

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by  
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at Aquinas Academy

## UNIT THREE SESSION SIX: Dispositions



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*The finest thing that we can experience is mystery. It is the fundamental emotion that is at the roots of true science. Those who cannot know it, those who cannot admire, those who are no longer capable of experiencing a sense of wonder, might as well be dead.*<sup>1</sup>



*What gives our lives coherence and consistency? Is it perhaps the acts that weave our days together? It seems improbable that they could provide a sufficient explanation because, taken by themselves, they constitute only a collection of unrelated events. What creates continuity in life is not particular acts as such. The secret of life's cohesion seems to reside in a flexible constellation of lasting dispositions that form the foundation of these acts. Together they dispose us to act coherently and in tune with the direction we have chosen to follow.*<sup>2</sup>



*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. .... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. .... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, and now my eyes see you .....*<sup>3</sup>



*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein, from 1932 recording.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality, Volume II: Human Formation*, Crossroad, 1985, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Job 42:1-6.

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2:20.

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

***\* Human behaviour is grounded in and shaped by innate and/or acquired dispositions.***

***\* In a healthy life formation process close and careful attention is paid to the development of formative dispositions and the re-formation of deformative dispositions.***



### **How did you start this day?**

The alarm went. How did you feel? Well-rested? Tired? Crabby? Pleased to greet the new day? You went about the business of preparing for the day. Were there other people around? If so, how did you greet them? You got yourself some breakfast – more than likely did things that you have done many times before. Then you set about the different tasks that were part of this day. And so you proceeded.

There is a marked pre-reflective quality to daily routines – getting out of bed, standing up, going to the bathroom, getting dressed, grooming ourselves, walking to the kitchen, preparing the food, greeting people and so on. We depend – albeit implicitly for the most part – on things just being the way they always are, more or less.

If we discovered, for example, that the bathroom had been flooded during the night or the power was off or someone had used the last of the milk and put the empty container back in the fridge or our legs did give way when we tried to stand up, we would quickly realize just how much we take for granted and how much we rely on habit and routine in any given day.

And at those times when we are constantly having to think carefully about every movement and deliberately choose the way ahead, we are, typically, put under more stress and must use more energy to proceed. We realize that it would be impossible to live that way all the time, every minute of every day.<sup>5</sup>

One of the functions of culture, for example, is to save us from constantly having to make decisions about every little thing every day. Thus we have our accepted rituals and symbols, customs and habits, laws and routines, a multitude of “social fictions” that form a web of life within which we move with some reassuring predictability each day.

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<sup>5</sup> We must make allowances for that exception, the person who thrives on crises and chaotic situations. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this type, Oscar Schindler, became the main character of the film *Schindler's List*. Schindler was a hero amidst the chaos of the war but a failure at life when peace broke out.

Anthropologists speak of *context* to describe this web of social structures. Where the social web is highly developed, where much is taken for granted and much expected, anthropologists speak of *high context*. Where the social web is not so highly developed, where less is taken for granted and less expected, anthropologists speak of *low context*. For example, Japanese society tends to be *high context* whereas Australian society tends to be *low context*.<sup>6</sup>

Athletes – especially in team sports – are aware of the same principles. This is why they spend a lot of time training. When they enter the sports arena, they need to be able to take for granted the basic movements and skills, they do not want to be consciously thinking about them and trying to deliberately apply them. And so it is with any human endeavour if it is to attain a high level of performance – ballet, carpentry, surgery, gymnastics, running an office, and so on. A certain practice that allows forgetfulness is essential to both our efficiency and our sanity.

Human life moves towards a higher level of attainment and efficiency when we are *pre-disposed* to that realm of living, whether by training and practice or natural endowment or both. If this is so obviously the case with the mundane matters of life and the more challenging matters of functional ambition, is it not reasonable to expect that it will also apply just as much if not more so to our *transcendent aspirations*? That is, if we aspire to be good people, people of integrity and depth of humanity, ought we not spend a good deal of time and effort on developing appropriate *dispositions*?

## **Some underlying principles**

### a. Life is a gift

One of the central principles to emerge from our reflections so far is that my life is first and last a gift. Yes, I am able to do much – or little – with the gift. But life is first and last given. Life is gracious, even if we do at times have look hard to discover that grace.

### b. The Great Mystery in the fields of living

Secondly, that gift is lived out in the context of the constant giving and receiving of successive formation fields<sup>7</sup> which are, in turn, particular concrete and specific manifestations of the mystery.<sup>8</sup> That mystery, in turn, is but a dim manifestation of the Great Mystery, the Source of all that is.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Edward T Hall, *Beyond Culture*, Doubleday, 1977, especially Chapters 6 (“Context and Meaning”), 7 (“Contexts, High and Low”) and 8 (“Why Context?”).

<sup>7</sup> See Unit One, Session Four of this course.

<sup>8</sup> See Unit One, Session Two of this course.

<sup>9</sup> Recall our definition of mystery as *inexhaustible intelligibility*. We encounter in each moment, everywhere.

### c. Contrasting types of thinking

Thirdly, therefore, it is appropriate to think of our lives primarily and most fundamentally in terms of:

- *facilitation* – rather than mastery,
- *participation* – rather than manipulation,
- *emergence* – rather than imposition,
- *cooperation* – rather than competition,
- *awe* – rather than rational analysis,
- *reverence* – rather than judgment,
- *community* – rather than individualism (“we”, “us” and “ours” rather than “I”, “me” and “mine”.)
- *self-transcendence* – rather than self-absorption.

There are, of course, times when it will be entirely appropriate to seek mastery or even manipulation; times when imposition and competition may be called for. There will be times when expressions of individuality and self-sufficiency are called for. These distinctions are meant to highlight a fundamental emphasis rather than indicate some kind of exclusion. Typically, a healthy life formation process will be characterized more by those things named in the left hand column than those named in the right hand column. Can you think of other contrasts that might highlight a particular – and preferable – way of being disposed towards people, events and things?

### d. Transcendent aspirations and functional ambitions

Fourthly, those higher expressions of humanity – such as compassion, wisdom, mercy, forgiveness, patience, courage, forbearance, generosity and so on – expressions we might properly call *virtues*, fall within the realm of transcendent aspirations rather than functional ambitions.<sup>10</sup> Thus, I cannot pursue aspirations such as compassion and wisdom in the same way I might pursue ambitions such as the skill of touch-typing or doing brain surgery. I master the latter but facilitate the former.<sup>11</sup> If I do master the keyboard and learn to be an efficient touch-typist, I can justifiably be proud of my efforts. If, on the other hand, I become a compassionate person, I am filled with gratitude that the Great Mystery would be manifest in the world through me in this way.<sup>12</sup> Although I might have taken very deliberate steps

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<sup>10</sup> See “Structural Self” in Unit Two, Session Two of this course.

<sup>11</sup> Though, of course, even in the processes of *mastery* – especially as it is applied to higher skills such as brain surgery – there will inevitably be an element of *facilitation*.

<sup>12</sup> Here is a little test you might try: When I catch myself being virtuous (say, patient, generous, merciful and so on) is my first or most basic reaction one of *satisfaction* or one of *gratitude*? If my most basic reaction is one of *satisfaction*, it might suggest that the pursuit of virtue is in fact a

to facilitate the emergence of compassion, at no point can I dare claim that I mastered it or that I am the origin of it. Being compassionate is actually a truly humbling experience. The grace of it evokes graciousness in us. Beware the “virtuous person” who is not gracious.

e. Living is an inside-out process

Fifthly, we can say that human life formation is essentially an *inside-out process* rather than an *outside-in process*. That is, life is an unfolding that happens, on the one hand, because of the transcendent beings that we are, with inbuilt dynamism and purpose, and on the other hand, because of the decisions we make and the actions we take to facilitate the potential that we are. Life formation is liberation, the emergence of our best potential. Thus we come to be what we most deeply are. We are a graced emergence, we come forth, our lives unfold.

## **Developing good dispositions**

a. Innate dispositions

It seems reasonable to suggest that we are all born with some dispositions which enable us and incline us to engage the world of people, events and things in certain ways. In other words, we are disposed in one way or another that differentiates us from others. One person may have a particular disposition for working with numbers, another with words and yet another with images; this one has a particular disposition for running quickly, another for physical strength and yet another for agility; this one a disposition for winning people over, another for concentrated study and yet another for singing, and so on. Some people are abundantly endowed with all sorts of innate dispositions, others seem to be not so well endowed or even quite deprived. Whatever the case may be, we all recognise that it is not our innate dispositions that make us “good people” or people with a “depth of humanity,” but what we do with what we are given by life. Our response is always the key.

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*functional ambition* and still ego-focused for me. If, on the other hand, my most basic reaction is one of *gratitude*, that might suggest that the pursuit of virtue is in fact a *transcendent aspiration* and appreciated as a moment of *grace*. This latter reaction would seem to be the healthier one.

## b. Acquired dispositions

There will sometimes be a blurring of the boundaries between those dispositions that are innate and those that have acquired. For example, I may have grown up in a very functionalistic environment and developed skills that got me into a career but I never averted to the fact that I have an innate disposition for writing poetry or that actually am more disposed to introversion than extroversion. I may discover this late in life with great relief and relish and perhaps some regrets. This reminds us of the critical role of attention and listening and growing in self-awareness from the very beginning of our lives. One of the common enjoyments of the last half of life can be the discovery of innate dispositions that remained latent because I was too preoccupied with a career or caught up in compulsive behaviours arising out of inner conflicts.

## c. Acquiring formative dispositions and reforming deformative dispositions

However, it is the acquisition and development of formative dispositions and the reformation of deformative dispositions that probably presents us all with the greatest challenge. It also probably presents us all – potentially at least – with the greatest cause for inner peace or inner turmoil, hope or despair. It is a challenge full of surprises and paradoxes.

Consider a mundane example. If I have an innate disposition for playing the piano, that disposition will not flourish unless I develop it, discipline<sup>13</sup> it and support it with development of other dispositions, such as flexibility in my fingers, good habits of practice and so on. The same principles would apply to other instances of innate dispositions, such as the disposition for mathematics or carpentry, for running or for graphic design.

Let us take a specific example that touches more deeply into life formation. Suppose I observe that I am impatient and aspire to become more patient. My impatience – an acquired deformative disposition in its own right – almost certainly is an expression of at least one other, perhaps more or less hidden, dispositions. In other words, a deformative disposition like impatience is a symptom of something deeper and more complex than just a bad way of behaving that might be changed with a bit of concentrated application. How do I approach this challenge?

- Firstly, *let go* of trying to be patient.<sup>14</sup>
- Secondly, be prepared to live with yourself as *impatient* – others have to!

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<sup>13</sup> The word “discipline” comes from the word “disciple” – thus, “to discipline” is “to make a disciple of.”

<sup>14</sup> There is nothing quite so tedious as someone self-consciously trying to be virtuous. Because virtue is grace, gift, it is best approached obliquely and indirectly. Stop trying to be “virtuous” and just be honest and realistic about the demands of the human situation before you.

- Thirdly, *listen* – pay close attention to what is happening when you experience yourself as impatient. See if you can hear the deeper dispositions. Feelings will generally be a good pointer to these deeper dispositions. (The simple process of listening and becoming aware is in itself liberating. Without realising it, you will be learning patience in that process of listening and facing what must be faced.)
- Fourthly, *reflect on* examples of patience.<sup>15</sup> Fill your mind with good thoughts and your imagination with good images that are supportive of what you seek.
- Fifthly, in light of the foregoing, *do* what must be done to facilitate the emergence of patience.<sup>16</sup>
- Sixthly, *wait!* – abandon yourself to the Great Mystery, submit to the pace of grace. (You will almost certainly discover that the first step in growing in patience is to become patient with your own impatience. All such experiences help us to grow in humility and all dispositions depend on humility. You will probably also discover another lesson in this process: There is generally a lot of pride involved in deformative dispositions. You will also discover that the ways of grace and true growth are filled with paradoxes and ironies and surprises.)

In this way we can foster the development of dispositions that will enable us to react and respond with grace. Increasingly our demeanour becomes gracious. We develop a graceful way with people, events and things.

Just as the athletes, in the pressure of the game, react appropriately because their hard training has disposed them well to precisely such a moment, so we, in the cauldron of daily living might react and respond with a measure of grace because we have disposed ourselves through repeated processes such as that described above.

We should not miss some wonderful paradoxes in this. For example, we will, sooner or later, discover that the whole point of human goodness is not that *we* achieve something but rather that the Great Mystery finds access to the world through us. We experience goodness, all goodness, as gift, pure gift.

The human vocation, each person's vocation, may be summed up as follows: To be the place where the Great Mystery of Love and Goodness and Truth and Unity enters the world. Where the Great Mystery is, there is freedom and grace.

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<sup>15</sup> For the Christian, this would obviously include reflecting on the life of Jesus and meditating on the Gospel.

<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the efforts to develop good dispositions that enable us to react and respond in life-giving ways in the daily stuff of living, can be assisted by other structures in our lives. For example, apart from feeding my mind and imagination with good, stimulating ideas and images, it will also help if I am getting adequate rest and recreation, if I am following a reasonable diet and have healthy relationships and if I am engaged in good rewarding work. Life tends to function as a whole. If you deform part you deform the whole, heal part and you heal the whole.



That is how healing and wholeness comes to the world. Thus we become experientially aware that we find ourselves by losing ourselves, that self-fulfilment is self-transcendence, that the centre of gravity in our lives is not our ego but the Great Mystery. There is a deep delight in this discovery.

In this way we are slowly introduced to the liberating insight that much of our growth actually happens precisely when we think we are failing, that our best possibilities are often found embedded in our limits. For example, nothing will teach me the subtle ways of deep human growth more effectively than living honestly and humbly with my own flaws and failures in the gracious presence of the Great Mystery. Thus when I face, and submit, to the truth of my own impatience and lack of compassion and my arrogance and any other dark force that might emerge from within, I may in fact be drawn surprisingly quickly into genuine and deep dispositions of patience and mercy and forgiveness and tolerance and humility, that I could never approach in any other way.

### **The consonant life**

One metaphor by which we might helpfully describe the kind of lifestyle that would be the result of a healthy life formation process is that of *consonance*.<sup>17</sup> This English word comes from the Latin words *con* meaning *together* and *sonare* meaning *to sound*. The word thus implies a harmony of energies and an integrity of movement within my being. It could be contrasted with a life or manner that is *dissonant*. Adrian van Kaam suggests three constituent elements to this *consonance*:

- a. Congeniality
- b. Compatibility and
- c. Compassion.

#### a. Congeniality

Firstly we can speak of the *consonance of congeniality*. This refers to an inner integrity of being, a certain harmony between my *foundational life form*<sup>18</sup> and all the other forms and dimensions of my life. If I am at odds with myself, with my deepest reality, there will be some measure of dissonance in my life. Obviously, complete congeniality is beyond us – it will always be more or less.

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<sup>17</sup> The metaphor of “life as conversation” is similarly useful.

<sup>18</sup> See “Forms and Transcendence” in Unit Two, Session Seven of this course.

## b. Compatibility

The second level is the *consonance of compatibility*. This refers to a certain harmony between the unfolding of my life and that of other people. Such a *consonance* will always carry the rider: “Until further notice!” We must constantly and consistently work to foster this harmony. And it will, like all those deeper realities of life that are transcendent aspirations rather than functional ambitions, come as grace, always a gift. Our task is one of facilitation. And our facilitation can demand great commitment and sacrifice, endurance and effort. For this reason, human relationships – especially those we regard as “significant” or “intimate” – can never be taken for granted. In fact, probably the more “significant” and “intimate” our relationships are, the more we must work on them. If we are not working to foster the growing consonance, chances are the consonance is diminishing. We may, one day, be taken by surprise when we discover just how much unacknowledged and therefore undealt with dissonance there is between us.

## c. Compassion

The third level is the *consonance of compassion*. This refers to a certain harmony between apparently conflicting and incomplete facets of life, the broken bits that do not quite fit, the middle and muddles that do not quite measure up. Life – our own in particular – is always falling short, always incomplete, always somewhat messy. It can, at times, be very difficult to live harmoniously with this fact of human existence, especially if we long to live life at depth and with total honesty. We may want to make it all right! When I am forced to face my own inadequacies – especially my moral failings – it is compassion that will minimize the possibility of my reacting deformatively. And compassion for myself will maximize the possibilities of my being more accommodating and patient with others. It may save me from that particularly obnoxious and too common fault of the conscientiously religious – that they can be awfully judgmental in their sense of self-righteousness.



## CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

\* *The Christian life is supported by those dispositions that best enable the Spirit of Christ to bear united witness with my spirit that I am a child of God (see Romans 8:16).*

\* *We find in the person and teaching of Jesus the manifestation of the dispositions of God; in these dispositions we find the best expressions of what we are called to be, since we are made in the image and likeness of God.*



### **Awe: The foundational disposition**

The very first story of the Bible is that of creation.<sup>19</sup> In a profound sense, we find there the underlying disposition that will be found again and again throughout the rest of the Bible. It may be summed up as the radical disposition of *awe*. The structure is forever set: God – this One who is later to be revealed as Lord of the Exodus – is Creator, we are God’s creatures. We are not God. Only God is God. We have an innate disposition that prompts us to recognise this. It is natural for the human creature to be in awe of God. Although this human creature, according to the Book of Genesis, is a companion of the Creator, this intimacy does not take away the awe, it simply gives it a specific shape.

This awe finds itself expressed in the sense of the ineffable. Eventually, in Judaism, not even the Name can be pronounced. So we find in Exodus 3:1-15, that the revelation of God’s name is enigmatic.<sup>20</sup> Even this enigmatic Name<sup>21</sup> is replaced in readings by names such as *Elohim* (“God”) or more often *Adonai* (“My Lord”). When they translated the Hebrew Scriptures in Greek, the word *Kyrios* (“Lord”) was used to render the name for God. We can only begin to understand Judaism when we begin to grasp something of the awe of the people before their God.

Reverence for the Name is one instance in which we find the fundamental disposition of awe at work. We could even say that awe is *the foundational disposition* for the People of God. A modern Jewish commentator sums it up well:

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<sup>19</sup> And we must not forget that this story of creation is told *after* the great story of the Exodus Event and God’s definitive entry into human history, and it is told in the light of that Exodus Event. There are two accounts of the story of creation in the Book of Genesis – 1 and 2:4-25.

<sup>20</sup> “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am’”. (Exodus 3:14.)

<sup>21</sup> The name revealed in Exodus 3:14 has the four Hebrew letters *YHWH* and is therefore often spoken of as the Tetragrammaton – literally “the four letters.” It is normally rendered in English as *Yahweh*. To this day scholars debate over both the precise etymological and theological meanings of the Tetragrammaton. One June 29 2008, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued a directive that the use of the word “Yahweh” in the liturgy would be dropped in faithfulness to the Hebrew tradition and the practice of the early Church.

*The true name of God is a mystery. It is stated in the Talmud, "And God said unto Moses . . . This is My name for ever" (Exodus 3:15). The Hebrew word 'forever' (leolam) is written here in a way that it may be read 'lealem' which means 'to conceal.' The name of God is to be concealed.*

*Throughout the ages the Jews shrank from uttering, and, to some degree, even from writing out in full the four-lettered Holy Name of God (the Tetragrammaton). Except in the Bible, the name is usually not written out in full. Even when the portion of the Pentateuch is read during the service, the Name is never pronounced as it is written. The true name is the Ineffable Name. It is rendered by the Jews as Adonai (literally, "My Lord"), by the Samaritans as Hashem, and by the translators of the Bible into Greek by the word "Lord" (kyrios). According to Abba Saul, he who pronounces the Ineffable Name is among those who have no share in the life to come. "No one may utter the mystery of Thy name."*

*Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, was the Ineffable Name uttered by the High Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. And when the name came out of his mouth, "in holiness and purity," "those who stood near him prostrated themselves, and those who stood afar said, 'Blessed be the name . . . for ever and ever.'" The name was pronounced ten times during the worship, and yet even before the people had left the Temple, all of them would forget the pronunciation. According to a medieval source, the name escaped even the High Priest himself as soon as he left the Temple.*

*To this day the priests close their eyes when pronouncing the blessing, because when the Temple was in existence, they would utter the Ineffable Name . . . and the Shechinah would rest on their eyes. In remembrance thereof they close their eyes.*

*The Decalogue does not contain any commandment to worship God. It tells us "honor thy father and thy mother," it does not tell us, "honor thy God, worship Him, offer sacrifice to Him." The only reference to worship is indirect and negative: Thou shalt not take my name in vain.<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955/1978, 64f. In another place the same author writes: "Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality. . . . Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe." (Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978, 74 & 75.)

## The Father inspires awe

John's Gospel portrays Jesus as a man living in deep reverence for the Father. Jesus is sent by the Father and his whole being is intent on doing what the Father desires:

*"My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and complete his work."*<sup>23</sup>

*"My teaching is not from myself: it comes from the one who sent me."*<sup>24</sup>

In John's Gospel, the awe that Jesus has of the Father is not manifest in distance but intimacy, it does not generate fear but loving obedience. This disposition towards the Father flows over into Jesus' attitude towards the disciples:

*"I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them."*<sup>25</sup>

In each of the synoptic Gospels the transfiguration is central.<sup>26</sup> It prefigures the triumph of Jesus on Calvary, which triumph is made evident in the empty tomb of Easter Day. Jesus is more than a political or social reformer. In fact, his vocation has little or nothing to do with the oppressor from Rome as such. It has everything to do with the oppressor God has begun to deal with in the desert of old – the oppressor called Sin. The dawning realization that this Jesus is the Christ,<sup>27</sup> he is "Kyrios,"<sup>28</sup> that he has conquered Sin and Death, is the basis of the Church's primitive faith and the authentic tradition to this day. It is the realization of this defining truth that prompts St Paul to say in awe:

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*<sup>29</sup>

To grasp this – or rather *be grasped by this* – is to find the treasure in the field.<sup>30</sup> This is the stuff of awe. What could come between us and the love of

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<sup>23</sup> John 4:34.

<sup>24</sup> John 7:16.

<sup>25</sup> John 17:26.

<sup>26</sup> See Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36.

<sup>27</sup> See Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21. See also texts indicating that, although Jesus is the son of David, he is also superior to him (Matthew 22:43ff).

<sup>28</sup> See for example Acts 2:36; Revelations 10:9; 1Corinthians 12:3; Colossians 2:6.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 11:33-36. See also Romans 8:31-39, reproduced in "Snippets for meditation."

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 13:44.

God made visible in Jesus Christ when we have experienced the overwhelming love of God in this way?<sup>31</sup> No wonder St Paul speaks of “being taken hold of” by the mystery of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

What difference might it make to our lives if we concentrated on facilitating the disposition of awe by contemplating the great mystery of God’s love manifest in Christ, evident in every moment of every day?

## **A Meditation in the light of Easter**

*Whereas the first thing to know in a technical crisis is exact information about the instrument concerned, the first thing to know in the problems of life is that we do not know. Life is a mystery to be lived not a problem to be solved. Before this mystery we stand in awe and surrender. We do not impose our petty categories on the mystery of life; we do not force life into our narrow prejudices; we do not complain that life is too vast for us; we know that life escapes our grasp. We bow in reverence to the mystery of Being; we accept humbly the fact that we cannot understand where life is leading us; we learn the virtue of patience in the school of the adventure of living.*

*For we are like sailors on a ship of unknown destination on an uncharted sea. Very gradually we learn the crucial lesson of existence that we do not ask what life has to give us, but rather respond to what life asks from us. Then the question is no longer what can I get out of life, but rather what can life get out of me.*

*This truth assumes infinitely deeper dimensions in religious existence. For religious individuals, the mystery of life is rooted in the mystery of Divine Providence. Faith in God’s project makes it less difficult for religious individuals to live with the darkness and uncertainty that are inherent in every human project. They know that behind the clouds of their own ignorance is the radiant sun of God’s presence. This certainty gives to authentic religious existence an air of freedom and carefree relaxation.*

*To be carefree is not to be careless. To be carefree is to be careful in a serene and evenminded way. The freedom of the children of God gives a specific style to human existence, characterised by the peace of heart typical of the authentic believer. This peace is not based on a denial of the darkness and uncertainty of their project of life. Religious existence knows this darkness as well as or even better than non-religious existence. Religious individuals, however, have learned how to live with this uncertainty in the light of their faith that everything – even darkness – has a divine meaning, a holy purpose, a*

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<sup>31</sup> Romans 8:35-37.

<sup>32</sup> Philippians 3:12.

*mysterious design. Therefore, the first premise in the art of living is to be able to live with one's problems, not to see them as problems to be solved, but as mysteries to be lived.*

*As long as we are anxious, agitated, perturbed about our problems, we prove that we have not yet learned the fundamentals of the art of religious living. Indeed, each time we attempt to force a solution of our difficulties in a quick, easy way we refuse to enter the school of life. This is especially true of the problems of sin and imperfection. Our personal inclinations to certain types of sin and imperfection will be with us as long as we live. They are rooted in our unique nature and in the dark recesses of our past.*

*To be sure, we must try to overcome them in the current of our existence, but we must also humbly accept the fact that possibly we shall never be wholly rid of them in spite of our efforts. It may be that we must live with a certain imperfection to the end of our life; that we must patiently try to cope with it in countless ways while never succeeding in eliminating it. A certain sin may persecute us until our last breath, humiliate us in the eyes of others, escape our understanding, and fill our eyes with tears. This fact we must accept.*

*The Lord will never ask how successful we were in overcoming a particular vice, sin, or imperfection. He will ask us, 'Did you humbly and patiently accept this mystery of iniquity in your life? How did you deal with it? Did you learn from it to be patient and humble? Did it teach you to trust not your own ability but My love? Did it enable you to understand better the mystery of iniquity in the lives of others? Did it give you the most typical characteristic of truly religious individuals--that they never judge or condemn the sin and imperfection of others?'*

*Religious individuals know from their own lives that the demon of evil can be stronger than them even in spite of their best attempts; they know that it is the patience, humility, and charity learned from this experience that count. Success and failure are accidental. The joy of Christians is never based on their personal religious successes but on the knowledge that their Redeemer lives. Christians are those who are constantly aware of their need of salvation. Acceptance of the mystery of iniquity in our project of existence is a school of mildness, mercy, forgiveness, and loving understanding of our neighbor. Our existential project is called authentic to the degree that it is in harmony with our life situation. Our project is unauthentic when it is not in harmony with reality as it manifests itself in our daily life. Wholesome individuals steadily grow in insight into their individuality within their own situation, and they accept their personal lives with all its possible and actual modes of existence.*

*This increasing self-understanding is accompanied by acceptance of their total life situations. For we cannot separate our lives from the situations in which they are lived. We cannot split our self-development from the development of our situations. The moment we attempt to do so, we become unrealistic and unauthentic. At such a time, we begin to dream about a fictitious situation, an ideal state in which it would be possible for us to be perfect. In the meantime we neglect our only possible real growth, namely, growth within the concrete situation here and now. In such a case we enter into an "if only" existence. People who are caught in the throes of this unauthentic project of life escape the burden of true self-realization by the "if only" attitude. If only my environment were different; if only I had a more cooperative wife, husband, or superior; if only I were given a different assignment; if only the people around me were more understanding and refined; if only my health were better, my face more handsome, my imperfections more malleable, then everything would be different, then I would be a marvellous person, then I would live a rich and useful life.*

*It is clear that the "if only" attitude lifts people out of reality, makes it impossible for them to live real lives, to actualize themselves in a concrete sense. They are the eternally absent people, the professional dreamers who never wake up. Their project of existence becomes increasingly fantastic, a castle in the air. The more these people live in their castles, the more useless they become in the everyday situation. They become expert at complaining because they cannot understand that imperfect life differs from their castle. They are sure that they cannot be at fault, for if life were only like their dream, then they would be perfect. It is not they who are mistaken, but all the others who have ruined their castle. Those people of the "if only" existence may travel from house to house, from task to task, from assignment to assignment in a fruitless search for paradise lost. They will never find it, and as a result they will never find themselves, for we can only discover what we are in the real situation in which we are.<sup>33</sup>*



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<sup>33</sup> Adrian van Kaam, *Religion and Personality*, Image Books, 1964, 24-26.



## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“As for myself, I experience a sort of terror when, at the moment of setting to work and finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that everything is permissible to me. If everything is permissible to me, the best and the worst; if nothing offers me any resistance, then any effort is inconceivable, and I cannot use anything as a basis, and consequently every undertaking becomes futile.*

*“Will I then have to lose myself in this abyss of freedom? To what shall I cling in order to escape the dizziness that seizes me before the virtuality of this infinitude? However, I shall not succumb. I shall overcome my terror and shall be reassured by the thought that I have the seven notes of the scale and its chromatic intervals at my disposal, that strong and weak accents are within my reach, and that in all of these I possess solid and concrete elements which offer me a field of experience just as vast as the upsetting and dizzy infinitude that had just frightened me. It is into this field that I shall sink my roots, fully convinced that combinations which have at their disposal twelve sounds in each octave and all possible rhythmic varieties promise me riches that all the activity of human genius will never exhaust.*

*“What delivers me from the anguish into which an unrestricted freedom plunges me is the fact that I am always able to turn immediately to the concrete things that are here in question. I have no use for a theoretic freedom. Let me have something finite, definite-matter that can lend itself to my operation only insofar as it is commensurate with my possibilities. And such matter presents itself to me together with its limitations. I must in turn impose mine upon it. So here we are, whether we like it or not, in the realm of necessity. And yet which of us has ever heard talk of art as other than a realm of freedom? This sort of heresy is uniformly widespread because it is imagined that art is outside the bounds of ordinary activity. Well, in art as in everything else, one can build only upon a resisting foundation: whatever constantly gives way to pressure constantly renders movement impossible.*

*“My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings.*

*“I shall go even farther: my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.*

*“To the voice that commands me to create I first respond with fright; then I reassure myself by taking up as weapons those things participating in creation but as yet*

*outside of it; and the arbitrariness of the constraint serves only to obtain precision of execution.*

*“From all this we shall conclude the necessity of dogmatizing on pain of missing our goal. If these words annoy us and seem harsh, we can abstain from pronouncing them. For all that, they nonetheless contain the secret of salvation: “It is evident,” writes Baudelaire, “that rhetorics and prosodies are not arbitrarily invented tyrannies, but a collection of rules demanded by the very organization of the spiritual being, and never have prosodies and rhetorics kept originality from fully manifesting itself. The contrary, that is to say, that they have aided the flowering of originality, would be infinitely more true.”<sup>34</sup>*



(2) *“It was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart.... Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: they struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety but it is possible to constrict it within each person. And since that time I have come to understand the falsehood of all revolutions in history: they destroy only those carriers of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). And they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more.”<sup>35</sup>*



(3) *“Is there ever a doubt in my mind that it is virtuous for me to give alms to the beggar, to forgive the one who offends me, yes, even to love my enemy in the name of Christ? No, not once does such a doubt cross my mind, certain as I am that what I have done unto the least of my brethren, I have done unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least of all the brethren, the poorest of all beggars, the most insolent of all offenders, yes, even the very enemy himself – that these live*

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<sup>34</sup> Igor Stravinsky cited by W. Lynch, *Images of Hope*, University of Notre Dame, 1966, 73-74.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, III-IV, pp.615-616).

*within me; that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I am to myself the enemy who is to be loved – what then?*"<sup>36</sup>



(4) *"A reciprocal action is therefore required between the conversion of the individual and the reform of the structures, even though the former must remain the principal factor in the life of the Christian."*<sup>37</sup>



(5) *"T S Eliot once said, there are two types of problems we face in life. In one case, the appropriate question is, what are we going to do about it? In the other case, the only fitting question is, how do we behave toward it? The deeper problems in life are of the latter kind. In the helping professions, the dividing line between these two questions falls roughly between the more glamorous systems of cure and the humbler action of care. But unfortunately, as Americans (given philosophically to pragmatism and culturally to technology) and especially as Americans in those professions that get tinged with a messianic pretension, we are used to tackling problems in terms of the first question; and we are bereft when that question is inappropriate to the crisis. If all we can say is, what are we going to do about it? -- then dying indeed (and our own death as well) is even more intensively a blow to professional self-esteem. But this is not the only question we need to ask. The question remains as to our mode of behavior toward an event which that behavior admittedly will not successfully dissolve. In extremity, it may not be possible to do something about a tragedy, but this inability need not altogether disable us humanly before it. Members of the helping professions belong to a network of care and not simply to an apparatus for cure."*<sup>38</sup>



(6) *"Imagine the story of a man born a prisoner – doubly a prisoner in fact for he is unaware of his servitude. He has been taught that his servitude is normal, and has even been led to be grateful for it. Then at one point or another, this man awakens; slowly he begins to recognise the state in which he has been living. Moreover, he recognises that he himself and no one else, has been responsible for that state. He acquiesced in it; he was satisfied in it; he was grateful for it. And yet, now that he sees his former self-deception, he realises that he could have*

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<sup>36</sup> Carl Jung cited by Conrad Baars and Anna Terruwe, *Healing the Unaffirmed*, Alba House, 1976, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Cullman, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, Harper, 1970, 55.

<sup>38</sup> William F May, "The Sacred Power of Death in Contemporary Experience", in Alien Mack (Ed.), *Death in American Experience*, Schocken, 1973, 120-121.

recognised it long ago. Even then he had the power that he has now: the power to attend, to question, to discuss and to break free. Step by step he begins to act like a free man, penetrating one self-deception after another, often discouraged by what he discovers about himself, but refusing to quit, even when he catches himself in continuing dishonesties. (In the attempt to be honest, are not one's own dishonesties the greatest sorrows?) Thus, never wholly equal to his relentless drive to question, he learns to fashion small acts of honesty, courage and freedom.<sup>39</sup>



(7) "In meditation we should not look for a "method" or "system", but cultivate an "attitude", an "outlook": faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All these finally permeate our being with love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in the Spirit of God we "see" God our Father without "seeing". We know him in "unknowing". Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the Spirit who gives us light and love."<sup>40</sup>



(8) "Religion always tends to lose its inner consistency and its supernatural truth when it lacks the fervor of contemplation. It is the contemplative, silent, "empty", and apparently useless element in the life of prayer which makes it truly a life. Without contemplation, liturgy tends to be a mere pious show and para-liturgical prayer is plain babbling. Without contemplation, mental prayer is nothing but a sterile exercise of the mind. And yet not everyone can be a "contemplative". That is not the point. What matters is the contemplative orientation of the whole life of prayer."<sup>41</sup>



(9) "Better stumble along the right way than run swiftly on the wrong path."<sup>42</sup>



(10) "Take stock of those around you and you will see them wandering about lost through life, like sleep-walkers in the midst of their good or evil fortune, without the slightest suspicion of what is happening to them. You will hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness*, Harper and Row, 1970, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Herder and Herder, 1969, 39.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Merton, *op cit*, 142.

<sup>42</sup> St Augustine, *Sermons on the New Testament*, CLXIX, xv, 18.

*having ideas on the matter. But start to analyze those ideas and you will find they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his 'ideas' are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality. The man with the clear head is the man who frees himself from those fantastic 'ideas' and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. As this is the simple truth - that to live is to feel oneself lost - he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look around for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life. These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is lost without remission; that is to say he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.'*<sup>43</sup>



(11) *“In the whole world, throughout the whole of history, even among religious people and saints, Christ suffers dismemberment.*

*His physical Body was crucified by Pilate and the Pharisees; His mystical Body is drawn and quartered from age to age by the devils in the agony of that disunion which is bred and vegetates in our souls, prone to selfishness and to sin.*

*All over the face of the earth the avarice and lust of people breed unceasing divisions among them, and the wounds that tear them from union with one another widen and open out into huge wars. Murder, massacres, revolution, hatred, the slaughter and torture of the bodies and souls of human beings, the destruction of cities by fire, the starvation of millions, the annihilation of populations and finally the cosmic inhumanity of atomic war: Christ is massacred in His members, torn limb from limb; God is murdered in people.*

*The history of the world, with the material destruction of cities and nations and people, expresses the interior division that tyrannizes the souls of all human beings, and even of the saints.*

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<sup>43</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, W W Norton, 1957, 156f.

*Even the innocent, even those in whom Christ lives by charity, even those who want with their whole heart to love one another, remain divided and separate. Although they are already one in Him, their union is hidden from them, because it still only possesses the secret substance of their souls.*

*But their minds and their judgments and their desires, their human characters and faculties, their appetites and their ideals are all imprisoned in the slag of an inescapable egotism which pure love has not yet been able to refine.*

*As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.*

*There are two things which we can do about the pain of disunion with other people. We can love or we can hate. Hatred recoils from the sacrifice and the sorrow that are the price of this resetting of bones. It refuses the pain of reunion.*<sup>44</sup>



(12) *“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>45</sup>*



(13) *“‘There’s a very good chance that if you have children,’ the doctor said, ‘they’ll be afflicted’. Blind, he meant; half-blind at birth and, by twenty, blind as bats. They had wanted children. It had seemed a kind of payment life owed for what they’d suffered. She was ashamed. Once again it was all her fault; her weakness -some ugly burnt-out thing in her blood - once again an invisible wall raised more around*

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 1972, 55-57.

<sup>45</sup> Romans 8:31-39.

*his life than hers. He accepted it, with such terrible kindness that she was robbed of any right to anger -the rage that had been building in her all day, since the doctor had told her - anger that for sanity's sake she had to vent on him because there was no one else, had no possible outlet - and so she raged at him, unthinkably cruel, stark mad, in fact.....*

*She told him that when he made love to her the stink of his breath made her sick. She had told him that he was like an animal and that when friends came to the house she was ashamed of him. She told him he was stupid and that all their friends knew it. "They mention it to me", she said, "they ask how I stand it." "You're angry and upset," he said. "We mustn't say harsh things and then tomorrow - " "I'll say what I please," she said. "For years I've said only what you please," she said to him. "I'm sick of it. You stink. I don't want to live with you. I just walk into a room where you've been sitting, filling the air with your stink .... I don't want to live at all!" Sobs. "Esther," he said, "my poor, poor dear - " She locked the bedroom door that night and wouldn't let him in, and he slept on the couch. But in the middle of the night she went down and asked him to come up where he belonged, but he was grieving and wouldn't come - it had come to his poor slow wits, finally, that though all she had said she had said in rage, and the words had nothing to do with the rage, they were incidentally true. He had committed no crime, the crime was, as usual, life itself, the immemorial curse, and she had raged at him because life itself is impossible to seize in one's two bare hands and choke. But though he was innocent, he smelled. That was true. "I'm sorry~, she said. "I love you, Freddy." "Just go to bed," he said. When she got up the next morning he had already fixed himself breakfast and washed the dishes and left the house, and she sat and wept. That time too she wanted to die, and she said to herself with conviction, I am going to kill myself, but she was afraid. She wanted to be even with him, balance the score once for all, but it was impossible, so impossible that she began to laugh as though her mind had slipped: "How can you balance the score once for all, but it was impossible, so impossible that she began to laugh as though her mind had slipped: "How can you balance the score with a policeman? - with the Law?" she said, and laughed and cried. It was he who had wanted children - both of them had, but he more than she - and because she could not give them to him she had turned on him in rage, and now to punish him for her rage she was thinking, like a maniac, of killing herself. It was life she wanted to settle with. ”<sup>46</sup>*



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<sup>46</sup> John Gardner, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, Vintage Books, 1987, 305-308.

## Suggestions for further study

- Bellah, Robert et al, *Habits of the Heart*, Harper Collins, 1985.
- Caussade, Jean-Pierre *Abandonment to Divine Providence*
- Cinema *Baraka* (1992) (Dir: Ron Fricke – no dialogue, no actors.)
- Durckheim, Karlfried, *The Way of Transformation: Daily Life As Spiritual Exercise*, Allen & Unwin, 1971.
- Heschel, Abraham, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978.
- Lawrence, Brother, *Practice of the Presence of God*
- Underhill, Evelyn *The Spiritual Life*
- Van Kaam, A. *Formative Spirituality, Vol. II: Human Formation*, Crossroad, 1986 - esp. Chapters. 9 & 10.
- , *Formative Spirituality, Vol. III: Formation of the Human Heart*, Crossroad, 1986 - esp. Chapter 1, "Dispositions of the heart" etc.
- , *Anger and the Gentle Life*, Dimension Books, 1976.
- , *Religion & Personality*, (Rev. Ed.), Dimension Books, 1980 (esp. 101-105)
- , Glossaries: "Formation of ego identity" to "Perfectionistic deformation of Christian life formation", *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, II, 3 (1981), 499f.; "Demonic deformation" to "Perfectionism and the demonic", *op cit*, 517-523; "The heart of our social presence" to "Social approach rooted in the four social dispositions of the heart", *op cit*, II, 2 (1981), 321-323; "Dispositions for effective social presence", *op cit*, III, 1 (1982), 142ff.; "Reformation dispositions and primary reformation acts", *op cit*, III, 2 (1982), 299ff.; "Form tradition and initial disposition formation", *op cit*, IV, 2 (1983), 267ff.; "Implication for initial disposition formation", *op. cit.*, 269ff.; "Initial deformation of the dispositional life", *op cit*, IV, 3 (1983), 409ff.; "Initial formation anxiety", *op. cit.*, 412ff.; "The influence of form traditions on the formation of our core dispositions", *op cit*, V, 1 (1984), 117ff.; "Common form traditional appreciation disposition" to "Second source of actualization", *op cit*, VIII, 2 (1987), 265-267.
- Whelan, Michael, *The Call To Be*, St Pauls, 1986/2000 - esp. Chapters 7 & 16.





## Suggested exercises

1. Pay close attention to the little things this week, the ordinary and unspectacular things that you would normally pass by without averting to their presence – the aroma of coffee and the bubbles around the edges, the transparency of water and the feel of the sun on your skin, the pathos of a friend's shoe and the shape of the back of someone's head, the tragic-comic stories walking by you in the street or sitting opposite you in the train or bus. Just notice these things. Do not *do* anything with what you notice – let it do something with you. Listen to what it evokes in you.
2. Imagine yourself with Jesus along the way somewhere in Palestine. You have an opportunity to ask him some questions. What would you ask him? (You might do this exercise using your journal. Allow five to ten minutes at the very beginning to quietly settle in to the exercise before you begin to write. Then listen carefully and write what comes.)
3. Take time out to reflect on the appearance of Jesus to Mary of Magdala on the first Easter Day (John 20:11-18). Pay particular attention to Mary's actions and manner. What might she have been feeling? Have you ever felt anything like that?

