

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT TWO SESSION ONE: Crises in life formation



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The term “taken for granted” ... means to accept until further notice our knowledge of certain states of affairs as unquestionably plausible. ... Common sense thinking simply takes for granted, until counter-evidence appears, not only the world of physical objects, but also the sociocultural world into which we are born and in which we grow up.¹



Transcendence is one of the fundamental dynamics of Christian formation. The Holy Spirit moves us to approach our original divine image by way of transitions from less to more inspired and graced forms of life. Each transition God calls us to is accompanied by a transcendence crisis. Note again that because this transcendence crisis is in fact the Spirit’s invitation to disclose and implement more of our original life call in Christ, it can also be called an originality crisis.²



See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.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 Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers, Volume One: The Problem of Social Reality*, ed Maurice Nathanson, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, 326.

² Adrian van Kaam, “Crisis of Transcendence and Christian Formation” in the author’s *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension Books, 1964/1980, 183.

³ Deuteronomy 30:15-16.

⁴ John 12:24.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** Because we are transcendent and transcending beings – ie beings who necessarily seek to move beyond the current boundaries of our situation – our lives will necessarily be marked by a series of partings-of-the-way or crises.***

**** The depth and richness of our life formation process will be closely linked to how well we live our partings-of-the-way, our crises.***



Our taken-for-granted worlds⁵

Consider the expression, taken-for-granted. Our ordinary, everyday lives are made up of so much that is simply taken-for-granted. We get out of bed and get ready for the day; we organise some breakfast and eat it; we catch the bus, go to work and settle into the routines of the day; we then return home and go through other routines and retire for the night. We expect this and that. Typically, we do not spare it a second thought, so long as the expectations are not frustrated.

In fact, our days are dotted – more or less – with such frustrations. For example, we might find ourselves feeling very tired or ill when we have to get up, or we find that someone has used the last of the coffee or put an empty milk carton back in the fridge, or the bus comes late or not at all or there is a traffic snarl, or someone at work says something that gets us offside, and so it goes. The smooth flow of life is frequently interrupted. The unfolding of our days can never be entirely taken-for-granted. Paradoxically, interruptions can be taken for granted. Yet, there is an underlying taken-for-grantedness about most days for most of us and we are realistic to live with that expectation.⁶

When the taken-for-grantedness is not there, that is, when our way forward is interrupted or obstructed or totally barred, we realise the wisdom of Alfred Schutz' comment that our ordinary daily existence always carries the rider: "until counter evidence appears." (See the epigraph.) We might say that our taken-for-granted worlds always carry a rider: Until further notice!

The fact that we do take life for granted, probably suggests something more than the fact that we gain certain efficiencies from habit and routine. Might it not also suggest an anxious wish to be reassured that all is well, that we are more or

⁵ It would be helpful to read, in conjunction with these notes, the earlier material on "Formation Mystery", Unit One, Session Two, "Form Potency", Unit One, Session Five, and "Transcendence and Life Forms", Unit One, Session Seven.

⁶ We simply would go mad if life was utterly chaotic and unpredictable. Just consider the amount of energy it takes to live through those events and moments that are teeming with unpredictability or how it focuses your attention when you are waiting in a hospital corridor for news of a very sick loved one.

less in control? Routine and habit and predictability can create and sustain this illusion of control – until “notice” is given, that is. When life does “give notice” and we are unable to proceed routinely and more or less predictably, we are reminded that our sense of being in control is actually based on a tenuous grasp of things. Ultimately of course, both the control and the sense we have that we are in control are, in fact, a fiction or a “vital lie” as Ernest Becker calls it.⁷

The illusion is exposed by the revelation that the movement of existence – our own and that of the world around us – does not lie within either our control or our comprehension, except in a very relative sense.⁸ The direction of our lives is revealed moment by moment as we enter an existence as yet unknown. It is not unrealistic to think of life as a constant movement into the unknown and unknowable.

We do not have “the map,” we cannot apply pre-definitions with any guaranteed assurance that that is the way things will turn out. We must constantly listen and pay attention, we must respond as creatively and as intelligently as we can to the various twistings and turnings of existence. Living is a conversation. We wait upon life, life does not wait upon us. Any control we might believe we have over life is, at best, limited, facilitative, fragile and very temporary. To be human is to be a traveller in a foreign land – always in a foreign land. We are never quite at home. Recall the reflection of Martin Heidegger we gave in Unit One, Session One:

“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.”⁹

⁷ Cf Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1973, Chapter 4.

⁸ Do you think we communicate this fact of life well to our children? Does our culture prepare children well for the ordinary disappointments that dot our days? Is our culture willing to acknowledge and live with the truth that life is tragic? Perhaps we actually communicate to our children – wittingly or unwittingly – that “anything is possible to you”? And what is the significance of our obsession with “celebrities” and people who are wealthy and/or powerful?

⁹ Martin Heidegger cited in A. Naess, *Four Modern Philosophers*, University of Chicago Press, 1967, 174. It is interesting to reflect on the significance of feeling homesick. What is going on there? Is it possible that there are occasions when life evokes the deep seated awareness that we

A cosmic pattern

The English word “crisis” is rooted in the Greek word *krisis* meaning *decision*. That Greek word has its roots in the more foundational word, *krineo*, meaning *a parting of the ways*. We normally restrict our use of the word “crisis” to serious events, where there is some more or less significant interruption to our taken-for-granted world. Such significant interruptions cause notable distress, even trauma.

We might, for example, use the word crisis when an important relationship fails or someone very close to us dies suddenly and unexpectedly or we lose our job or we discover that we have a serious illness. We might also find ourselves using that word in less traumatic circumstances, such as selling/buying a house or when we are achieving well in a career and become aware of serious ethical questions related to that career. Yet again, the word crisis might be applied when, out of the blue, as it were, everything seems just fine with our lives on the surface, but work no longer holds the same challenge and family does not enchant us as before and we have gnawing questions and doubts about meaning and purpose and we, well, just don’t feel entirely “right” or “well” about our lives.¹⁰

In fact, the essential pattern contained in such more or less significant events and moments is actually present all the time. It is part of the DNA of existence. In this moment, here and now, this ordinary moment that seems just like millions of other moments when nothing is apparently happening, that essential pattern of the parting of the ways is at work. The taken-for-granted world is always something of an illusion.

We may not be conscious that anything significant is happening and we may confidently predict the next thing. In other words, the illusion of taken-for-grantedness is working very well. Sometimes, however, the crisis pattern is writ large, it erupts from our ordinary existence with a strong impact, suddenly changing everything. Mostly, however, the crisis pattern – the partings of the ways – will pass unnoticed in our daily routines or is manifested simply as an annoyance or inconvenience or frustration. Typically, we only become aware of it when we no longer can avoid its presence.

What is the pattern? Considered from a common sense point of view we can note the following:

- Firstly and most obviously we experience some measure of frustration: We

are actually not at home anywhere, that “feeling at home” is an illusion and the unmasking of the illusion makes us “sick”? In this sense, the experience of homesickness may be a very graced moment?

¹⁰ Walker Percy writes: "Why is it that a man riding a good commuter train from Larchmont to New York, whose needs and drives are satisfied, who has a good home, loving wife and family, good job, who enjoys unprecedented 'cultural and recreational facilities,' often feels bad without knowing why? Why is the good life which men have achieved in the twentieth century so bad that only news of world catastrophes, assassinations, plane crashes, mass murders, can divert one from the sadness of ordinary mornings?" ("The Delta Factor" in Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981, 4 & 6-7).

feel frustrated, we get angry, maybe confused, we might feel hard-done by, aggrieved and so on; in the ordinary, day-to-day taken-for-granted world we use words like “will”, “would”, “should” and “ought;” these imply confident expectations; such expectations are exposed in moments of frustration and interruption; thus, what we thought *would* or *should* happen does *not* happen and we express our distress with expressions like: “Damn!”, “Murphy’s Law”, “Why!”, “I should have known”, “Who the heck ...!” etc.

- Secondly, and perhaps not so immediately obvious, we experience a shifting centre of gravity: Our taken-for-granted world generates the feeling – again mostly implicit – that *we* have the initiative, that *we* are in charge; thus, when the flow of life is interrupted, we may have a sense of *losing the initiative*, at least momentarily, and so we use passive voice and/or indirect speech, generally in the second or third person, and we say things like: “Somebody has used all the milk,” “The bus did not come,” “Someone had broken down,” “They were not there,” “He’s renowned for that” etc. All these kinds of statements carry at least a faint sense of blame or perhaps explanation or exoneration for why things are not flowing smoothly in a taken-for-granted sort of way; we might even detect the implication that “If I was in charge/control then this would not happen!”¹¹
- Thirdly, and again not so immediately obvious, we are forced into an experience of waiting: Sooner or later we come to realise that being human includes a lot of waiting; and when we are forced to wait we realise we are definitely not in control and our speech reflects a certain impotence; we say things like: “I wonder where she is ... ,” “Maybe they don’t know we are here ,” “Perhaps there’s been an accident ... ” or we make small talk, or just remain silent etc. One way or another, we attempt to cope with the loss of control and maintain some equilibrium when we are not able to enforce our patterns and expectations; waiting can be a distressing experience – which prompts us to wonder what is happening to us when we must wait.
- Fourthly, life demands a response: In these moments in which the taken-for-granted world erupts in some more or less significant way, we must respond; we are forced to make choices, at least implicitly; thus, we say things like: “What can I do?”, “Let’s make the best of this,” “Does anybody have a mobile?”, “How can I help?” etc.¹²

¹¹ One of the critical experiences in depression is the sense that I have lost the initiative. I feel disempowered, and say things like, “I do not feel like doing this or that.” In extreme circumstances I may not feel like getting out of bed and may actually feel *unable* to get out of bed. Is there some connection between, on the one hand, our failure as a culture to grasp that we are not supposed to be in charge, that life is a graced process of surrender, that life is often disappointing and frustrating, and on the other hand, the epidemic of depression?

¹² Given that freedom is at the very heart of our being human, this demand for a response may be understood as a formative dynamic that evokes our deepest and best possibilities, at least potentially. It goes to the very heart of our humanity and says: “What are you made of?”

- Fifthly, there is typically a certain letting go: In such circumstances, something is taken away from us, we lose something, expectations are slain, maybe our sense of ourselves, based on the fiction of being in control, is eroded just a little; this stripping may be felt by us at the time as more or less devastating, annoying, threatening, painful; thus, we are forced to let go of something and we say things like: “That’s that,” “What can you do?,” “Well it was a good idea,” “Better tell them we can’t make it,” “I thought she was a good friend,” “We did our best” etc;
- Sixthly, we are changed: Thus we are forced to change our expectations, our attitudes, our felt needs, our assumptions, and so on. *We* are changed. For we are forced into one of the many transitions through which our lives must inevitably pass. The old taken-for-granted world with its taken-for-granted sense of self and others begins to be replaced by a new one; we thus can develop new ways of relating with ourselves and other people, events and things; hopefully, we relinquish some of our illusions and become a little more real, a little more humble, a little more understanding of others, a little less likely to place too much store on ego-control and the taken-for-grantedness of life; thus, life re-emerges and resumes some new measure of routine about it and we say things like: “Thank God that’s behind us,” “I learned a lot from that,” “It was painful but I wouldn’t change anything,” “Now I know what you meant when ...”, etc.

Common sense reflection on the nature of everyday living actually points towards the Greek roots of our word, “crisis” – a parting of the ways. In this “parting” there are, broadly, three characteristic movements. These three movements pertain to the very nature of human existence as such and are present whether the crisis is an event of some serious impact or a simple part of the ebb and flow of daily existence. The three movements are:

- *Dying* – something ends, there is a termination, what was is no more, the taken-for-granted world can no longer be taken-for-granted in quite the same way;
- *Deciding* – we must respond both to the demands of the dying process – the absence of what was expected – and the pressure to discover an alternative to what was but is no more, to facilitate the emergence of a new possibility;
- *Re-emerging* – slowly something different is born of this process, something over which we do not have absolute control, only facilitative control – we must wait.¹³

However, this can be extremely painful and even overwhelming.

¹³ Cf Adrian van Kaam, “Existential Crisis and Human Development” reproduced in the *Reader Volume II*, 15-28.

The great paradox of life

The first century Roman philosopher, Seneca, wrote:

*I (Seneca) remember one day you (Lucilius) were handling the well-known commonplace – that we do not suddenly fall on death, but advance towards it by slight degrees; we die everyday. For everyday a little of our life is taken from us; even when we are growing, our life is on the wane. We lose our childhood, then our boyhood, and then our youth. Counting even yesterday, all past time is lost time; the very day we are now spending is shared between ourselves and death. It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which has previously flowed out; similarly the final hour when we cease to exist does not itself bring death; it merely of itself completes the death-process. We reach death at that moment, but we have been a long time on the way. In describing this situation you said in your customary style: Not single is the death which comes; the death which takes us off is but the last of all.*¹⁴

There is something fatalistic about Seneca's reflection. He comes close to the realization that living and dying are organically linked, that there is no living without dying. But he sees death as the destroyer of life and, as a consequence, his words carry a heavy sense of despair.¹⁵ There is, however, another way of looking at the relationship between living and dying. Robert Browning, for example, wrote:

*You never know what life means until you die;
Even throughout life, 'tis death that makes life live,
Gives it whatever the significance.*¹⁶

I believe William H Auden's words suggest the same positive link between living and dying, while recognizing that there is a certain fear in embracing the link between living and dying:

*Afraid of our living task, the dying which the coming day will ask.*¹⁷

Dying is an essential part of living. Living is actually born of dying. This is the greatest paradox of life. There is no living without dying.

¹⁴ R M Gummere, trans, "Epistle XXIV" in *Seneca: Epistulae Morales*, Loeb Classical Library, 1917, Volume I, 177-79.

¹⁵ Seneca was a First Century Roman writer. He was a proponent of Stoicism. At the request of Nero, he committed suicide by slashing his wrists in 65 CE.

¹⁶ From "The Ring and the Book".

¹⁷ Cited by G Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols*, Braziller, 1964, 143.

Both Browning and Auden focus on dying giving birth to living. Seneca focuses on dying putting an end to living. Seneca seems to know nothing of the organic link between living and dying. For Seneca, dying is simply dying, annihilation, merely the end. For Browning and Auden, dying is a transition, a moving forward by leaving behind, a stripping in order to be more free, more alive. Understood in this way, dying is an ordinary part of the everyday, taken-for-granted worlds of each and everyone of us. It is not to be escaped or even resigned to, it is to be embraced with the expectation of life.

There is a certain dying involved in the limits and demands we face in daily living. Thus, there is a dying in getting out of bed in the morning, a dying in being patient with oneself and others, a dying in resisting the temptation to indulge oneself with the cutting remark, a dying in doing what must be done, a dying in submitting to the constant and manifold demands of daily routine, a dying in living out a reality that one will never adequately understand.

While this dying may in fact be an echo of that final, literal moment we call death, it is also, if *lived through*, a constitutive and enriching part of the present moment we call life. Without the dying, in fact, our lives would become empty, soulless, self-entrapped. In other words, without the dying we would simply be dead. Living is moment by moment being born of dying. You will find this borne out in the lives of those people who have a depth and richness of humanity. People who are, for example, very compassionate and forgiving are typically people who have died a lot. You can depend on it: Those qualities of compassion and forgiveness emerged in the crucible of dying. Like the seeds of much Australian fauna, compassion and forgiveness – and qualities like them – need the fire of everyday dying to germinate.

We have grown accustomed – in modern Western, affluent societies – to think of death as simply the enemy of living and therefore something to be feared, shunned, evaded or at least held at bay for as long as possible and at all cost. This sort of talk about the necessity of dying as part of daily living disturbs us. And, as we have already noted, there is an awful irony in the denial of death: When we embrace the dying we live, when we attempt to evade it we die. The alternative to death-denial and evasion is not a morbid attraction to death, a sort of necrophilia. The healthy alternative to death-denial is rather a generous realism about the structure of life and reality.¹⁸

The 20th century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, saw the intimate link between living and dying more clearly than most secular thinkers. One commentator notes:

¹⁸ It might be useful to reflect that both suicide and euthanasia represent a significant denial of death. Each is a refusal to live the dying that life asks. We should hasten to add that, in making this observation, we are not suggesting any necessary moral blame on this or that individual who might choose suicide or euthanasia.

*For Heidegger, death is the only thing that really belongs to man as his own. It is not just the end of life; it is present at the very core of life during its whole course. But this anguish does not lead to despair; on the contrary, it is this daily confrontation with death that makes sense of human existence. It is the hidden spring of self-realization and all human creativity.*¹⁹

Authentic living is self-transcending, and self-transcendence entails dying. We leave ourselves behind in order to meet ourselves, we lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. Would we call it “living” if we constantly evaded the central challenges of life, all those moments that draw us out of ourselves and demand self-transcendence (ie dying)?²⁰

We must choose the partings and go where we are sent

We have a choice in all this. We can say “Yes” to the dying – implicitly or explicitly – and embrace it as generously and wholeheartedly as we are able. Or we can say “No” to the dying – implicitly or explicitly – and invest our energies and talents in various forms of evasion. The first is the way of life; the second is the way of death. In the first, the paradox is maintained, in the second the paradox becomes tragedy, a pathetic mimicking of life.

The “Yes” to the dying will be made amidst a certain amount of pain and darkness. The daily dying carries all the marks of literal death, with the sense of loss and grief and sadness, confusion and perhaps anger and guilt. Those very feelings are at once signals of death and bearers of death. We embrace them, *live* them and something richer and deeper emerges. We become more alive. Or, alternatively, we endeavor to deny and evade them and sink into something poorer and more superficial. If we take the path of denial and evasion, we will in fact yield to death rather than grow through it and because of it. For example:

- When you wake up on a cold morning and you are feeling very tired, getting out of bed is, in the sense in which we have spoken, a moment of dying. If you generously enter that dying (ie get out of bed and turn up for your day),

¹⁹ Claude Geffre, “Death as Necessity and as Liberty” in *Theology Digest*, 12 (1964), 191-92. Another commentator on the same author writes: “As long as we look on death as something which invades our existence from outside we can never integrate it as a constitutive element in the structure of Dasein, nor can we ever grasp Dasein as a totality. Inauthentic existence will always take this view; it will try to live deathlessly, to conceal from itself its being-towards-death.” (B E O’Mahony, “Martin Heidegger’s Existential Analysis of Death,” *Philosophical Studies*, 18 (1969), 69.)

²⁰ Is it possible that every act of death denial, every refusal to live the dying that life asks of us, “accumulates” or “gathers” un-lived life or “bundles of death”? Perhaps one of the causes of depression and mental illness – and “moral illness”? – is the amount of death we carry around with us? And if this is the case, the correct response cannot be more denial but rather facing and living the dying. We will not get it out of our individual and collective systems until we live it!

you live. Alternatively, if you pull the covers up over your head and refuse the dying, you die, your life is diminished. And if you do not reverse that movement into death, your life will soon degenerate and fade away.

- When you have said or done something that causes hurt to someone you love, going humbly and honestly to that person and apologizing is a moment of dying that can beget new life. If you evade the dying you will introduce an element of death into your relationship, and when enough elements or bundles of death have been introduced into a relationship, it quite simply dies.
- When you have duties of state that you do not feel like doing, doing them, with good grace and a generous spirit, involves a certain dying. That's life! If you refuse that dying you will in fact refuse part of your life and, again, you yield a mini victory to death rather than life. In this way, death as a pathology rather than a bearer of life, gains a foothold in your life and with each mini victory to death, it becomes that much harder for us to live, except by evasions, deceptions and fictions.

We must keep asserting and reasserting, confirming and deepening our willingness to engage in this fundamental rhythm of life – embracing the dying and the possibilities being opened up by that process. Our responding is not only a “Yes” to the dying, it is a “Yes” to the formation mystery and the living that will emerge from the present moment and the unknown and unknowable future.

It is therefore a “Yes” to surrender and abandonment, a “Yes” to waiting in trust. And it is a “Yes” to grace. Through this dying we discover the truth that life is, in the end, gift. You can understand how a person becomes gracious by repeatedly surrendering generously and intelligently to this pattern. Each moment holds an invitation.

Embracing this pattern is also the ground of authentic hope. It is a movement from mastery towards mystery, from finding one's form potency conviction in ego to finding that conviction in the Great Mystery. We discover that daily dying is not an enemy but a friend, not a threat but a promise, not so much an ending but a beginning – constantly beginning.

Show me a person of depth, a person of genuine wisdom and compassion, someone who is capable of serious forgiveness, and I will show you someone who has embraced the dying generously and often. I will also show you someone engenders hope. They have won life's most significant victory through their dying. Their very being thus radiates life, freedom and possibility therefore. Show me someone, on the other hand, who is self-absorbed or mean spirited or just plain selfish and I will show you someone who has repeatedly refused the dying. They have not yet won that significant victory that comes through dying. I will show you someone who engenders despair.²¹

²¹ I suggest there is a strong link here between the amount of dying I am willing to live on a daily

Submission leads to mission

The English word “submission” gives us a clue to a very practical outcome of embracing this rhythm of dying into living. It comes from the two Latin words, *sub*, meaning “under,” and *mittere*, meaning “to send.” In the constant and generous submission to this rhythm of living, we grow into our unique mission in life. We discover at increasing death, why we are here.

In this way our whole beings assimilate a confident sense of “being sent.” We may not come to know our mission in life in any clear intellectual sense or in precise concrete details. It is, rather, a deep gut sense of *who* we are and *that* we are here for a definite purpose. Submitting to life’s paradoxical rhythm will teach us what no books or seminars can ever teach us. We will come to know in ways that are far deeper than merely rational knowing. We will also come to a deep sense of our selves as beings who participate in and manifest Being, individuals grounded in the Ground of all that is, one with the One.



basis and my capacity for peace-making. Alternatively, I suggest that there is a link between the violence human beings wreak on the world and the amount of dying they have *not* been willing to do personally. That dying does not just go away, it is carried around as death waiting to happen. Consider this in relation to ordinary human relationships – in families, amongst neighbours, in the work place and so on, as well as international relationships.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** Jesus Christ, through his dying into Life shares with us the ultimate victory whereby our daily dying leads into Life.*



Everyday dying in the light of the Paschal Mystery²²

It is helpful to remember that the Sacred Scriptures do not *impose*, they *expose*. Consider the following statements from the Scriptures – they all point back to the radical paradox of living that we have been discussing above:

*"If you want to save your life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it'."*²³

*"For those who raise themselves up will be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be raised up'."*²⁴

*"Many who are first shall be last, and the last, first'."*²⁵

*"For it is when I am weak that I am strong."*²⁶

*"When we were baptized into Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death."*²⁷

The first thing to note is that these statements – correctly understood – are *pointing*. They say “Look! Pay attention! This is the way existence actually *is* when you strip away the games and illusions and pretenses, the ‘vital lies’ and the social fictions! Most particularly, this is where the Incarnation happens, where we

²² The English word “paschal” has its roots in the Latin word “paschalis” which has its roots in the Greek word “paskha” which has its roots in the Aramaic word “pasha” which is rooted in the Hebrew word “pesah” which means “passover.” In the Catholic tradition we refer to the central mystery of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus or His “passover” – as the Paschal Mystery. For example we read in the documents of the Second Vatican Council: “He achieved his task principally by the Paschal Mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and the glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death, and rising he restored our life”. For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth “the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church”. (From *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Dec 4 1963), #5.)

²³ Matthew 16:25.

²⁴ Luke 14:11.

²⁵ Matthew 19:30.

²⁶ 2Corinthians 12:10.

²⁷ Romans 6:3.

become one with Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ in his *teaching* points to that fundamental human rhythm: Everybody, simply because they are human, must enter the dying in order to live. Jesus Christ in his *action* transforms this fundamental rhythm of existence into a paschal rhythm. By embracing that rhythm in union with him, we become what we are made to be. This is the essence of the Christian life.

Jesus is talking about what *is*. He is calling his disciples to *be* in accord with the way things *are*. That is where we are to meet him.

St Paul explains that we are reconciled through him (see 2Corinthians 5:18). We are restored to ourselves, the broken connections are healed, a radical “at-onement” has been achieved in him. We, who are made for relationships and constituted in, through and by relationships, are enabled to reach the fullness of our humanity through him, with him, in him. We now call God, “Abba!”, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We can, in the light of this, understand the distinction between Christian mysticism and Christian morality and why the mysticism must always be primary. What we *do* manifests what we *are*. We are baptized into Christ (see Romans 6:3), we cry out “Abba! Father!” because our spirit and the Holy Spirit bear united witness that we are God’s children (see Romans 8:16). Our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit allows us to be Christlike in our behaviour. This is Christian mysticism, our being in Christ. Christian moral action thus emerges from Christian mysticism. Our being in Christ becomes Christ being in the world.

The failure to give primacy to Christian mysticism – who and what we *are* – and the recurring tendency to give the primacy to Christian morality – what we must *do* – has been a severely distorting influence in the history of Christianity over the centuries. Genuine renewal in the Christian churches can only come about when there is a vigorous and well-grounded recovery of Christian mysticism in the lives of those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ.

The victory of Jesus

The Good News is that Jesus, in his body, defeats death-as-annihilation and restores death as a way into life. He defeats death-as-annihilation in the way that we defeat it daily – by embracing the truth of it and actively submitting to that truth. Thus death becomes the servant of life. In Jesus Christ the defeat – or perhaps the *transformation* – of death is definitive. St Paul recognizes this when he quotes the Prophet Hosea:

*“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting?”*²⁸

²⁸ 1Corinthians 15:54-55. Cf Hosea 13:14.

In fact, this revelation is so important to St Paul, he says nothing of the *life* of Jesus in his letters but refers constantly to the Cross and Jesus' death and resurrection. In dying Jesus has gone to the heart of reality and set existence free.

Those baptized into his death²⁹ embrace the dying in union with him, confident that each embrace is an experience of being drawn more deeply into the Eternal Love Affair we call the Trinity. Each embrace is a *being embraced* more intimately by Life. Because we are members of his body, literally death will be the end of dying rather than the end of living.

The ultimate victory is in his dying. Our dying shares in his. We can be confident that all our daily dying is a movement of liberation. This is the Good News. It is also the mystical heart of our faith – a mystical heart that is discovered progressively through our lives, in the daily dying that is our lot as human beings.

Karl Rahner brilliantly describes the everyday rhythm of our lives in the light of Christ:

Death and life are not simply two events which follow one upon another and are distinct one from the other in human existence. They interpenetrate one another. We are in process of dying all through our lives, and what we call death is the culminating point of an act of dying that extends over the whole span of life. This is why we are constantly undergoing a foretaste of that descent into death which the Lord took upon himself. Do we not sometimes feel as though an immeasurable distance lay silently between us and the things of this world, dividing us from them? Are we not slowly in process of becoming those who depart? Are we not constantly and ever-again saying goodbye? Is not that which is familiar to us changing to an ever-increasing extent into that which is alien and hostile and almost repellant? Long before the hour in which we close our eyes for the last time we are already being drawn back into the depths of the world. This descent into the poverty of our own being has already commenced, and has been in progress ever since we received our human natures, even though only in an invisible and hidden manner, at the roots of our being.³⁰

Again, Karl Rahner, highlights the theological significance and practical implications of this in relation to the celebration of the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist:

Among the central mysteries of Christian and Church life we proclaim in the Lord's Supper the death of the Lord until he comes again. We Christians, then, are really the only people who can forgo an 'opiate' in our existence or an analgesic for our lives. Christianity forbids us to reach for an analgesic in such a way that we are no longer willing to drink the chalice of the death of this

²⁹ Cf Romans 6:1-4.

³⁰ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume VII*, Herder and Herder, 149-50.

existence with Jesus Christ. And to this extent there is no doubt that in living out its Christian existence Christianity is required to say in an absolute and sober realism: yes, this existence is incomprehensible, for it passes through something incomprehensible in which all of our comprehending is taken from us. It passes through death. And it is only when this is not only said in pious platitudes, but rather is accepted in the hardness of real life – for we do not die at the end, but we die throughout the whole of life, and, as Seneca knew, our death begins at our birth – and it is only when we live out this pessimistic realism and renounce every ideology which absolutizes a particular sector of human existence and makes it an idol, it is only then that it is possible for us to allow God to give us the hope which really makes us free.³¹



³¹ Karl Rahner's "Remarks on the Christian Life" in his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, A Crossroad Book, 1978, 404.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“Rather than being some kind of propulsion toward the grave, the so-called death instinct may actually be that part of the human personality which is required for the disintegrative or falling-apart phase of the normal response to stress. The greater the stress and the more profound its impact, and the greater the demand for recovery to a higher level, the more disruptive the shock will be to the individual. There is plenty of evidence in the collective history of mankind to support such a concept. In Christian theology, the admonition to 'die in order to be born again' has been taken to mean a promise of life after death. But it can also be interpreted within the framework of each person's own evolution throughout life, so that the process of adaptation to stress, especially at life's turning points, becomes a series of deaths and rebirths on a psychological rather than a physical plane. And it is precisely when people cannot fall apart and recover, that they enter a condition in which most of their energy is spent holding themselves together in one piece, while a crippling spiritual and emotional corrosion goes on underneath.”*³²



(2) *“A man might be unconscious at the moment he is passing away. Death might take him by surprise, if what we mean by death is the instant at the end, in which the death we die all through our lives with regard to this moment is manifested. But just because we die our death in this life, because we leave permanently, because we are parting permanently, because we are looking towards the end, we are thwarted permanently; ceaselessly we break through the reality into nothingness; continually we narrow the possibilities of the freedom of life through our actual decisions and actual life until it is exhausted completely and we drive life into the straits of death; because we always experience the fathomless, we constantly reach out beyond our range into the realm of the incomprehensible where we are impotent; and because only then do we exist in a properly human manner, if we do die all through our life, therefore, that which we call death is actually the end of death, the death of death. Whether this death of death will be a second death or the killing of death and the victory of life, depends completely on us. Hence, because death is permanently present in the whole of human life, biologically and existentially, death is the act of freedom.”*³³



(3) *“How wonderfully is man's love transformed by the interior experience of this nothingness and this nowhere. He who patiently abides in this darkness will be comforted and feel again a confidence about his destiny, for gradually he will see his*

³² Frederic F. Flach, *Choices: Coping Creatively With Personal Change*, 47.

³³ Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, Herder and Herder, 1961, 92-93.

past sins healed by grace. The pain continues yet he knows it will end, for even now it grows less intense. Slowly he begins to realize that the suffering he endures is not hell at all but his purgatory."³⁴



(4) *"To see the infinite pity of this place.
The mangled limb, the devastated face,
The innocent sufferers, smiling at the rod,
A fool were tempted to deny his God;
He sees, and shrinks, but if he look again
Lo, beauty springing from the breast of pain,
He marks the sisters on the painful shores,
And even a fool is silent and adores."*³⁵



(5) *"And the peoples of the world stood, prudent and well fed, around the Russian arena where light and darkness were engaged in battle. 'Finished! Russia is finished!' they guffawed, because the prudent and well fed can never understand the invisible resurrectional forces of the Crucifixion."*³⁶



(6) *"O Lord, remember not only the men of goodwill, but also the men of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have gathered thanks to this suffering - our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this - and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."*³⁷



(7) *"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I do not do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will*

³⁴ *Cloud of Unknowing*, Image Books, 1973, Chapter 69, 137.

³⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson – After a visit to the leper colony at Kalaupapa, Molokai, 1888.

³⁶ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, Faber, 1965/1989, 415.

³⁷ Prayer found in a concentration camp after the War.

trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."³⁸



(8) *"One dark night,/ Fired with love's urgent longings/ - Ah the sheer grace! -/ I went out unseen,/ My house being now all stilled."*³⁹



(9) *"Everyone of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one that wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love. ... The secret of my (true) identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him."*⁴⁰



(10) *"My God I don't love you, and I don't even want to because I am bored with you. Perhaps I don't even believe in you. But look at me as you go by! Take shelter for a moment in my soul and set it in order with a breath, without seeming to, without saying anything to me. If you want me to believe in you bring some faith. If you want me to love you bring me some love. As for me I haven't any and there is nothing i can do about it. I can only give you what I've got, my weakness and my grief. And this tenderness that torments me and that you can surely see ... and this despair ... this maddening shame. My pain, nothing but my pain! That's all. And my hope."*⁴¹



(11) *"This 'salvation,' or saving of ourselves, which is what life is about, consists in a kind of losing. It consists in the taking up of the cross in so far as this means the denial of our egostistical selves by submitting to what really and positively is. This is always a kind of continuous death. It is a death to our own perceptions, to*

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Farrar Straus and Cudahy, 1958, 83.

³⁹ John of the Cross, "Stanzas of the Soul" from *The Dark Nigh*, trans. by K. Kavanagh & O. Rodriguez.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 27-28.

⁴¹ Marie Noel, *Notes For Myself*, trans. H. Sutton, Cornell University Press, 1968.

our own understanding of things, to our own merely private point of view, and it is a death we desperately need to die in order to live. But it is one to which we can only wisely and properly submit if we understand that the work of our saving is primarily God's work, and that in that work he will not fail us unless we insist upon making it impossible for him to succeed. It is precisely for this freedom of God's action in our lives that we have to struggle and pray everyday."⁴²



(12) *(The Australian author, Kim Mahood, writing of her own attempts to discover her "story", describes an experience that we might identify with:)* "When I finally crawled out the landscape had changed in all sorts of subtle ways, or the way I saw it had changed, which amounts to the same thing. I had encountered someone in the fault-line whom I didn't know, and whom my own particular set of myths could not accommodate. She crawled out with me, inarticulate and storyless, and although she looked at the world through my eyes, when I tried to speak for her the language was crippled and absurd, full of psychological cliché. Over the years I learned, and am still learning, to listen to her silences. If my own busy voice goes on for too long she begins to howl, a primitive psychic noise which cannot be ignored."⁴³



(13) "Poetry isn't in my words
It's in the directions I'm pointing.
If you can't understand that
And if you're appalled at the journey,
Stick to the guided tours –
They issue return tickets."⁴⁴



(14) "All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

⁴² Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1973, 102-103.

⁴³ Kim Mahood, *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Anchor, 2000, 26.

⁴⁴ Peter Hooper, "Poetry is for Peasants." Used by Colin McCahon, September 5, 1969, in reference to one of his paintings. The McCahon exhibition was at the New South Wales Art Gallery, December-January, 2003-2004.

*But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”⁴⁵*



- (16) *“Now you shall know the truth,
No matter how bleak, how black;
If the white track leads to death
Heroes will not turn back.*

*It is better to climb the ridge
And stare on chasms of air,
Or stroke from the sea-cliff’s edge
The sea’s dark strangling hair,*

*Than to run like a rat for cover
When the truth comes storming by.
Better than huddling over
The sinking coals of a lie*

*To climb to the barren peak
Where the shape of truth must show
And no man, strong or weak,
Can hide his head in the snow.”⁴⁶*



- (17) *“Can a man grow from the dead clod of failure
Some consoling flower
Something humble as a dandelion or a daisy,
Something to wear as a buttonhole in heaven?
Under the flat, flat grief of defeat maybe
Hope is a seed.
Maybe this’s what he was born for, this hour
Of hopelessness.
Maybe it is here he must search
In this hell of unfaith*

⁴⁵ The final lines from T S Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi.”

⁴⁶ Douglas Stuart, *The Fire on the Snow*. (About Scott’s expedition in the Antarctic.)

*Where no one has a purpose
Where the web of Meaning is broken threads
And no one looks at another in fear.
O God can a man find You when he lies with his face downwards
And his nose in the rubble that was his achievement?
Is the music playing behind the door of despair?
O God give us purpose.*⁴⁷



(18) *“Advent is the time for rousing. Man is shaken to the very depths, so that he may wake up to the truth of himself. The primary condition for a fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender. Man must let go of all his mistaken dreams, his conceited poses and arrogant gestures, all the pretenses with which he hopes to deceive himself and others. ... A shattering awakening; that is the necessary preliminary. Life only begins when the whole framework is shaken. There can be no proper preparation without this.”*⁴⁸



(19) *“Wherever Christianity becomes more at home, more easy to bear, wherever it becomes more liveable and ends up for many being the symbolic exaltation of what is going on anyway and of what determines the way of the world, there its messianic future is weak. Wherever it is difficult to bear, recalcitrant and thereby promises more danger than safety, more homelessness than security, there, obviously, it is closer to the reality of which Jesus spoke. Only if we remain faithful to the images of crisis will the images of promise remain faithful to us.”*⁴⁹



(20) *“I feel that no human being anywhere can answer for you those questions and feelings that deep within them have a life of their own; for even the best err in words when they are meant to mean most delicate and almost inexpressible things. But I believe nevertheless that you will not have to remain without a solution if you will hold to objects that are similar to those from which my eyes now draw refreshment. If you will cling to Nature, to the simple in Nature, to the little things that hardly anyone sees, and that can so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring; if you have this love of inconsiderable things and seek quite simply, as one who serves, to win the confidence of what seems poor: then everything will become easier, more coherent and somehow more conciliatory for you, not in your*

⁴⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, from *The Complete Poems*, The Goldsmith Press, 1987.

⁴⁸ Alfred Delp SJ, *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp*, Macmillan Company, 1966, 17.)

⁴⁹ John Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God*, 49.

intellect, perhaps, which lags marveling behind, but in your inmost consciousness, waking and cognizance. You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."⁵⁰



(21) *"The real miracle of Christ's death resides precisely in this: death, which can be experienced only as the advent of emptiness, as the dead-end of sin, as the darkness of eternal night ..., and which could be suffered, even by Christ himself, only as a state of being abandoned by God, now, through being embraced by the obedient 'yes' of the Son, while losing nothing of the horror of divine abandonment native to death, is transformed into something completely different: into the advent of God in the midst of that empty loneliness, into the manifestation of a complete, obedient surrender of the whole person to the Holy God at the very moment when the person seems lost and far removed from him.... The trinity of Faith, Hope and Charity makes death itself the highest act of believing, hoping, loving, the very death which seems to be absolute darkness, despair, coldness itself."*⁵¹

⁵⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans M D Herter Norton, W W Norton, 1962, 34-5.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, *The Theology of Death*, Herder and Herder, 1961, 78-79.

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Suggested exercises

1. Take note of the occasions this week that present themselves as *entry points* to deeper living – they are also potentially *exit points*, times when we might engage in some kind of evasive behaviour. Accompany yourself in these moments; pay close attention to what is happening in you. Note especially the little processes and strategies you use – perhaps even unconsciously – to pull back from the journey into living more deeply.

2. In the coming days, when you find yourself faced with those moments of “dying”, call to mind the presence of Jesus Christ. He did promise to be with you – unite yourself with Him in that moment, focus on Him. You could perhaps do this by using the Jesus Prayer.

