

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by
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at Aquinas Academy

UNIT TWO SESSION SIX: The person as willing I



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'He who no longer finds what is great in God,' Nietzsche wrote, 'will find it nowhere – he must either deny it or create it.' ... I share Nietzsche's dour foreboding that the loss of the divine Will in our existence would have paradoxical consequences. In place of our relation to the Immortal, each of us must assume some of the prerogatives of Divinity. The tremendous advantages of such reliance on our own will are immediately apparent in our technological, scientific, and even social and political advances. On the other hand, the more ominous side of such willing would lie in our vainglorious attempt to impose this will on precious and private aspects of our lives that must wither under such coercion.¹



When I distort the authentic nature of the human will, I distort the whole of human life; for as we have seen, the will, the core of freedom, is the center of human existence. My whole conception of what it means to be human is dependent on a sound appreciation of what the will is.²



Being swollen with pride you have said: I am God.³



As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people'. And immediately they left their nets and followed him.⁴



¹ Leslie Farber, "Thinking About Will", *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon, 1976, 9 & 11-12.

² Adrian van Kaam, *The Art of Existential Counseling: A New Perspective in Psychotherapy*, Dimension Books, 1966, 71.

³ Ezekiel 28:2.

⁴ Mark 1:16.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** All human life formation is affected for better or worse by the capacity for, necessity of and limits to the person as willing.***



Introductory Note

In Sessions Four and Five we focused on “the person as thinking.” What we said there is closely related to what we must now say about “the person as willing.” We will open the topic and consider some of the limits and even deformative manifestations of “the person as willing” to begin our reflections with this first Session. In the following Session we will consider a new paradigm for thinking about “the person as willing;” there we will pay special attention to the more formative possibilities. We will begin by considering five examples which show “the person as willing” in different ways. We will then suggest an interpretation of what might be happening in these instances and how it might relate to our own life formation.

Observing the person as willing

Let us begin with a simple, common sense notion of willing as our ability to say yes or no – implicitly or explicitly – and follow that through with action. Each of the examples of willing that follows, like all human situations, is multi-faceted. There is no suggestion that the examples are simply this or that. We could examine each with a view to gaining insight into “the person as thinking” or “the person as willing” or “the person as remembering” or “the person as anticipating” or “the person as imagining.” We could also consider the depth and extent of feeling involved and the various levels of consciousness operating on each occasion. We set ourselves a very modest task here, to see if we might hear something useful and even wise about “the person as willing” in these examples.

a. “Let’s do coffee sometime”

The first example is taken from a newspaper article. Some time ago an article entitled “In flight from ties that bind” appeared in one of our major newspapers.⁵ In that article the author wrote as follows:

An old friend rang to ask me for coffee last week and then spent 25 minutes eloquently easing herself out of any plans we tentatively made. A host of

⁵ Ruth Ostrow, “In flight from ties that bind” in *The Weekend Australian*, June 2-3, 1990, *Review*, 20.

“maybes” and “perhapses” later, she cheerfully ended the conversation by promising to ring and confirm our non-existent arrangements “at some later stage”. I was exhausted but, frankly, not confused. I knew I was dealing with someone who had caught what I have diagnosed as the dreaded Yuppie disease of the 1980s and 90s, severe and prevalent enough to take its place alongside modern horrors such as ME, Teeth-Grinding Syndrome, Terminal Greed and Self-a-holicism. Introducing the as-yet-unrecognised but totally insidious ... Commit-a-phobia. Definition: chronic inability to commit to anything or anybody, anytime, anywhere, with symptoms including debilitating indecision, claustrophobia and a sudden onrush of migraine, memory loss, hyperventilation or narcolepsy when confronted with anything remotely resembling a long-term plan, a discussion on topics such as “the relationship”, the M word (marriage), love or commitment. Language spoken: Non-specific English (NSE). Favourite words and catch phrases: maybe; possibly; let’s ring and confirm at a later date; we’ll see; let’s not go down that path right now; let’s not rush things; I’ll sleep on it; some time in the future; I’m not sure if that’s exactly what I want at this particular moment in time. Recognisable feature: A four-second attention span. Other names: Open Door Syndrome (the elusive Commit-a-phobe will not go into anything that does not have an escape hatch in sight, and preferably enters where he/she will almost certainly be forced out); Choice Anxiety; Something-Better-May-Be-Out-There mania; Holy Grail Syndrome (or Grass-is-Greener Syndrome); Life-is-a-Lolly-Shop-Syndrome; I Deserve Greed mania; and, occasionally, Fear of Intimacy neurosis.⁶

Allowing for the tongue-in-cheek manner of this piece, the author is naming something we would all probably have encountered at some time in the last few years – perhaps even in ourselves. We could suggest another name for it in its more serious form: Keep Your Options Open Syndrome or Never Burn Your Bridges Syndrome or Never Make a Commitment You Cannot get Out Of Syndrome. At all levels of our society and in all facets of our lives we witness many examples of an *unwillingness to commit*.

What is happening? Among other things, it seems to be some sort of failure of will, a *will-lessness*. Yet, those very people who will behave in this way might also be seen behaving in a way which manifests *willfulness* – the very antithesis, it seems, of will-lessness. They might, for example, against all good advice and all the available evidence suggesting the contrary, willfully pursue some course of action, something they were determined to do no matter what.

⁶ *Ibid.*

b. “What have I done!”

The second example is a news item. The report began:

Death came to two-year old Tyrell Hart in the driveway of his own home when he became the innocent victim of road rage.⁷

The report went on to describe what had preceded this tragedy. Tyrell was in a car, with his grandparents, returning from a family outing. While turning from the roadway into his drive, the grandfather braked to let a cyclist proceed along the footpath. This seems to have upset the driver of the car behind the grandfather, prompting him to drive in behind the grandfather’s car and ram it. He had not allowed for the fact that Tyrell had jumped from the car. He was crushed to death in the impact between the two cars. The driver of the car that had just crushed the little boy kept saying, “What have I done, what have I done!” What do you think is going on here?

c. A question of political will

The third example concerns the negative relationship between the lifestyle we pursue in the affluent Western world and the environment. The massive amount of accumulated evidence of the past thirty years or so, unequivocally and unambiguously says something like: If we continue to live as we are living we will destroy the planet, or at the very least, seriously diminish the environment’s ability to support human habitation. In particular, we have known for many years that internal combustion engines – most especially in motor vehicles – are among the major sources of pollution. Yet we go on building our lifestyles around the motor car and the many other sources of pollution. What’s going on?

The kind of radical and serious decisions and measures that will eventually be forced on us, seem to be beyond us at the present. It seems we do not have *the political will*. Perhaps this should not surprise us. People typically do not make radical choices and radical changes to their lives unless there is some more or less significant *experience* – as distinct from some idea or ideal or principle – that forces them to move. Put more simply, we could say we make the big life-changing decisions, not on the basis of ideas, principles or ideals but on the basis of pleasure or pain, attraction or threat. We are, at a fairly primitive level, attracted to the pleasurable and tend to seek it, we are threatened by the painful and tend to avoid it. We often ignore higher level motivations, such as those implied by principles and ideals.⁸ What is happening?

⁷ Trevor Robb, “Boy, 2, dies as road rage spills into yard,” *The Sun Herald*, March 7, 2004, 9.

⁸ Recent research presented to the 9th Behavioural Research in Cancer Control Conference (Melbourne, April 2008) pointed out that smokers are more likely to stop smoking on the basis of immediate financial cost than long term health costs.

d. Struggling to be a good parent

The fourth example is taken from the eminent psychiatrist, Rollo May. He describes a fairly mundane sort of situation:

A friend of mine with whom I was having lunch seemed depressed. The lunch was not far along when he told me that he was pre-occupied over some events of the weekend. His three children, aged twelve to twenty-three, had devoted several pithy hours to how he had been, if not responsible for, at least a prime contributor to their problems. The upshot of their attack was that he had not made enough clear decisions in his relation to them, hadn't taken a firm enough stand or set a strong enough structure. My friend, a sensitive, imaginative man who was a considerable success in his own life and work, had been brought up by strict "inner-directed" parents. But he had known that he could never raise his children on the Victorian "will-power" pattern. At the same time, he and his wife had never been devotees of the popular overpermissiveness which filled the vacuum when Victorianism was routed. What struck me with poignancy as he talked was my awareness that almost every parent these days seems to express in some form the same pain and perplexity that infused his question, "How do parents make decisions about their children? How should a father and mother assert their will?"⁹

We can see the typical pendulum swing here. As we move out of an era which operated on the "spare the rod, spoil the child" principle, we have tended to move into extreme positions. Uncertainty, even confusion, are very much part of the modern parents' situation with respect to child-raising. How do we train children to be self-reliant yet relational, assertive yet respectful, able to compete yet not aggressive, prudent yet trusting, hard-working yet appreciative of play, accountable yet realistic, principled yet flexible, serious yet humorous. As we reject the illusions of Victorian "will power", what do we put in its place? How do we foster a well formed 'person as willing'?

e. Longings, yearnings and wishes

The fifth and final example is also taken from Rollo May. It is a clinical example, therefore more extreme. But it does point to experiences that may be common to many of us. May begins by setting the context:

I have not infrequently observed in patients that the emphasis on "will power" is a reaction formation against their own repressed passive desires, a way of fighting off their wishes to be taken care of; and the likelihood is that this

⁹ Rollo May, *Love and Will*, W W Norton, 1969, 181-82.

mechanism had much to do with the form that will took in Victorianism. Will was used to deny wish. Speaking in clinical terms, this process results in a greater and greater emotional void, a progressive emptying of inner contents. This impoverishes imagination and intellectual experience as well; it stultifies and suffocates longings and yearnings as well as wishes. No one needs to remind us of the great stores of resentment, inhibition, hostility, self-rejection, and related clinical symptoms which can develop as a result of this repressive kind of will power.

A woman in her late twenties – since we shall refer back to her, we shall give her a name, Helen – informed me at the beginning of her therapeutic treatment that her motto had always been, “where there’s a will, there’s a way.” This motto seemed to fit her executive job, which required a lot of routine as well as serious decisions, and her respectable New England background in a typically upper middle-class family. She gave the impression at first of being a “strong-willed” person. The only trouble was that one of her most pronounced symptoms was compulsive, promiscuous sexual activity; she seemed incapable of saying no. Whatever the cause, this symptom – no doubt aided by the fact that she was a pretty girl – was directly contradictory to her “will power,” as she could easily see. She would also “wolf” food, occasionally eating everything left on the plates by others at breakfast, paying the price of a stomach ache and later struggling to diet to keep her figure. Her job revealed similarly driven patterns – she would work for fourteen hours at a stretch but never seem any farther ahead. It soon came out, with a good deal of painful weeping, that, despite her superficial social success, she was a profoundly lonely and isolated person. She talked of longings for her mother expressed in the half-fantasy, half-memory of sitting with her in the sun when she was a little girl, and a recurrent dream of wanting to be encircled again by waves of the ocean. She dreamt that she went home and knocked on the door, but her mother, on opening the door, did not recognize her and closed the door in her face. The historical fact was that her mother had suffered a serious depression and had been hospitalized in mental institutions for a good deal of the several years after the girl’s birth.

So what we see in our patient is a lonely, pathetic infant, overcome with longing for what she never had. It seemed clear that the great stress of “will power” was a frantic “reaction formation,” a desperate endeavor to compensate for the symptoms of her unfulfilled infantile needs, a strategy of living on despite these painful early longings. It is not surprising – such is the irony and “balance” of the complex processes of human consciousness – that her symptoms were of the compulsive, driven type. This is precisely will gone awry; will turned self-destructive, directed against the person herself. Life is saying to her – if we may put it figuratively, in terms of her motto – where there

*are such longings and unfulfilled needs, will is exactly not the way. We note, furthermore, that her problem was not mere defiance of her parents, as we normally see it in adolescent behavior. That would show the “will” still present and active, though negative, and a situation not too difficult to deal with. Our patient’s problem was more serious – an emptiness, a vacuity, a longing to fill something which from infancy had always been empty. This kind of pattern can lead to critical problems of apathy if the “will” breaks down before the dependent longings have been brought to consciousness and to some degree integrated. The early trauma taught Helen as an infant that she must renounce her wishes for they carried a degree of despair which would have probably sent her into psychosis. “Will power” was the means by which she accomplished this. But the neurosis then takes revenge in exactly the area in which the problem originated.*¹⁰

Willfulness and will-lessness

Broadly speaking, we can discern two major symptoms in all the above examples: Will-lessness and willfulness. They seem to be opposites. In fact, it may be more helpful to think of them as the flip-side of the same experience of deformation. When we say a person is *will-less*, or has “no will,” we generally imply some inability to make a choice and act on it. Ruth Ostrow’s “Commit-a-phobes” would be obvious examples. But it is also very evident in Roll May’s patient, Helen. In a previous time we would have called this a *moral* failing, rather than a *psychological* one. These days we might consider it “normal” and even quite acceptable behavior.

When we say a person is *willful* we generally imply determination, perhaps stubbornness or “pigheadedness” even. More properly, willfulness is the state or condition in which the person as willing has so dominated other aspects of the person’s life that the person as thinking or imagining or anticipating or remembering, is more or less suppressed or at least in servitude to the person as willing. Along with the suppression of these powers three other significant forms of suppression also occur:

- Firstly, the person as feeling is more or less suppressed.
- Secondly, the capacity for genuine mutuality in relationships is more or less suppressed.
- Thirdly, the person as openness to the more than, the Transcendent, is also more or less suppressed – even if the willfulness is allegedly in service of the Transcendent.

Willful people are not listening people and therefore not aware of the many subtleties of the reality around them. Willful people tend to live life back-to-front – they start with what *they* think they want to achieve and they force everything and

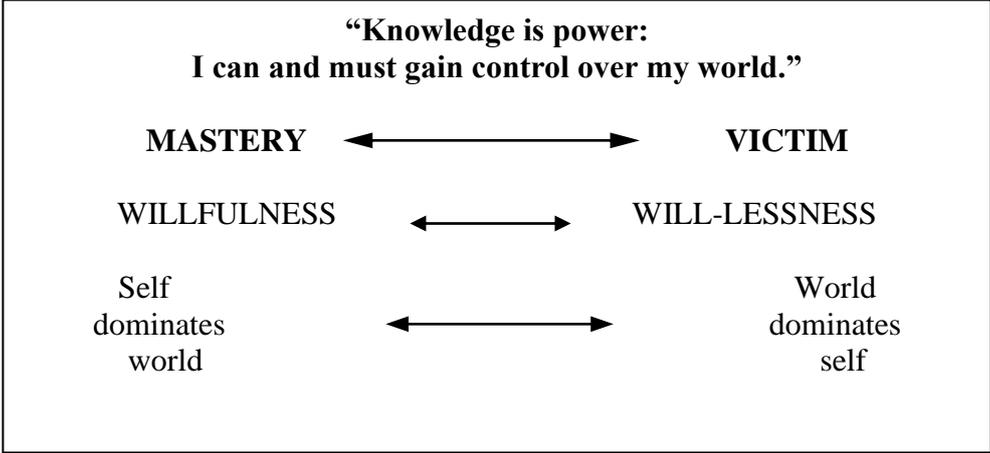
¹⁰ Rollo May, *Love and Will*, W W Norton and Co, 1969, 205-206.

everyone – including themselves – to submit to that desired outcome, at least in the circumstances in which they are being willful.¹¹ Central to the tragedy of the willful life is the fact that the willful person may not even want what they are pursuing so willfully. Their inability to listen and hear means that much will be going on inside them that is beyond their awareness.

Obviously, willfulness is very egocentric. It is also very common in a rationalistic and functionalistic culture. Willfulness flies in the face of our true nature as being participants in the mystery of life, where giving and receiving is the essential pattern.

We noted in our previous two Sessions on the person as thinking, one of the driving dynamisms of the Enlightenment was the underlying assumption that knowledge is power. Thus the person as thinking is inclined to experience himself/herself as a being called to be in charge, to control. Our culture keeps urging us in this direction of mastery.¹² The result of this tends to be confusion about our real possibilities as well as our real responsibilities. More specifically, we constantly come up against concrete experiences that contradict the advertisements, that remind us of how much we *cannot control*. It is a formula for generating both willfulness and will-lessness in the one person. We can depict it diagrammatical as follows:

THE MASTERY-VICTIM CAGE



The divine will and the person as willing

It seems likely that the psychiatrist, Leslie Farber, is on to something deeply important when he looks to the consequences of our disconnection from any

¹¹ As we indicated above, a person might be willful in certain circumstances but quite passive, even will-less in other circumstances. It is probably fair to say, however, that a person will tend to be predominantly willful or predominantly will-less.

¹² The Nike advertisement is a good example: “Just do it!” So much advertising plays on the theme of “taking charge of your life”, “be your own person”, “break free”, “be on top” and so on.

confident belief in the Divine (see the epigraph). Without any sense of the Transcendent, an awful burden falls on the human shoulders. Nietzsche, perhaps more than most, realized this and he went mad. It is difficult to accept a nonchalant rejection of the Divine. It is actually a matter of the utmost moment. To the extent that someone is nonchalant about it, we must believe that he or she has not examined the matter thoroughly.

If the truth be told, Farber may have put his finger on one of the critical factors for us in understanding the contemporary experience of the person as willing. Put most simply, the individual cannot bear the full weight of an isolated and disconnected humanity. So what do we do? We willfully fabricate alternatives to the fullness of humanity, evade the horrible truth of the abyss we carry around in us, and pretend to be alive.¹³ Most of us spend most of our lives sleep-walking; we are not awake to who and what we are; we maintain this somnolent state with the help of the culture. Yet, it may be that, while individuals can survive this sort of pseudo-life, whole cultures sooner or later rebel. Perhaps we are seeing signs of the rebellion in our young people.



¹³ The whole consumerist lifestyle is perhaps the most obvious fabrication. We are encouraged, cajoled, seduced into acquiring and possessing and having more and more. It is a chosen lifestyle that, among other things, is characterized by willfulness – actions that are “all will,” “full of will,” largely devoid of critical thinking or openness to other possibilities of any kind or awareness of consequences and implications. Or if there is awareness there seems to be little willingness to accept accountability and responsibility and act accordingly.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** The primary emphasis in Christian spirituality must always be the initiative and action of God.*

** When the primary emphasis in Christian spirituality becomes the human subject, this will tend to manifest itself in more or less significant deformations of the person as willing.*



The biblical vision

From the very beginning of the Bible, the human person is seen as a co-creator with the Creator. Human beings participate in God's plan for the world. Human beings are in a privileged position because they are made in the image and likeness of the Eternal Creating Mystery. Similarly, however, from the very beginning of the Bible, the human person is seen as capable of falling far short of this vocation. Thus Adam and Eve seek to become gods in their own right, Cain kills Abel and reminds us of the tragic effects of uncontrolled emotion, and the Tower of Babel reminds us of the immense difficulty we have in communicating with each other. It seems that we are all prone to go our own way, to be stiff-necked, to be proud and selfish. Rather than lead a life of gracious cooperation and participation – with other people and the whole of God's creation – the Bible reminds us that we have a strong tendency to willfully pursue our own ends.

The Prophets have, as their central role, the vocation to call the people back. They must keep on rising up and reminding this people that they have forgotten the God of the Covenant. In their forgetfulness and their failure to listen, the people repeatedly miss the mark. And so it goes. The whole person and the whole community is then repeatedly called back into communion and life-giving relationship – with God, with themselves, with one another and eventually with all the peoples of the world and all creation.

Jesus, like the Prophets who foreshadow him, does the will of the Father. John's Gospel speaks for the tradition: "Jesus said to them: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to do his work'" (1:34). St Paul reminds us that the "obedience" of Jesus is in direct contrast to the "disobedience" of Adam (cf Romans 5:18-21). This "obedience" is set within a loving relationship, one in which there is mutual listening. Jesus is presented as one who is able to transcend the deformations of both willfulness and will-lessness.

Pelagianism then and now

In the 5th century a heresy emerged that was to re-emerge more than once down the ages; in fact, it seems to have been alive and well in the middle of the 20th century. Perhaps it is such a deeply human inclination that is manifest in this heresy, if poor old Pelagius had not invented it someone else most surely would have.¹⁴

Pelagius was probably born in Britain about the middle of the 4th century. He was certainly in Rome towards the end of that century because he had a renown as a spiritual director for both clergy and laity; he had a reputation for a fairly rigorous approach to the Christian life. He left for Africa before the capture of Rome by Alaric in 410. He soon moved unto Palestine which was his home until 418. Nothing is known of him after this time.

Pelagius taught that the human will is completely free and is equally ready to do either good or evil. Pelagius saw grace as merely God's assistance to the human will to make the decisions and do the virtuous things which it could in fact do in and of itself. Pelagius did not accept any notion of original sin as applying to the human race – he did not accept that we were absolutely in need of God's saving grace. He rejected baptism. Augustine among others strongly opposed Pelagius' excessive optimism with regards to human capacities and his denial of the absolute need for grace.

The heresy of Pelagianism was an unwarranted trust in and emphasis on the person as willing. Consequently, Pelagianism manifested itself in a willful pursuit of virtue that tended to leave people alienated from the initiative of God and the liberating action of God's love in their lives. The confidence and optimism with regard to the human capacities for attaining what the heart aspired to, soon degenerated into a rigid will-power Christianity.¹⁵

Adrian van Kaam describes a modern form of Pelagianism:

¹⁴ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus – generally known simply as Tertullian – seems to have been a particularly willful person, for example. He was born about the middle of the 2nd century in North Africa and died there about the year 220. Tertullian, a lawyer before he became a convert and powerful apologist for the faith, the originator of ecclesiastical Latin, proponent of the Montanist heresy for which he was subsequently excommunicated. He reflects a harshness – amidst a great brilliance – that was not uncommon in the North African Church of his time. People like Tertullian remind us that, while there may be a fine line in the beginning between courageous commitment on the one hand and willful action on the other, as time passes the gulf between the two grows. Again, grace and freedom – or the lack of these – are the signs we ought to look for. Willful people are neither gracious nor genuinely free.

¹⁵ It is probably fair to say that much of the Pelagianism of recent generations was completely oblivious to the fact that it was grounded in the heresy proposed by Pelagius. In fact, many of the later proponents of this willful Christianity – so evident when the Gospel is reduced to a moral program defining certain behaviours and Jesus is reduced to a moral teacher – would, no doubt, have explicitly condemned Pelagius.

There are no easy and fast solutions for the problems of human growth, no solutions that can be handed to me like a medical prescription and which I can execute at once. Even if such a prescription were possible, I should lose rather than gain from it, for it would rob me of the precious experience of growing insight in the midst of painful crosses.

In the case cited above, what would happen if I refused to recognize my ties to my family which were still overwhelmingly strong? These feelings would not indeed be absent. I would willfully repress the awareness of what I am; I would refuse to take into account all the aspects of my own reality. In short, I would willfully behave as if I did not have such feelings, and my life would be untrue and artificial. Moreover, I would use a tremendous amount of energy to fight off the awareness of my true self. I would have to cut off increasingly all thoughts, feelings, and perceptions which would bring back to my awareness what I refuse to recognize as being me.

When I repress my true feelings, I am not only artificial but I also become rigid, tense, and strained. My life becomes a lie; my make-believe detachment and perfection become a shining paper palace over a dormant volcano. All the feelings, passions, and memories which I refuse to recognize and to take into account are building up within the dormant volcano which I am. I become exhausted from crushing them, and at an unexpected moment later in life the volcano which I am erupts; the paper palace of my willful artificial perfection disappears in fire and smoke. This is true not only of my feelings toward home but also of all my other feelings, passions, and, emotions.

It is true of my sexual feelings, my envy, my jealousy, my aversion for silence and for certain types of work, my impulsive hostility toward certain persons, and my desire on a beautiful day to break away and have a wonderful time with my old friends.

Thus, I may be said to be willful when I refuse to take into account all the aspects of my life. When I do so, I try to mold my life magically. I behave like an absolute king who regards neither past nor future nor "irrational" feelings, drives, and passions. I attempt to manipulate myself into religious perfection. I deal with myself not as with a sensitive, vulnerable person but as with an inert piece of rock from which I try to fashion with heavy hammer blows the image of the perfect religious person? Such a highhanded approach to sanctity leaves me oblivious of the unconscious anxiety, bodily drives, resentments, hostile inclinations, and secret ambitions which poison my saintly motives, because the stone which I am sculpturing is not inert, without past and passion, without egocentric resistance to the chisel of the sculptor. My nature is a lively existence that moves and grows under the changes that are imposed on its surface. Imagine the amazement of a sculptor who would discover that within his statue of a madonna, a totally different image had developed, for instance, that of a devil. How disconcerted he would be if suddenly the subtle, refined, and beautiful lines of his madonna would fall apart, and the grinning face of a

demon would appear to tell him, "While you were thinking that the center of this stone was inert and lifeless so that you would have to occupy yourself only with changing the surface, I have had the chance to grow wildly inside." This represents what happens to me when I try to mold and manipulate my life as a thing with the chisel or hammer of will power.

Superficially speaking, I may seem successful because I alter rapidly and effectively the surface of my existence, the exterior layer that covers my personality, the thin shell of my soul. However, I do not interact with the deeper layers of my existence. My life becomes regular and religious at the surface. In reality, it is a life of pious self-deceit. I can maintain it only by compulsion, for my spontaneous inner life is cut off from this peripheral religious existence. The willful me is thus closed, cumbersome, tyrannical, and compulsive. I isolate myself increasingly from my own source of vitality and spontaneity. Soon my religious existence is marked by an obstinate, stubborn, frozen mentality. My life suggests withered, dead leaves in the fall. It is as if I nailed the green wood of my life into a straight and heavy coffin. My religious existence gives people the sensation of death, of tombstones and cemeteries. Thus, "religion" often comes to be considered incompatible with the vigorous joy of living.

Moreover, when I am strained, willful, and noisily busy about my holiness, I am unable to listen to either the egocentric rumblings within me or the silent voice of grace in the core of my being. I lose my sensitivity to this voice. Nor can I listen quietly to the subtle message of the situation in which I live. My willfulness chains me to only one thing, my idealized self-image of religious perfection which I must maintain against the disturbing demands inside and outside my being. Gradually the unique aspects of my life situation, of my inner moods, and of the subtle intimations of grace are unable to communicate themselves to me at all. I have cut off all bridges between my willful striving for a perfect religious surface and the living reality of nature, grace, and my life situation. Because I no longer listen to the voice of the changing situation, I fail to recognize its uniqueness and the new response which I should create to the ever new challenge of my life history. Therefore, I must invent a pious code of stilted, identical reactions which I have readily available for every situation that may arise. I become a will-power Christian. Instead of being bound to the appeal of God in the unique reality which comes to meet me, I become addicted to my blueprint of perfect external behavior, uninspired, rigid, and precise. I assume a compulsive instead of a dialectic attitude toward my existence. Compulsive comment replaces respectful dialogue. I become a religious engineer who manipulates all objectivated "things" in my life and situation as if they were parts of an electronic computer. I become a would-be holy man or woman. I am so busy engineering my devotional existence that no awareness remains for the sacred

dimension of reality, the veiled presence of the Lord as it reveals itself through the relaxed openness of faith.

As a will-power Christian I may even develop a split or schizoid religious existence in which an isolated “higher and holier” self represses, compels, and manipulates all my human behavior without regard for reality. If such a sickness spreads among Christians, it may even give rise to a disembodied, suspended style of Christianity which is foreign to contemporary life by its refusal to be present to it. The willful Christian who is out of tune with the contemporary situation makes it impossible for Christ to incarnate Himself through him in humanity.

Another complication makes the situation more dangerous. Out of touch with myself and with reality, I, the will-power Christian, construct an idealized image not only of myself but of other people and the world. After disregarding my own reality and forcing upon myself an image of religious perfection like a rigid, wooden mask that distorts my own human face, I now feel compelled to do the same to others. My inability to listen to what others really are and to what their situation really is leads me to distort reality and to force it into the same superficial religious mold as my own life. I am tempted to overpower and willfully transform reality in others. At the moment that I as the willful Christian yield to this temptation Christ dies in my behavior; there is born instead a fanatical, self-righteous style of faith which averts people from the good tidings that the believer claims to represent.

We may now summarize how willfulness may be discerned. When I am willful I become, first of all, closed to reality as it reveals itself to my fresh and naive perception. Instead, I develop a code of stilted perceptions of God, other people, and myself. As a result, I am unable to respond creatively to the real meaning of my situation. Instead of responding, I react blindly in a stereotyped manner. These stereotyped reactions are not real responses to the situation. They merely conform to my standardized code of perception which discloses reality not as it really is but as I should like it to be according to my willful blueprint of life and reality.¹⁶



¹⁶ Adrian van Kaam, *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension Books, 1980, 94-98.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“If I cannot listen to the subtle manifestation of rich reality in my environment, I will necessarily try to impose my willful codes on others. If I am not open to reality and do not obey the voice of reality, a terrible distortion takes place. Sooner or later I will turn the whole relationship around: Instead of listening to reality in people and events, I become convinced that reality in people and events should listen to me.”*¹⁷



(2) *“One of Sigmund Freud’s great contributions – if not his greatest – lay in his cutting through the futility and self-deceit in Victorian “will power.” That “will power” was conceived by our nineteenth-century forefathers as the faculty by which they made resolutions and then purportedly directed their lives down the rational and moral road that the culture said they should go. I say that this was possibly Freud’s greatest discovery because it was this exploration of the ill effects of Victorian will power which led him to what he called the “unconscious.” He uncovered the vast areas in which motives and behavior – whether in bringing up children or making love or running a business or planning a war – are determined by unconscious urges, anxieties, fears, and the endless host of bodily drives and instinctual forces. In describing how “wish” and “drive” move us rather than “will,” Freud formulated a new image of man that shook to the very foundations Western man’s emotional, moral, and intellectual self-image. Under his penetrating analysis, Victorian “will” did, indeed, turn out to be a web of rationalization and self-deceit. Now he was entirely accurate in his diagnosis of the morbid side of the vaunted Victorian “will power.”*

“But along with this inevitably went an unavoidable undermining of will and decision and an undercutting of the individual’s sense of responsibility. The image that emerged was of man as determined – not driving any more, but driven. Man is “lived by the unconscious,” as Freud, agreeing with the words of Groddeck, put it. “The deeply rooted belief in psychic freedom and choice,” wrote Freud, “... is quite unscientific and must give ground before the claims of a determinism which governs mental life.”

“Now whatever the theoretical truth or falsehood of such a position is, it had very great practical significance. It reflected, rationalized, and played into the hands of modern man’s most pervasive tendency – which has become almost an endemic disease in the middle of the twentieth century – to see himself as passive, the willy-nilly product of the powerful juggernaut of psychological drives. (And of economic forces, we may add, as Marx, on the socioeconomic level, had demonstrated with an analysis parallel in brilliance to Freud’s.)

¹⁷ Adrian van Kaam, *The Art of Existential Counseling*, Dimension Books, 1966, 80.

“I do not say that Freud and Marx ‘caused’ this loss of individual will and responsibility. Great men, rather, reflect what is emerging from the depths of their culture and, having reflected, then interpret and mold what they find. We may disagree with their interpretations of their findings; we cannot disagree with the fact that they found it. We cannot ignore or slough over Freud’s discoveries without cutting ourselves off from our own history, mutilating our own consciousness, and forfeiting the chance to push through this crisis to a new plane of consciousness and integration. Man’s image of himself will never be the same again; our only choice is to retreat before this destruction of our vaunted ‘will power’ or to push on to the integration of consciousness on new levels. I do not wish or ‘choose’ to do the former; but we have not yet achieved the latter; and our crisis of will is that we are now paralyzed between the two.

“The dilemma arising from the undermining of will has become a thorny problem in Freud’s own field, psychoanalysis. The analyst Alan Wheelis is particularly perceptive of the problem as he writes:

Among the sophisticated the use of the term ‘will power’ has become perhaps the most unambiguous badge of naivete. It has become unfashionable to try, by one’s unaided efforts, to force one’s way out of a condition of neurotic misery; for the stronger the will the more likely it is to be labeled a ‘counter-phobic maneuver.’ The unconscious is heir to the prestige of will. As one’s fate formerly was determined by will, now it is determined by the repressed mental life. Knowledgeable moderns put their backs to the wheel and in so doing may fail to put their shoulders to the wheel. As will has been devalued, so has courage; for courage can exist only in the service of will, and can hardly be valued higher than that which it serves. In our understanding of human nature we have gained determinism, lost determination.

“The tendency to see ourselves as the pawns of determinism has spread, in late decades, to include contemporary man’s conviction that he is the helpless object of scientific forces in the form of atomic power. The helplessness is, of course, vividly represented by the nuclear bomb, about which the typical citizen feels powerless to do anything. Many intellectuals saw this coming and asked in their own terms whether ‘modern man is obsolete.’ But the important development in our present decade is that this is the common awareness of all who even watch TV or go to the movies: a recent film stated it baldly, ‘The nuclear age has killed man’s faith in his ability to influence what happens to him.’ Indeed, the central core of modern man’s ‘neurosis,’ it may be fairly said, is the undermining of his experience of himself as responsible, the sapping of his will and ability to make decisions. The lack of will is much more than merely an ethical problem: the modern individual so often has the conviction that even if he did exert his ‘will,’ – or whatever illusion

passes for it – his actions wouldn't do any good anyway. It is this inner experience of impotence, this contradiction in will, which constitutes our critical problem.”¹⁸



(3) “I can will knowledge but not wisdom; going to bed, but not sleeping; eating, but not hunger; meekness, but not humility; scrupulosity, but not virtue; self-assertion or bravado, but not courage; lust, but not love; commiseration, but not sympathy; congratulations, but not admiration; religiosity, but not faith; reading, but not understanding.”¹⁹



(4) “Man is the only entity in nature with which sanctity is associated. Sanctity of human life is not something we know conceptually, established on the basis of premises; it is an underived insight. It is not a quality that man can bestow upon himself; it is either bestowed upon us or is spurious. We come upon it first in pondering the mystery of another person's life, and subsequently in the realization that one's own life is not something acquired or owned. Life is something I am. What I have is mine; what I am is not mine. Life is not my property.

“Being human involves being sensitive to the sacred. The objects regarded as sacred may differ from country to country, yet sensitivity to the sacred is universal.

“The acceptance of the sacred is an existential paradox: it is saying ‘yes’ to a no; it is the antithesis of the will to power; it may contradict interests and stand in the way of satisfying inner drives.

“To our sense of power the world is at our disposal, to be exploited to our advantage. To accept the sacred is to acknowledge that certain things are not available to us, are not at our disposal. However, it is a profound misunderstanding to think of the sacred in terms of negativity. Its negativity and separateness is but a protective screen for the positive aspect of the sacred. For accepting the sacred means not only giving up claims, but also facing a unique dimension of reality.

“What is the positive aspect of the sacred? Being a unique quality, it is not capable of being described in terms of any other quality, just as beauty cannot be described in terms of goodness. The sacred is perceptible to the sense of the sacred. The beauty of a beautiful object is inherent in the object, whereas the sanctity of a sacred object transcends the object. Beauty is given with the nature of a thing, sanctity is imposed on things. Beauty is in the form of an object, sanctity in its status.

“There are degrees of sanctity but they all share one aspect: ultimate preciousness. To sense the sacred is to sense what is dear to God. Its mode of being differs from the modes of being of other qualities.

¹⁸ Rollo May, *op cit*, 182-184.

¹⁹ Leslie Farber, “Thinking About Will”, *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon, 1976, 7.

*“It is true that sacred objects are objects set apart from the rest of reality, but it is a mistake to regard the sacred and profane as absolute contrasts. For some parts of reality to be endowed with sanctity, all of reality must be a reflection of sanctity. Reality embraces the actually sacred and the potentially sacred.”*²⁰



(5) *The will to power destroys the power to will.
The weapon made, cannot help but use it;
It drags us with its own momentum still.*

*The power to kill compounds the need to kill.
Grown out of hand, the heart cannot refuse it;
The will to power undoes the power to will.*

*Though as we strike we cry ‘I did not choose it’,
It drags us with its own momentum still.
In the one stroke we win the world and lose it.
The will to power destroys the power to will.*²¹



*The opposite of the will to control is the wish to participate.*²²



‘He who no longer finds what is great in God,’ Nietzsche wrote, ‘will find it nowhere – he must either deny it or create it.’ ... I share Nietzsche’s dour foreboding that the loss of the divine Will in our existence would have paradoxical consequences. In place of our relation to the Immortal, each of us must assume some of the prerogatives of Divinity. The tremendous advantages of such reliance on our own will are immediately apparent in our technological, scientific, and even social and political advances. On the other hand, the more ominous side of such willing would lie in our vainglorious attempt to impose this will on precious and private aspects of our lives that must wither under such coercion. I need hardly remind you of the extent to which ordinary and private relations between people have suffered from this imposition, sexuality being only one of the more conspicuous catastrophes resulting from this encroachment of will. My own failures repeatedly tell me I cannot will relation, anymore than I can will not to will relation. ... Whether God is dead, as Nietzsche would have it, or merely in eclipse,

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, 1965, 48-49.

²¹ Judith Wright, “Weapon” in *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, Collins Dove, 1986, 99.

²² Huston Smith, *Beyond The Post-Modern Mind*, Crossroad, 1982, 143.

*as Martin Buber would have it, I know I am granted occasional and surprising moments in my life, neither self-induced nor drug-induced, that lie outside the dominion of my conscious will. At such times my soul is indeed conquerable and I am more servant than captain of my fate. Yet even as these moments arise, I know my temptation to declare myself their master who must manipulate them into public certainties of knowledge or relationship. Since they are easy objects for my will, I stand ready to reduce them to nothingness out of my insistence on everything.*²³



²³ Leslie Farber, "Thinking About Will", *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon, 1976, 9 & 11-12.

Suggestions for further study

- Cinema *Map of the Human Heart* (1993) (Dir: Vincent Ward with Jason Scott Lee and Anne Parillaud)
Tender Mercies (1983) (Dir: Bruce Beresford with Robert Duvall and Tess Harper)
Kolya (1996) (Dir: Jan Sverak with Andrej Chalimon and Libuse Safrankova)
- Durckheim, Karlfried, *The Way of Transformation: Daily Life as Spiritual Exercise*, Allen and Unwin, 1971.
- Farber, Leslie "Thinking About Will" in *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide, Drugs and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon Books, 1976,3-12.
-----, "Will & Anxiety" in *Lying, Despair etc.*, 13-34.
-----, "Will and Willfulness in Hysteria" in *Lying, Despair etc.*, 46-63.
- Keenan, Brian, *An Evil Cradling*, Vintage, 1991/1993.
Lynch, William, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1965/1974 – especially 143-158.
- May, Gerald, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, Harper and Row, 1982 – especially chapter 1.
- May, Rollo, *Love and Will*, W W Norton, 1969 – especially chapter 7.
Merton, Thomas "Promethean Theology" in *The New Man*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961, 23-48.
- Van Kaam, Adrian, *The Art of Existential Counseling: A New Perspective in Psychotherapy*, Dimension Books, 1966 – especially 61-104.
-----, *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension Books, 1964/1980 – especially chapter 3.
-----, "Glossary" in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, I, 3 (1980), 464-478.
- Whelan, Michael, *The Call To Be*, Society of St Paul, 1986 – especially chapter 5.



Suggested exercises

1. Do some ordinary things reflectively that you would normally do prelectively – like walking, closing a door, making the bed, vacuuming the floor, cleaning a basin, making a cup of coffee, washing your face, turning on a light switch.

2. Ask yourself a number of times this week: What am I feeling at this moment? It may be that there has been some wilfulness in your life that has suppressed emotions; if that is the case it will be a particularly freeing – though slow – experience for you to listen and let those emotions work themselves out. In particular, pay attention to what happens when you are frustrated.

3. Pay attention to your life situation: Can you say you are fully where you are? Recall the question of God to Adam in the garden: “Where are you?”

