

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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## **UNIT TWO SESSION TWO: A metaphor: “structural self”**



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*Human life is rich in possible modes of forming presence. The science of formation has characterized these under four main dimensions: sociohistorical, vital, functional, and transcendent.<sup>1</sup>*



*God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. That is the first and the last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite Love. And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates a human being. He creates those human beings in such a way that they can receive this Love which is God himself, and that they can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift. And let us not forget here that ultimately we only know what 'unexacted' means when we know what personal love is, not vice versa: we do not know what love is by knowing the meaning of 'unexacted'. Thus in this second respect God must so create human beings that love does not only pour forth free and unexacted, but also so that the human person as real partner, as one who can accept or reject it, can experience and accept it as the unexacted event and wonder not owed to him or her, the real human being. As unexacted, not only because we do not deserve it as sinners, but further because we can also embrace it as unexacted when, already blessed in this love, we are allowed to forget that we were sinners once.<sup>2</sup>*



*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know.<sup>3</sup>*



*Human beings live not on bread alone.<sup>4</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality, Volume I: Fundamental Formation*, Crossroad, 1983, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace" in the author's *Theological Investigations, Volume I: God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, Darton Longman and Todd, 1961/1965, 310-311.

<sup>3</sup> Job 42:3.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:4.

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

***\* As human beings our presence in the world is always multi-dimensional.***

***\* We can employ a useful metaphor – ‘the structural self’ – highlighting the different dimensions through which we are present in the world.***



### **Human presence – a common sense view**

Consider the young married couple. Let us call them Simpson and Dalia. They are deeply in love with each other. Life is full of romance and promise. Simpson and Dalia look at each other and all is right with the world. They fall into each other's arms and enjoy the most intense physical encounters, filled with joy, excitement, tenderness, fun and deep satisfaction. They share a wonderful secret, they are quietly and confidently optimistic. They have never been so alive. They have amazing energy to do things and they set about the task of planning and developing a living arrangement that is their home.

In chapter two of Simpson and Dalia's story, Dalia becomes pregnant. The first child is on the way! Then the first child is born – let us call her Isabel. The relationship between Simpson and Dalia has now become more complex. Mingled with the great joys associated with the birth of Isabel are some significant stress factors. The way they are present to each other and other people now takes on some new and very different aspects. No longer do they think of themselves in the same way, their sleep patterns are disturbed, their priorities have changed, their freedom to go here and there has also been altered dramatically. Being together as individual adults – as husband and wife – now has a radical new factor: they are now together as parents – mother and father of a helpless, utterly dependent, new human being. They have dreams and concerns for their child, they feel a responsibility that they had not felt before, they view each other in a different manner and they are viewed by the world in a different manner.

If we examine this situation of Dalia and Simpson closely, we can discern a certain *structure* within which all human beings give and receive form in their lives:

- Firstly and most obviously there is the *bodily* dimension to our lives.<sup>5</sup>
- Secondly, there is an obvious *functional* dimension, a giving and receiving of form occurs through the *tasks* we perform.
- Thirdly, there is a more subtle and probably more complex *social/historical*

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<sup>5</sup> Adrian van Kaam refers to this as the *vital* dimension (see the epigraph). We will refer to it simply as the *bodily* dimension as that description seems to be more readily understandable.

dimension within which we give and receive form.

- Finally, there is a *transcendent* dimension that reflects a giving and receiving of form at a deeper level, where we encounter life as *possibility* and touch ‘*the more than,*’ ‘*the beyond*’ which is implicit in our concrete everyday existence.

If we were to follow Simpson and Dalia and their family through life, at least one other aspect of these dimensions would become obvious: the *trajectory* of each varies. For example:

- The *bodily* dimension typically rises to a crescendo in life’s journey, then slowly levels off and finally declines towards disintegration.
- Like the *bodily* dimension, the *functional* dimension of our lives through which we engage the world in terms of *tasks* and *jobs* to be accomplished and *problems* to be solved, also has a roughly predictable trajectory to it. We become more or less adept at tasks and problem solving of one kind or another, we maintain our proficiency in the performance of these for a time and then that proficiency declines until – if we live long enough – we become more or less dependent on others to do tasks and solve problems for us. (We might say that, typically, the movement of human existence in the bodily and functional dimensions is one from infancy to infancy, from total dependency back again to total dependency.)
- The *social* and *historical* dimension may be a little harder to track or predict. Much depends on what is actually going on in the social and historical context. At its best, however, it might be seen as a continually ascending line – albeit a bumpy one – with the relationship between the individual and the social and historical reality growing and becoming richer with time, even as we approach our end.
- The *transcendent* dimension through which we are open to ‘the more than’ and ‘the beyond’ is, like the social and historical dimension, more difficult to track. However, like the social and historical dimension, at its best, it is a line that can continue to ascend – again, with lots of bumps in it – as our relationship with ‘the more than’ and ‘the beyond,’ becomes stronger, even amidst bodily and functional decline. In fact, sometimes this dimension is liberated precisely because of bodily and functional decline.

Try drawing the trajectory of these four dimensions of your own life thus far. Make the vertical axis the axis of achievement or proficiency or quality and the horizontal axis the axis of the years of your life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, a very positive outcome of the so-called ‘mid-life crisis’ can be a deepening awareness of the more than, a more lively openness to a deeper and richer spirituality. It seems that many people in our highly functionalistic culture have to wait until they reach a point of ego

## A metaphor – ‘the structural self’

We have already developed one metaphor of the self – the forms of the self.<sup>7</sup> That metaphor speaks of the human person in terms of the different ways our lives assume form. Paradoxically, such descriptions remind us of just how mysterious and ultimately unknowable we are – the more we know the more we know we do not know.<sup>8</sup> The metaphor gives us a place to stand, as it were, from which we contemplate and respect the mystery and the unknowability of it all. It will assist us to develop a healthy wonder and awe in the face of the human. The Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel, says it well, implying also the moral implications that go with the wonder:

*The heart is often a lonely voice in the marketplace of living. Man may entertain lofty ideals and behave like the ass that, as the saying goes, ‘carries gold and eats thistles.’ The problem of the soul is how to live nobly in an animal environment; how to persuade and train the tongue and the senses to behave in agreement with the insights of the soul.*<sup>9</sup>

From that place of respect and wonder and the moral life it underpins, we can develop some more or less useful ways of thinking that facilitate our living the mystery. Hopefully the metaphor also stimulates a good conversation within yourself and with the people, events and things of your world.

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desperation before they begin to sense that their might be more to their lives than simply doing things and solving problems.

<sup>7</sup> See Unit Two, Session One.

<sup>8</sup> Again, when we use the concept of mystery we are *not* merely saying that “for the moment we cannot understand this or that.” We are saying, rather, that we are in the presence of *inexhaustible intelligibility*. This is suggested in the saying, “The more I know the more I know I do not know.” When we say, “Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved,” we are actually saying that life is inexhaustibly intelligible, that the more we understand about life the more humbled we are – or should be – by the sheer poverty of our capacity to know in contrast to the sheer immensity of that which lies before us. Every question we answer poses many more questions to be answered. In principle, it is impossible to terminate that process. The questions to be answered, in other words, expand infinitely. This suggests at least two things: Firstly that our quest for knowledge must never cease, secondly, that our quest for knowledge must be done with increasing humility. We must take off our shoes, for we are on sacred ground! Wonder and awe are signs of maturity. Deep wonder and deep awe are signs of deep maturity.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955, 297. I have found Heschel’s writings most inspiring in this regard. See for example *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, 1965. Coming from another perspective, the cultural anthropologist, Edward T Hall, writes in a similar vein in the Introduction to his fine little book, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Books, 1977): “Man is not anywhere nearly enough in awe of himself” (5). Given the connection between self-regard and regard for the other, this is not an insignificant point.

This encounter with mystery in the human presence is a pointer to our origins. We are part of the mystery that life is – what we have called the formation mystery – and, in that, manifest the Great Mystery. Like all that is, our beings point, they are evocative, always suggesting ‘the more than.’ Our beings speak of Being.

I am a question to myself. The challenge is not to *answer* that question but rather to *hear* it and let it *shape* me and *lead* me on. The question that I am, is spoken from beyond myself not by myself. Each of us is a word spoken from beyond and demanding attention. I must listen to the word that I am and so must the world. We discover our human dignity in a conversation of attentiveness. And our dignity is found in the extended conversation that emerges spontaneously in the human community when each of us is faithful to that inner conversation of attentiveness.

Each person – indeed, we could say each being – is a message from, and a messenger of, the Great Mystery beyond the mystery. Our existence demands that we all pay attention!

‘The structural self’ is a second metaphor of the human person. It too gives us a place to stand from which we can further contemplate the mystery of being human and enter the conversation within. Using this metaphor we speak of four dimensions<sup>10</sup> of the self, as already suggested above:

- bodily
- functional
- sociohistorical
- transcendent

Each of these dimensions enables us to participate in the formation mystery – in the giving and receiving of form of daily living – in a specific way. Thus we can speak of:

- bodily *impulses*,
- functional *ambitions* and
- sociohistorical *pulsations*,
- transcendent *aspirations*.

Each of these dimensions also implies a whole set of *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits*. We could diagram the metaphor as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> The person is one. The metaphor, in speaking of ‘structure’ and ‘dimensions’, seeks to uncover the richness and complexity of that oneness. The dimensions are not entities in their own right but ways of the human person being present in the world.

<i>The person is:</i>		<i>The person interacts with the formation mystery in terms of:</i>		<i>The person is defined in that interaction by specific:</i>
Bodily	→	“Impulses”	→	Needs, limits and possibilities
Functional	→	“Ambitions”	→	Needs, limits and possibilities
Sociohistorical	→	“Pulsations”	→	Needs, limits and possibilities
Transcendent	→	“Aspirations”	→	Needs, limits and possibilities

### **Person as bodily**

Suppose Simpson and Dalia give each other a hug. We say that *they* hugged each other, we do not say that their arms wrapped around each other. A hug is much more than a physical, biological reality. They are humanly present to each other in and through their bodies. Through that *bodily* dimension they are present to each other in all sorts of ways. But that presence is not as straightforward as it might seem at first blush.

This *bodily* dimension places us in the world in a particularly mysterious and ambivalent way:

- On the one hand, there is an identification with my *bodyliness* – hit my head with a hammer and you hit *me*.
- On the other hand, there is a dis-identification with my *bodyliness* – amputate my arm and *I* am not less of a person for that loss.
- Further, through my *bodyliness* I know a certain ambiguity. I am able to encounter other human beings and – in the case of Simpson and Dalia – find a certain union and unity in and through bodylines. Yet, I am, *in that very experience of unity*, aware that my *bodyliness* separates me from others. The very materiality and physicality that connects also disconnects. The union reminds me that I am alone, the oneness never loses the twoness.

In my *bodyliness* I *react* to my world of people events and things rather than *respond*. This is particularly evident if we consider Simpson and Dalia’s newborn

baby, Isabel. Isabel's bodyliness dominates her life – she will cry when in distress, start sucking when something is put in her mouth, defecate when her bowels are charged, urinate when her bladder is full, sleep when she is tired and so on. We can speak of these bodily reactions as *impulses*.

In a healthy life formation process we learn to integrate and discipline these bodily impulses, more or less. Thus, we do not expect adults to behave as the infant Isabel behaves. Given the mysterious and ambivalent nature of the bodily dimension, and its impulses which can be relentless and very demanding even overwhelming, it is not surprising that our bodyliness is problematic. As bodily, I can experience myself and my world of people, events and things as more or less pleasurable or more or less painful – sometimes both at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

The body often becomes the place where inner conflicts and tensions are manifest. For example, we can develop stomach ulcers, sad expressions, headaches, backaches, sexual impotence, addictions and so on.<sup>12</sup>

The body can also become the place where I attempt to work out a deformative relationship with my world. For example, we may develop eating disorders, obsessions with dieting and weight loss, health and fitness and body appearance, sexual promiscuity and so on.<sup>13</sup> Bodily impulses, if indulged indiscriminately, can dominate us and in the process obscure our deeper human needs and possibilities.

Perhaps the most profound and potentially troubling aspect of the bodily dimension is found in the fact that it relates us to both *living* and *dying* in a starkly immediate and palpable sort of way. Whilst the body is a dimension of my being through which I can feel very energetic, strong and alive, it is also a dimension through which I am reminded of my mortality, that my hold on existence is fragile.

My bodyliness, through its sensuousness and immediacy, can propel me into the most wonderful experience of bliss or the most dreadful experience of pain.<sup>14</sup>

What might be some of the *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits* of human presence when considered through the *bodily* dimension?

Clearly our *bodily needs* include adequate food, water and sleep. We must empty both bowel and bladder from time to time. We seem to *need* a minimum of physical movement to maintain muscle strength and blood circulation at reasonable

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<sup>11</sup> In this context it is relevant to note the phenomenon of sado-masochism. Perhaps it is this ambiguity again, where an individual finds pleasure through pain?

<sup>12</sup> And again, we rightly say, “*I have a stomach ulcer*,” or “*I am an alcoholic*.”

<sup>13</sup> Excessive pre-occupation is a sign of anxiety. The excessive pre-occupation with the body in the Western world suggests a deep anxiety about the body in Western culture. We spend inordinate amounts of time focusing on diets and exercise regimens and bodily ailments. We idolize youth and health and bodily appearance. Our Victorian grandparents hid the body in an anxious way that was unhealthy, we display the body in a way that may be just as anxious and unhealthy. And what are we to make of the current fad for “body-piercing”?

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Becker puts it bluntly in regard to sex: “Sex is of the body and the body is of death.” (Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, 1971, 162.) I thoroughly recommend this book in the context of this whole discussion.



levels.<sup>15</sup> Infants seem to *need* a certain amount of tactile care. Apart from that our perceptions of *bodily needs* may begin to vary. For example: What is the adult *need* to be touched? How much food, water and sleep do we actually need? Do we *need* to express ourselves sexually?<sup>16</sup>

Our *bodily impulses* in and of themselves are not always a safe guide either, because they may have become deformed, more or less, through excessive control or permissiveness.<sup>17</sup> Further, it may be true that, given the sociohistorical context of the Western world – a context typically of affluence, consumerism and a tendency towards instant gratification – we may become confused between *what we wish for* and *what we actually need*.

The *possibilities* available to us through the *bodily* dimension are literally tangible. We can move around, encounter people, hold and be held, enjoy food and wine and the company that goes with such things, experience the beautiful warmth of the sun, swim in the ocean, gaze at stunning views, smile, sleep and feel all sorts of wonderful feelings. In a more profound and subtle way, our bodyliness can give us access to knowledge that exceeds what mere rationality can give us.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Obviously, when the normal bodily functions do not work well or break down, some may have further bodily needs, like the need for insulin.

<sup>16</sup> In a sociohistorical context where the pulsations concerning bodyliness are deformative, it may be very difficult for us to distinguish between, on the one hand, *needs* – be they absolute or relative needs – and on the other hand personal *desires, wishes*. It is probably fair to say that within the Catholic sociohistorical context coming into the middle of last century in Australia – and probably elsewhere – the pulsations concerning bodyliness were not always formative. In fact, at times – especially with specific reference to sexuality – those pulsations were sometimes quite deformative.

<sup>17</sup> The observations of Abraham Maslow are relevant: “I had not realized that in most neuroses, and in many other disturbances as well, the inner signals become weak or disappear entirely (as in the severely obsessional person) and/or are not 'heard' or cannot be heard. At the extreme we have the experientially empty person, the zombie, one with empty insides. Recovering the self must, as a sine qua non, entail the recovery of the ability to have and to cognize these inner signals, to know what and whom one likes and dislikes, what is enjoyable and what is not, when to eat and when not to, when to sleep, when to urinate, when to rest. The experientially empty person, lacking these directives from within, these voices of the real self, must turn to outer cues for guidance, for instance eating when the clock tells him to, rather than obeying his appetite (he has none). He guides himself by clocks, rules, calendars, schedules, agenda, and by hints and cues from other people.” (Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Viking, 1971, 33)

<sup>18</sup> This is a particularly fascinating aspect of the human mystery. It is widely recognised in the great religious traditions by the emphasis on ascetical practices – for example, fasting. Asceticism is intended both to engender freedom and knowledge through a disciplined bodily presence. The word “disciplined” here means “to make disciples of.” In Sessions Four and Five of this Unit we will reflect on “The Person as Thinking”. We will consider there the move to rationalism that has tended to dominate our approach to knowledge. One of the critical needs for human beings today is to recover the body’s ability to know. Eugene Gendlin’s “focusing” is useful in this regard.

The *limits* of our bodyliness are just as tangible. We can only lift so much, run so fast, stay awake so long, see so far and hear so much and stand so much pain and appreciate so much pleasure and so on. We may be crippled, unable to eat, sleepless, arthritic, constipated, bruised, sick, in pain and feel all sorts of terrible feelings. In time our *bodyliness* bears increasing witness to our mortality until it gives way to final disintegration and returns us to the elements.<sup>19</sup>

### **Person as functional<sup>20</sup>**

Simpson and Dalia, when they get married, set about doing various *tasks* and solving problems in order to establish their home. They engage in a whole array of daily jobs – some bigger, more necessary, more difficult and more complex than others, but each requiring some sort of functional proficiency or aptitude. Some things they would be good at and some things they would not be so good at. For example, one or the other might be more competent at cooking or driving a nail into a piece of wood or sewing or keeping a budget.

This *functional* dimension is part and parcel of every one's life. It manifests itself in and through specific urges and drives we can call *ambitions*. Thus we might set ourselves to learn how to cook or touch-type or become an engineer or master a foreign language and so on. Our *functional ambitions* are carried through by application and personal effort, by developing particular strategies and following certain techniques. If we have the necessary aptitudes and commitment, we will typically master the task and get the job done.

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<sup>19</sup> The novelist, Jane Smiley has a powerful little piece in one of her stories. In *At Paradise Gate* (Washington Square Press, 1984), Clare, a more than middle aged aunt, whose husband has died, talks with Christine, her young niece who has been married for one year and is thinking of a divorce: ““You know what getting married is? It's agreeing to taking this person who right now is at the top of his form, full of hopes and ideas, feeling good, looking good, wildly interested in you because you're the same way, and sticking by him while he slowly disintegrates. And he does the same for you. You're his responsibility now and he's yours. If no one else will take care of him, you will. If everyone else rejects you, he won't”” (162).

<sup>20</sup> This “functional dimension” might be considered as roughly equivalent to what is often referred to as “ego.” There is in all of us – more or less – a “functional center” which enables us to organize our lives, get jobs done, solve problems and generally cope with the day to day tasks of living. Out of this “center” we develop – again more or less – a sense of “I can” when I am faced with the tasks of my life. We could add four particular comments with regard to “ego”: Firstly it is critical in the early development of form potency conviction (see Unit One, Session Five); secondly “ego” is ultimately an inadequate basis upon which to facilitate the fullness of life formation, for the obvious reason that there is much more to human existence than the performance of tasks and the solving of problems, important as these aspect are; thirdly, “ego” can actually become a significant obstacle to growth if it becomes *the* center of our living; fourthly, “ego” must surrender to the higher possibilities, it must be constantly challenged so that it will always assume its proper role as a relative factor in life and a servant of a higher order – in other words, the center of gravity must shift – and this is a never-ending task – from “ego” to the Great Mystery.

The *functional* dimension is central to the whole daily business of getting on with life. Among the significant *functional* tasks we must master early in life are those relating to the *bodily* dimension – for example, learning how to dress and feed and toilet oneself. Other *functional* tasks involve our participation in the *sociohistorical* realities – for example, learning the rituals and customs for social interaction.<sup>21</sup>

As we shall note further in a moment, the *functional* serves an essential role in anchoring the *transcendent*. The *functional* dimension is critical to the development of a sense of identity, self-esteem and form potency conviction – that is, developing a sense of ‘can do,’ confidence that I can participate concretely in the formation mystery, in this place at this time.<sup>22</sup>

What might be some of the *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits* of human presence when considered through the *functional* dimension?

We all seem to have a *need* to be useful, to be able to achieve some more or less worthwhile tasks. It can be very depressing when we are ill or incapacitated in some way and are thereby prevented from expressing ourselves in this *functional* way. Consider, for example, the repercussions of unemployment. One of the responsibilities of a leader in a group is to find ways in which each individual can be useful – *functional* – within the group.

The *possibilities* of the functional dimension are immense, as is indicated by the experience of the Western world over the past few centuries. Our ability, for example, to develop highly sophisticated technologies, defeat diseases, probe space, give the blind sight and clone animals, intimates something of our astonishing *functional* possibilities.

At a more mundane, personal level, this *functional* dimension can help us remain connected to the real and concrete world when, for example, depression or anxiety weigh us down and tend to force us into an isolated and dark world. Setting oneself *do-able* tasks and actually *doing* them can be a very healing thing.

The *limits* of the functional dimension are paradoxically implicit in that very same experience of the Western world in its staggering inventions and discoveries over recent centuries and especially over recent generations. We can be seduced by this functionality and forget that our presence in the world is much more than can be indicated or measured by our usefulness. Functionalism – the over prizing of the functional – is rampant in Western cultures. It leads to a certain consciousness that treats life ultimately as a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This kind of functionality that allows us to know and do what is socially appropriate is, sadly, one of the more obvious losses when we move into dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. And this can be tracked by a CT scan of the frontal lobe region of the brain.

<sup>22</sup> Recall our discussion of “Form Potency” in Unit One, Session Five.

<sup>23</sup> Cf John Thornhill, *Modernity: Christianity’s Estranged Child Reconstructed*, William B Eerdmans, 2000. The author argues that we have reduced thinking and being to the functional mode – to use our language here – and lost our ability to think and be in relationship to the metaphysical.

Functionalism very quickly has us thinking of human identity and value in utilitarian terms. This is demeaning. Functionalism – as distinct from a healthy functionality – generates *pulsations* which tend to make people feel used and therefore alienated and diminished. For example, it may turn the normal discomfort of “not being useful” into a deeply depressive experience.

### Person as sociohistorical<sup>24</sup>

Simpson and Dalia’s daughter Isabel now has a sister and a brother. Before Simpson and Dalia got married, they each belonged to a prior family. These two people who are now parents were once children of certain parents themselves. In their new arrangement – as husband and wife to each other, and parents to these three children – Simpson and Dalia will change themselves and prompt change around them. A new social reality is being formed. This group of human beings will develop its own ways of giving and receiving form. Their way of being in the world will be more or less formed by prior family experiences, by their influence on each other and by their own personal choices and by the influences of the person, events and things that become part of their life in some way.

Extend the scope of this example. Consider Simpson and Dalia and their three children, together with a number of other families, constituting a neighbourhood. Consider, further, that neighbourhood, together with other neighbourhoods, constituting a town or city. And so on. The fundamental interactions between those human beings in the human family are extended and made more complex. Together, the human beings participating in those shared formation fields, interact and shape each other both individually and corporately.<sup>25</sup>

We can say that the sharing of formation fields engenders *pulsations*. In other words, there is something new emerging between all these people. We may also use words like spirit and atmosphere and mood when we try to describe social and historical contexts. Colloquially we might speak of vibes.

What might be some of the *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits* of human presence when considered through the *sociohistorical* dimension?<sup>26</sup> What do the *pulsations* do to the shape of our lives?

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<sup>24</sup> See also Unit One, Session Six, “Tradition and Culture”.

<sup>25</sup> We must also allow for how open or closed the family is to their environment and how open or closed the environment is to the family. For example, it is one thing for say a family of aborigines to be within a wider, traditional aboriginal culture and quite another thing for that family to be isolated within a typical modern Western city. You could draw similar analogies with regard to ethnic, religious and cultural groupings.

<sup>26</sup> We need to sound a note of warning when looking at these *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits*. These are not straight forward. What seems to be a possibility might also be a limit, and vice versa; what seems to be a need, might only be a wish. Expand the possibilities and you also expand the limits. Every limit generates possibilities and every possibility generates limits. We could think in terms of a sort of ‘principle of paradox’: every blessing is a curse, every curse is a blessing.

One of the most obvious *needs* is our need to interact with people. We are group animals. Put most simply, we need each other. We cannot escape – even if we wanted to – the inherent interconnectedness of our lives. We would do well to put some of our best efforts into making sure that the inevitable interaction is life-giving rather than death-dealing. This suggests, further, that we need to be aware of the *pulsations* that are an inevitable part of that interaction.<sup>27</sup> Depending on the significance of the group for us, we will tend to carry and radiate the group’s *pulsations*. This may or may not be a good thing. For example, those *pulsations* may or may not enhance our freedom or promote human dignity and foster a life-giving environment and so on.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious *possibility* that emerges in this *sociohistorical* dimension is that of growing in and through love. We can give and receive much from each other. In a culture where people give a high priority to fostering relationships and genuinely caring for each, the *pulsations* will bear that reality. At their best, human groups support and encourage individuals to grow. They engender a sense of personal security and confidence in the members, enabling them to participate well in the wider human community. Tradition and culture can serve to ground people in a life-giving vision of human existence.

The *limits* of the *sociohistorical* dimension may be most evident when we think of the individual as individual. There will generally be some tension between the individual and the group. The *pulsations* of a given social and cultural context might prove stifling for some individuals.<sup>29</sup>

Even as the group provides a certain level of support and security, it may exact a high price on the individual’s originality. We could, for example, note the potential for “herd intoxication” as Aldous Huxley called it, or bullying, or peer group pressure or the power of ostracism and classism, and so on. Group pulsations might also generate prejudice and even hatred and violence which the individuals may then absorb without even knowing it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The movie, “As it is in heaven,” is a very interesting example of this, well worth viewing. You might also look at “Babette’s Feast” and “Tender Mercies” for different examples of the same thing.

<sup>28</sup> It might be useful to think about the pulsations that have helped to shape you in your family, neighbourhood, culture, ethnic grouping and so on. It might also be helpful to reflect on the positive and negative features of that. Further, what pulsations do you think you generate when you are with people? We could put that question another way: What social and historical baggage to you carry? Often enough we are not aware of such baggage until we bump up against some kind of conflict or contradiction.

<sup>29</sup> The current struggle for life-giving forms of community in the Western world is perhaps indicative of the limits of any sociohistorical situation. This is obvious, for example, in the Roman Catholic tradition of vowed religious today.

<sup>30</sup> We could note in passing the horrific tribal conflict and violence that has rent the continent of Africa in recent years. How do we humans grow to a point at which the humanity we share is more important than the family or tribal or ethnic or religious or cultural ties that bind us? For a helpful Christian perspective on this question, see William M Thompson, *Christ and Consciousness: Exploring Christ’s Contribution to Human Consciousness*, Paulist Press, 1977.

## Person as transcendent

Let us suppose that Simpson and Dalia discover that their now teenage daughter, Isabel, is running with the wrong crowd and taking some heavy drugs. This presents them with a serious crisis. They know from the experience of other crises in their married life that they cannot deal with these situations by simply working harder or spending more money. Their daughter, Isabel, is in deep trouble and therefore, so are they because they love her.

They must, however, respond *functionally* – there are some practical things they can do, like discovering the facts of the matter, finding out where they can get help and actually organizing that. But they must be more than merely *functional* in their response. This situation requires genuine wisdom, care, lots of waiting, vigilance, courage, trust, forgiveness and so on. Such qualities are found in higher dimension of the human capacity to be present in the world. This is not a situation that submits simply to force or mastery or control. It takes more than functional skills to deal with such complex, difficult and deep human realities. This is not merely a “problem” that has a “solution,” this is a multifaceted *human reality* that is both threat and promise, an invitation and a challenge that forces the parents up against the stark limits of human functionality.<sup>31</sup>

The crisis interrupts their taken-for-granted world. It reminds them that they do not and cannot have absolute control over their lives as a family. There are times when they must submit to what is, accept and work with the givens, unwelcome as they might be. They also discover that there is a significant element of grace in it, that ultimately what measure of real life they have is not the result of mastery but gift. They are also aware of their commitment to each other and their children and they want to be faithful to that commitment and do what must be done, be what they must be. “Can we rise to the occasion?” becomes a serious question.

This sort of experience highlights the *transcendent* dimension and the *aspirations* through which we engage the world as transcendent beings.<sup>32</sup> Whereas

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See especially Chapter VII of this book, “On the Need for a Transcultural Consciousness” (128-162).

<sup>31</sup> We could perhaps call this an experience of “ego desperation” and it will be marked – more or less – by the experience of “I cannot,” “I do not know,” “I am confused,” “I am not in charge” etc. One of the most painful parts of this “ego desperation” is the fact that we must still call on “ego” because life must go on, there are tasks that still need to be done and there are problems that still need solutions. This is the stuff of transformation if we respond intelligently and generously. See “Crises in Life Formation”, Unit Two, Session One.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of “transcendence” see Unit One, Session Seven. Rollo May notes the significance of this dimension and its relationship with the bodily dimension: “The neurobiological base for this capacity (ie transcendence) is classically described by Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein found that his brain-injured patients – chiefly soldiers with portions of the frontal cortex shot away – had specifically lost the ability to abstract, to think in terms of ‘the possible.’ They were tied to the immediate concrete situation in which they found themselves.

the *functional* dimension proceeds through its *ambitions* to endeavour to master the job and solve the problem at hand, the *transcendent* dimension proceeds through its *aspirations* to dispose us to the movements of life as gift.

It generally requires a good deal of maturity to first of all recognise when life is appealing more to the *transcendent* than the *functional* in us. It then requires further maturity to effectively give precedence to this *transcendent* dimension with its *aspirations*. A critical part of giving precedence to the *transcendent* dimension is an ability to mobilise the *functional* dimension in service of the *transcendent aspirations*.<sup>33</sup>

Our Western cultural pulsations tend to push us into the *functional* whenever our taken-for-granted worlds are interrupted. We immediately look for something to *do* and forget that the most important thing, in some circumstances at least, is that we choose an attitude and a way of *being*.<sup>34</sup> Our Western cultural *pulsations* do not

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When their closets happened to be in disarray, they were thrown into profound anxiety and disordered behavior. They exhibited compulsive orderliness – which is a way of holding one's self at every moment rigidly to the concrete situation. When asked to write their names on a sheet of paper, they would typically write in the very corner, any venture out from the specific boundaries of the edges of the paper representing too great a threat. It was as though they were threatened with dissolution of the self unless they remained related at every moment to the immediate situation, as though they could 'be a self' only as the self was bound to the concrete items in space. Goldstein holds that the distinctive capacity of the normal human being is precisely this capacity to abstract, to use symbols, to orient one's self beyond the immediate limits of the given time and space, to think in terms of 'the possible.' The injured, or 'ill,' patients were characterized by loss of range of possibility. Their world-space was shrunk, their time curtailed, and they suffered a consequent radical loss of freedom." (Rollo May, "Contributions of Existential Psychotherapy" in Rollo May, Ernest Angel & Henri F Ellenberger, eds, *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, A Touchstone Book, 1958, 74-75.)

<sup>33</sup> The place of asceticism in the religious traditions of the world can be understood in this light. We set up structures, engage in rituals, commit ourselves to regular practices etc, in order to dispose ourselves to the workings of grace. Human beings being human, however, frequently slip into making these practices ends in themselves. Thus the functional replaces the transcendent and religion is easily reduced to an ideology or merely human system. Closer examination of this deformation will probably reveal that the underlying dynamic is anxiety and the functional dimension – immediately, concretely, quantifiably and practically focused as it is – promises to allay our anxiety. This is hardly the stuff of authentic religion.

<sup>34</sup> "T.S. Eliot once said, there are two types of problems we face in life. In one case, the appropriate question is, what are we going to do about it? In the other case, the only fitting question is, how do we behave toward it? The deeper problems in life are of the latter kind. In the helping professions, the dividing line between these two questions falls roughly between the more glamorous systems of cure and the humbler action of care. But unfortunately, as Americans (given philosophically to pragmatism and culturally to technology) and especially as Americans in those professions that get tinged with a messianic pretension, we are used to tackling problems in terms of the first question; and we are bereft when that question is inappropriate to the crisis. If all we can say is, what are we going to do about it?--then dying indeed (and our own death as well) is even more intensively a blow to professional self-esteem. But this is not the only question we need to ask. The question remains as to our mode of behavior toward an event which

know much about the *transcendent* dimension and the significance of *aspirations*.

One of the signs of human maturity is a thorough integration of the *transcendent* dimension in my life. If the life formation process has been truly formative for me, the *functional* dimension with its *ambitions* will be a more or less significant but *relative* part of my presence in the world. Primary to that presence will be the *transcendent* dimension with its *aspirations*. When addressing the major issues of my life situation I will give my *aspirations* the final say, not my bodily impulses, or the sociohistorical pulsations or the functional ambitions.

What might be some of the *needs*, *possibilities* and *limits* of human presence when considered through the *transcendent* dimension?

As a *transcendent* being, my *needs* are profound and subtle. I need to feel connected to ‘the more than,’ to know that I am part of something bigger. I can never satisfy my deepest *needs* as a *transcendent* being simply through the *sociohistorical* and/or the *bodily* and/or the *functional* dimensions. Even when all is quite well taken care of in those dimensions, I will still feel restless, urged to search and look for something ‘more.’<sup>35</sup>

Yet the *needs* of the *transcendent* dimension are normally not felt with quite the same urgency or immediacy as the *needs* of the other dimensions – especially the *bodily* dimension. In fact, we can ignore the *transcendent needs* and seemingly live a normal life.<sup>36</sup> However, it often happens that the *transcendent* dimension asserts itself through a crisis, especially towards the middle of one’s life.

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that behavior admittedly will not successfully dissolve. In extremity, it may not be possible to do something about a tragedy, but this inability need not altogether disable us humanly before it. Members of the helping professions belong to a network of care and not simply to an apparatus for cure.” (William F. May, “The Sacred Power of Death in Contemporary Experience”, in Alien Mack (Ed.), *Death in American Experience*, New York, Schocken, 1973, pp.120-121)

<sup>35</sup> Walker Percy captures this truth well: “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?” (Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor” in *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, 4). See also the other references in Unit One, Sessions One and Two. The psychiatrist, Jan van den Berg, gave a lecture at Duquesne University in 1979, in which he remarked that, typically, his clients today suffered from “repressed transcendence.” I think Carl Jung would have agreed with him. In a highly functionalistic culture, it is not surprising that the transcendent dimension is variously suppressed and repressed, if for no other reason than the fact that it demands submission and surrender to something “Other.” Functionalism promises mastery and control and submission is a scandal or a prospect too frightening to countenance.

<sup>36</sup> “But in spite of the fact that a man has become fantastic in this fashion, he may nevertheless (although most commonly it becomes manifest) be perfectly well able to live on, to be a man, as it seems, to occupy himself with temporal things, get married, beget children, win honor and esteem - and perhaps no one notices that in a deeper sense he lacks a self. About such a thing as that not much a fuss is made in the world; for a self is a thing the world is least apt to inquire about, and the thing of all things the most dangerous for a man to let people know that he has it. The greatest danger, that of losing one’s own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed.” (Søren



There is no telling the *possibilities* that lie before me as a *transcendent* being. But, unlike the *ambitions* of the *functional* dimension, the *aspirations* of the *transcendent* dimension do not allow direct action calculated to gain some sort of mastery and control. The fulfilment of *ambitions* is more or less within my control, the fulfilment of *aspirations* is not at all within my control. The fulfilment of aspirations is gift. I can make choices and facilitate possibilities and open myself to the fulfilment of the *aspirations*, but then I must simply wait. *Aspirations* only allow *facilitative* action and require us to wait – in energetic receptivity, hopeful vigilance and humble openness. The *possibilities* then available to us in this dimension are the highest human *possibilities* – freedom and grace, wisdom and compassion, mercy and care, patience and forgiveness, courage and fidelity and so on. These are the qualities of the deeply human life, people with these qualities tend to be gracious and free people.

The *limits* of the *transcendent* dimension, as you might expect, parallel the *possibilities*. The *transcendent aspirations* will speak to us of things beyond our grasp and intimate realities no eye has seen nor ear heard. Thus the deepest longings of my being can cause me to overreach myself, idealizing myself and perhaps others.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, transcendence – albeit perverted – can also drive such human travesties as greed and violence, masochism and addictions of one kind or another. The *transcendent* dimension must be kept in tension with the other three dimensions – which are much more mundane and promise much more meagre rewards.<sup>38</sup>

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Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, Walter Lowrie trans, Princeton University Press, 1975, 165).

<sup>37</sup> The classic myth of Daedalus and Icarus typifies this limit inherent in the possibility. In our own Christian tradition the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall could be understood in the same way. Adam and Eve, according to the story, are seduced by the prospect of becoming “gods”. In ancient Greece, over the temple of Apollo in Delphi, the words, “Know Yourself”, were inscribed. The message was that human beings should constantly be alert to who they are lest they suffer *hubris* (pride) and begin to think they are like the gods and thus plunge themselves – and perhaps those around them – into tragedy.

<sup>38</sup> Whilst the danger of our culture is to suppress the *transcendent* dimension and slip away into functionalism and rationalism, the danger of another time, perhaps, in Catholicism, was to pay too little attention to the *functional* and *bodily needs* of people – especially in novitiates and seminaries – and artificially promote the *transcendent* dimension. This was not helpful to the overall formation of the individual, frequently leaving many with a sense of regret about what might have been or occasioning illnesses through neglect of rest and recreation and relationships.

We might also consider the possibility that, amidst our contemporary fascination with functionalism and rationalism, there is an emerging cry for the transcendent. The so-called “New Age” phenomenon might be understood in this way. And this of course raises a most serious question for our culture: Are we equipped to handle this emerging cry for transcendence? Indeed, are the Christian Churches equipped to respond to this cry?

## CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

*\* Through the Incarnation God has entered completely into all the dimensions of human presence and enhanced the possibilities available to human beings in and through those dimensions.*

*\* Christian virtue is never the object of mastery but the emergence of grace in our lives, and is therefore primarily the outcome of transcendent aspiration and only secondarily the outcome of functional ambition.*

*\* Human beings have a natural openness to the liberating love of God.*



### The enfleshing of God's liberating love

The Incarnation – or enfleshing of God – can never be fully understood by us. We must always remember that, no matter how we talk of it, our language about God and God's actions, at best, gives us a place to stand in silent awe while we look towards the far horizon, beyond which is the Essence of the Great Mystery. Yet divine revelation speaks of a God who was made flesh: the Great Mystery has come among us as one like us.<sup>39</sup> This is presented as an act of infinite love that breaks the ultimate bonds that would otherwise prevent us from coming to be what we are made to be.

We believe that Jesus is a human being in all the dimensions of humanness. We meet Jesus in and through those dimensions and are liberated in them and through them. He experienced fully a *bodily* presence with all the *impulses* associated with that; he experienced fully a *functional* presence with the *ambitions* associated with that; he experienced fully the *sociohistorical* presence in the world with the *pulsations* peculiar to his society and its historical moment associated with that; he experienced fully a *transcendent* presence with the *aspirations* associated with that.

### The bodily and sociocultural dimensions

In the Catholic tradition and culture there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, like so many others in the human family, we too find the bodily dimension problematic.

Two of the earliest heresies in the Church are associated with bodyliness. The first was called *enkratism*. In this heresy anything pleasurable – particularly bodily pleasures – were regarded as evil and therefore to be shunned. The second was

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<sup>39</sup> Cf For example John 1:14. The whole of the Gospels tell this story of God become flesh – the Transcendent One is also the Immanent One. Nowhere is it more starkly put than in St Paul: “The sinless one became sin” (2Corinthians 5:21).

called *docetism*, and pertained specifically to Christology. The word comes from the Greek word *dokeo* meaning *to appear* – it was alleged that Jesus only *appeared* to be *bodily* in the same way as us. It is probably true to say that the Church has never been entirely free of either of these heresies.<sup>40</sup>

The sociocultural reality of Catholicism in particular, and probably Christianity in general, was imbued with a negative attitude to the body. St Augustine, strongly influenced by Manichean teachings in his early adulthood, had an immense impact on the development of the Christian tradition.

On the other hand, within the Catholic tradition and culture there is a strong appreciation for the place of the *bodily* dimension in prayer and worship. Liturgical ritual involves the bodily dimension through posture and movement and the active engagement of the senses. Catholicism has generally proved itself very adept at appealing to the sensuous in us – with sight, sound, touch, taste and smell more or less satisfied. Perhaps this is not so much the case with contemporary liturgy. We could say that this appeal to the senses generated tangible *pulsations* within the community at worship.<sup>41</sup>

There is also a fine tradition within Christianity of the corporal works of mercy. This refers to the care for the broken Body of Christ in its members. Practically, this comes down to tending the needs of the poor, the sick, the frail and those who are unable to fend for themselves. The so-called “last judgment scene,” described by Matthew at the end of his Gospel, has been a motivating force for this (see Matthew 25:31-46).

## **The functional and transcendent dimensions**

On a very practical level, within the Catholic tradition much has been done and accomplished, especially in the fields of education and health care. Very high aspirations have been fostered. However, we have also tended to be seduced by the *functional* dimension, giving precedence to doing over being, functional ambitions over transcendent aspirations.

Already at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the forerunner to this tendency had begun to emerge. It was called *Pelagianism* – after the monk Pelagius – and it gave an inappropriate efficacy to personal effort, based on a belief in the uprightness and goodness of human nature, that omitted original sin and gave too little room for grace. We could say that Pelagianism overprized human effort and underprized God’s action in the work of our liberation.

Coming into the middle of the last century, this sort of thinking tended to

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<sup>40</sup> Note how the word “moral” had become – at least until recent times – almost synonymous with “sexual.” So much moral theology focused on sexuality. One could ask whether this pre-occupation might be in some measure responsible for the strong backlash against the Church’s teaching on sexual matters today.

<sup>41</sup> The Catholic tradition seems to manifest this engagement with the sensual much more than say the strict Protestant traditions. Consider the film, *Babette’s Feast*.

dominate the spiritual theology of the Catholic tradition. Put in terms of the metaphor we have been using, the acquisition of virtue was primarily a matter of functional ambition rather than transcendent aspiration. As part of this approach we had the “grocery list confessions” with the gentle but frequently fruitless advice of confessors to “keep trying,” and the “try harder sermons” which emphasized doing over being, human effort over grace. The central importance of Covenant and communion and community tended to be lost in this sort of “spiritual functionalism.” It both manifested and promoted moralism rather than the mysticism that is the living heart of the Christian faith.

This frequently led people to a sense of impotence with regard to their own ability to follow the Gospel way. It also kept many in an infantile state with respect to their religious commitment, unwilling and or unable to freely choose their way of living the Gospel. Worst of all, it badly misrepresented the person and teaching of Jesus – functionalism and moralism, for example, can have no idea of what the parable of the prodigal son is all about.

Goodness and truth are, in the end, a matter of *grace*. Whenever I am compassionate or forgiving or merciful and so on, I am the recipient and instrument of God’s grace. That is, God is present and active in and through me and is manifest in these qualities I call compassion, forgiveness, mercy and so on. Yes, I am responsible to freely live in such a way that my being and doing facilitates the advent of God. But we are talking about facilitation not mastery, aspiration not ambition. Perhaps a sign that we are seeking goodness and truth in a functionalistic way is that we feel *satisfied* when we catch ourselves being virtuous. On the other hand, perhaps a sign that we are seeking goodness and truth as grace is that we feel *grateful* whenever they are manifest in our lives.

## **Nature and grace**

In the epigraph to these notes, Karl Rahner represents the authentic tradition when he says that God “creates those human beings in such a way that they can receive this Love which is God himself.” In this positive view of human nature, stressing a continuity between “fallen” humanity and “saved” humanity,” grace finds in that nature the potential for transformation. The Christian life then becomes a matter of grace and freedom combining to transform nature. This is the basis for spirituality.

If, however, we believe that human nature is unable to receive God’s love, stressing *discontinuity* between “fallen” humanity and “saved” humanity, grace finds no potential in that nature for transformation. Nature must therefore be left behind or covered up, as it were. Even though we are saved by the action of God in Christ, our nature – according to this view – remains essentially untouched, still “evil.”<sup>42</sup> The Christian life, therefore – in this view – is a matter of predestination. There is no room for the ongoing transformation of nature through our free

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<sup>42</sup> Luther represents something of this when he uses snow on a dung heap to describe atoning grace in the life of the human person.

cooperation with grace. There is no basis for spirituality in this theological view of grace and nature. Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, when writing on prayer, sums it up nicely:

*“So it is that these explorations of the mystery of prayer are in various ways explorations of the riches and resources of the human. Even the ‘dark companions’ of human life, companions such as pain and death, are seen as horizons of man’s destiny and possibilities. One can accept that men and women are born under the shadow of what is called ‘original sin’ without denying or questioning the goodness and greatness of the human in all its energies and dimensions. The heart of man is troubled and the mind of man confused, not because of what he lacks but because of what he has; it is the New Man within him seeking to be horn that troubles him. Most Reform theologies and most contemporary Catholic theologies tend to see the New Man as discontinuous with natural, ‘fallen’ man. Again I see this attitude as destructive of the human and ultimately of the divine: it leaves us with a fantasy God playing with a fantasy man. Like all fantasy figures these are supremely manageable, and the theologian lives a beautifully insulated existence as a theologian. He pitches his tent comfortably at the foot of the Mountain and regales the would-be climber with ‘tales of the unknown’ as a substitute for the great adventure that calls him to the holy heights.”<sup>43</sup>*



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<sup>43</sup> Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *The Holy Mountain: Approaches to the Mystery of Prayer*, Michael Glazier, 1983, 11.

## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“The capacity of the normal human being to transcend the present situation is exemplified in all kinds of behavior. One is the capacity to transcend the limits of the present moment in time ... and to bring the distant past and the long-term future into one’s immediate existence. It is also exemplified in the human being’s unique capacity to think and talk in symbols. Reason and the use of symbols are rooted in the capacity to stand outside the particular object or sound at hand ... and agreeing with each other that these will stand for a whole class of objects. The capacity is particularly shown in social relationships, in the normal person’s relation to the community. Indeed, the whole fabric of trust and responsibility in human relations, presupposes the capacity of the individual to “see himself as others see him,” as Robert Burns puts it in contrasting himself with the field mouse, to see himself as the one fulfilling his fellow men’s expectations, acting for their welfare or failing to. Just as this capacity for transcending the situation is impaired with respect to the Umwelt in the brain-injured, it is impaired with respect to the Mitwelt in the psychopathic disorders which are described as the disorders of those in whom the capacity to see themselves as others see them is absent or does not carry sufficient weight, who are then said to lack “conscience.” The term “conscience,” significantly enough, is in many languages the same word as consciousness, both meaning “to know with.” Nietzsche remarked, “Man is the animal that can make promises.” By this he ... meant that man can be aware of the fact that he has given his word, can see himself as the one who makes the agreement. Thus, to make promises presupposes conscious self-relatedness and is a very different thing from simple conditioned “social behavior,” acting in terms of the requirement of the group or herd or hive. In the same light, Sartre writes that dishonesty is a uniquely human form of behavior: “the lie is a behavior of transcendence.”<sup>44</sup>*



(2) *“Behind all these labors was another question, one of great personal importance for him: What did it mean to be a monk, a contemplative in the twentieth century? In a way his whole twenty seven years at Gethsemani had been an attempt to find the answer to this problem, and as the years stripped away the obvious answers and comforting illusions he felt he was left with little but his humanity. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his Nazi prison, he began to see that the highest spiritual development was to be “ordinary”, to be fully a man, in a way few human beings succeed in becoming simply and naturally themselves. He began to see the monk, not as he had believed in youth, as someone special, undertaking*

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<sup>44</sup> Rollo May, “Contributions of Existential Psychotherapy” in Rollo May, Ernest Angel & Henri F Ellenberger, eds, *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, A Touchstone Book, 1958, 75.

feats of incredible ascetic heroism for the love of God, but as one who was not afraid to be simply “man”, who, as he lived near to nature and his appetites, was the “measure” of what others might be if society did not distort them with greed or ambition or lust or desperate want.”<sup>45</sup>



(3) “Anyone who accepts his existence, that is, his humanity – no easy thing – in quiet patience, or better, in faith, hope and love ... Anyone who accepts his own humanity in full – and how immeasurably hard that is, how doubtful whether we really do it! – has accepted the Son of Man, because God has accepted man in him.”<sup>46</sup>



(4) “The basic and ultimate thrust of Christian life consists not so much in the fact that a Christian is a special instance of mankind in general, but rather in the fact that a Christian is simply man as he is. But he is a person who accepts without reservations the whole of concrete human life, with all its adventures, its absurdities and its incomprehensibilities. A real non-Christian on the other hand, a person who could not even be called an “anonymous Christian” in the ultimate depths of the way he lives out human existence, is characterised precisely by the fact that he does not muster this unconditional acceptance of human existence. In the concrete a Christian is a person who is distinguished in a great variety of ways from a non-Christian: he is baptised, he receives sacraments, he belongs to a very definite organisation, he receives norms from this organisation, he has to acquiesce calmly in a certain lifestyle with the same kind of patience with which he confronts, the uncontrollable givens in the other areas of his life. The really ultimate thing is that he accepts himself just as he is, and does this without making anything an idol, without leaving anything out, and without closing himself to the totality of what in the ultimate depths of reality is inescapably imposed upon man as his task”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, Collins, 1980, xviii.

<sup>46</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume 4*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, Seabury Press, A Crossroad Book, 1978, 402. Cf. also J.H. Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*: “My first elementary lesson of duty is that of resignation to the laws of nature, whatever they are; my first disobedience is to be impatient at what I am, and to indulge an ambitious aspiration after what I cannot be, to cherish a distrust of my powers, and to desire to change laws which are identical with myself” (272-3). Quoted by W. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 5. See Lynch for a very insightful treatment of the incarnational dimension of Christian spirituality as studied in the light of contemporary literature.

## Suggestions for further study

- Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber and Faber, 1988/1991.
- Cinema  
*As it is in heaven*  
*Babette's feast*  
*Tender mercies*.
- Duffy, Eamon, "When Belief Fails" in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume II*, 128-32.
- Fitzgerald, Constance "Impasse and Dark Night" in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 122-34.
- Goetz, Joseph, et al, *A Christian Anthropology*, Abbey Press, 1974.
- Kraft, William, *Normal Modes of Madness: Hurdles in the Path to Growth*, Alba House, 1978.
- McGinn, Bernard, ed, *Three Treatises on Man: A Cistercian Anthropology*, Cistercian Publications, 1977.
- McGinn, Bernard, John Meyendorff & Jean Leclercq, eds, *Christian Spirituality, (Volume 16 of World Spirituality): Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Crossroad, 1985 – especially Chapter 5: "Monasticism and Asceticism".
- Moltman-Wendel, Elizabeth, *I am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment*, SCM Press, 1994.
- Squire, Aelred, "The Emancipation of Bodies" in the author's *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1973, 51-66.
- Van Kaam, Adrian, *Formative Spirituality, Volume I: Fundamental Formation*, Crossroad, 1983, - especially Chapter 5





## Suggested exercises

1. What are the *sociohistorical pulsations* of your world? This week, listen for example for the *pulsations* that define what “success” is, what it means to be “human”, what is “quality of life”, what “matters” and so on. To what extent have you been shaped by those pulsations?
2. When you catch yourself being virtuous this week, listen for your spontaneous reaction – is your primary reaction one of satisfaction or gratitude? Just note it. Become aware, honestly, compassionately. A primary reaction of satisfaction might suggest you have reduced virtue to functional ambition and therefore an ego project. A primary reaction of gratitude might suggest the virtues are experienced by you as gift, as grace, something happening through you rather than by you.
3. Which tend to dominate your life – *aspirations?* – *ambitions?* – *impulses?* – *pulsations?* Reflect on the implications for your being a Christian.

