

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by
Michael Whelan SM PhD with Marie Biddle RSJ MA MTh
at Aquinas Academy

UNIT TWO SESSION SEVEN: **The person as willing II**



Aquinas Academy, 141 Harrington St, Sydney NSW 2000
T: 02 9247 4651 F: 02 9252 2476
E: secretary@aquinas-academy.com I: www.aquinas-academy.com

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What is the meaning of existence and life that we find present in the structural options of our violent and oppressive world? The hidden meaning that sustains our present world is the understanding of being and life as knowledge, and the understanding of knowledge as power. This is not something unfamiliar. It would seem to be quite natural. And indeed it would be if human beings did not make the knowledge and power the last word about everything, the criterion of truth and the ultimate basis of human relations. Reason as knowledge did not remain only reason, but was transformed into rationalism. Will as power did not remain only will, it degenerated into power as domination of others. Here is the structural drama that pervades the whole fabric of modern human beings, a drama that came about when mythical thought gave way and reason as the power of discursive thought and discernment took its place.¹



*The consonant life form is **congenial** or in tune with the embodied foundational life form, **compatible** with or attuned to inter- and outer-formation, **compassionate** or in empathy with the consequences of the fallen state of formation or for the vulnerability it entails for human life. ... The will as a formative power is always already pre-directed, in a universal way, to strive after the attainment of the fullness of peace and joy and by implication to strive after the universally necessary means for this attainment: namely, the wholly consonant form of life.²*



Samuel answered: ‘Speak Yahweh your servant is listening’.³



Mary said: ‘You see before you the Lord’s servant, let it happen to me as you have said’.⁴



¹ Leonardo Boff, “Theology of Captivity: The Structure of Modernity”, from a private translation by David C Kelly MM.

² Adrian van Kaam, “Glossary” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 1:3 (November 1980), 461 & 464.

³ 1 Samuel 3:10.

⁴ Luke 1:38.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

* *The alternative to willfulness and will-lessness is willingness – a way of being present in the world that is attentive and self-transcending, seeking participation through facilitation, as opposed to willfulness and will-lessness which are (implicitly at least) inattentive and self-focused, seeking manipulation and mastery.*

* *Human life formation is enhanced to the extent that it is shaped by willingness and diminished to the extent that it is shaped by willfulness and/or will-lessness, no matter what measures of success and failure the culture may use.*



Ways of relating – a common sense view

As a way of moving towards a more formative view of the person as willing, it may be useful to reflect on our experiences of relating with people. How we choose to relate and how we do in fact relate with others, constitutes the heart of living. That is also the essence of spirituality.

Broadly speaking, there are three different ways by which we can relate with people, events and things:

- a. the *way of conversation*,
- b. the *way of mastery* and
- c. the *way of the victim*.

We will paint with fairly broad brush strokes in describing each of these. The idea is to be descriptive rather than definitive.

a. The way of conversation

Let us consider first of all the way of relating we might call the *way of conversation*. In this mode we intend to be *with* the world, not *at* it nor *overcome* by it. The dispositions that are more typical of this way include eagerness to listen effectively, to respect, to wait upon, to trust, to care, to speak the truth in love and a manner marked by freedom and graciousness. This *way of conversation* is Mystery-centred rather than self-centred or even other-centred.⁵

⁵ Individuals who live out the victim mode, may in fact be “other-centred.” That is, instead of a healthy sense of self and an ability to turn up in a gracious and free way and say, “Here I am!”, they place all the emphasis on what they think or feel others want or expect. This kind of “other-centred” behaviour should not be confused with genuine altruism which is grounded in a solid sense of self.

The way of conversation says:

“To live is to participate and facilitate, to know oneself to be part of a mystery.”

Life is seen as mutual, even though the mutuality may not be actually experienced in this or that moment. Life is seen as a constant, gracious unfolding, a pilgrimage centred in the Great Mystery which is the source of the mystery of life itself

The way of conversation depends on a decision for trust in, and abandonment to, the Great Mystery. Living becomes increasingly a free cooperation with grace in community. Human relatedness is more important than any law, creedal formula or organizational structure.

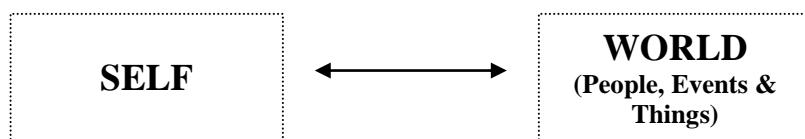
The way of conversation says:

“To live is to affirm Being – in all its manifestations – over non-being, to affirm self-transcendence over self-absorption, to submit to the demands of Being in every ordinary moment.”

The courage to be in this way is sorely tested when “the other” does not respond and take up the conversation – especially when that “other” is God. The “silence of God” is one of the most tormenting of all human experiences. It takes great courage and faith to remain in the conversation alone, facing the silence, the void.⁶

Similarly, it can take great courage and patience to remain in conversation with a person who is pursuing the way of mastery or one who has taken on the role of victim. In some instances, in fact, the issue might require serious discernment as to how much time and energy we ought to put into such a conversation with a person or persons who show no willingness – perhaps even an inability – to reciprocate, because they are caught in the way of mastery or the way of the victim.

We could depict the way of conversation as follows:



⁶ This situation is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Sometimes we can only “keep the appointment”, even when it seems to make no sense.

b. The way of mastery

The *way of mastery* is a deformative way. It represents a pathology of will. In this mode we are *at* the world rather than *with* it. Probably, lurking in this attitude and manner, is also an anxious striving not to be *overcome* by the world. The common references to “winners” and “losers” suggests this ambivalent presence.

The dispositions that are more typical of this mode include aggression (sometimes as *passive-aggression* or at least controlled aggression), impatience, dogmatism, authoritarianism, intolerance, perhaps contempt for “weaker” folk and a manner marked by driveness and a striving – more or less obvious – to be in control. The *way of mastery* is self-centred rather than Mystery-centred, even when it purports to be “religious.” Despite its appearances to the contrary it is a mode of more or less diminished freedom. Willful people may believe they are driving their lives when in fact they are being driven. Anxiety is the typical driver of the willful person.

The *way of mastery* says:

“*To live is to take control.*”

Life is typically seen as an either/or situation where you are *either* a “master” *or* a “victim”. Thus life is made up of “winners” and “losers.” You are on your own when it comes down to it. *If* there is such a thing as the Great Mystery, it cannot be trusted, except to reward the “winners.” Grace – *if* there be such – is that which enables you to gain mastery. The only alternative to willful control – or so it seems to the willful person – is will-less submission. The masterers of this world live in secret terror of becoming victims. That said, a culture that fosters the willful mode as the normal way of living is unlikely to recognise this.

Anxiety about the human condition – which anxiety, by its nature, is nebulous and uncontrollable – must be transformed into fear about specific concrete obstacles and threats which can then be overcome by sufficient courage and effort.⁷ Life, then, is a project of overcoming rather than being overcome.

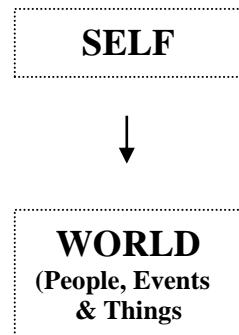
This *way of mastery* disguises anxiety about being a victim and may slip into the *way of the victim* when courage and/or effort falter or fail. Failure can bring on despondency and/or depression. The anger that failure often evokes in the mastering person – whether it is failure of the master or another – is a measure of the anxiety by which he/she is haunted. And the anxiety is about non-being, non-existence, losing one’s place in the world. It is as if he/she is haunted by the thought: “If I do not control I will not exist! I control, therefore I am!”

Our culture tends to favour the *way of mastery*. It is probably fair to say that the impetus of religious training in our culture has been towards the *way of mastery* also. “Conquering faults” and “mastering virtues” and “self-discipline” were

⁷ See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

heavily stressed. This tends to lead to a will-power Christianity that lacks both grace and freedom. It also tends to promote “grocery list confessions,” “try harder sermons,” false guilt and scruples and perhaps a gnawing sense of shame. It is also fertile ground for self-righteousness and judgmentalism.

We could depict the *way of mastery* as follows:



c. The way of the victim

The second deformative way of relating might be called the *way of the victim*. This way also represents a pathology of will. In this mode we are *overcome* by the world, not able to be either *at* it or *with* it. The dispositions that are more typical of this way might include lack of ability to carry through on personal decisions, unwillingness to commit, eagerness to please, over-dependence on what others think or do, lack of confidence, withdrawal, sadness and a manner marked by accommodation and a tendency to settle for much less than one ought. It may manifest itself in otherwise willful people when they meet circumstances they cannot control – in these instances it may be recognized by the constant use of the third person plural (“they …”) accompanied by frustration, agitation and perhaps anger. In its more extreme forms the *way of the victim* may have people withdrawing into chronic illness – physical and/or psychological.⁸ The *way of the victim* is also self-centred rather than Mystery-centred. While the willful person may experience himself/herself – consciously at least – as powerful, the will-less person tends to experience himself/herself as powerless.

⁸ Our highly sophisticated and marvelous medical care system, apart from healing also provides many socially acceptable ways of evading reality when life becomes too burdensome for us. And we should not miss the irony in the way of the victim in seeking an identity through illness: it can be a way to power in a system, especially a system that cares about the sick. As such, there may even be an odd mixture of willfulness caught up in the will-lessness.

The way of the victim says:

“Life is not ‘promise’ but ‘threat’.”

Life is typically seen as disappointment, failure, loss. Life, as with the mastery mode, is made up of “winners” and “losers” and I am fundamentally “a loser.” The Great Mystery beyond the mystery might “exist” but is not “with me” or we see that Great Mystery simply as more or less detached “rescuer” or perhaps even “cruel judge.” There is lot of (generally unacknowledged) grief and (generally unspoken) sadness in the way of the victim.

Chronic gamblers and other addicts may be understood – at least in part – as people who approach life as victims in search of some magical route to mastery. Fundamentalisms and authoritarian systems attract those who live in this *victim mode*. Fundamentalisms and authoritarian systems need *victims*. They also need *masters*. But, for obvious reasons, they cannot abide people who operate according to *the way of conversation*.

We could depict the way of the victim as follows:



Individuals may live, more or less, in one or other of the three modes; it is probably impossible to live exclusively in one mode. Life would probably be intolerable to be exclusively in the mastery mode or victim mode all the time, and the conversation mode is probably too difficult to maintain to the exclusion of the mastery and victim modes all the time.

Ideally, we should foster the *way of conversation* – both with ourselves and our world of people, events and things – and gently, humbly and constantly reaffirm our commitment to that, even in the face of repeated regression to either the *way of mastery* or the *way of the victim*.⁹

⁹ And sometimes all is not what it might seem to be. For example, under the pretence of a *conversation mode* I may in fact be attempting mastery. This is common enough in some of the approaches to “better communications” today, especially where something is to be sold or a contract signed. It may also be found in some “facilitated group work” – especially where there is, for example, an underlying ideology that the group has an “unconscious” which must be

A new paradigm

Authors like Adrian van Kaam, Rollo May, Leslie Farber, William Lynch and Gerald May all point in the direction of recognizing that there is much more to the person as willing than the mere accomplishment and mastery of tasks. For example, Leslie Farber writes:

Although the word (will) has been used as a synonym for decision, choice, intention, passion, spirit, determination, control or volition, my use of the term is general enough to include all these qualities: I understand will to be the category through which we examine that portion of our life which is the mover of our life in a direction or toward an objective in time. In other words, through will I can arbitrarily raise my hand at this instant or prepare this essay over a period of time. Will, then, is the mover of actions both trivial and important. But now I must distinguish between what I call the two realms of will. ... I suggest that the reader imagine some sports activity that interests him or her – tennis for example. When our game is most fluid and effortless, we cannot really be said to be planning our shots and strategies: if we are thinking about the game, we are not aware of thinking; though will is involved in our shots and maneuvers, we cannot be said to be aware of will itself. We are, so to speak, of a piece – mind and body seamlessly and unselfconsciously joined in a totality. Will is so wedded to our faculties, our perceptions, our motor possibilities that it may be said to be unconscious in this first realm. It is only after the fact, retrospectively, that we can infer the place of will, thought, footwork and other components. Now let us assume that because of our opponents or ourselves, our game goes badly, requiring us to assess our failure. ‘It is the forehand that’s our fault,’ we say. ‘Too slow and too much topspin.’ Will, clearly, has become conscious, for now we will ourselves to stroke the ball differently and are conscious of our willing. This ordinary state of affairs, in which will can be experienced consciously, I term the second realm of will.

Let me contrast these two realms of will a bit more. The first realm of will moves in a direction rather than toward a particular object. Our tennis playing has no particular object, such as a particular shot or point, but merely pursues its own direction, which is playing and winning, playing and winning, and then going home. Direction, here, is to be understood not as an ideal goal toward which we press, however much we falter, but rather as a way interspersed with, yet not obstructed by, worldly detail and worldly objective. Direction, therefore, is a way whose end cannot be known – a way open to

“surfaced” and in order to provoke this the facilitator remains silent. It may also be fair to assume that lurking under every *mastery mode* is someone who feels himself/herself to be potentially or actually a victim. Some people may use a *victim mode* to gain mastery.

possibility, including the possibility of failure. While this realm must, to some degree, remain impenetrable to inspection, its predominant experience is one of freedom – the freedom to think, speak, and act forthrightly and responsibly, without blinking the hazards such freedom entails. No human relation need occur within this first realm. Nevertheless relation is always a dialogic potentiality.

In the second realm of will, will moves us toward a particular objective, all such movement being either conscious or potentially conscious. This could be said to be a utilitarian will, in that we do this to get that. We grasp the racket so that its face is more perpendicular, and as the serve arrives, rush to it and hit more energetically – all this willing in order to achieve a more effective forehand shot. Here the experience is not that of freedom, as in the first realm, but of conscious willing, successful or not. It goes without saying that in our utter absorption with this forehand we are less available to relation should it arrive.¹⁰

Farber goes on to suggest that our period of history might aptly be called “The Age of the Disordered Will” because it generally bypasses the first realm and assigns the whole of life to the second realm or “utilitarian will.” And, Farber argues, one of the more distressing and peculiar consequences of this misapplication of “utilitarian will” is an increase in our anxiety.¹¹ Farber says:

Anxiety is that range of distress which attends willing what cannot be willed.¹²

In the passage above, Farber awakens us to three significant points we ought to be mindful of in our work of developing a new and more life-giving way of understanding the person as willing:

- Firstly, the person as willing shares with all the other faculties of the human person, a radical openness towards the “possible;” this is in fact an openness

¹⁰ Leslie Farber, “Thinking About Will”, *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon, 1976, 9 & 5-6.

¹¹ Cf Leslie Farber, “Will and Anxiety”, *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide and the Good Life*, Harper Colophon, 1976, 9 & 13-34. Note also his observation in the earlier essay: “I can will (ie use utilitarian 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” (“Thinking about Will”, *Op cit*, 7).

¹² *Op cit*, 27. We could wonder here about the influence of rationalism. It seems likely that the rationalistic approach to life sees a direct line between thought, decision and action. This may be the case at times. However, in the more important issues of life and in the deeper movements of life formation as such, this is not the case. Such a simplistic view is a formula for willfulness and/or will-lessness.

to the Transcendent; there is a “universal,” non-specific natural inclination of the person as willing; we lean into life, as it were, naturally seeking the “more than” and the “beyond;” in specific concrete activities – such as playing a game of tennis – this is manifest as an “unconscious” movement, seemingly with no particular objective – simply in a “direction;” one might even use words such as “letting go,” “flowing with,” “being in the zone,” “being on song,” “surrendering to the moment” and “participating in,” to describe this fundamental human experience; it is also typically experienced as harmonious and pleasing; the freedom in that sort of human experience – whether it is a game of tennis or a cup of coffee with a friend, an hour of reading or cooking a meal, mowing the lawn or doing a professional task – is satisfying; it is unself-conscious and self-forgetful; how we cherish such moments of harmony – probably much more rare in our lives these days than they ought to be.

- The second significant point that Farber raises is that the person as willing is *both* non-specific openness and leaning into life as such, implicitly affirming all that is, *and* specific and deliberate commitment and functional endeavor, implicitly defining this or that tiny concrete segment of life; limitlessness must be held in tension with limits, infinitude with boundaries, vision with practicalities; to be human is, therefore, to be in the apparent contradiction of always being open and at the same time bringing closure in this moment, being concretely here and now and at the same time engaging the “more than,” the “beyond;” in the person as willing we find an “in-betweeness” that can be unnerving, exciting, threatening, it can be repressed but not eradicated, it can also be embraced and enjoyed as profoundly life-giving.
- The third significant point suggested by Leslie Farber concerns the relationship between these two – the willing as openness to Being in all its manifestations, and the willing as concrete, focused on this or that manifestation of Being; the second is subsequent to and utterly dependent on the first, as servant to master; the first provides the ground and basic stance from which we then engage the second; when we lose sight of this right order and relationship, our willing becomes deformative.

The way of conversation as described above is the way of willingness or healthy willing. This willingness is probably best identified by the grace and freedom that accompany it. On the face of it, the willing person and the willful person might concretely seem to achieve the same ends – for example, cooking a meal, writing a letter or developing say the virtue of patience. The willing person’s manner and the mood he or she creates along with this concrete end, will indicate that their action is not ego-centred but Mystery-centred, that they are more intent on participating than competing, that they want to facilitate something rather than impose something. In a word, their willingness will be marked by grace and freedom. Willfulness and will-less are notable for their lack of both grace and

freedom. Both have string attached. There is another unspoken agenda being played out.

The person as willing – transcendent and functional possibilities¹³

We can think of willing as an *intra-formative power which enables us to participate in the formation mystery by placing ourselves purposefully there*. The person as willing manifests the radical interdependence of the transcendent and functional possibilities of life formation. The person as willing as *transcendent possibility* is a potential to be purposefully there, in the world, as engaging the “more than,” as openness to the Transcendent and as grounded in the Great Mystery.

The person as willing as transcendent possibility, is epitomized in such activities and dispositions as creative waiting, staying with, facilitation, submitting to what is, abandonment to the Great Mystery. The determination of the person as willing in this way is non-specific. That is, he/she has no definite concrete aim, no specific task to achieve – just openness and availability to the Great Mystery and the ways of that Mystery. This can be the basis of great courage and enduring commitment in situations in which the concrete reality appears to be against us or even hostile to us.

The person as willing as *functional possibility* is a potential to be purposefully there, in the world, as bringing practical closure on this or that situation or task. The person is thus grounded in the immediate and the concrete. The person as willing in this way is epitomized by immediate action, completing tasks, specific planning, control, setting limits, finding solutions. The determination of the person as willing in this way is specific. That is, he/she has a more or less definite concrete aim, a specific job to do.

It is essential to see the transcendent and functional dimensions as necessarily interdependent. The transcendent is the ground out of which we live; the functional enables us to get on with the business and tasks of living in practical and realistic ways. The latter is the servant of the former and must always emerge within the context of the former.



¹³ See separate sheet for diagrammatic presentation of what follows.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

* *The Christian person as willing is deliberately and consciously grounded in the reality of God's action in the world in and through Jesus Christ, so that in every movement of life formation he/she seeks cooperation with grace and manifests that grace and the freedom it brings in his/her being and bearing.*



The biblical vision

There is an expression in the tradition that invites us into the willing approach to life: “The grace of the present moment.” Perhaps the best expression of this is found in the writings of the Jesuit, Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1851). He writes:

God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment.... The events of each moment are stamped with the will of God... we find all that is necessary in the present moment. If we have abandoned ourselves to God, there is only one rule for us: the duty of the present moment.¹⁴

This echoes the words of Jesus:

My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.¹⁵

For the willing person, the one who desires to live a life grounded in the vision revealed in the Bible, the real world is the world which tells us of the loving Presence of God in an infinite variety of ways. For such a person, the real is a manifestation of the Real. In our Catholic Tradition we refer to this as sacramentality – everything points to and is evocative of the Great Mystery we call God. St Augustine says the world is our “first bible.” Evagrius of Pontus (late 4th century) tells of a learned man who was perplexed that the great Desert Father Anthony had no library:

One of the wise men of that time went to find the holy man Anthony and asked him, ‘Father, how can you be happy when you are deprived of the consolation books can give?’ Anthony replied, ‘My philosopher friend, my book is the

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Image, 1975, 10. I recommend this book. I also recommend Br Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

¹⁵ John 4:34.

*nature of creatures; and this book is always in front of me when I want to read the words of God.*¹⁶

The consciousness implicit here is underpinned and permeated by the conviction that God's promise is real and is always, in every moment and every situation being fulfilled: "I am with you!" It is a consciousness that experiences life as Covenant.

Human life formation is thus a process of free cooperation with the Creator God, the One who desires nothing more than to love us into freedom through every moment of every day, in every circumstance and every event, through trials and triumphs.

I am made by God – in the image and likeness of the eternally wise, infinitely lovable and ever-faithful God – and my purpose is written by God into my very being. My being *is* my purpose. This purpose makes itself felt as conscience, vocation, and as an "existential must" that cannot be refused if I am to thrive. Hence the import of Jesus' reminder:

*What does it profit if you gain the whole world but lose your very self?*¹⁷

Our freedom is found in our willingness to be what we must be and do what we must do.

We all have a deep, natural urge towards the good, the true, the one and the beautiful. But all formation is fallen formation – it does not just happen, as if automatically. We must choose and act, and we must do so with wisdom and discernment, often with courage and endurance. It is in our best interests to become as deeply imbued as we possibly can with the plan of God – through engaging Sacred Scripture, in liturgy and communal worship as well as personal silence and contemplation, by opening ourselves to the movements of the Spirit manifest in the experiences of the Christian community passed on through the ages, through the manifestations of the Spirit in our very beings here and now.

The following biblical texts capture something of this vision:

- '*I shall be with you*'. ... '*I am he who is*'.¹⁸
- *I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves.*¹⁹

¹⁶ Evagrius of Pontus, *Practicus or the Monk*, cited by Oliver Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City Press, 1995, 215.

¹⁷ Matthew 16:26.

¹⁸ Exodus 3:12 & 14. See the whole of this passage – 3:1-15.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:1. This is the beginning of the so-called Ten Commandments. You might find it helpful to read the whole of this section reflectively.

- Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh. You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul with all your strength.²⁰
- Give thanks to Yahweh for his love endures forever.²¹
- You created my inmost self, knit me together in my mother's womb.²²
- Wisdom is brilliant, she never fades. By those who love her she is readily seen.²³
- That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life.²⁴
- The Word became flesh; He lived among us.²⁵
- Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies it remains only a single grain.²⁶
- 'It is fulfilled'. Bowing his head he yielded up his spirit.²⁷

Fostering willingness

We can foster willingness in our lives by remembering three simple things:

- a. The fundamental importance of listening,
- b. The fact that healthy life formation is always self-transcending and
- c. The importance of being indirect when seeking a desirable attribute.

a. Listen!

It is no accident that St Benedict begins his *Rule* with the instruction that those who seek God must listen. Listening is so fundamental to healthy Christian life formation that we could say all else will be distorted if we are not constantly developing the ability to listen.

St Benedict, in the same place, urges us “to listen with the ears of the heart.” This listening is a radical way of being in the world. To learn to listen in this sense is as basic and as important as learning to breathe. The assumption is that God seeks us and desires to meet us in every moment of every day. Our listening is

²⁰ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

²¹ Psalm 118:1. The NJB uses the English word *love* to translate the Hebrew word *hesed* in this Psalm. The KJV uses the English word *mercy*. The word *hesed* is an immensely rich one and has no satisfactory English equivalent, especially when you consider its connotations as applying to the ever-faithful God of the Covenant. You might find it helpful to spend some time reflecting on this Psalm.

²² Psalm 139:13. See the whole of this magnificent Psalm in praise of the Creator God.

²³ Wisdom 6:12. See this whole section, verses 12-21.

²⁴ Luke 12:22. See this whole section, verses 22-32.

²⁵ John 1:14.

²⁶ John 12:24.

²⁷ John 19:30.

longing to reconnect, it is a yearning that makes us available to the breath of the Spirit in this place.

The willing person – in contrast to the willful or will-less person – is actively *attentive* and *listening* with the ears of the heart. Willingness always proceeds with the expectation of grace and freedom in everything. Willingness knows that God is *here in this place*. Willingness is alert living.²⁸

b. Self-transcendence

The second distinguishing characteristic of willingness is its *self-transcending* movement. Willingness bespeaks a life formation process grounded in the Great Mystery, not mere ego. When I am truly willing, I have begun to discover my true self in God. When willingness is my predominant way of being in the world my centre of gravity is the Great Mystery, revealed to us in the First Testament and further revealed in the Second Testament, in and through Jesus of Nazareth.²⁹

Having my centre of gravity in the Great Mystery is, in the end, the *only* way I can be willing rather than willful or will-less. The more I become willing, the more I am drawn beyond myself, allowing me to become increasingly empty, available and transparent, a true sacrament of the Great Mystery, a place where the Incarnation can continue. I will know the remarkable insight and import of St Paul's words:

*For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*³⁰

c. Indirectness

There is a third, very practical, distinguishing characteristic of willingness. It emerges specifically when we intend deeper, more radical life-changing goals. Willingness is focused ultimately on God and what God is doing and will therefore be *indirect* and *oblique* with regard to what it intends immediately and concretely. The realization of those concrete tasks and intentions come, as it were, as a by product.

For example, suppose I want to be more patient. The first thing I recommend is do

²⁸ I highly recommend Eugene T Gendlin's little book, *Focusing*. I know of no better way of teaching people the simple art of listening to what is happening within. The process of “focusing” is then an excellent basis for contemplative prayer, *lectio divina* and the general business of being an alert participant in living.

²⁹ See Ephesians 1:3-14.

³⁰ 2Corinthians 4:6-7.

not aim directly at patience, as if it was some kind of functional task to complete or difficulty to master. Rather, put your energies and talents into listening as honestly and effectively as you can to what is happening when you experience yourself as *impatient*. Let the truth be heard and embraced, no matter how embarrassing it may appear to be. Let the truth set you free. Patience thus overtakes you, it emerges in and through the truth. Patience – like any of those attributes we call “virtues” – is simply another name for God. God’s presence is a given. There are just factors that block God’s presence bursting forth and loving us infinitely and loving others infinitely through us. God waits for us. We must, as Meister Eckhart says, let God be God in us.

Whenever I experience the opposite characteristics, characteristics that are in some way hostile to this attentiveness and self-transcendence and indirectness, I should pay careful attention. The most practical question I can ask myself at any moment of the day is, “What is happening here?”

Such counter-characteristics may point to willfulness or will-lessness. I need to hear that and submit to the truth of it. If there is willfulness or will-lessness there, my response must be one of willingness. It is very tempting to try and deal with willfulness and will-lessness in willful ways. That is a formula for despair.

It hardly needs to be stated that willingness is always deeply conscious of grace. When I am willing I am waiting on grace, available to the breath of God to move me and to move through me. Willingness respects the fundamental movement of life formation as graced emergence.

Willingness is alert and active attention, always ready to move in the ways that seem appropriate. The willing person will tend to be grateful. By way of contrast, the willful person will tend not to have that grateful disposition. The willing person is typically a much more attractive person to those who are seeking the depths. (The willful person might be more attractive, of course, to someone who is ambitious for success as the world sees it.)

Faced with our efforts to be better persons, we may be seduced into willful behaviours by our conscientious efforts to outgrow manifestations of those traits we do not admire. Adrian van Kaam offers wise advice:

The will is always able to take a stand even if the situation is physically or psychologically unchangeable for the moment. This is also true on the boundary situations of sin and neurosis. When I am the victim of a habitual sin or of a neurosis, then my freedom and responsibility are diminished. However, I should not underestimate the responsibility which remains to me in spite of the fact that I cannot at once escape my neurotic or sinful reactions. It is the acceptance of this last shred of responsibility which can save me when I am moved by grace. If I desire to survive spiritually, there is only one way, namely, not to identify myself with my sinful or neurotic habit, but to assume some attitude against it whenever and to the degree that I am still able to do so. It is

necessary for me to maintain some areas of freedom of thought and activity, however insignificant and seemingly ineffective, against the onslaught of passion, habit, and neurosis. I must hold on to this last possibility of “not totally consenting interiorly” to that which seems to draw me in without the possibility of resistance. This preservation of a conviction of freedom, even if it does not help me to transcend totally the symptoms of neurosis and sin, will at least preserve my awareness of a last vestige of that human dignity which extends as far as freedom does. Without this awareness, everything seems lost. It is in this last outpost and refuge of my disturbed existence that grace may move me to turn to God in a dialogue between humble contrition and infinite mercy. The Power and the Glory, a novel by Graham Greene which reports the dialogue between the weak will of a priest and his Lord, is representative of such a boundary situation which tomorrow may be mine.³¹

I can thus take some stand even in the situations of sin, neurosis, or organic affliction. I can do so because my will has an existential or dialectical nature. My will is not, as we have seen, the absolute ruler imagined by the will-power Christian. Nor am I the will-less product of my past, my impulses, passions, or environment. My will is my ability to respond to reality as it reveals itself to me in a situation, even when I am not able to change this reality in all its factual aspects. My ability to respond is transformed and nourished by grace. This transformation enables me to respond freely to God and to His will as They manifest Themselves in my life situation. What the Lord allows in a given situation escapes my manipulation. My life situation is a challenge, an invitation, an appeal which comes to meet me in its uniqueness. It demands my personal response. It is not of my making; rather, it makes me while I respond faithfully to its manifestations. Therefore, I-as-religiously-willing am fundamentally ‘openness’ and ‘affirmation.’ If I am truly religious, I am open to the presence of the divine. At the same time, my life becomes increasingly an affirmation of the divine will and presence. My religious will becomes unconditional commitment and surrender to His mysterious design. In other words, I-as-religious-will am a fundamental readiness to face and affirm God’s presence as it reveals itself in my daily situation.

The manifold reality which God allows to be in and around me manifests itself to me daily if I am open to its message. To be willing is to be open, whereas unwillingness is the refusal to listen to the message of reality. At every moment I can open or close myself to the intimations of God’s will. When I am open I am receptive with my whole being, not only with my logical mind but also with my intuition, not only with my eyes and ears but also with my emotional

³¹ Adrian van Kaam, *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension Books, 1964/1980, 101-102.

sensitivity, not only with my imagination but also with my memory, for my past experience enlightens me concerning the situation of the moment.

I-as-willing am thus openness to all revelation of reality that Providence allows in my situation. This willing openness is the permanent source of the manifold moods, feelings, memories, imaginations, and perceptions which particularize, as it were, my fundamental openness. They are special modifications of my primordial openness to my situation. For example, if I decide to grow to a truly religious existence, I become increasingly a willing openness for all manifestations of the presence of God in the reality which surrounds me. This willingness to experience the Lord in my life leads to a special openness to all my modalities of existence. When I walk in the country, I see with a new eye the beauty of trees and flowers. I see and hear with eyes and ears like those of St. Francis, whose willing openness to God gave him a fresh perception of the sun, the moon, the stars, and even the graceful animals playing in forest and stream. Moreover, my emotional modality of existence shares in this transformation. When I hear a poem or a sermon which is a moving expression of God's love, I may experience deep joy or awe; my willing openness inclines my emotions to experience God also on this level of my existence. When I must speak of God, my willing openness prompts my memory to recall the tangible marks of His presence in my past. Thus my openness guides me to recollect past knowledge and experience to meet my present need.³²



³² Adrian van Kaam, *op cit*, 105-107.

Snippets for meditation³³

(1) “When do we, as human beings, experience ourselves as being most ourselves? It is true that, in such experiences, our bodies are experienced as harmonic and vitalized, but it is also true that the focus is not on the body. In fact, if we did attend to the body in such experiences, we would become self-conscious and awkward. It is also true that our rationality, the ego aspect, is often in tune and available to us in such experiences. But, there is also a way in which the experience transcends our thoughts. We may say, especially in these experiences, that we are ahead of our thoughts and it is only in later reflection that we really “know” fully what we were doing. These statements are not meant to glorify impulsivity as a mode of existence; to say that our most characteristic human activity is not completely rational does not mean that irrationality is the ideal. It is meant as a descriptive statement. It is also true that in our most authentic moments we experience greater openness to others but, even if another is involved, as in therapeutic caring, we are focused on the other and may not even be aware that we are in tune with him. However, attempts to make the social relationship the focus of our attention inevitably fail. Nothing breaks true communication faster than the injunction, “Now, let’s really communicate.” Obviously, all three aspects are involved but no one or combination of the three really describes what is most central in these moments. Nor are these moments of experiencing ourselves as more fully ourselves necessarily esoteric or “far-out” experiences. They happen in ordinary life to ordinary people.”³⁴



(2) “Spiritual formation cannot be forced, only prepared for. Hence its means cannot be those of conquest, but only of facilitation and preparation.”³⁵



(3) “Without a consciousness of truth itself, doubt of truth would be impossible.”³⁶



(4) “Psychotherapy, and the problems which lead people to come in numbers for psychological help, emerge at a particular point in the historical development of a culture – that is the point where the myths and symbols of the culture disintegrate.

³³ Se also the Snippets from Unit One, Session Three, “The Distinctively Human”.

³⁴ Richard Knowles, *Human Development and Human Possibility: Erikson in the Light of Heidegger*, University Press of America, 1986, 4.

³⁵ Adrian van Kaam, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, I, 2 (1980), 303.

³⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, Fontana Library, 1962, 155.

The values of the culture are mediated by these myths and symbols, and with their breakdown comes the inner conflict which sends people to psychotherapy. ”³⁷



(5) “*Our refusal (to be absolutes/gods) will anger the sick for a time, but it will be nothing compared to the hatred for the one who ascends the throne. That will be hatred of those who have taken away the souls of men. We can get along without our souls for a little while in life, but not for long. The time often asked for us today, by so many forces in our culture, is much too long. That is one reason, perhaps the greatest, why so many are so sick. It will always be true therefore that the hope of the sick lies in destroying their idols and restoring their own souls. As for the well, the question is: how can they help? If they have good will and wisdom, too, let them at least stay off the mighty throne of God. Such is the need and such the demand of people for gods and absolutes, that it will often be wise to descend slowly but firmly from the throne. It is a pity that this must be. But the fact that there is one God and no more is for all of us, the well and the ill, the most difficult proposition in this world.* ”³⁸



(6) “*We love out of leisure from self-concern, and we are always self-concerned unless we know that someone other than ourself is prepared to maintain the significance of our being.* ”³⁹



(7) (Writing of young men entering the Cistercian monastery in the 1960’s:) “*It is quite true that most Americans suffer a prolonged and severe identity crisis and many never really pull through it at all. Hence we can expect postulants to come to us in the midst of this crisis. But we will not solve it for them (and indeed no one can solve it for them anyway) if we assume that ‘identity’ means something akin to ‘character building’ as propounded in the do-it-yourself manuals for success in dynamic ‘strong personality’ (whatever that may be). A monastic spirituality that assumes that the individual is a center of volitional force that is supposed to exert itself upon or against a world outside and around it can at best only perpetuate the illusory identity which no man in his right man would consent to have: that of a mythical and detached ‘subject’ existing entirely outside all ‘objective’ reality, able to understand everything by pure reason and to dominate everything by his own*

³⁷ Rollo May, “Myths and Culture: Their Death and Transformation” in *Cross Currents*, XXXIII:1 (Spring 1983), 1-16.

³⁸ William Lynch, *Images of Hope*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1974, 125.

³⁹ Shirley Sugerman, *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism*, Westminster Press, 54f.

will. Such an identity would not exist except as a caricature of God. And it is unfortunately true that many men have tried to solve their identity problem by this fraudulent imitation of what they imagine their Creator to be. The problem is much more subtle than that. It is resolved only by a much deeper and much more mysterious commitment that begins with the acceptance of a place and a destiny which one can never completely understand because it belongs not simply to an ordered and natural system of laws, but to a supernatural order of grace and love, an order of freedom in which nothing is scientifically predictable and everything has to be taken as a wager, with daring and unbounded trust.”⁴⁰



(8) Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your spirit and light. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of Yours. Shine through me, and be so in me, that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as to be a light to others. The light, O Jesus, will be all from you; none of it will be mine. It will be you shining on others through me. Let me thus praise You in the way which You love best, by shining on those around me. Let me preach You without preaching, not by words, but by my example; by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you. Amen.⁴¹



(9) God reveals himself where there is anyone who respects life, who desires the light, who seeks to love. Every time you open yourself to life, every time you act the truth, every time you love, God is there in your action.⁴²



⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Image Books, 1973, 59-60.

⁴¹ Prayer of Cardinal John Henry Newman for the Grace to Radiate Christ.

⁴² Carlo Carretto, *The Desert in the City*, Collins, 1979, 6.

Suggestions for further reading

- Arnold, J *Escape Routes: For People Who Feel Trapped in Life's Hells*
- Buechner, Frederick *Telling the Truth*
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Prayers from Prison*, Fortress Press, 1978.
- Casey, Michael *Truthful Living*
- Chittister, Joan *The Rule of St Benedict*
- De Mello, Anthony *Sadhana*
- Cinema
Stones for Ibarra (1988) (Dir: Jack Gold with Glenn Close and Keith Carradine)
Dead Poets Society (1989) (Dir: Peter Weir with Robin Williams)
Falling Down (1993) (Dir: Joel Schumacher with Michael Douglas)
Un Coeur en Hiver (A Heart in Winter) – French with subtitles
- De Caussade, Jean-Pierre *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, New York, Image, 1975, 10.
- Durckheim, Karlfried, *The Way of Transformation: Daily Life as Spiritual Exercise*, Allen and Unwin, 1971.
- Gruen, A *Heaven Begins Within You*
- Lawrence, Brother *The Practice of the Presence of God*
- 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.
Addiction and Grace
Love and Will, W W Norton, 1969 – especially chapter 7.
- , *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.
- Van Kaam, Adrian, *The Call To Be*, Society of St Paul, 1986 – especially chapter 5.
- , *Whelan, Michael*



Suggested exercises

1. Observe other people this week; become mindful of their presence; think of each person as a “story” – a tragic-comic story like you. No adult remains untouched by tragedy in some form; all of us share something of the absurdity of existence. Forget your own struggles for a moment and consider the struggles and ambiguities of someone else’s life, the absurdities they must wrestle with.
2. When you think of it this week, pray the prayer: “Into your hands Lord I commend my spirit”. Say it gently, mindful of Jesus and his disposition towards the Father.
3. What is the biggest challenge for you at this point in your life? Are you addressing it in the manner of *willingness*? Are there any choices you need to make, actions you need to take? Can you identify in any way with the spirit of Mary, the mother of Jesus: “You see before you the Lord’s servant, let it happen as you have said”? (See Luke 1:39)

