

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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## UNIT FOUR SESSION TWO: Person as idealizing



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*Self-centredness, the refusal to be human and not God, is the core of the demonic in human nature.*<sup>1</sup>



*The Christian heroism (and perhaps it is rarely to be seen) is to venture wholly to be oneself, as an individual person, this definite individual person, alone before the face of God, alone in this tremendous exertion and this tremendous responsibility.*<sup>2</sup>



*Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me but I was not with you.*<sup>3</sup>



*The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods knowing good and evil.'*<sup>4</sup>



*For what will it profit you if you gain the whole world and forfeit your life?*<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Adrain van Kaam, *The Demon and the Dove*, Duquesne University Press, 1967, 46-47.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Preface" to *Sickness Unto Death*, Walter Lowrie trans, Princeton University Press, 1974, 142.

<sup>3</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book. 10, Chapter 27.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:26.

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

***\* All human life formation is subject to the possibility of constructing a life according to an idealized image rather than what is. We call this idealization or idolization.***

***\* Idealization (idolization) is a misplacement of human energies, typically driven by anxiety, to establish and maintain a false and exalted pre-definition of the self and/or others.***

***\* Idealization (idolization) may be a more or less serious counterfeiting of the life formation process.***

***\* Idealization (idolization) is always accompanied by demonization in some measure.***



### **Catching yourself pretending**

We have all pretended, at one time or another, to be what we are not. When we were children we perhaps pretended to be adults or giants or horses or birds or porpoises or cowboys and Indians. Children typically have a great capacity for make-believe. When we were adolescents we may have pretended to know more than we actually did know, pretended to be less frightened than we actually were or played some other game of pretence to be accepted or at least avoid ridicule and rejection. As young adults we may have pretended to be much more adult than we were or at ease in our first job when in fact we were profoundly nervous or pretended not to be keen to be noticed by that special person whom we dearly wanted to notice us. And so it goes.

“Pretending” and “game-playing” are an important part of living. They give colour and fun to our lives, they enable us to explore other worlds through art and literature and poetry and acting, they also shield us from embarrassment and help the social wheels turn in the everyday business of living. In this sense, we can say that “pretending” and “game-playing” are a normal, generally healthy part of growing up and getting on with people. Life would, in fact, be terribly boring without this sort of pretence and game playing. It might also be terribly harsh.

We certainly recognize that the sort of “pretence” and/or “game-playing” we have spoken of above is essentially different from some other kinds of “pretence” and/or “game-playing.” For example, if we say someone is arrogant,<sup>6</sup> egotistical, a know-it-all, a social climber or simply a pompous individual, we are noting

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<sup>6</sup> The English word *arrogant* comes from the Latin word *rogare*, meaning *to ask*. It implies that we ask – or more precisely *claim* – for ourselves what is not rightfully ours.

something more serious and deformative than the more or less innocent and healthy “pretence” described in those first examples. In these latter cases there is a significant *dishonesty* – whether it be psychological or moral or both.<sup>7</sup> These pretenses lack the playfulness and lightheartedness of the former games of life. They are about dominating life and avoiding the real, rather than engaging it in a mutual giving and receiving, and submitting to what is real.

And we might, in turn, distinguish this latter kind of “pretence” from yet a third kind of pretence – a kind of “pretence” that is perhaps implicit in the reference to psychological dishonesty. Take an extreme example of a little boy of say six, an only child whose father dies and his mother regards him, from that day forward, as “the man of the house.” It is quite likely that the little boy will endeavour to fulfill his mother’s expectations. Those expectations might be more or less explicitly stated or more or less implicit in the relationship. The little boy himself may be substantially unaware of the mother’s expectations and the specific shape he is giving to his life as a result of those expectations. He just does what seems “right” and “good.” He may in fact feel a certain satisfaction and delight in measuring up to his mother’s expectations. Indeed, other adult members of the wider family circle might give him much affirmation in his role as “the man of the house,” saying how “mature” and “responsible” he is for his age.

Such a situation could easily see that child setting aside his normal childish wishes and needs in order to become and “adult,” “the man of the house.” In other words, he assumes a willed identity through the role that life has thrust on him. He “pretends” to be older and more mature than he actually is. His identity, rather than emerging from within, in the context of the give and take of relationships, is built for the most part from without, in the context of expectations that overwhelm his natural potential. His life formation is more an outside-in process than an inside-out process.

His own wishes and needs are more or less displaced or usurped by the expectations of his mother and those others around him who confirm his role. He may seem to “grow up” very quickly, but he does so only by more or less denial and suppression of those natural wishes and needs. Once set on this path, he, and others, may confuse “the man of the house” image with the truth of who he is. Thus, quite innocently, the person may substitute “seeming” for “being,” an exalted and false pre-definition for what is. And no one is to “blame” in any strict moral sense. This is just the way life turns out for some of us.

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<sup>7</sup> It is useful to distinguish between a dishonesty that is moral – that is, more or less freely and deliberately chosen – and a dishonesty that is psychological – that is, a subterfuge or evasion that is not known to the person or at least is compulsive enough to “happen” before the person knows, and therefore it is not freely chosen. Of course, we cannot be entirely exonerated in the latter instance because part of the responsibility of life formation is to actively seek awareness of what is happening within so that we can progressively outgrow such psychological dishonesties and become increasingly free moral agents.

## When pretence becomes deformative

The first of the three types of pretence cited above is not our concern here. We are concerned with the latter two, most especially the last. Under the pressures of family, friends and culture and our own intra-formative dynamics, we are all prone to pretend to be what we are not, to mistake role for identity and the expectations of others for our own felt needs. For the most part we will not be aware – or at least fully aware – that the pretence is being played out. When we do pretend in this way we are engaged, more or less, in the process of *idealization* or *idolization*.<sup>8</sup>

That is, instead of facilitating the emergence of the truth, the truth of who we are and the way reality is, in persistent and gentle dialogue with ourselves and the world of people, events and things, we endeavour, instead, to impose an exalted pre-definition of the way things *should* be or the way *we* want things to be.<sup>9</sup> Our living tends to become a monologue governed by our anxious desires and willful efforts to impose the idealized image.

This idealizing process might be more or less deep-rooted and chronic or it might be more or less superficial and short-lived. We are probably most likely to become chronic idealizers when we are caught in a persistent environment that makes it intolerable or at least very unattractive to be simply who and what we are.

We feel compelled to perform, to pretend, to please “them” in order to earn our place in the world, to belong somewhere. The following situations, for example, could easily promote the idealizing way of living:<sup>10</sup>

- A family where one or more of the parents is alcoholic;
- A conscientiously religious household that tends to be rigid and dogmatic in

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this discussion we will use the terms “idealization” and “idolization” interchangeably. When we idealize we are in fact submitting to an “idol” – the image or false, exalted pre-definition – rather than the real thing. At the other end of the spectrum to idealization we have demonization; where the former lives out of an exalted pre-definition of self, the latter lives out of a humiliated sense of self. This latter phenomenon demands a whole focus of attention in its own right, though we must refer to it later in this discussion, because, just as we noted in an earlier discussion (see “Person as Willing”, Unit 2, Sessions 6 and 7) the willful-mastery mode is shadowed by the will-less-victim mode, so it seems the idealizing mode is shadowed by the demonizing mode.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the chronic idealizer believes, implicitly and unconsciously, that his idealized image is a fair representation of reality. He believes that his depiction of things is the way things are and any evidence to the contrary needs to be confronted and dealt with as being at odds with what is true and real. Idealizers can be more or less aggressive or evasive when faced with the realities that confront and put the lie to their idealized image. A powerful and tragic example of this is found in the way so many of the ideologues of recent generations have dealt with those who confronted their idealized images of the world. Ideologies in their more developed and embedded forms are always idealizations (idolizations).

<sup>10</sup> Typically, the kind of embedded or chronic idealization about which we are speaking is going to develop in children and therefore our focus is the family. Human beings who have grown up in a healthy human environment are not so likely to become idealizers later in life because they will have a more or less strong sense of themselves.

- its thinking;
- A family in which communication is marked by:
    - persistent and strong negative reinforcements rather than encouraging affirmations;
    - authoritarian injunctions rather than open conversations;
    - passive-aggressive style rather than honest expressions of thought and emotion;
  - Family relationships marked by a puritanical attitude to the body rather than healthy tactile presence;
  - A family where the parents are too busy about their careers to give quality time to the children or too many children for the parents to cope with;
  - A family in which a child is constantly told he/she is an underperformer compared with another sibling;
  - A family situation that, through death or illness or some other cause, requires a child to become a surrogate parent;
  - A family in which the child is adulated and/or spoiled;
  - A family where there is an extreme of either poverty or wealth and there is no quality relational factors to make up for this.

### **Responding creatively to idealization**

Typically, the process of idealization is pre-moral. That is, it is not freely chosen but is – more or less – a compulsive reaction to anxiety.<sup>11</sup> There is no attempt here to suggest moral blame or moral accountability. We are concerned about becoming aware of what is happening so that we can facilitate a movement beyond idealization towards a realistic promotion of healthy ideals.

Idealization must first be treated as a psychological issue. That treatment – if

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<sup>11</sup> Anxiety may be understood as a certain formless distress about the future. There are different kinds of anxiety. The most basic anxiety we might call *existential anxiety* because it comes from our very *existence*. Human beings are by nature anxious animals. Such anxiety arises because we always live with the possibility of *non-existence*. A second kind of anxiety, which most of us experience at some time in our lives, might be called *performance anxiety*. This is sometimes called “nerves” or “butterflies” and is a normal and healthy part of bracing oneself for a testing moment, like going for a job interview or giving a speech or raising a difficult matter with a friend. A third kind of anxiety which some of us experience might be called *neurotic anxiety*. This third type of anxiety is likely to emerge in our lives when we are over-exposed to *existential anxiety*, or exposed to it when we are too young or too weak to deal well with it. This over-exposure can happen with a child who has unreliable and unpredictable parents (eg alcoholics), those who are not adequately affirmed through the foundational formative triad of faith, hope and love, those who are exposed to trauma etc. Different people have different capacities for coping with anxiety and the situations that evoke anxiety. For example, a family environment that might produce debilitating anxiety in one child, might elicit determination and great independence and a strong drive towards achievement in another child in the same family. Different people have different ways of behaving when they are anxious. For example, one person eats compulsively and another loses his or her appetite.

appropriate – will lead to greater self-awareness – notoriously lacking in the idealizer – and that self-awareness leads to greater freedom. In other words, the psychological needs must be addressed before the moral possibilities can be realistically developed. The psychological dynamics of idealization might be summarized as follows:

- I am overwhelmed by *anxiety* about the way things actually are with me and my world, so
- I (unconsciously) develop a *false* and *exalted predefinition* of my self that is more attractive – my true self being perceived as more or less unworthy, even hateful – and
- I develop a whole array of *irrational and tyrannical shoulds* as part of that pre-definition, and
- driven by the “shoulds,” I force-fit this predefinition by *willful effort*, and
- I am sustained by *the perception and conviction of success*, and
- the perception and conviction, in turn, are typically supported and promoted by the *confirmation* of the social system of which I am a member, the members of the social system assuming that I am the image.<sup>12</sup>

### **Idealization as counterfeit life form**

The English word *counterfeit* comes from the two Latin words *contra* meaning *against* and *facere* meaning *to do* or *to make*. Anything that is said to be counterfeit is not only fake, it is hostile. Thus, governments are always alert to counterfeit money. The better the counterfeit, the worse it is. A very good batch of counterfeit notes can do a lot of damage precisely because the “notes” *look like* the real thing but are actually the *enemy* of the real thing. Theoretically it would be possible to destroy a whole economy by flooding it with expertly produced counterfeit money.

Idealization can look like the real thing too. Idealization can employ all one’s best talents to build the kind of persona that the prevailing social system applauds and confirms. In this way the idealization achieves one of its primary ends: a feeling of belonging. An individual driven by anxiety to high achievement might be applauded as a “success.” The fact that such a person may also have evaded the truth of who he or she is, might be completely overlooked by the members of such a social system. The Danish philosopher and psychologist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Søren Kierkegaard, sums this situation up nicely:

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<sup>12</sup> Omitted from this description is the inherent urge to transcend. If we were able to sit in some kind of quiescent state and not constantly be moved towards “the more than,” we could perhaps avoid these exalted pre-definitions. The story of The Fall in Genesis reminds us that there is an urging within us to be “gods.” For a discussion of “transcendence” see this course, Unit One, Session Seven, “Forms and Transcendence.” Idealization may be understood as a healthy urge gone wrong.

*But in spite of the fact that a man has become fantastic in this fashion, he may nevertheless (although most commonly it becomes manifest) be perfectly well able to live on, to be a man, as it seems, to occupy himself with temporal things, get married, beget children, win honor and esteem – and perhaps no one notices that in a deeper sense he lacks a self. About such a thing as that not much a fuss is made in the world; for a self is a thing the world is least apt to inquire about, and the thing of all things the most dangerous for a man to let people know that he has it. The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc, is sure to be noticed.*<sup>13</sup>

One of the terrible tragedies of this counterfeiting process is that the true and the real become despised and shunned. If the idealizing persists for long enough and perhaps becomes a deep-seated and chronic process for me, an implicit enmity is set up between who I actually *am* and the *pre-definition* I am striving to impose. In other words, instead of seeing the counterfeit as the enemy I tend to see my very self as the enemy. And just as the economy that has been flooded with counterfeit notes is threatened with destruction, so the idealized image I am wilfully striving to maintain threatens my very being with destruction. Ironically, this process can be all the more destructive if the idealized image is focused on human qualities highly prized by the prevailing social system, for example, “virtue” or “holiness.”

The idealizing process is all the more threatening and difficult to deal with the more deep-seated the anxiety that underlies it and the more deeply the image or pre-definition has taken hold.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the image may become particularly deep-seated and difficult to outgrow when it seems “successful.” There is a simple psychological reason for this. Driven by the anxiety, over time I begin to experience the idealized image as the truth of who I am. It becomes my place in the world, my very existence. Viewed through the eyes of idealization, without this existence I will cease to exist. This is the triumph of the counterfeit. If my image is threatened I experience it as a threat to my very existence. Naturally, my first instinct will be to

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<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, Walter Lowrie trans, Princeton University Press, 1975, p.165.

<sup>14</sup> A significant factor here will be the social system of which the idealizer is a part. Groups – whether they realize it or not – can exert enormous pressure on individuals to maintain their idealized place in the group. We may become trapped in a role. And we cannot ignore the possibility that we might actually derive some perceived “payoff” from this situation. There may be a number of reasons for this situation developing between the individual and the group. Take one example: A woman idealizes herself as the generous one, always available and willing to do the job ... the group comes to rely on her and their expectations, perhaps even unstated assumptions, become too overwhelming for her to break out of ... Or a husband drives himself to get to the top in his career but at a point begins to see that there are more important things ... his family has grown to depend on the lifestyle his driven careerism has enabled and the social and financial pressures may cause him to feel hemmed in ...

defend myself against such a threat.<sup>15</sup> This is a tragic irony. I end by fighting my real self in order to save the pseudo-life of the pseudo-self that I have built up over the years.<sup>16</sup>

### **Idealization begets moral confusion**

This confusion between the real and the unreal will permeate my whole life when I have become subject to a deep-seated idealizing process. I will experience confusion in my social interactions and, worst of all, I will tend to be drawn into a profound moral confusion. Initially I may believe that I have great moral decisiveness and clarity. But when this decisiveness and clarity is built on wilfulness and the compulsion of tyrannical “shoulds,” it is, like the rest of the idealized image, unreal, very fragile and vulnerable to questions. The kind of “virtue” and “moral clarity” and “decisiveness” and “commitment” that emerges under such wilful striving lacks the grace and freedom of a genuine adult moral life. This is the emergence of demonization which we mentioned earlier. Karen Horney speaks of this demonizing that accompanies the idealizing:

*While focusing on the attitude towards self, I realized that people hated and despised themselves with the same intensity and the same irrationality with which they idealized themselves. These two opposite extremes remained separate in my mind for a while. But finally I saw that they were not only closely interrelated but were in fact two aspects of one process. This then was, in its original draft, the main thesis of this book: the god-like being is bound to hate his actual being. With the recognition of this process as an entity, both extremes become more accessible to therapy. The definition of neurosis too had changed. Neurosis now became a disturbance in one's relation to self and to others.<sup>17</sup>*

The moral confusion may only become evident to me when I begin to become aware of the unreality of the idealizing project. Then, in that emerging awareness, as

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<sup>15</sup> And obviously an idealized self is far more insecure than the real self. The idealizer will tend to be far more defensive, far less able to absorb the truth.

<sup>16</sup> One of the tell-tale signs of this situation is the ambiguity with which idealizers hear compliments. Another tell-tale sign is the inordinate discomfit which they may experience when others are affirmed and they are overlooked or when others simply out-perform them.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, W W Norton, 1950, 368. One of the notable characteristics of idealizers is their confusion about compliments and praise. Typically, when I am deeply entrenched in idealization, I hunger for acclamation and praise on the one hand – indicating self-doubt – and find it difficult to accept that acclamation when it is forthcoming. This, I believe has everything to do with the self-alienation that lies at the heart of idealization. Life becomes performance – a performance I at least implicitly recognize as unreal – and when the performance is acclaimed I am sad and disappointed because I really do not want them to applaud this pseudo-me but the *real* me.

I think of what is good and right and desirable in my life, and seek these things, I will experience quite a deal of uncertainty and ambiguity. My temptation will be to summon all those idealizing dynamics to try and extricate myself from the idealization. In other words, in my attempts to outgrow the idealization, I will tend to fall back on to those intra-formative processes – deformative as they are – that I have grown accustomed to over the years. This can lead to great discouragement, despondency, depression and even despair.

The confusion will also show itself in relationships, the heart of the moral life. Just as I have become confused in my relationship with myself, it is not surprising that I should be confused in my relationships with others. My expectations of others, and my commitment to them, will be infected with the same deformative tendencies that infect my relationship with myself. In fact, the struggle that I am having unconsciously with myself, blighted as it is with unreality and psychological “deceit,” may be transferred to the relationships with others.<sup>18</sup>

Idealizers must come to realize that their idealized image of the self is actually a Trojan Horse. It may have gotten us through tough times as a child, it will destroy us or at least prevent us growing at depth, as adults. We are faced literally with a fight to the death when we discover this enemy within – either the idealized image dies or we die.

### **Addressing idealization in my life**

The journey out of and beyond the destructive irreality of an idealizing project towards the more constructive reality of a life lived in the light of genuine ideals, may be long and arduous. It will take courage and persistent effort. It will also take a good deal of wisdom and compassion from other people. Blessed are those who experience all these possibilities. Even so, the journey may still be very much in process when we die. The point is not to complete the journey, wonderful and all as that prospect is. The point is to go, to begin the journey and persevere, no matter what. And the journey is essentially the journey of love, of loving and being loved. The following suggestions might be of some help:<sup>19</sup>

1. *listen*; pay attention to what is happening; become an astute and gentle and thoroughly honest observer of your thoughts, feelings and reactions in the stuff of daily living; be particularly alert to any signs of evasion or flight or denial; the truth will set you free (see John 8:32); learn to listen and hear

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<sup>18</sup> We could wonder how much of a factor this might be in some marriage situations. Clearly, if two idealizers marry each other, the quality of the relationship will be poor until/unless they begin to address the idealizations in their lives individually and jointly.

<sup>19</sup> What follows in no way excludes the possibility of professional help. Ideally these suggestions should be followed in conjunction with the professional help. But not everyone has access to such help. So we do the best we can. A good friend who can listen without rescuing might be of some assistance.

without judgement;<sup>20</sup>

2. *be open to being loved by other people*; avoid abrasive speech and defensive behaviours that keep the love of others at bay; accompany yourself lovingly and honestly in the everyday; again, listen honestly to your reactions, face them, own them, hear them;
3. deliberately foster *a relationship with the Great Mystery* – however you name that One; this is done through contemplation, reading, reflection, solitude, silence, stillness etc; listening honestly to what is happening in and around you (suggested in the first bullet point above) will bring a certain freedom so that your deepest longing and transcendent urgings can find their rightful and fulfilling focus on the Real in the stuff of daily living – the Great Mystery, the Transcendent – rather than some “idol”; in other words, promote a shift in the centre of gravity from ego towards Mystery, from image towards Reality, from seeming towards being, from an accidental life towards the graced emergence of your true self;
4. as indicated above, be *honest*; face what comes; evade nothing; except for extraordinary developments, there is no need to *do* anything about it – trust the combination of awareness, your willingness to own it and the natural formative tendencies of the organism;
5. *facilitate* rather than master; allow the emergence of what is; encourage your experience to reveal itself to you; ultimately the life formation process is a *graced unfolding* not a conquest; life is an *inside-out process*; life formation is a gradual process of liberation, facilitating the emergence of my deepest potential;
6. learn to *laugh* at the absurdity of life; don’t take it too seriously; good humour is a sign of good faith; recognise that you are misfit and a tragic-comic story like the rest of the human race;
7. when you catch yourself moving under the influence of the irrational *shoulds* that are so much part of the idealizing project, gently question them – with *open questions*<sup>21</sup> – and listen for the feelings associated with those *shoulds* – especially the feeling of anxiety;<sup>22</sup>
8. take particular note of any tendency to *judge* others – there can be a lot of

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<sup>20</sup> The ANS technique might be especially useful in hearing and working through your anxiety. *Acknowledge* the feeling; be *non-judgmental* about it, re-assuring yourself that it is okay to feel this or any other feeling – watch for the vicious circle of getting anxious that you are anxious; *stay with it* by gently asking open questions – questions you ask with your head and wait for your stomach to answer – like “What is this feeling?” “Is it located in any particular part of my body?” “What’s it like?” “Does it remind me of anything from the past?” “Are there any images associated with it?” and try on some descriptive names to encourage it to name itself.

<sup>21</sup> See Eugene Gendlin’s *Focusing*. Briefly, we could say “open questions” are questions we ask with the head and answer with the gut. When you ask the question – eg “What am I feeling?” – hold your attention “inside” where the feeling is, be present to it, let it manifest itself.

<sup>22</sup> See Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self Realization*, W W Norton, 1950 – especially “The Tyranny of the Should” (64-85).

free-floating anger associated with idealization and it may show itself in judgemental moments; generally pay close attention to the way you think of others or assess their behaviour or manner or appearance – especially when those others annoy you;

9. deliberately develop the habit of making thoughtful *choices*; the idealizing process diminishes freedom of choice – emergence from the bondage of idealization will be experienced as increased freedom and that freedom ought to be encouraged and guided.
10. listen for your *motivation* – what drives you? – who gets the rewards of your work? – do you find yourself thinking or speaking of “they” and “them”? – who are “they”?
11. Take note of *disproportionate reactions*; excessive anger, for example, can be a sign that there is more than meets the eye in a particular experience; listen, gently and firmly pay attention;
12. Discover as much as you can about your family story and the stories of the individual members of your family, taking every care to be both sensitive and compassionate in this research.<sup>23</sup>



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<sup>23</sup> Note that, in each of the above suggestions, we have the very opposite of what goes on in the idealizing mode – idealization refuses to listen to the truth of what is, it is closed to genuine love since self-hate lurks in the very heart of the project, it is ego-centred not Mystery-centred, it is radically and persistently (always psychologically and sometimes morally) dishonest, it is about mastery and will use all sorts of strategies to prevent the emergence of the truth from within, it thus begets inner hostility, it cannot laugh and it proceeds by way of an outside-in-process.

## CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

*\* Of each person it can be said, “You are your vocation” – in other words, my primary task in life is to become the person God made me to be.*

*\* Holiness may be described as graced originality.<sup>24</sup>*

*\* When it comes to the near-at-hand business of becoming who we are in God’s loving plan, we are all prone to miss the mark and invest our energies in becoming who we are not.*

*\* Religion itself can be an occasion and even a project of idealization (idolization).*



### Our humanity constituted by relationships

The Story of The Fall in the Book of Genesis contains a question that echoes down through the ages: “Where are you?”<sup>25</sup> The question is addressed to Adam, the archetypal human being.<sup>26</sup> It is also a question to *me*. And it is a question I need to hear again and again in my life, because I am prone to drift away from the fundamental relationship by which my being is constituted. For we are made in the image and likeness of God<sup>27</sup> and that implies a relationship with God, and all else that God created, at the heart of our beings. I cannot be me except in relationship with God, with those other creatures made in God’s image and likeness and with the rest of the creation that proceeds from God’s loving hand. In other words, to be *me* is to be in a community of relationships. My very being is constituted in, by and through relationship.

These divine origins can also leave me confused. I may mistake the longings and urgings deep in my heart, those reminders of my divine origins and destiny, for a call to be a “god” separated from God. I may seek to become my own creator and

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<sup>24</sup> The English word “original” comes from the Latin word *oriri* meaning “to arise”. “Originality” is used here to speak of the process of emergence or unfolding of the person. Human formation is ultimately an inside-out process rather than an outside-in process. Formation is liberation. Holiness in the Christian sense may be understood as our coming into the fullness of freedom in Christ.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 3:9.

<sup>26</sup> Scripture scholars note that in Genesis 1:26 – “Let us make *man*” – the word used for *man* is a collective noun. Similarly, in 2:16 – “Then Yahweh God gave the *man* this command” – means “man *and* woman” as in 3:24 and 3:1-3 which is the continuation of 2:17. Yet 2:18ff actually describes the origins of “woman” as if this collective noun “man” referred to the male of the species. Clearly there is more than one traditional story represented in the text of Genesis describing the origins of the human race.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 1:27. See also 5:1-2.

creation, the very cause and origin of my self. The substance of my humanity that calls me into relationship with God might, ironically, lead me away from that essential relationship.

Hence the constant warnings about idolatry we find in the Bible.<sup>28</sup> Obviously these warnings are given in the context of the Covenant and the call to remain faithful within the relationship with the one true God. But it is not unreasonable to see in these warnings a more subtle revelation. We may not worship “gods” of stone and wood in our particular culture and time in history. But we may worship “gods” which are fabrications of our own egos. When we give an absolute value to a relative thing and when we turn means into ends we are going down the path of idolatry. Thus, possessions can take on an absolute value for us. So too can our need to control or our obsession with being right. So too our religious dogmatism can be a form of idolatry. The Church may, in our minds, assume the authority that belongs to God. Our very image or idea of God might take on the character of actually being God. This is idolatry.<sup>29</sup>

Idealization is – at least in a psychological sense – an act of idolatry. And it is probably much more common than we would be prepared to admit. We are all born with a genius for self-deception. Couple that with a restless heart that longs for the Infinite and desires to be in union with the Great Mystery of God, the God of the Covenant, the God of history, and you have the inevitability that all of us will lurch and stagger from one idolatry to another.

This should make us, first and foremost, cry out for mercy. Secondly it should make us slow to judge others. The struggle against idolatry is a radical and lifelong struggle against the demonic, the source of all oppression, the “father of lies” (see John 8:44). We can only win this victory by working diligently with the grace of God. If we ignore the primacy of grace, the very struggle to outgrow our idealizing/idolizing could become an idolatrous project in itself.

At the heart of biblical revelation is the invitation to “taste and see.”<sup>30</sup> God offers us the Covenant relationship. And the Covenant is first and foremost the initiative of God reaching out to us in infinite love. When the primacy of relationship gives way to the primacy of dogma or moral injunction or legal requirements or organizational structures of one kind or another, authentic religion has been defeated, idealization/idolization has triumphed over the pursuit of genuine religious ideals. Any injunctions to obey laws or perform rituals or to set up structures and organizations – necessary as these are – can only be understood as a means to foster and celebrate and strengthen the Covenant.

When the means becomes the end – and this is an ever-present likelihood in human affairs – the community must take urgent stock of what is happening. In

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<sup>28</sup> See for example Exodus 20:3.

<sup>29</sup> Thus Meister Eckhart prays: “I pray God that he may quit me of god, for his unconditioned being is above god and all distinctions”. Raymond Blakney, translator, *Meister Eckhart*, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 231.

<sup>30</sup>.See Psalm 34:8.

fact, any community that does not maintain a perpetual and serious vigil over its direction will very quickly fall away into something other than they intended or pretend to be. Therein lies the major role of the Prophets in the community. They call the people back to their vocation, they demand that we move from forgetfulness to remembrance.

Biblical revelation is first and foremost an invitation to be loved by Love. When we are loved in this way we are set free. Love, by its very nature, is liberating. And when we are set free we can be in the world so as to let God love others into freedom through us. The Psalmist sums up the religious vision of the Bible beautifully:

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,  
And set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.  
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.*

*Blessed is the one who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud,  
To those who go astray after false gods!  
Thou hast multiplied, O Lord my God, thy wondrous deeds and thy thoughts towards us;  
None can compare with thee!  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be numbered.*

*Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire;  
But thou hast given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering thou hast not required.  
Then I said, 'Lo, I come; in the roll of the book it is written of me;  
I delight to do thy will, O my God;  
Thy law is within my heart.'*

*I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation;  
Lo I have not restrained my lips, as thou knowest, O Lord.  
I have not hid thy saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of thy faithfulness and thy salvation;  
I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness from the great congregation.  
Do not thou, O Lord, withhold thy mercy from me,  
Let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness ever preserve me!<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup>.Psalm 40:1-11.

## The Covenant is the way

Throughout history – Jewish and Christian – we repeatedly find the relational vision of the Covenant being reduced to an ideology. An ideology, as we have noted above, is a more or less coherent set of ideas, constituting a pre-definition of the way the world should be. An ideology is – at least potentially – always an idealization. Ideologues attempt to make the world of people, events and things fit their pre-definition. Jesus’ constant battle with the legalism of the religious authorities of his day may be understood in this light.<sup>32</sup> The cleansing of the temple – an extraordinarily powerful event that we probably do not meditate on enough – gives us a unique glimpse of Jesus’ own priorities.<sup>33</sup> Consider too the Johannine description of Jesus’ self-understanding and therefore His understanding of discipleship.<sup>34</sup>

However, it would be wrong to assume that Jesus was in opposition to structured religion or rituals or laws. The Gospels give ample evidence to the contrary.<sup>35</sup> Jesus seems to be more concerned that his audience – especially the leaders – are missing the whole point. Rituals and rules and structures and doctrine

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Mark 7:1-13. See also Matthew 15:1-9 and 23:1-12.

<sup>33</sup> See John 2:13-22. See also Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:11, 15-17; Luke 19:45-46. There is remarkable harmony between each of these accounts.

<sup>34</sup> John’s Gospel, for example, makes frequent use of the Greek word *menein*. It is a primary verb meaning both “to stay” and “to dwell” (in a given place, state, relation or expectancy). It is used to mean *to abide, to dwell, to continue, to endure, to be present, to remain* and so on. At the very beginning of John’s Gospel, however, this common word begins to take on an uncommon significance: “Jesus turned and saw them (ie the first disciples) following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ And they said to him ‘Rabbi (which means teacher), where are you *staying*?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was *staying* and *stayed* with him the rest of that day” (1:38-39). The profound significance of this term for John is already implicit in the obvious symbolism of this passage. The reader is prompted to wonder: Where does Jesus abide? From where does he draw His life? Where is “home” for Him? And then we hear his simple invitation: “Come and see”. And the disciples “came and saw”. There is a meeting, the disciples are attracted by “something” and are moved to ask the question; the response is straightforward, unambiguous, ordinary; they make the next move and they see. And what do the disciples “see”? The disciples begin to understand what it means *to remain with Him*. In chapters 6 and 8 we return to the theme: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood *abides* in me, and I in him” (6:56); “If you *continue* in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (8:31-32). John presents, through this concept of *abiding*, a thoroughly rich and coherent view of what it means to be a disciple. It implies both a moral vision and the mystical reality that underpins that moral vision. Perhaps it is nowhere better summed up than in the image of the vine (cf 15:1-17; see similarly 14:23). In the space of eleven verses there, he uses the concept eleven times. In the middle of that passage, soon after the actual use of the image, we read the awesome words: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; *abide* in my love” (v9).

<sup>35</sup> For example: Matthew 5:17 (“Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets etc.”); 5:20-48 (The new standard much higher than the old); 6:5-6 (You must pray); 6:16-18 (You are encouraged to fast); 26:17-19 (Jesus celebrates the feast of the Passover); 13:53 (Jesus taught in the synagogue).

and injunctions are means to an end, and as such they play an essential role. When they become ends in themselves – when they are idolized or idealized or constructed as ideologies – they become idols and instruments for control. The sovereign God, utterly incomprehensible and utterly uncontrollable, is replaced by “gods” which are utterly comprehensible and – more importantly – utterly controllable. The way of grace then tends to be replaced by the way of will power, loving intimacy tends to be replaced by performance and mastery and freedom tends to be replaced by entrapment. Religion – and the conscientiously religious – can easily slip into this tragic irony.

Jesus seals the Covenant on Calvary.<sup>36</sup> Our Eucharistic liturgy proclaims this great mystery of our faith: “Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!” And: “Through Him! With Him! In Him! In the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours almighty Father, forever and ever!” These proclamations that express the heart of our Gospel faith remind us that the heart of our faith is a *mystical* heart. That is, the Christian life is about being drawn into communion with the One, the great God of our ancestors, the faithful God of the Covenant, the God incarnate in Jesus whom we call the Christ. “What does it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your very self?”<sup>37</sup>



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<sup>36</sup> See for example Matthew 26:28.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 16:26.

## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“How did it happen that now for the first time in his life he could see everything so clearly? Something had given him leave to live in the present. Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he ever been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream. Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way that one misses a plane? And how is it that death, the nearness of death, can restore a missed life? Why is it that without death one misses his life?”*<sup>38</sup>



(2) *“To say Yes to life is at one and the same time to say Yes to oneself. Yes - even to that element in one which is most unwilling to let itself be transformed from a temptation into a strength.”*<sup>39</sup>



(3) *“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.”*<sup>40</sup>



(4) *“If I got rid of my demons I'd lose my angels.”*<sup>41</sup>



(5) *“I am what I am or I am nothing. .... My first elementary lesson of duty is that of resignation to the laws of nature, whatever they are; my first disobedience is to be impatient at what I am, and to indulge an ambitious aspiration after what I cannot be.”*<sup>42</sup>



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<sup>38</sup> Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980, 123f.

<sup>39</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Alfred A Knopf, 1964, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Shirley Sugeran, *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism*, Westminster Press, 54f.

<sup>41</sup> Tennessee Williams, quoted in "The Laureate of Loss," Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*, March 7, 1983, 53.

<sup>42</sup> John Henry Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, Image Books, 1955, 272f.

(6) *“Everyone of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the person I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about that person. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one that wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love - outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves - the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honour, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface. But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness to tell me that I am my own mistake. The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. ... Ultimately the only way I can be myself is to become identified with Him in whom is hidden the reason and fulfilment of my existence. ... Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.”*<sup>43</sup>



(7) *“... but the self that did not become Caesar is the thing that is intolerable.”*<sup>44</sup>



(8) *“Whether I am a child or an adult, a simple person or a hero, a prisoner or a free citizen, I am always a potentiality for transcendence in many ways. If I were to freeze myself into one mold by repression of the aspiration to transcend what I*

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 27f.

<sup>44</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, Walter Lowrie trans, Princeton University Press, 1975, p.152.

currently am, I would die to authentic living. The most sordid crime against our humanity is to destroy what we basically are: transcendent selves."<sup>45</sup>



(9) "Yet the living Truth, the great breaker of idols and destroyer of false gods, is ultimately easier to live with than the most comforting of lies. It is better to lose the God we found it easy to envisage, and the faith that was only a protection from our fears, and stand naked and unknowing in the presence of the One who can only really be known when He is lived with. At least with that God we can and, indeed must, begin from where we are. There can be no becoming that does not start from that which really is."<sup>46</sup>



(10) "Let me read with open eyes the book my days are writing -- and learn."<sup>47</sup>



(11) "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? <sup>27</sup> "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."<sup>48</sup>



(12) "Nothing is ever completed ... Incompleteness is a part of nature and it takes great art or great wisdom to know when to lay down the brush ... we should always avoid perfectionism."<sup>49</sup>



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<sup>45</sup> Adrian van Kaam, *The Transcendent Self*, Dimension Books, 1979, 167f.

<sup>46</sup> Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1973, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 131.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew 16:24-28. See also Mark 8:34-9.1; Luke 9:23-27.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, trans. Richard Mayne, Doubleday, 1978, p. 521.

(13) *"Hell is yourself, ... and the only redemption is when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person."*<sup>50</sup>



(14) *"In a weird way I must have loved my little collection of hurts and wounds. They provided me with some real nice sympathy, with the feeling I was exceptional. I was the girl abandoned by her mother. I was the girl who kneeled on grits. What a special case I was."*<sup>51</sup>



(15) *"The absolutizing instinct is the father of the hopeless and adds that special feeling of weight that hopelessness attaches to everything it touches. It is in general the creator of hopeless projects and idols."*<sup>52</sup>



(16) *"Let us be honest about it. We are more afraid of the truth than of death."*<sup>53</sup>



(17) *"The law of our life can be summed up in the axiom 'be what you are.' As sons and images of God, we must have no higher or more urgent obligation than to resemble Him in the purity, the universality and the perfection of our freedom in divine love."*<sup>54</sup>



(18) *"Lucky is the man who does not secretly believe that every possibility is open to him."*<sup>55</sup>



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<sup>50</sup> Tennessee Williams, quoted in the "The Laureate of the Outcast", T.E. Kalem, *Time*, March 7, 1983, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Penguin Books, 2002, 278..

<sup>52</sup> William Lynch, *Images of Hope*, Notre Dame University Press, 1973, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong, editors and translators, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Volume IV*, 503.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961, 236.

<sup>55</sup> Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, Avon, 1978, 12.

(19) *“Who am I? ... I am one loved by Christ.”*<sup>56</sup>



(20) *“To say I am made in the image and likeness of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. ... Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”*<sup>57</sup>



(21) *“The Word became flesh to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (cf 2Peter 1:4): ‘For this is why the Word became a human being, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that human beings, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God’ (St Ireneus). ‘For the son of God became a human being that we might become God’ (St Athanasius). ‘The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made human, might make us gods’ (St Thomas Aquinas).”*<sup>58</sup>



(22) *“To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day, to make you everybody else; means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stops fighting.”*<sup>59</sup>



(23) *“My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit – not brute strength but glorious inner strength – that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.”*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas Merton, "Conference on Prayer," *Sisters Today*, XLI (1970), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1972, 60.

<sup>58</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #460.

<sup>59</sup> e e cummings.

<sup>60</sup> Ephesians 3:14-19. (From *The Message – The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Peterson.

## Suggestions for further study

- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book X.  
 Binswanger, Ludwig, “Extravagance” in the author’s *Being-in-the-World: Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*, translated by Jacob Needleman, A Condor Book, 1963, 342-350.
- Brown, Peter, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, University of California Press, 1967/69 – especially Chapter 15 (“The Lost Future”)
- Cinema, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) (Dir: Milos Forman with Jack Nicholson).  
*Ordinary People* (1980) (Dir: Robert Redford with Donald Sutherland and Mary Tyler Moore).  
*Death of a Salesman* (1985) (Dir: Volker Schlöndorff with Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, John Malkovich and Stephen Lang).  
*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) (Dir: Woody Allen with Caroline Aaron, Alan Alda, Claire Bloom, Mia Farrow and Woody Allen).  
*Dead Poets Society* (1989) (Dir: Peter Weir with Robin Williams).  
*Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993) (Dir: Steven Zaillian with Joes Mantegna).  
*Wrestling Ernest Hemingway* (1993) (Dir: Randa Haines with Robert Duvall, Richard Harris).
- Horney, Karen, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, W W Norton, 1950 – especially Chapter 1 (“The Search for Glory”).
- , *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis*, W W Norton, 1945/1966 – especially Chapter 1 (“The Poignancy of Neurotic Conflicts”).
- , *Self-Analysis*, W W Norton, 1942.
- Ibsen, Henrik, *The Master Builder*.
- Lynch, William, *Images of Hope*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1974 – especially Chapter 5 (“The Absolutizing Instinct”).
- Merton, Thomas “Rain and the Rhinoceros” in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New Directions, 1966, 9-26.
- Miller, Arthur, *Death of a Salesman*.
- O’Connor, Flannery, “The Lame Shall Enter First” in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume II*, 48-64.
- Peck, M Scott, *People of the Lie: The Hope for healing Human Evil*, A Touchstone Book, 1983.
- Smiley, Jane, *Thousand Acres*, Alfred Knopf, 1992.

- Van Kaam, Adrian, *The Demon and the Dove*, Duquesne University Press, 1967.
- Whelan, Michael, *Living Strings*, E J Dwyer, 1994 – especially Chapter 5 (“Missing the Mark”).
- , *The Call to Be*, St Paul’s, 1986/2000, - especially Chapter 10 (“Becoming Yourself”).
- , *Without God All Things Are Lawful*, St Pauls, 1995 – especially Chapters 2 (“When the Gold Leaf Wears Off”) and 14 (“Vocation”).
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.



## **Suggested exercises**

1. As you go about the business of your week, pause a number of times and become aware of what you are feeling. Do not try to do anything about it – just be aware. Listen. Be honestly present to what is happening. If you catch yourself filtering anything out or resisting or evading anything, be particularly attentive to that.
2. Listen carefully to the thoughts and feelings you have about other people this week. Again, just be aware and gently pay attention to what is going in inside you, especially when you feel distressed by or angry with others.
3. To what extent has religion been an idealizing project for you? For example, have you thought more in terms of striving to be “the good Christian spouse” or “the faithful one” by observing a program of life, or have you thought more in terms of opening yourself to God’s liberating love and becoming who you most deeply are? What are the implications for you? Where are you?

