

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT TWO **SESSION FIVE:** **The person as thinking II**



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(Formative thinking is) an experiential, open style of thinking characteristic of the human person as openness to transcendent formation. Dwelling reverently on familiar formative events, it discloses the transcendent and pneumatic meanings they conceal. This gentle formative presence makes human life available to the transforming created and uncreated powers that pervade the universe, humanity, history and one's interiority. Engagement in formative thinking fosters personal transformation. The intra-formative relation between formative thinking and informative thinking is the servant-master relationship. Formative thinking as the gentle master of unfolding life reveres – in relaxed detachment – the services logical and practical thinking should render to the functional incarnation in life and world of the inspirations and aspirations formative thinking gathers in its indwelling in the formative events it encounters.¹



Knowing is not due to coming upon something, naming and explaining it. Knowing is due to something forcing itself upon us. Thought is a response to being rather than an invention. The world does not lie prostrate, waiting to be given order and coherence by the generosity of the human mind. Things are evocative. When conceits are silent and all words stand still, the world speaks. We must burn the clichés to clear the air for hearing. Conceptual clichés are counterfeit; preconceived notions are misfits. Knowledge involves love, care for the things we seek to know, longing, being-drawn-to, being overwhelmed.²



O Lord you have searched me and you have known me.³



I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.⁴



¹ Adrian van Kaam, “Glossary,” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, I, 1 (Feb 1980), 153. NOTE: Van Kaam speaks of the “pneumatic,” with its “inspirations,” as a sub-set of the “transcendent” with its “aspirations.” The “pneumatic” implies “graced transcendence,” the workings of the Holy Spirit within the natural human potential. See the metaphor of the “Structural Self” – Unit Two, Session Two.

² Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, 1965, 109.

³ Psalm 139:1. Compare this idea – that God *knows me* – with the idea in Psalm 46:10 (“Be still and know that I am God.”) – that I *know God*. This is another way of expressing the Covenant.

⁴ John 10:14.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** All human life formation is typically enhanced by an integrated style of thinking that is both formative and informative, transcendent and functional.***

**** Some people have a greater potential for the formative and transcendent way of thinking, others for the informative and functional way of thinking or both.***

**** While the integration of the formative and transcendent and the informative and functional ways of thinking should be promoted in the individual, the full integration of these two ways will typically be achieved only through community.***



The topic so far

In the first part of our reflections on “the person as thinking,”⁵ we endeavored to simply open up the topic. We reflected briefly on the complexities of the person as thinking and noted the Enlightenment as a significant moment in the history of the human family – particularly in the West – a moment when a whole new way of thinking began to take hold. We also noted the ambivalence of the Enlightenment thinking that has come to dominate our culture. It is a style of thinking, closely related to the empirical scientific method, that tends to reduce all thinking to rationality and functionality.

While this sort of thinking has its own validity and has given us many fascinating and useful inventions and marvelous technological and mechanical things, as well as social and political benefits, it does tend to omit – even resist? – any serious attempts to be open to mystery, to the transcendent and the deeper complexities and aspirations of the human person. The rationalistic and functionalistic style of thinking inevitably tends to approach the world as a series of problems to be solved. Rationalistic and functionalistic thinking does not have the capacity to address the ultimate and deepest issues of human life formation because these issues have more the nature of mysteries to be lived rather than problems to be solved, they are not things to be mastered but events that demand a journey on our part.

When the rationalistic way encounters mystery in life – for example, the mystery of love, of evil, of death, of God – it tends to do one of two things. It either dismisses it or reduces it to comprehensible proportions, proportions that can be encompassed by the rational mind. Either way, the essential mystery – and therefore the reality – is lost. The result of the pre-occupation with rationality and functionality tends to be an impaired relationship with reality. We must suspect

⁵ See Unit Two, Session Four.

that the ultimate agenda with this reduced style of thinking has more to do with power and control than with becoming more engaged with what is actually true and real and good. And because it is about power and control, its driving force is likely to be anxiety rather than the desire to be who and what I am made to be.

Among those who have suggested there is something important missing from the way we think, we will briefly note five:

1. John Polkinghorne
2. T S Eliot;
3. Michael Polanyi;
4. Martin Heidegger;
5. R D Laing

1. John Polkinghorne

John Polkinghorne has had a long career as a particle physicist.⁶ He relates a personal experience which is revealing. It is worth quoting at length:

A little while ago I was idly watching Australian television when a long interview by satellite with the geneticist Richard Dawkins appeared on the screen. The first half hour or so of the programme was devoted to a fluent exposition of Professor Dawkins' well known bleak views of the meaningless character of terrestrial and cosmic history, which he sees as a concatenation of inane events whose only connecting thread is the propagation and survival of limited structure-carrying systems such as genes. In the closing minutes of the interview, however, the character of the conversation underwent a startling change. Dawkins explained that, though he might have sounded like an austere and somewhat desiccated character, he was in fact a warm person in whose life the experiences of human affection and scientific wonder played vital roles. He also called on us to transcend the narrow motivations of the selfish genes and to repudiate those notions of eugenics or racism that might have seemed to follow from a policy of genetic survival at all costs.

I do not doubt for a moment the authenticity of these closing remarks. A fully alive and responsible human being could hardly say less. Yet I longed for the interviewer to inquire where these humane and moral encounters found their lodging in the empty world, devoid of meaning, which the speaker had been describing. Richard Dawkins is celebrated as being the apostle of an extreme and unrelenting material reductionism. In theory, for him science must be enough, because there is no other reliable form of knowledge to be had. The richness of experience and insight that makes human life worth living is, in his official view, reduced to epiphenomenal triviality.

⁶ See John Polkinghorne, *Beyond Science: The Wider Human Context*, Cambridge University Press, 1996/1998, xi.

We are entitled to require a consistency between what people write in their studies and the way in which they live their lives. I submit that no-one lives as if science were enough. Our account of the world must be rich enough – have a thick enough texture and a sufficiently generous rationality – to contain the total spectrum of human meeting with reality. The procrustean oversimplification of a fundamentalist reductionism will not begin to suffice. In fact, it cannot even embrace the practice of science itself, which calls for judgements of value (we seek elegant and economic theories) and whose chief reward is the experience of wonder at the rational beauty of the physical world. The discoveries of science place in our hands an enhanced power to do good or ill, and scientists have to participate in the human search for insight in order to act wisely and to avoid harm. The deliverances of science constrain our metaphysical understandings but they do not determine them. There is much else that must also be taken into account. The context of science is the human context; it is an activity of persons, involving unspecifiable powers of creative imagination. Science by itself is not enough even to describe the pursuit of science itself.⁷

2. T S Eliot

In 1934 T S Eliot wrote:

*Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information.⁸*

Eliot is perhaps most famous for his 1922 poem, *The Wasteland*. There he explores timeless themes of moral achievement and moral dissipation that transcend the situation of any particular culture. But he is also aware of something peculiar to the 20th century – especially in the wake of the First World War. There is a loss of connection with reality, a fragmentation, especially manifest in the new metropolises and their suburbia.

He pursues something of the same theme in these lines from the “Choruses,” cited above. Eliot suggests a distinction between “wisdom” and “knowledge.” It is possible to be very knowledgeable but lack wisdom. This observation is perhaps even more relevant to us now since we have access to enormous amounts of data. That access to data might lull us into thinking that we are actually knowledgeable.

⁷ John Polkinghorne, op cit, 9-10.

⁸ T S Eliot, “Choruses” from *The Rock*, Lines 14-16, in *T S Eliot: Selected Poems*, Faber & Faber, 1975, p.107. Martin Luther King’s comment is also pertinent though more prosaic: “The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live. Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.” (*Strength To Love*, Fount Paperbacks, 1989, 74.)

Further, it might even have us thinking we are wise or at least ignoring the question of whether we are wise or not or whether wisdom actually matters. The truth of the matter is that the great mass of data never becomes true knowledge, let alone wisdom, for any of us. Google is a remarkable source of data which we may turn into knowledge, which knowledge may eventually help us to be wise. But that remains a mere possibility unless it is actively and effectively pursued.

A distinction may be helpful. We could distinguish between “intellectual ability” and “intelligence.” If we were to think of “intellectual ability” as the ability to comprehend the order and pattern in things and organise and analyse data and information, and “intelligence” as the ability to apprehend what is real, we can understand a little better what Eliot seems to be saying. It is possible, if we follow such a distinction, to be “intellectually gifted” – and this may earn us a positive reputation amongst our peers – but be “unintelligent” – and this may go entirely unnoticed by our peers.

Thus the professor, brilliant in his or her sphere, may actually be less intelligent than the unlettered old farmer who has learned much about what is real from the ways of nature over the years, or the desert aborigine who has never darkened the doorstep of a school room. Wisdom is more a matter of intelligence than intellectual ability.

3. Michael Polanyi

In 1951-52 Michael Polanyi gave a series of lectures in which he brilliantly exposed the blatant bias of much so-called “objective” and “detached” scientific thinking.⁹ In the Preface to the book which is based on those lectures, Polanyi notes:

I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this false ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by scientists.

⁹ Cf Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, 1962. This book is based on the author’s Gifford Lectures. It is worth noting that Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*, was first staged in Paris in 1953. Beckett’s play marked the beginning of what has become known as “theatre of the absurd.” In this genre, plays defy the normal expectations of coherently developed situations, characterizations that are rooted in a predictable logic of human behavior and motivation and communications between the players that are logical and rational. This genre can be seen as both a rebellion against the rationalistic mode and a statement about the validity of ways of knowing that are *transrational*, even *non-rational*. Such ways of knowing may appear to those who are accustomed to an exclusively rationalistic way as *irrational* or *sub-rational*, and therefore to be rejected as unworthy of the adult human being. Note also the tough social realism in the genre ushered in by Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. There is an implicit rejection of much of the confident and idealized social thinking that had characterized Western societies to that point. We might see in some of these early post-war years, intimations of what we have come to call “post-modern thinking.” Post-modern thinking is, in part, a rebellion against the confident and at times arrogant rationalism of the Enlightenment. Post-modernism’s greatest gift to us may be its refusal to go on accepting the conceits of rationalistic thinking.

*But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science.*¹⁰

The “personal knowledge” which Polanyi went on to propose, encompasses human experience as well as rationality, it assumes connectedness and bespeaks openness and relatedness as integral to the thinking processes. Polanyi gives to human beings, in their capacity to express themselves by thinking, both a wonderful and a humble role:

*So far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in man are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the strivings of a myriad centres that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us up to this point. They are all akin to us. For all these centers – those which led up to our own existence and the far more numerous others which produced different lines of which many are extinct – may be seen engaged in the same endeavour towards ultimate liberation. We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own towards an unthinkable consummation. And that is also, I believe, how a Christian is placed when worshipping God.*¹¹

Polanyi observes: “Our attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.”¹² Another author notes similarly:

The concept of scientific objectivity rests upon the assumption of an external world which is ‘out there’ as opposed to an ‘I’ which is ‘in here.’ (This way of perceiving, which puts other people ‘out there,’ makes it very lonely ‘in here.’) According to this view, Nature, in all her diversity, is ‘out there.’ The task of the scientist is to observe the ‘out there’ as objectively as possible. To observe something objectively means to see it as it would appear to an observer who has no prejudices about what he observes. The problem that went unnoticed for three centuries is that a person who carries such an attitude certainly is prejudiced. His prejudice is to be ‘objective,’ that is, to be without a pre-formed opinion. In fact, it is impossible to be without an opinion. An opinion is a point of view. The decision itself to study one

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *op cit*, vii.

¹¹ Michael Polanyi, *op cit*, 405.

¹² Michael Polanyi, *op cit*, 3.

*segment of reality instead of another is a subjective expression of the researcher who makes it. It affects his perceptions of reality, if nothing else. Since reality is what we are studying, the matter gets very sticky here.*¹³

The failure to realize this flaw in what might be called the scientific model of thinking, left many Christian thinkers on the back foot in recent generations. They felt obliged to defend their religious thinking by using science's flawed paradigm for thinking. Christian thinkers – especially in the 19th century – thus tried to present a defense of faith with rational thinking that is (allegedly) absolutely “objective” and therefore absolutely reasonable, thinking that no reasonable person could possibly reject it.¹⁴

In fact, to be human is to be condemned to believe, if we may adapt a comment by Sartre. Even the scientist believes in the scientific method and the need for values, the most fierce rationalist believes, against all reason in fact, that it is unreasonable to accept as true any conclusion that cannot be empirically verified and/or proven scientifically or philosophically. Try applying the principle of the need for empirical verification to that principle itself. Can you empirically verify it or “prove” that it must be true? And if not, must the rationalist not reject it? The issue is not *whether* we believe but rather *what* we believe.¹⁵

4. Martin Heidegger

In 1955 Martin Heidegger delivered his “Memorial Address” in which he makes a distinction between “calculative thinking” and “meditative thinking.”¹⁶ While Heidegger acknowledges a complementarity between the two, he suggests that the primary way of thinking – “meditative thinking”¹⁷ – has been largely displaced in our world by “calculative thinking.” He speaks of the need for “releasement towards things and openness to the mystery.” These “belong together” and

*they grant us the ability of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it.*¹⁸

¹³ Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*, 1979/1986, 55-56.

¹⁴ See Michael J Buckley SJ, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism*, Yale University Press, 2003 – especially Chapter 6, “The Negation of Atheism.”

¹⁵ See Michael Whelan's critique of the TV program by Richard Dawkins, “Root of all evil?” – go to www.aquinas-academy.com and click on Reflections.

¹⁶ Cf Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address” in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 135-40. Heidegger's distinction between calculative and meditative thinking roughly parallels van Kaam's distinction between formative and informative thinking.

¹⁷ Heidegger says of the human person that “he/she is a meditative being” (139).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Heidegger then goes on to express his fears that “calculative thinking” will so dominate our world and if that comes to pass, we will forget how to engage in “meditative thinking,” our first responsibility as thinking beings:

But for the time being – we do not know for how long – man finds himself in a perilous situation. Why? Just because a third world war might break out unexpectedly and bring about the complete annihilation of humanity and the destruction of the earth? No. In this dawning atomic age a far greater danger threatens precisely when the danger of a third world war has been removed. A strange assertion! Strange indeed, but only as long as we do not meditate.

In what sense is the statement just made valid? This assertion is valid in the sense that the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking.

What great danger then might move upon us? Then there might go hand in hand with the greatest ingenuity in calculative planning and inventing indifference toward meditative thinking, total thoughtlessness. And then? Then man would have denied and thrown away his own special nature that he is a meditative being. Therefore, the issue is the saving of man’s essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive.

Yet releasement toward things and openness to the mystery never happen of themselves. They do not befall us accidentally. Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking.

If releasement towards things and openness to the mystery awaken within us, then we should arrive at a path that will lead to a new ground and foundation. In that ground the creativity that produces lasting works would strike new roots.¹⁹

5. R D Laing

In 1967, the psychiatrist R D Laing, published a controversial essay in which he expressed the opinion that we have created a mad world for ourselves. He writes:

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *op cit*, 139-40. Heidegger had been a student of Edmund Husserl, considered to be the founder of Phenomenology. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* – published in 1927 and dedicated to Husserl – gives a description of Phenomenology, from the Greek roots of the word, that echoes the notion of “meditative thinking:” “Phenomenology means to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the way in which it shows itself from itself But here we are expressing nothing else than the maxim: ‘To the things themselves!’”(58). The Greek word *phaino* – the root of our words *phenomenon* and *phenomenology* – means *to show*.

*We are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world – mad, even, from an ideal standpoint we can glimpse but not adopt. We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially human beings, but are in an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings.*²⁰

The violence about which Laing speaks is not the blatant physical kind, but the violence of separating people from the experience of what is true and real in themselves and their worlds.²¹ He writes:

*As men of the world we hardly know of the existence of the inner world. Our capacity to think, except in the service of what we are dangerously deluded in supposing is our self-interest and in conformity with common sense, is pitifully limited.*²²

In his clinical experience, Laing believes he has seen the disastrous effects of this “pitifully limited” way of thinking about ourselves and our world. In a word, it is a way of thinking that separates us from our own experience. The very nature and

²⁰ R D Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, Ballantine Books, 1967 – from the Introduction. Further on he indicates how this mad situation is disguised: “The ‘normally’ alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labeled by the ‘normal’ majority as bad or mad” (27-28). He goes on to quote a sociologist: “There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive, or, by a glance, a gesture, or a remark, shriveling up the reality in which one is lodged” (33). We might suggest that, for Laing, the difficulties lie in the *field of formation* as such, in the *in-between* of relationships, rather than in the individual as such – rather than just in the *intra-formative* or *pre-formative* poles. See our discussion of the Formation Field in Unit One, Session Three. We could suggest further, that all of this implies that, to understand the person as knowing, we must think relationally and communally – *thinking is a communal event*. The former Secretary General of the United Nations, the late Dag Hammarskjöld may have been suggesting something similar to Laing when he wrote in his journal: “A heart pulsating in harmony with the circulation of sap and the flow of rivers? A body with the rhythms of the earth in its movements? No. Instead: a mind, shut off from the oxygen of alert senses, that has wasted itself on ‘treasons, stratagems and spoils’ – of importance only within four walls. A tame animal – in whom the strength of the species has outspent itself, to no purpose.” (Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Alfred A Knopf, 1964, 40)

²¹ This is a similar point to the one made by Heidegger in the article already mentioned. Heidegger talks of “autochthony” – our rootedness – and argues that excessive calculative thinking or, more precisely, the inability to engage in meditative thinking, makes us rootless in the world. Is not disconnectedness one of our major social problems? And Eliot’s suggestion that we have gained “knowledge” without “wisdom” is also pertinent.

²² R D Laing, *op cit*, 26.

destiny of the human person is, as Laing sees it, one of “enabling being to emerge from non-being.”²³ Laing argues that we have developed, as a culture, a whole way of being in the world with one another – and that includes especially the way we think – that suppresses our true nature. Laing believes that the way ahead demands the development of, among other things, new and more real ways of thinking, ways of thinking that connect rather than disconnect, ways of thinking that express and foster relationships and draw us into the mystery rather than separate us from it.

The challenge seems to be one of developing ways of thinking that both enable us to be very practical, functional and inventive, and yet remain open to the transcendent possibilities in people, events and things. That nexus has been severely undermined since the Enlightenment. The reconnection and reintegration are going to require what Thomas Kuhn has referred to as a “paradigm shift.”²⁴ We must learn to think differently about ourselves and our world. We must learn to think differently about thinking itself.

A new paradigm

We can think of thinking as an *intra-formative power*²⁵ which enables us to participate in the formation mystery²⁶ through the creation, reception and processing of ideas and their connectedness with one another and the full field of formation. That is, within ourselves – *intra-formatively* – we human beings possess a faculty whereby we are able to produce and receive ideas about ourselves and our world and thus we know and name our world. This is a primary way by which we, as human beings, participate in the mystery of formation. Thinking, at its best, connects us with the “more than,” ourselves and other people, events and things. This intra-formative power for participating in the formation mystery manifests itself as both:

- Transcendent possibility and
- Functional possibility.

a. Transcendent possibilities of thinking

As *transcendent* possibility, thinking opens us to the transcendent dimension of all that is, to the “more than” inherent in each moment and every person, event and thing. It keeps us connected with the depth dimension. It is able to recognise “the

²³ R D Laing, *op cit*, 42. This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s thought, especially his understanding of “meditative thinking. It is also reminiscent of the revelation of Genesis where the human being is seen as made in the image and likeness of the Creator God, bringing order out of chaos, being out of non-being, and thus expressing Being Itself.

²⁴ See Michael Whelan, “When Anomalies Consistently Appear at the Interface Between Learning and Experience we Must Act: Reflections on the Emergence of a New Science,” in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 57-68.

²⁵ See again “The Formation Field”, Unit One, Session Four.

²⁶ See again “The Formation Mystery”, Unit One, Session Two.

more than” in each person, event and thing. It sees the world as evocative, everything as part of something bigger than itself, all things interconnected and interdependent, nothing disconnected from the whole. This transcendent possibility keeps us from becoming forgetful of who we are and why we are here. It opens us explicitly and experientially to the graciousness of existence. It is the kind of thinking that supports the notion of living as graced emergence rather than ego mastery.

Transcendent thinking is epitomised in the kind of thinking we might call *formative thinking* (see the epigraph) or what Heidegger has called *meditative thinking*. This is the most radical form of thinking available to us as human beings. We can see it operative in Einstein’s discovery of the so-called Theory of Relativity, in Mozart’s creation of a piece of music, a loving parent’s attempts to be with a troubled teenager, people reflecting on what is happening in their lives or someone pondering the truths of the Christian faith.

A healthy life formation process has this kind of thinking as the basis for every other form of thinking and as the basis for being in the world as such. It is the essential foundation for pursuing a healthy life formation process.

This kind of thinking is epitomized by listening, attentiveness, openness, dwelling, waiting upon, awe, reverence, and a deepening sense that knowledge is gift and knowing is loving. It is facilitated most especially by open questions (eg “What is happening?”), silence and solitude. Transcendent thinking does not allow mastery or control, it can only flourish when we feel invited to participate and eventually submit to what is.

b. Functional possibilities of thinking

As *functional* possibility, thinking helps us to bring closure on the practical issues that confront us daily. It is able to recognize what must be done as well as what cannot be done, what strategies might best suit the problem to be solved and how we might get from here to there, it works out the logic and the patterns of problems and challenges and helps us find useful responses. It keeps us connected with the concrete here and now.

Functional thinking is epitomized in the kind of thinking we might call *informative thinking*²⁷ or what Heidegger has called *calculative thinking*. A healthy life formation process has at least sufficient of this style of thinking to enable a person to cope with the daily tasks of living. It ought to be grounded in and servant of *formative thinking*. We can see it operative all around us in the tasks we and other pursue daily – getting dressed and groomed, preparing meals, catching buses, getting to places of work, doing what must be done, developing good policies and procedures in systems, organizing meetings and so on. Unless we are quite

²⁷ See Snippets for Meditation in Unit Two, Session Four.

deliberate about fostering transcendent thinking, this functional mode of thinking easily becomes the only mode.

This kind of thinking is epitomized by its ability to focus on issues and problems, its ability to draw boundaries and answer questions, make decisions and organize things. It is facilitated by competence, practical awareness, skills and an ability to confine one's focus to *this* and put the rest aside.

c. Integrating the transcendent and the functional

At the risk of being simplistic, we could say that the transcendent possibility is our opportunity to protect and foster our very nature as unique and communal human beings, and the functional possibility is our opportunity to protect and foster our need to accomplish the tasks without which life would quite simply fall apart. The focus of the former is *Being* and the focus of the latter is what we might *do* as participators in *Being*. Keeping the transcendent possibility fundamental to our thinking will ensure that all our thinking and choosing and acting stands a good chance of being actively situated within the context of the Great Mystery. Emphasizing the transcendent does not denigrate or dismiss the functional. It rather gives the functional – and all its useful expressions – its true value and place in our lives.

The person as thinking is always situated in the full field of formation, always interacting with the other poles of that field. He or she is caught up most immediately in the *intra-formative* pole – the person as thinking is also the person as willing, the person as remembering, the person as anticipating and the person as imagining, with all this interaction occurring at different levels of consciousness and with varying emotional force. Two obvious examples of the transcendent and functional dimensions coming into play in our thinking in an integrated way are found in what we have called foundational thinking and formative thinking.²⁸

The very nature of the person implies that life is tension and can never be reduced to this or that. We therefore must expect loose ends, moments of incomprehensibility, much ambiguity and paradox, lots of middles and muddles. Solutions, resolutions and closures are not always possible or, at least, are not always satisfactory. Adult thinking tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive. It resists ideologies, idealizations, dogmatism and fundamentalism because they pretend to comprehend the incomprehensible. And their “comprehension” is more about control than genuine thinking or knowledge as such. Every power we possess as human beings is ordered towards participation in the mystery of formation, not power over it.

²⁸ The ability to think in this transcendent way presupposes that we are willing and able to face our anxieties. Transcendent thinking, precisely because it implies yielding control and surrendering to life's processes, implies great potential for anxiety. Faced with this anxiety, if we are not accustomed to addressing it, we will seek one or other of the “normal” escape roots – eg fundamentalism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, functionalism etc.

People vary in their potential for thinking. Some are more or less gifted in terms of the transcendent possibility while others are more or less gifted in the functional possibilities. Some may be gifted in both domains. Our saying “Out of the mouths of babes,” indicates that the transcendent dimension can break through in the most unlikely ways. Some people may be intellectually very gifted but have very diminished capacity to actualize the *transcendent* possibilities. Such people may therefore lack “common sense” or “realism” or genuine “wisdom and knowledge.”²⁹

Healthy life formation needs both the transcendent and the functional possibilities. Life formation suffers to the extent that one of those possibilities is more or less denied or even suppressed. Hence we need to think of thinking in the context of *community*. It is rare to find the individual who exhibits in full measure both the transcendent and the functional. Genuine leaders – as distinct from managers – do typically exhibit both in good measure. This is one of the reasons they are good leaders. Such people stand a good chance of keeping both alive and active within the group. Together we are much more likely to find a rich process of both the transcendent and the functional. Paradoxically, this includes the need for some members of the group – indeed some sub-groups – to give special witness to the role of solitude and silence in keeping the community open to the full riches of human thinking.



²⁹ Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) says: “One person who has mastered life is better than a thousand persons who have mastered only the contents of books, but no one can get anything out of life without God. If I were looking for a master of learning, I should go to Paris to the colleges where the higher studies are pursued, but if I wanted to know about the perfection of life, they could not tell me there.” Raymond E Blakney, trans, *Meister Eckhart*, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 236.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** Christian life formation promotes the fullness of the knowledge of Jesus Christ as the ultimate and proper end of all our thinking.***



Christian thinking and knowing

St Paul sets the vision of the Christian person as thinking when he writes to the followers of the Way in Philippi:

For God will testify for me how much I long for you all with the warm longing of Christ Jesus; it is my prayer that your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment, so that you will be innocent and free of any trace of guilt when the Day of Christ comes, entirely filled with the fruits of uprightness through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.³⁰

Christians should be at home with both transcendent and functional thinking, in any of their legitimate manifestations, just as they are at home with any expression of the truth, no matter who speaks it, no matter which field of knowledge discovers it, no matter what it demands of them. Jesus has identified himself with truth – see John 14:6. Ultimately, the Christian recognizes that all truth emerges from and points back to God. To grasp the truth – any truth – is to enter a relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ, no matter how implicitly or imperceptibly. For the Christian, the truth is ultimately a person. Each and every instance of truth announces that person.

The Christian vision, however, does presuppose and foster most particularly, a style of thinking that is radically and primarily open to the transcendent. The natural openness of the human person to the transcendent is transformed by grace so that the person as thinking can “know” Christ Jesus and all people, events and things in the light of Him. In and through our various attempts to be faithful disciples of Jesus in our daily lives, we express the desire

to come to know him and the power of his resurrection.³¹

With this in mind, we can think of our daily lives, with their manifold tasks and interactions with people, events and things, as a process through which we facilitate the graced emergence of truth – both in ourselves and in the field of formation that is our life. As and when that truth emerges, we submit. And we are

³⁰ Philippians 1:8-11.

³¹ Philippians 3:10.

blessed by life. We allow ourselves to be formed by that truth – challenged, urged, embarrassed, consoled, strengthened, transformed. That truth will set us free when we submit humbly and openly to its transforming possibilities (see John 8:32). But we must be actively seeking it and actively open to it. Hence the Gospel call: ‘Stay awake!’³²

A certain discernment is required. While we are eager to hear and heed the truth that will emerge from within ourselves, we are just as eager to hear and heed the truth that will emerge from the field of formation. The great truths of our faith – specifically the Truth revealed in and through Jesus Christ – is the ultimate source of our freedom. That is the Truth we long to know and be known by. And that knowing is loving. In that same text from Philippians cited above, St Paul expresses this knowing most eloquently when he refers to it as being overtaken by Christ Jesus.³³ Our lives may be understood as a journey into ever-deeper knowing and being known:

*Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known.*³⁴

And the ultimate knowledge is

*to come to know him and the power of his resurrection.*³⁵

Thinking about God

The Christian tradition has a twofold approach to thinking about God. Each complements the other and gives rise to a fruitful way of knowing God, as in the sense in which the word knowing is used in the paragraphs immediately above – knowing as loving relationship. The two kinds of thinking about God which give rise to two kinds of knowing about God are:

- The *apophatic way*, sometimes called *via negativa* (“the negative way” or “the way of negation”);³⁶
- The *kataphatic way*, sometimes called *via positiva* (“the positive way” or “the way of affirmation”).³⁷

³² See for example Matthew 24:42 and 25:13; Mark 13:33; Luke 19:12-13 and 12:38, 40.

³³ Cf 3:12. The NJB has “Christ Jesus took hold of me;” the RSV has “Christ Jesus has made me his own;” the KJV has “I am apprehended of Christ Jesus”.

³⁴ 1Corinthians 13:12. See also the passage from Ephesians cited in the epigraph.

³⁵ Philippians 3:10.

³⁶ From the Greek roots *apo*, meaning “from” or “away” and therefore some kind of negation or breakdown, *phanai* meaning “speak; thus *apophasis* meaning “denial.”

³⁷ From the Greek roots *kata*, meaning “thoroughly” or “entirely” and *phanai* meaning “speak; thus, *kataphasis* meaning “affirmation.”

a. The apophatic way

The *apophatic way* is perhaps more commonly seen in the writings of the Eastern Church, in both their mystical writings and their theology, though there are significant expressions of it in the West. Writers such as St Gregory of Nyssa (335-398) and Dyonisius the Areopagite (latter part of 5th century) are very good representatives of this tradition. In the West you find the *apophatic way* in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century England), in Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and in St John of the Cross (1542-91). At its best, it radiates a powerful sense of the transcendence of God, the Great Mystery beyond the mystery. Yet, paradoxically, the *apophatic way* leaves one with a strong sense of God's intimate presence. Paradoxical images and expressions, such as light that is experienced as darkness, the overwhelming experience of love that is a painful wound, a knowing that comes by way of not knowing, the way that is no way, are common.

Sooner or later all Christians find themselves in the *apophatic way*: We know we do not know. And that "not knowing" is a form of knowing. The closer we get to God the more intensely we become aware of the poverty of our thoughts and definitions. Doubts and confusion are typically accompanied by a deeper sense of actually knowing God. We may even feel embarrassed about the naiveté of our once confidently held beliefs; we may feel that we have lost our faith because none of the old answers or names or images work anymore. St Thérèse of Lisieux is a wonderful companion when we find ourselves entering the *apophatic way*.³⁸ So too is someone like Marie Mélanie Rouget – better known under her pseudonym, Marie Noël – a French peasant who died in 1967 at the age of 84.³⁹ During her own crisis of faith when she was a woman in her thirties she wrote:

Finally it is He, the Nameless, the Unknown One, it is He who will prevail in the final hour of trial. He kept our God, our Christ, prostrate before Him in the Garden in the hour of the 'Power of Darkness.' He leaves us no other prospect in the hereafter than continued disorder and suffering (for how can we conceive that this Intelligence, this Might, which tends to Unity in all its creation has made our portion of the universe and the portion that lies beyond our ken on two opposing levels: Evil here, Good yonder.... What we call Good, our Good; for perhaps our Evil is his Good? And perhaps everything is Good in his eyes). Oh! I do not rebel. I have never rebelled. He is great! I worship Him, I bow as reverently now as formerly before his infinite thought of which I am a victim. And I who am nothing, consent with hopeless serenity to being sacrificed to his design. It seems to me that if I were a poor piece of cloth, I would in like manner submit, with affectionate and docile suffering, to the torture of the scissors and the needle, out of respect and blind love for the

³⁸ See for example, Bernard Bro's *The Little Way*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974/1997.

³⁹ See her book, *Notes for Myself*, translated by Howard Sutton, Cornell University Press, 1968.

*unfinished masterpiece of the seamstress. Such a feeling must be a form of devotion.*⁴⁰

b. The kataphatic way

The *kataphatic way* is probably more commonly found in the writings of the West, though it is inevitably found, sooner or later, in every journey of faith. At its best, it knows and respects the *apophatic*, but also holds firmly to the conviction that we must not withdraw entirely from using words and images to describe the Great Mystery. Limited as our thoughts and language are, they are an essential part of the incarnational situation in which we find ourselves. Our statements about the Great Mystery can be meaningful and valid, provided we do not think that adequately grasp the Reality. The ever-present danger of the *kataphatic way* is forgetfulness – forgetfulness of the *apophatic*, forgetfulness of the fact that, at best, any name or image we use to describe God only gives us a platform, as it were, from which we contemplate the incomprehensible mystery.⁴¹ Probably no one in the Christian tradition has pursued the *kataphatic way* as brilliantly and as fruitfully as St Thomas Aquinas. Yet St Thomas was supposed to have said that it was all “straw” and should really be burned as it hardly began to express what he had become aware of through contemplation and mystical insight.



⁴⁰ Marie Noël, *Notes for Myself*, 14-15.

⁴¹ See Michael Whelan, *Living Strings*, E J Dwyer, 1994, Chapter 7 – “Images of God: The Mystery Beyond the Mystery.”

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“The only thing that can save the world from complete moral collapse is a spiritual revolution. Christianity, by its very nature, demands such a revolution. If Christians would all live up to what they profess to believe, the revolution would happen. The desire for unworldliness, detachment, and union with God is the most fundamental expression of this revolutionary spirit. The one thing that remains is for Christians to affirm their Christianity by that full and unequivocal rejection of the world which their Baptismal vocation demands of them. This will certainly not incapacitate them for social action in the world, since it is the one essential condition for a really fruitful Christian apostolate.*

The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees. This should not lead us into the illusion that the world is necessarily about to return to God. Nevertheless, the exposure of the nineteenth-century myths – “unlimited progress” and the “omnipotence of physical science – has thrown the world into confusion. Many are spontaneously turning to the only evident hope for spiritual and moral integration – an order based on philosophical and theological truth, one which allows free expression to the fundamental religious instinct of man.”⁴²



(2) (Saul Bellow speaks of the main character in one of his novels who has a PhD in history:) *“I meant the novel (Herzog) to show how little strength ‘higher education’ had to offer a troubled man. In the end he is aware that he has had no education in the conduct of life (at the university who was there to teach him how to deal with his erotic needs, with women, with family matters?) and he returns, in the language of games, to square one - or as I put it to myself while writing the book, to some primal point of balance. Herzog’s confusion is barbarous. Well, what else can it be? But there is one point at which, assisted by his comic sense, he is able to hold fast. In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as education. But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves - to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in*

⁴² Thomas Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, Hollis & Carter, 1951, 3.

ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether."⁴³



(3) *"We must accept ourselves in spite of our imperfections, half saints, half sinners, with the constant shifting of shadow and light that constitutes a living soul. We must not exhaust ourselves in striving to attain an exaggerated purity. The best, most fruitful souls are made up of a few great radiant virtues and of a thousand little minor flaws which sometimes nourish the virtues as wheat lives on the decay of the soil."*⁴⁴



(4) *"What a strange, narrow idea we sometimes form of the Truth of God!*

"By what presumption do we imagine it to be a circumscribed realm of light around which the proprietors by divine right have, once and for all, set limits?

"By what inflexible obstinacy do I insist on conceiving of it as fixed and immutable, so that one single variation in my thinking seems to me an act of sacrilege toward it?

"Must the truth of God, once revealed, once contained in its entirety – in its entirety? – in the heads of some dozen men, stop with the words that were spoken?

"For fear that it may escape, we enclose it, keep it in the tomb, set guards around it, roll over it the heavy stone which will prevent it from fleeing, and place on the stone the seal of authority.

"What precautions, repressions, prohibitions, threats, indictments, sentences, in order to preserve forever inviolate in its sacred immobility, the body – the corpse – of God! "But God lives, rises again, escapes in spite of the seal, the stone, the guards, and his Spirit blows where it lists over the land.

"It seems to me that a truth is all the truer if it is alive, moves, evolves, bears fresh fruit in every season; that it is all the more divine if it escapes us under one aspect to reappear a little farther on in a new light, all the more eternal if it remains forever unfinished in us who are finite, and changes in our eyes with the hour of the day, the age in life, the march of the centuries, while remaining fundamentally for all – centuries and men – an unfailing source of enlightenment and nourishment. "Such

⁴³ Saul Bellow, "Foreword" to Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon & Schuster, 1987, 16f.

⁴⁴ Marie Noël, *op cit*, 33.

as this supreme Illumination: “Love God with all thy might and thy neighbor as thyself.”⁴⁵



(5) “They lay quiet for a while in the hut. The priest thought the lieutenant was asleep until he spoke again. ‘You never talk straight. You say one thing to me – but to another man, or a woman, you say, “God is love.” But you think that stuff won’t go down with me so you say different things. Things you’ll know I’ll agree with.’ ‘Oh,’ the priest said, ‘that’s another thing altogether – God is love. I don’t say the heart doesn’t feel a taste of it, but what a taste. The smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditch-water. We wouldn’t recognize that love. It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us – God’s love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn’t it, and smashed open graves and set the dead to walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around.’”⁴⁶



(6) “Jesus reveals in its fullness the mystery of the living God. There is only one God, revealed by Jesus Christ his Son who is his Word sprung from the silence.”⁴⁷



(7) “(In the Song of Songs) the Bride speaks: ‘Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves ... but found him not. I called him, but he gave no answer.’ How indeed could she reach with a name the one who is above every name?”⁴⁸



(8) “We are really well taught only by the words which God addresses especially to us. Neither books nor laborious delving into history will instruct us about the wisdom of God. They will fill us with a useless, muddled kind of knowledge and puff us up with pride. It is what happens moment by moment which enlightens us and gives us that practical knowledge which Jesus Christ himself chose to acquire before beginning his public life. The Gospel tells us how he ‘increased in wisdom:’ (Luke 2:52), although, as God, all wisdom was already his. This knowledge that comes to us only through experience is absolutely necessary if we want to touch the hearts of those God sends to us. We can understand nothing perfectly except what experience has taught through what we have suffered and done. Our master is the

⁴⁵ Marie Noël, *op cit*, 19-20.

⁴⁶ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Penguin, 1982, 199-200.

⁴⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, “Letter to the Magnesians,” 8.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “Homilies on the Song of Songs,” 6.

Holy Spirit, who gives us these words of life, and all we say to others must come from him. All we read and study becomes fruitful, clear and effective under the guidance of experience. Without it, we are dough without yeast or salt. Our ideas are vague and ill-directed. We are like absent-minded people who know all about geography but lose their way when going home. So we must listen to God moment by moment to become learned in this practical theology of virtue. Take no notice of what is said to other people. Listen only to what is said to and for you. There will be enough there to strengthen your faith, for it will be exercised, purified and deepened by the very obscurity of these communications."⁴⁹



(9) “.... in any given moment there is an act of faith which is very human, and very much a part of our human use of any system. The system may be what we know at the moment as logic or what we call mathematics or what we call theology. To ignore or deny the role of such an act of faith on our part in terms of any system is to presume we are more than creatures, more than what (in fact) we are. Thus, there is an inescapable tentativeness which affects all of our certainties. However, what we should not overlook is that the very bothersome tentativeness comes out of our creatureliness in this creation; it is, fundamentally, a profoundly religious idea. It is not atheism, by a long ways. It is not deism, either. Actually it is profoundly theological and has many a tie to the highest forms of mystical experience (at least within the Christian tradition). Tentativeness is our rational response to what mystics have persistently termed the ineffable vision of G-O-D. It is our passing, changing certainties that are our problem, not our present tentativeness.”⁵⁰



(10) “As St Ireneus put it: ‘Nothing is a vacuum in the face of God. Everything is a sign of God.’ For those who see everything in terms of God, the entire world is one grand sacrament. Every thing and every historical event appear as sacraments of God and God’s divine will The mystics offer us the best proof of this. St Francis of Assisi immersed himself so deeply in the mystery of God that suddenly he found everything transfigured. Everything spoke of him of God and Christ: the worms along the wayside; the lambs in the field; the birds in the trees; fire, and death, which he came to call Sister Death. God comes to fulfil everything: immanence, transparency, and transcendence. As St Paul put it: ‘There is only one God and Father of all, who is over all (transcendence), works through all (transparency), and is in all (immanence)’ (Ephesians 4:6). The transparency of the world with respect to God is what enables us to understand sacramental structure and sacramental

⁴⁹ Jean Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Image Books, 1975, 49.

⁵⁰ J Peatling, *Religious Education in a Psychological Key*, Religious Education Press, 1981, 128-29.

thinking. It tells us that God is never reached in and by self. We always reach God together with the world and the things of the world, which are diaphanous and transparent with respect to God. Hence experience of God is always a sacramental experience. In things we experience God."⁵¹



(11) *"The achievement of freedom from fear is a lifetime undertaking, one that can never be wholly completed. When under heavy attack, acute illness, or in other conditions of serious insecurity, we shall all react to this emotion -- well or badly, as the case may be. Only the self-deceived will claim perfect freedom from fear."*⁵²



(12) *"The mystery that is beyond God himself, the Ineffable, that gives its name to everything, is complete affirmation, complete negation, beyond all affirmation and all negation."*⁵³



(13) *"The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.*

*The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill*

*A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'*

*The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvelous as he had known it."*⁵⁴

⁵¹ Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life, the Life of the Sacraments*, The Pastoral Press, 1987, 30-31.

⁵² *The A.A. Way of Life; A Reader by Bill*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1967, 263.

⁵³ Dyonisius the Areopagite, "Divine Names," II:4.

⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1995, 203. Heaney says of this poem: "Whatever the possibilities of achieving political harmony at an institutional level, I wanted to affirm that within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing." (Ibid.)

Suggestions for further study

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- , *Without God All Things Are Lawful*, Society of St Paul, 1995 – especially chapter 3.
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Suggested exercises

1. Practise asking yourself questions beginning with *what* rather than *why*. For example: What am I feeling at the moment? What is it like? What part of my body is affected and how? What is happening? (Questions that begin with *what* tend to focus us in our hearts and stomachs and help us to listen to our bodies and surrounds, while questions that begin with *why* tend to focus us in our heads in search of a rational explanation. This may prevent us thinking clearly and discovering the truth that is on offer.) Ask these questions with your head but let your tummy answer!
2. What does it mean to you to *know* Christ Jesus? Is it enough to know information about Him? What has been your experience of learning and knowing Christian truth – has it oriented you more towards grasping information or towards relating with a person, the person being Jesus?
3. Take one or more of the *Snippets for meditation*, read it slowly and attentively; let it affect you. Listen to what is happening within you when you read it. Stay with that effect on you. You might find it helpful to write words and phrases that express what is going on for you. The important thing is to listen carefully, pay attention, give the Truth a chance to overtake you. In this way you can deepen your relationship with Him. Sit in silent contemplation when you have done this exercise. Just be there.

