinthians 12:1-10.

⁴⁸ 2Corinthians 4:7.

⁴⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 17.

⁵⁰ T.S.Eliot, "The Wasteland".

⁵¹ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973, 8.

inside himself, and consequently that it can be reduced to pure psychology.... Life is as far as possible from a subjective phenomenon. It is the most objective of all realities.... To live is to be outside oneself, to realise oneself."⁵²



(14) *"God's love for us is not the reason for which we should love him. God's love for us is the reason for us to love ourselves. How could we love ourselves without this motive?"*⁵³



(15) *"Have you thought that He stained Himself, soiled Himself, being not only with men, but Himself a man ... And it wasn't that He put on man like a jacket to take off at night, or to bathe ... But man He was, as man is man, the maker made Himself the made; God was un-Godded by His own hand ... He was God from before the beginning, and now never to be clean God again. Never again. Alas! ... Hosanna!"*⁵⁴



(16) *"Religion is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself."*⁵⁵



(17) *"Man must first be restored to himself."*⁵⁶



(18) *"Emotional 'diseases' can be a product of human strengths, strengths that come to be misused in a life, rather than being absent or weakened."*⁵⁷



(19) *"If you say, 'Show me your God', I reply, 'Show me the person that you are and I will show you my God'. You must show me that the eyes of your soul can*

⁵² Jose y Ortega cited by Maurice Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness*, University of Chicago Press, 1978, 22.

⁵³ Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, Ed. George A. Panichas, David McKay, 1977, 351.

⁵⁴ H.F.M. Prescott, *The Man on a Donkey*, Vol. 2, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952, 510-511.

⁵⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, Yale University Press, 1952, 156.

⁵⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Ch. 8.

⁵⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*, Vintage Books, 1971, 23.

see and that the ears of your heart can hear. Those who see with bodily eyes contemplate the affairs of life on earth and distinguish things that differ, such as light from darkness, white from black, ugly from beautiful, the excessive from the defective, what is well-proportioned and shapely from what is irregular and distorted. So too, the human ear distinguishes sounds that are shrill or deep or sweet. In the same way the ears of the heart and the eyes of the soul are capable of perceiving God. For God is seen by those who are capable of seeing him, once they have the eyes of the soul opened. All people have eyes, but some have eyes which are hooded by cataracts and do not see the light of the sun. But the light of the sun does not fail to shine just because the blind do not see ... Just as you must keep a mirror polished, so you must keep your soul pure. When there is rust on a mirror the human face cannot be seen in it; so also when there is sin in a person, such a one cannot see God.”⁵⁸



(20) *“I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.*

*“I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, his might to stay, his ear to hearken to my need,*

*“The wisdom of my God to teach, his hand to guide, his shield to ward;
The word of God to give me speech, his heavenly host to be my guard.*

*“I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity;
By invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three,*

*“Of whom all nature hath creation; Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation: Salvation is of Christ the Lord.”⁵⁹*



(21) *“Dear God: We pray for another way of being: another way of knowing. Across the difficult terrain of our existence we have attempted to build a highway and in so doing have lost our footpath. God lead us to our footpath: lead us there where in simplicity we may move at the speed of natural creatures and feel the earth’s love beneath our feet. Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel the movement of creation in our hearts. And lead us there where side-by-side we may feel the embrace of the common soul. Nothing can be loved at speed. God lead*

⁵⁸ St Theophilus of Antioch, *Address to Autolycus*, Book 1, 2:7. Theophilus is numbered among the Apologists of the 2nd century. We know nothing more of him than this single work.

⁵⁹ Hymn from Sunday Morning Prayer in *Prayer of the Church*.

*us to the slow path; to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing:
another way of being.*"⁶⁰



⁶⁰ Michael Leunig, *When I talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God*, Harper Collins Publishers. Year of publication and page numbers not given.

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Suggested exercises

1. Who is the most important person in your life at the moment? How does your use of time and energy reflect this?
2. How much time do you spend allowing the Great Mystery to emerge as the felt ground of your life?
3. When you are next celebrating the Eucharist pay particular attention to the line of people walking up to receive the Bread of Life. Listen and let it teach you something.