

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by
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UNIT ONE SESSION ONE: Introduction



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Freedom of the spirit in the Spirit

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Scientism, said Kierkegaard, explains everything under the sun except what it is to be man, to live, and to die. Nor do the manifold delights of consumerism and six hours of TV a day change this state of affairs. Indeed, it is in the very face of this massive consumption of goods and this diversion by entertainment, either despite it or because of it, that psychiatrists, not priests but psychiatrists, have remarked the ominous increase of depression and suicide – to say nothing of the recourse to drugs. In a word, the consumer of mass culture is lonely, not only lonely, but spiritually impoverished.¹



I believe most people hunger after spirituality, even if that hunger remains, in many cases, unconscious. If those who dragoon us ignore that longing of the human psyche, they are running a great risk. The sense of real purpose, the life force, could be expelled from a society whose leaders are obsessed by money, muscle and machinery. That society could, quite simply, die.²



(Liberal humanism's) unrelenting adulthood forces people on to the thorns of tragic complexity and the strange intractability of the world, and often when people who subscribe to it relax for a moment, their eyes are seen to contain an almost desperate appeal: please prove us wrong, make us believe there is more to it than this, show us your God and that Grace you talk about.³



¹ Walker Percy, "Culture, the Church and Evangelization" in Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed, Patrick Samway, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991, p.302.

² Patrick White, from an Address he gave at La Trobe University in July 1987. Reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

³ Les Murray, "Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia" in D. Harris et al., *The Shape of Belief: Christianity in Australia Today*, Lancer, 1982, p.26.

Imagine your utopia

Imagine that you have everything you would like to have: You have good health, intelligence and talent “to burn,” as the saying goes, the most wonderful spouse in the world and healthy, intelligent, good kids to boot, the most scintillating circle of faithful friends, a beautiful house with a stunning view and all the high tech gadgetry you can think of, a great job with abundant income, enough money in fact to travel first class anywhere in the world and eat at the finest restaurants and drink the most expensive wines, and so on. Is it possible to imagine yourself being totally satisfied – I mean *totally* satisfied – in this way? Would it be possible to have a life in which you did not ever “want more,” that left you perfectly at ease and content?

In Isak Dinesen’s novella, “Babette’s Feast,” one of the main characters is General Loewenhielm. The general is a very successful man, someone who “had obtained everything that he had striven for in life and was admired and envied by everyone”.⁴ But the same man is deeply dissatisfied and restless. He longs for something that he has not been able to attain and he is not quite sure what it is he longs for:

Only he himself knew of a queer fact, which jarred with his prosperous existence: that he was not perfectly happy. Something was wrong somewhere, and he carefully felt his mental self all over, as one feels a finger over to feel the place of a deep-seated, invisible thorn.

He was in high favour with royalty, he had done well in his calling, he had friends everywhere. The thorn sat in none of these places.

His wife was a brilliant woman and still good looking. Perhaps she neglected her own house a little for her visits and parties; she changed her servants every three months and the General’s meals at home were served unpunctually. Still the thorn was not there either.

Nay, but an absurd thing had lately been happening to General Loewenhielm: he would find himself worrying about his immortal soul. Did he have any reason for doing so? He was a moral person, loyal to his king, his wife and his friends, an example to everybody. But there were moments when it seemed to him that the world was not a moral but a mystic concern. He looked into the mirror, examined the row of decorations on his breast and sighed to himself: ‘Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!’⁵

Sit with some questions:

- What do I really want?
- What will satisfy my deepest longings?
- Is it possible that these longings are just a meaningless inner urging, biological

⁴ Isak Dinesen, “Babette’s Feast” in the author’s *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard*, Vintage, 1993, 45. See also Gabriel Axel’s 1987 (Danish) film based on this novella.

⁵ Ibid.

and psychological energy that suggest nothing more than themselves?

- Or are these longings and urgings – longings and urgings that paradoxically can emerge very strongly precisely when we have “everything” and “all is well” with our lives – perhaps signals of inner depths, something other, something more than biology and psychology?
- Is it possible that these deeper longings and urgings – or, more precisely, their repression – have something to do with the so-called “epidemic of depression” in the Western world?
- What would happen if we paid attention and listened, if we took the longings and restlessness of the heart seriously, as if they did suggest something more than we have yet experienced?

There are some interesting voices coming from different parts of our culture that suggest we would do well to pay attention to such movements of the human heart.

Signals from TV-land

In 1992 the Emmy Award-winning American TV writer/producer, Norman Lear, addressed a Joint Faculty Seminar of the Harvard Divinity School and the Harvard Business School.⁶ His words are perhaps even more insightful today and probably apply as much to the rest of the Western world as they do to the United States. Lear argued that the traditional institutional sources of values in our society – the church, family, education and civil authority – have waned.⁷ He suggested that business has now become “the fountainhead of values in our society.” Lear begins his presentation:

Let me start by recognising something that unites both of the communities in this room, and, for that matter, all of humankind. I'm talking about the mysterious inner life, the fertile invisible realm that is the wellspring for our species' creativity and morality. It is that portion of ourselves that impels us to create art and literature, and study ethics, philosophy, and history. It is that portion of our being that gives rise to our sense of awe and wonder and longing for truth, beauty, and a higher order of meaning. For want of a better term, one could call it the spirited or spiritual life of our species. Whatever we call it, we have long recognised its presence and accepted that it sets us apart. And yet, as a student of the American psyche, at no time in my life can I remember our culture being so estranged from this essential part of itself. One can see it in the loss of faith in leaders and institutions – the cynicism, selfishness, and erosion of civility – and the hunger for connectedness that stalks our nation today. How bizarre that there is such an

⁶ Norman Lear, "The Cathedral of Business: The Fountainhead of Values in America Today" in *The New Oxford Review*, April 1993, 6 (6-13).

⁷ Ask yourself a question: Who do I trust? The clergy, politicians, social and scientific researchers, people in the media? Do you think we, as a society, trust one another more or less than people did in Australia, say fifty years ago? What is happening? How important is trust to the well being of a society?

*unhealthy reticence in our culture generally, and in business and education and public life in particular, to discuss what may be the most distinctive trait of this remarkable creature, the human being.*⁸

Norman Lear goes on to cite the historian, Lewis Mumford:

*“Rome fell, not because of political or economic ineptitude – or even because of barbarian invasions. It collapsed through a ‘leaching away of meaning and loss of faith.’ Rome fell, he said, because of a ‘barbarization from within’.”*⁹

The loss of a clear sense of “a higher order of meaning,” of a lived sense of connectedness with “the spirit-led or spiritual life” in our time is both a danger and an opportunity. A culture cannot live for long without adequate food for the soul. We will, inevitably, seek “the more than,” “the beyond” in some form or other.

The *danger* is that we will seek it in dead ends or even destructive ways – eg idolising something like science or money or work or diet or body-building or attaching ourselves to a “messianic” figure such as a cult leader or giving ourselves over to any one of a number of New Age phenomena such as channelling or crystals, and so on.

The *opportunity* is that we will, both as individuals and as a culture, take up the challenge and pursue a vigorous and honest conversation about what is happening here. We may then promote a transition to something richer and deeper than we have hitherto known. It can be a conversation of possibilities that were out of the question in a culture that had tight boundaries and confident “answers” for every serious question. Such a conversation can lead us to the liberation of our best possibilities as people who seek the “more than.” Partners in this conversation must include:

- our own experience and especially our own heart’s deepest longings expressed through the ordinary events of each day,
- the “more than,” the Great Mystery of Life Itself,¹⁰
- the manifold sources of wisdom expressed in the human family’s struggle to make sense of the human story down through the ages (eg the great myths and the records of the great ventures, triumphs and failures),
- the discoveries of contemporary research and writing, especially in the human sciences, and
- the manifestations of human experiences – whether positive or negative – in popular culture.

⁸ Norman Lear, Op. cit., 7.

⁹ Op. cit., 9.

¹⁰ The word “mystery” is understood to mean “inexhaustible intelligibility.” When we write it with a capital “M” – as in “the Great Mystery” – we are pointing towards the Ultimate Source of all that is. For the Christian believer, this Mystery is pre-eminently revealed in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. Throughout this course we will repeatedly emphasize the human ground of spirituality, that realm of experience that can be accessed by any human being anywhere, with or without faith as such. All human experience, if we know how to listen, leads us ever more deeply into the inexhaustible intelligibility of existence.

Such an ongoing conversation – which can and ought to become the very boiler room of our lives – will facilitate the emergence of a well grounded spirituality that progressively situates us more and more solidly in the truth of who we are and what we are called to be as unique and communal human beings. Such an ongoing conversation will also awaken us to reality in extra-ordinary ways. The unspectacular stuff of our daily lives will become places of epiphany and transformation. In this way, we will also become aware, slowly but surely, of the claims placed on us and the possibilities offered to us by the Great Mystery.

This opportunity, however, will have to be sought out within the complexities and hard realities of the cultural context and historical moment in which we find ourselves. We can point to at least seven significant cultural and historical factors at play here:

- Firstly, one of the greatest pressures on all of us concerns *time*. We are all terribly busy. There is so much that can and must be done. The email is one particular point of stress in this regard. Another is the increasing expectations that people will work longer and longer hours. In such an environment, the need for privacy, silence, solitude, liturgy, personal and communal reflection, relaxation time with friends and even sleep, tend to be ignored or squeezed down to something minimal, as if they were dispensable items.
- Secondly, we are constantly threatened with *information overload*. In the market place of human thought, we are faced with an overwhelming multitude of ideas and teachings. The sheer quantity of known and available facts is expanding all the time. “Just Google it!” has become a symbol of our ability to access literally millions of items of information at the click of a mouse. Just about anything that happens anywhere in the world today can be on your TV screen tonight. In the excitement, fascination and pressure created by this movement of information we are liable to some deforming reactions. For example, we may mistake mere exchange of information for genuine communication.¹¹ We can easily become burdened and distracted and even overwhelmed by a huge number of items of information that, for the most part, do not matter. Our minds and our thinking may thus become closed to the things that *do* matter. We can be seduced into believing that trivia are really important, that information is really knowledge and knowledge is really wisdom. We can also be confused by the welter of conflicting information, a confusion that leaves us either bewildered and wanting to withdraw or vulnerable to manipulators who want us to believe a certain ideology or world view.¹² Our availability for and apprehension of truth may then be diminished. Our lives

¹¹ Bill Gates is reported as saying the internet is a good place to post the agenda for a meeting, a good place to post the minutes of a meeting, but not a good place to have a meeting. Human communication is severely constrained when there is no human presence.

¹² The run-away best seller – *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown – may be a case in point. On the face of it the book looks like a fast-moving whodunnit. I suggest there is a mischievous misuse and misrepresentation of historical data in this book aimed at promoting a particular world view. Such books can make those who have little or no knowledge of history very confused.

may become robotized. Excess of information can have an anaesthetic effect, thus limiting rather than liberating us.

- Thirdly, our peculiarly *rationalistic* way of thinking about ourselves and our world tends to leave us dealing with life as merely a series of problems to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived. If we begin with the assumption that there is no mystery, only problems, then we will assume there is a strategy and an expert to help us find and pursue that strategy. You do not have to be a genius to see the limits of this obsession with problem-solving approaches to life. For one thing, it is likely to generate unreal expectations which can, when they fail, promote depression. Further, our rationalism tends to stand in the way of other deeper ways of knowing – the ways of knowing common to the great religious traditions, especially in their mystics, as well as the ways of knowing that a mother has of her child or the lover has of the beloved or the poet or artist have. Again, an excess of a rationalistic way of thinking can limit rather than liberate.
- Fourthly, and hand in hand with the rationalism, there is a certain *functionalism* characteristic of our times, especially in the West. We tend to focus on whether something “works” or is “useful” rather than whether it is “meaningful” or “good.” Functionalism tends to emphasise the immediate and the concrete and has little regard for the long term ramifications or moral implications or subtleties of human experience as such. Functionalism is not likely to ask “*may* such and such be done” but “*can* such and such be done.” Functionalism tends to generate excessive concern for skills, order and measurable outcomes. Functionalism is obsessed with outcomes and those outcomes must be measurable. Functionalism does not allow much room for ambiguity, paradox, poetry or the mysterious uncertainties of life that are actually the heart and soul of what is surprising and beautiful about human beings. Functionalism even manages to turn sport and play into business. It alienates people by turning them into commodities and assigning identity on the basis of usefulness (or profitability). Rationalism and functionalism present us with a huge irony. On the one hand they have given us the fascinating and immensely useful array of technological marvels – like computers and miracle drugs and lens implants etc – but on the other hand they contribute to life being fragmented, frenetic and superficial. As recently as the Eighties, we thought computers and other technical marvels would usher in an age of unprecedented leisure time. The very opposite seems to have happened. The times when we can be quiet and still and at leisure either alone or with others – a *sine qua non* for waking up to the depth dimension of our humanity – are rare or even avoided. Again, limits rather than liberty can be the result of functionalism.
- Fifthly, under the general impetus of the Enlightenment of the 18th century and the kind of thinking that emerged at that time, and the particular influence of empirical scientific research, we have also become accustomed to a certain *reductionism* in our thinking. Reductionism keeps reducing things to their parts, and the parts are reduced further to their parts and so on. While this kind of thinking may be appropriate to empirical scientific research, it is often

destructive of our thoughts and attitudes in daily living. Reductionism does not know how to deal with the whole – whether it is a person or a relationship or a virtue or some other matter of daily living. It contributes to life itself becoming fragmented. The parts become disconnected from each other. Life tends to become a series of disconnected pieces – episodic – with no clear relationship to a totality. One of the most serious consequences culturally of such reductionism is that the individual’s story seems to be disconnected from any larger, all-encompassing story. We are fast becoming a culture of disconnecting and disconnectedness, a gathering of individuals rather than a community.

- Sixthly, and closely related to all the above, is a pronounced *materialism*. From the time we get up in the morning until we retire at night, there are not many signs, symbols, conversations, buildings or activities that put us in mind of the Transcendent or the spiritual. We live – especially as city-dwellers – within an ambience that is focused on material things, all the while suggesting – more or less explicitly or implicitly, subtly or blatantly – that we do not need anything more in life than material possessions. In fact, you could be forgiven for thinking that the prevailing belief of our culture is that the more you possess the happier you will be. There is very little food offered for “the soul”.
- Seventhly, Christianity – along with Western civilization and perhaps the whole human family – *is being forced to question itself*. Long held and largely unquestioned assumptions and convictions are now being challenged. This is particularly the case for Christianity in its understanding of the Gospel, the Tradition, the structure of Church, the shape of its institutions, the world and its role in relation to these. As always happens when human beings are forced into a process of deep self-questioning, a deconstruction or dismantling of one’s taken-for-granted world occurs. This provokes doubts and confusion, uncertainty about identity and role, and responses can range from the tentative and inept to the tragic and disastrous through to the simply faithful and even heroic. Thus the conversation between the Gospel, the authentic Tradition and the world that should enliven Christianity, giving it its energy and purpose, has – for the moment at least – become very confused. In fact, it seems that some do not want such a conversation to occur. It seems reasonable to suggest that the emerging expressions of neo-conservatism and fundamentalism – in politics and culture as well as religion – are due to the anxiety that has been provoked by the shaking of an old, more or less stable and predictable world. Because that world did offer stability and predictability, it also offered the powerful seduction of controllability and safety. The world is no longer predictable and seems dreadfully unstable and therefore uncontrollable and unsafe. The “finding of spirituality/religion” by many in the Western world might be more an expression of anxiety than faith and therefore more properly a subject of psychological than theological research.¹³

¹³ See for example, Hugh Mackay, “Social Disengagement: A Breeding Ground for Fundamentalism.” This was the Sixth Annual Manning Clark Lecture, given on Thursday March 3 2005 at the National Library in Canberra. It was aired on Radio National’s Big Ideas program, Sunday March 20, 2005. Mackay observes at the beginning of that lecture: “It seems to be a law of nature that when any society

Signals from the gulag

In 1977 Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered his now famous Harvard Commencement Address.¹⁴ He spoke there of “the spiritual exhaustion of the West,” a theme to which he has returned a number of times since. Other commentators – such as American writer Walker Percy and Australians Les Murray and Patrick White, cited in the epigraphs to these notes – seem to agree with Solzhenitsyn. Many are frightened by the apparent lack of values and the moral confusion so evident in Western society at this time.¹⁵ In our wonderful world of general enlightenment and good will and staggering technological progress, the human spirit may be oppressed. Martin Luther King Jr added his voice to that of Solzhenitsyn when he commented:

*The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live. Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.*¹⁶

In 1983, Alexander Solzhenitsyn received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. When receiving that prize, Solzhenitsyn commented:

*The great crisis of humanity today is that it has lost its sense of the invisible. We have become experts in the visible, particularly in the West. If I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat again and again: Men have forgotten God. The failings of a human consciousness deprived of its divine dimensions have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of (the 20th) century.*¹⁷

goes through a period of upheaval and transformation, simplistic worldviews increase their appeal. Right now, Australia is looking like a classic case of point. For the past thirty years, we’ve been living through a cultural revolution that has radically re-defined the kind of society we are becoming and now, right on cue, the fundamentalists are here to tell us how to make sense of it all.”

¹⁴ Cf. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart", Ed. R. Berman, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, Ethics and Public Policy Centre, Washington D.C., 1980.

¹⁵ I refrain from commenting on what is happening in other parts of the world. However, the evidence would seem to suggest that what is happening in the West is in fact part of a phenomenon that is affecting the entire human family in some form or other.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr, *Strength To Love*, Fount Paperbacks, 1989, p.74.

¹⁷ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "We Have Forgotten God", *The Tablet*, May 14, 1983. We might note in passing the upsurge, in recent generations, of supposedly religion-based terrorism and wars. This would seem to contradict Solzhenitsyn. Surely, it is precisely the belief in God that is causing all the strife? I suggest that those who rape and torture other human beings or hijack planes and fly those planes with their passengers to their deaths or engage in suicide bombings and claim to be doing this on behalf of God are lying or, at least, are misled. They may be doing it on behalf of a “religious ideology” but they are not doing it on behalf of the One who is Infinite Love and Truth and Goodness and Beauty, the Source of all Unity, the Ground of Being. Whatever else we might say about these people, we cannot call them authentically religious. These are not religious acts but the acts of psychologically and/or morally twisted human beings. These people have, in the deepest sense of Solzhenitsyn’s expression, forgotten God.

Without some real sense of the Transcendent within a culture, we tend to lose our way as human beings. A sense of morality – without which a society becomes prey to lawlessness and eventually moral chaos – tends to recede when our sense of the Transcendent, or higher order of reality, recedes. And as our sense of morality recedes so we tend to look around for some way to hold society together. Typically we settle on laws – we become increasingly litigious. When a human need or dispute arises in this atmosphere, we look immediately to what the law requires or allows. The more litigious we are, ironically, the more anarchical and lawless we tend to become as we devise increasingly sophisticated ways of ensuring that the law does not apply to us.¹⁸ In sum, a successful legal system depends on a solid, shared moral sense among the citizens, and a solid, shared moral sense depends on a sense of the Transcendent.

Without doubt, we have the most serious political, social, environmental and economic issues to address. But we also have the most serious issues of value, purpose and meaning to address. Put most simply, we need to ask with great urgency, “What does it mean to be a human being?”¹⁹ Both sets of issues are interdependent, and must be addressed together with all the intelligence, creativity, courage and generosity we can muster. However, the issues of value, purpose and meaning – issues pertaining to a vision of what it means to be a human being – are more foundational than the political, social and economic issues.

Signals from philosophy

The late twentieth century French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, has spoken of “the three masters of suspicion” – Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friederich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).²⁰ Ricoeur argues that these thinkers – and their colleagues and disciples – introduced a certain “hermeneutics of suspicion”²¹ which permeates the consciousness of contemporary Westerners. Our hitherto certain convictions about the world have been undermined. We can no longer take our assumptions and understandings and answers for granted. In the social, political, economic and religious

¹⁸ Perhaps the following observations from social researcher Hugh Mackay suggest signs of anarchy: “800,000 children are being raised in homes where neither parent has a job. Each year about 40,000 Australians aged 15-24 years attempt suicide. By the age of 18, about 20% of children will have experienced a major depressive episode. Illicit drug use is on the rise, and it’s taking a heavy toll on the health and lives of young Australians.” (Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future*, Macmillan, 1999, page ix.)

¹⁹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is one very positive step towards promoting awareness of what it means to be a human being. This Declaration is based on what we in the Catholic tradition call “natural law.” Natural law refers to the demands of human dignity. The fact that I am a human being is a “statement” that must be heard and respected.

²⁰ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay On Interpretation*, Yale University Press, 1980, pp.32-36.

²¹ Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It endeavours to discover the meaning of what is said or written. In this context, Ricoeur implies that the search to understand the meaning of what is said or written has been overtaken by a sense that, in fact, there is no given meaning to it or perhaps there is some ulterior meaning, intended or not. This leaves us “suspicious” of everything that is said or written, unwilling to trust the spoken or written message. More importantly, it leaves us unwilling to trust the messenger.

domains, questions and questioning have replaced unchallenged answers and simple convictions. Questioning has, in fact, become the order of the day.²² We are incurably suspicious of “answers” to any of life’s major questions. We are particularly suspicious when those who come up with those “answers” want to impose them on everybody else. The fact that we now know that many of those who pretended to have “the answers” in an earlier time, and exerted considerably authority over others – at times demanding blind conformity – had no such sure knowledge, contributes to our ongoing suspicion. Absolutism is being challenged at every turn.

There is of course a danger in this suspicion. We may come to a point where we deprive ourselves of any certitude about anything and thus leave ourselves in an intolerable psychological and moral muddle.

The embodiment of virtue

An exciting and daunting challenge lies before us. The opportunities and dangers are immense. We must learn anew to discern between good and evil, wisdom and foolishness, between those things that do actually satisfy the deepest longings of the heart and those that merely satisfy our whims, those that lead us to the Good, the True, the Beautiful and the Loving, and those that lead us away, those that give a solid basis for peace and communion within the human family and those that divide and fragment. The contemporary American moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, suggests a good starting point:

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of such parallels are those that have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman Empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman ‘imperium’ and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with maintenance of that ‘imperium’. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able

²² At least two other factors promoting this suspicion ought to be noted. Firstly, many of the traditional institutions and their representatives have not stood up well to close scrutiny and, in some instances, they have in fact failed scandalously, adding to the suspicion and cynicism. Secondly, the explosion of knowledge and availability of that knowledge to a growing number at an earlier age have fostered both a spirit of inquiry and a sense of relativism – any answers we might come up with today may not stand up tomorrow.

*to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting, not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.*²³

MacIntyre offers two critical observations here. Firstly, he points to society's need of people who *embody* virtue. Such people are *grounded* and *connected*, drawing a life force from beyond themselves and making it present in the here and now through their very bodily presence. They are, in the best sense of the word, builders and maintainers of community by their presence among us. To see and meet them is to see and meet much more than them. Their integrity and commitment to ultimate values is a compelling challenge to our own fearful and half-hearted attempts to be human. These people – such as St. Benedict (c.480-c.547) – become points of reference and inspiration, connectedness and strength, purpose and hope. They are the kinds of people around whom communities grow because in their presence people not only feel connected to themselves but connected to something bigger than themselves. Such people give witness to self-transcendence and challenge us to that same self-transcendence. They are signs of hope along the way. One of the outstanding characteristics of such people is their transparency. They are not ego-driven, they are Mystery-drawn.

Clearly, the likes of St. Benedict are a rare commodity. But the principle remains: The embodiment of virtue, living witness to the fact that the life of the spirit is the ground out of which authentic human existence emerges, is our best chance of thriving as a truly human society.

Secondly, MacIntyre highlights the need for *community*. Human beings need each other because human beings, of their very nature, are relational beings. Self-centred and individualistic lives are truncated and immature expressions of human possibility. Each unique individual person finds his or her true identity by loving and being loved – we are constituted in our humanity in and through relationships. Self-fulfilment implies self-transcendence. Self-transcendence breaks the hold of the ego that wants to establish a world of mastery where ego is god. Self-transcendence implies “a higher order of meaning.” We all need a “centre” from which to live – if it is not to be one's own ego or the ego of another, where shall we find our centre? Finding and embodying that “higher order of meaning” as the context for our relational lives is the work, in the end, of spirituality.

The course ahead

There are some assumptions underlying this course:

- Firstly, that human life is a call to participate in a mystery.
- Secondly, that mystery in the everyday, in turn, is but a pointer to the Great

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 263.

Mystery beyond the mystery, beyond all our comprehension and control.

- Thirdly, we are more than mere machines and our hearts long for “the more than,” we reach out for “the beyond” in order to be fully alive. Put another way, we long to be in love – literally, *to be in love* – and we are restless until we are completely in Love, one with Love.
- Fourthly, this course is about that human *longing* – what it means, what its object is, how best to guide it, how all other aspects of living relate to it. It is a course intended to help the intelligent and searching adult to address these matters.

This course is also a basic guide to the study of spirituality. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – the word spirituality has no generally accepted meaning. It is a much used and abused word to which people attach a variety of meanings and emotional connotations. As C S Lewis remarked, nothing will destroy the meaning and value of a word more quickly than popularity.

Spirituality, as it is understood in the context of this course, is the exploration of the ultimate issues relating to our deepest formation as unique and communal human beings. We may describe spirituality most simply as **LIVING RELATIONSHIPS**. The relationships about which we speak are fourfold:

- ***Our relationship with the Great Mystery,***
- ***Our relationship with ourselves,***
- ***Our relationship with other people and***
- ***Our relationship with the events and things of our world.***

To describe spirituality as “living relationships” suggests two lines of thought:

- Firstly, that spirituality is about relationships that are *living* and contribute to life, relationships that are constructive and contribute to the healthy formation of the person. It is possible to become caught in death-dealing relationships. This latter situation could hardly be called spirituality.
- Secondly, this description suggests that spirituality includes a *commitment*. Living relationships do not just happen, they are the outcome of constant work and sacrifice. We must *live* the relationships, accepting all the demands and responsibilities they entail.

The study of spirituality (See Appendix for diagram, “The Study of Spirituality”)

The *study* of spirituality, at its best, is a conversation through which we grow in awareness of these relationships and how they are in fact present or diminished or even dormant in our lives, and how they might be further developed and deepened. For this reason, spirituality is often likened to “waking up” or “enlightenment.” When we effectively develop spirituality – ie living relationships – in our lives, we are increasingly able to “see” and “hear” what is real and what matters.

For the Christian, a special part of that conversation will be both the Word and the authentic Tradition. But, in the end, no source of wisdom can be excluded from that conversation, at least in principle.²⁴

The very study of spirituality, properly engaged, is a transforming experience. Those who study spirituality in an authentic way will inevitably grow in the process. This growth will come about primarily through grace.²⁵ It will be experienced as pure gift, even though we have worked hard.²⁶

Throughout this course the expression *human life formation* (or simply *life formation*) will be used interchangeably with the word *spirituality*. This expression – *human life formation* – is meant to embrace *all those factors that are significant to the formation of human life as distinctively human*.

The contemporary study of spirituality or human life formation as a discipline in its own right has been significantly developed by Adrian van Kaam at the Institute of Formative Spirituality, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh.²⁷ A series of *constructs* and *foundational principles* have been articulated, initially by intuition, subsequently tested and verified by research. These constructs and principles – themselves always open to confirmation, nuancing or challenge – are used to help us *listen to* our lived experiences, and *interpret* and *assimilate* what is revealed to us there. Central to this whole process is a never-ending *dialogue* or *conversation* between what we hear in our lived experiences and what others have said or written about similar experiences. This conversation, pursued with intelligence and honesty, disposes us to the powerful and transforming movements of grace.

Helpful in this conversation will be sources of wisdom found in four broad areas:

- the more theoretical sciences – such as the branches of philosophy and theology;
- the more practical sciences – such as anthropology, sociology and psychology;
- the arts – such as film, literature and theatre;
- the pre-scientific tradition of various cultures – such as the myths and legends of the ancient Greeks and Australian Aborigines.

²⁴ There are limits to how many sources of wisdom any individually can competently and usefully engage. Furthermore, there is a timing to all this – a source of wisdom may be very beneficial at one time and not at another.

²⁵ Adrian van Kaam enunciates a principle to which we will return often: “Spiritual formation cannot be forced, only prepared for. Hence its means cannot be those of conquest, but only of facilitation and preparation.” (Adrian van Kaam, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, I, 2 (1980), 303.)

²⁶ “Grace” is here understood as simply *the presence of God*. Implicit in this understanding is the belief that where God *is*, God *acts*. God’s presence is God’s action and God’s action is always the action of *liberating love*.

²⁷ For an extended description of the history of this science, from Adrian van Kaam’s involvement in the Dutch resistance during the Second World War, through his nine years as Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University, and his founding (in 1965) and direction of the Institute of Formative Spirituality, see *Envoy*, Vol. XXVII, No.1 and following numbers, and *Studies in Formative Spirituality* (Volumes I–XV). Both are journals which were published by the Institute of Formative Spirituality, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA 15282. (The Institute closed in 1995.) See also *Suggestions for further study* at the end of this *Introduction*. NOTE: The word “science” is used in its classical sense rather than the more recent limited sense. It comes from the Latin word “scientia,” meaning knowledge. In its classical sense, science means a systematic and coherent inquiry or pursuit of knowledge. For the Greeks, the science *par excellence* is Metaphysics.

By listening to our experiences and using particular constructs and principles as referred to above to facilitate the conversation with the multiple sources of wisdom, an expanding integrated body of knowledge concerning life formation is developed. Human experience – most particularly *your* experience – is the starting point for the conversation. Abstractions and theoretical principles and ideals can never be the starting point, only useful facilitators for the conversation that must remain grounded in your experience. And the whole intent is *living relationships!*

In this course participants will be introduced to the study of spirituality in general and Christian spirituality in particular. By listening to your own experience and that of others, by engaging in conversation about that, either in group work or privately in reading or viewing movies etc, participants will grow in their knowledge of life formation and what it means to be distinctively human. If engaged honestly and conscientiously, this whole process will be a personally transforming one – each participant will grow to be more fully and freely *this* unique and communal human being.

How to participate in this course

Experience is the great teacher. By listening attentively to the lessons of life and reality that are constantly coming to us through experience, we can be formed by reality itself. In the best sense of the word, in this way our lives become *more real*. The general intention of this course is to facilitate that attentive listening to experience that we may each become who we most deeply are.

This course is not about “the answers” or constructing a logical system that “solves” life’s “problems.” In spirituality there are no such codes or formulae. Indeed categories like “success” and “failure,” “knowing” and “not knowing,” “happiness” and “unhappiness,” “fulfilment” and “emptiness,” are radically re-defined for us – not by us. Through authentic spirituality we become aware that life is a mystery to be lived not a problem to be solved. We come to increasingly experience life’s journey as characterised by paradox and ambiguity, incomprehension and surprise. Thomas Merton, speaking specifically of the needs of young men entering the Cistercian monastery in the 1960’s, writes in a way that is pertinent to us as we begin this course:

If we assume that modern man is simply rootless and disoriented and try to give his life direction and meaning with a logical, scholastic view of the universe and of the economy of salvation, we may at first arouse his curiosity, but we must take care not to lead him into what he considers a further and more radical disappointment. The ‘answers’ that modern man seeks and needs are not those of the neat verbal formula or the logically constructed system. There is in his very being a profound distrust of logic and of system. His need and his hope are in a realm of paradox where strict logic cannot reach, because it is the realm of the personal and the unique. The very meaning of personal identity is lost if we suppose that it conforms to precedent and the general type. The question of identity and meaning in our personal life can never be adequately answered by logic but only by life itself. Yet we live in a world where words, formulas, official answers, and a seemingly logical system may pretend to decide everything for us

*in advance. If modern man, seeking his true self, seeking the existential atmosphere of an exploration that has not been determined beforehand, comes to a monastic life and discovers that all his questions are answered in advance, all his decisions are made for him, all his movements are expected to fit in with a rigid logical necessity of black and white, absolute right and wrong, he may try earnestly to accept the answers, and may seem to succeed for a few years. But in the end he will feel as frustrated in the monastery as he did in the world. He will not find himself because he will not be able to seek himself. He will simply have been told who and what he is expected to be.*²⁸

We must know *how* to listen therefore. This implies that we are *willing* to listen. And the point of listening is that we *hear* the truth in our experience of the world. And the point of hearing the truth is that we *submit* to that truth.

Throughout the course we will proceed according to the following steps:

- Step One: One or more foundational principle relating to human life formation will be articulated.
- Step Two: Those principles will be discussed at a *universal human level* to begin with. That is, human experience is taken at face value and observations are made without reliance on any belief system or formation tradition. The assumption is that whatever is worth preserving in a particular formation tradition – such as the Christian formation tradition – is clearly and firmly grounded in human experience as such.
- Step Three: After the principles have been explored at the *universal human level*, those same principles are articulated in the light of one tradition of human life formation – the Christian tradition.²⁹ This *Christian articulation* helps us to see the connections between biblical revelation and human experience. When we lose that connection our specifically Christian understanding of life formation becomes distorted.

Some quotations are then presented to promote further reflection. With the foundational principle as a point of reference, these further sources can help to foster the process of conversation between our own experience and what we have discovered there, and the testimony of other people, cultures and traditions.

A few *suggestions for further study* are offered. Individuals and groups are thus helped to use these notes as a study text. Titles in the reading list cover a spectrum, from the more academic for the serious student, to the more popular for the informal reader.

Finally, some *exercises* are suggested.

²⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Image Books, 1973, 58-59.

²⁹ If this course was being given within another tradition – say Jewish or Buddhist or Muslim – it would be entirely appropriate to articulate the universal human in a manner that manifested that tradition. And, of course, different groups within traditions – such as elderly people or married women/men, clergy, children and so on – will nuance the articulation even further.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“University philosophers will never understand what Novalis said: ‘Philosophy is, strictly speaking, a homesickness’. It is not a discipline that can be learned ... He who does not know what homesickness is, cannot philosophise if – and because - we do not feel at home anywhere, because we are unceasingly being pushed up against Being, against that because we feel at home nowhere except on the way to the total and essential. We are without a native land and are restlessness itself, living restlessness; it is because of this that it is necessary for us to philosophise. ... And we are not allowed to let it pass away. to comfort ourselves in an illusion about totality and a satisfactory infinitude. We must not only bear this restlessness in us but accentuate it.... only then are we in a position to be ‘gripped’. And when we thus make ourselves ‘grippable’, by handing ourselves over to reality, our homesickness makes us into human beings.”³⁰*



(2) *“The main question is this: where we should look for sources of a shared minimum that could serve as a framework for the tolerant coexistence of different cultures within a single civilization. It is not enough to take the set of imperatives, principles or rules produced by the Euro-American world and mechanically declare them binding for all. If anyone is to accept these principles, identify with them and follow them, those principles will have to appeal to something that has been present in him or her before, to some of his or her inherent qualities. Different cultures or spheres of civilization can share only what they perceive as genuine common ground, not something that some simply offer to or even force upon others. The rules of human coexistence on this Earth can work only if they grow out of the deepest experience of everyone, not just some. They have to be formulated so as to be in harmony with what man – as a human being, not as a member of a particular group – has learned, experienced, endured.*

“Every unbiased person will have no trouble knowing where to look. If we examine the oldest moral canons, the commandments that prescribe proper human conduct and the rules of human coexistence, we find numerous essential similarities among them. It is often surprising to discover that virtually identical moral norms arise in different places and different times, largely independently of one another. Another important thing is that the moral foundations upon which different civilizations or cultures were built always had transcendental, or metaphysical roots. It is scarcely possible to find a culture that does not derive from the conviction that a higher, mysterious order of the world exists beyond our reach, a higher intention that is the source of all things, a higher memory recording everything, a higher authority to which we are all accountable in one way or another. That order has had a thousand faces. Human history has known a vast array of gods and deities, religious and spiritual beliefs, rituals and liturgies. Nevertheless, since time immemorial, the key to the existence of the human race, of nature and of the universe, as well as the key to what is required of

³⁰ Martin Heidegger cited in A. Naess, *Four Modern Philosophers*, University of Chicago Press, 1967, 174.

human responsibility has always been found in what transcends humanity, in what stands above it. Humanity must respect this if the world is to survive. To this day, this point of departure has been present in all our archetypal notions and in our long-lost knowledge, despite the obvious estrangement from these values that modern civilization has brought with it. Yet, even as our respect for the mysteries of the world dwindles, we can see for ourselves again and again that such a lack of respect leads to ruin. All this clearly suggests where we should look for what unites us: in an awareness of the transcendental.

“I possess no specific directions on how to revive this awareness which was once common to the whole human race, on how to retrieve it from the depths to which it has sunk, or how to do this in a way that is appropriate for this era and at the same time universal, acceptable to all. Yet, when thinking about it, no matter where or in what context, I always – without intending to – come to the conclusion that this is precisely where we should begin the search for the means of coexistence on this planet, and for the salvation of the human race from the many dangers to its existence that civilization generates. We should seek new ways to restore the feeling for what transcends humanity, for what gives a meaning to the world surrounding it, as well as to human life itself.

“Dostoyevsky wrote that if there were no God everything would be permitted. To put it simply, it seems to me that our present civilization, having lost the awareness that the world has a spirit, believes that anything is permitted. The only spirit that we recognize is our own. However different the paths followed by different civilizations, we can find the same basic message at the core of most religions and cultures throughout history; people should revere God as a phenomenon that transcends them; they should revere one another; and they should not harm their fellow humans. “To my mind, reflecting on this message is the only way out of the crisis the world finds itself in today.”³¹



(3) *“In the beginning GOD created the world. Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep.*

“And when there were men, in their various ways, they struggled in torment towards GOD

“Blindly and vainly, for man is a vain thing, and man without GOD is a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination.

“They followed the light and the shadow, and the light led them forward to light and the shadow led them to darkness,

“Worshipping snakes or trees, worshipping devils rather than nothing: crying for life beyond life, for ecstasy not of the flesh.

“Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.

“And the spirit moved upon the face of the water

‘And men who turned towards the light and were known of the light

³¹ From the Address to the National Press Club in Canberra by Vaclav Havel, March 29th, 1995.

*“Invented the Higher Religions; and the higher religions were good
 “And led men from light to light, to knowledge of Good and Evil.
 “But their light was ever surrounded and shot with darkness
 “As the air of temperate seas is pierced by the still dead breath of the Arctic current;
 “And they came to an end, a dead end stirred with a flicker of life,
 “And they came to the withered ancient look of a child that has died of starvation.
 “Prayer wheels, worship of the dead, denial of the world, affirmation of rites with
 forgotten meanings
 “In the restless wind-whipped sand, or the hills where the wind will not let the snow
 rest.
 “Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.
 “Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
 “A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting
 the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment in time,
 “A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning
 there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning.
 “Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the light of the Word,
 “Through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being;
 “Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before,
 “Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the way
 that was lit by the light;
 “Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way.
 “But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though
 we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.
 “Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never
 happened before
 “That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,
 “And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.
 “The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells upturned, what have we to do
 “But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards
 “In an age which advances progressively backwards?”³²*



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

³² T S Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’”, VII:1-30.

“The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees. This should not lead us into the illusion that the world is about to return to God. Nevertheless, the exposure of the nineteenth-century myths – “unlimited progress” and the “omnipotence” of physical science has thrown the world into confusion. Many are spontaneously turning to the only evident hope for spiritual and moral integration – and order based on philosophical and theological truth, one which allows free expression to the fundamental religious instinct of the human person. So vast is this movement that a psychoanalyst as important as Carl Jung can make the following declaration: ‘I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, a smaller number Jews and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients in the second half of my life ... there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that everyone of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given their followers and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.’ (C G Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 264)”

“The big problem that confronts Christianity is not Christ’s enemies. Persecution has never done much harm to the inner life of the Church as such. The real religious problem exists in the souls of those of us who in their hearts believe in God, and who recognize their obligation to love Him and serve Him – yet do not!”³³



(5) *“Human certainties are eminently fallible and eternal truth unknowable, yet undeterred we seek assurance, authority, security and infallibility. Man is, by definition, a religious animal, whether he believes in Christ or an anti-Christ, whether he believes in God or man as supreme, whether espousing communism or the free market, whether intent on massacring or saving – whilst as ‘les extremes se touchent’ he is also a doubter, harbouring the very contradictions he seeks to resolve or to reconcile: ‘Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.’ The Son of God on the cross in his agony asks the Father – his, our Father – ‘My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?’ Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ Certainties bring critical assessments in their wake as well as condemnation and hypocrisy.”³⁴*



(6) *“We live in the Church at a privileged moment of the Spirit.”³⁵*

³³ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, Hollis and Carter, 1951, 3-4.

³⁴ Yehudi Menuhin, writing in the Foreword to Hans Kung’s, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, SCM Press, 1992, vii.

³⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.75.



(7) *"See, today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster..."*³⁶



(8) *"What can you offer in exchange for your life?"*³⁷



(9) *"Humanity cannot be explained in terms of itself. The fine word 'ethos,' debased by us into 'ethics,' originally meant 'dwelling place.' And Heraclitus said, 'The dwelling place of man is God'."*³⁸



(10) *"He captures them talking so candidly because, he says, they sense that he is one of them. 'They see me as being a vulnerable person, which I am. But quite apart from that aspect of my personality, which I can't fully understand, there is my philosophical point of view that we are all very much frightened. We're all searching for meaning. We all want to be loved. That's it.'"*³⁹



(11) *"Szubanski was raised a Catholic and puts store in Christianity as a philosophy, especially the bit about turning the other cheek. She loves the idea that comedy lightens the load and, as Mel Brooks puts it, can foil detractors and fend off enemies. 'Comedy is a release. People fantasise that if they have enough money or enough fame that you will escape the struggle. But you don't. There's always sadnesses, tragedies. We are finite beings and we are vulnerable and mortal; there's nothing you can do to remove yourself from harm or hurt. It's part of being a person.'"*⁴⁰



(12) *"The real problem is the problem of death. If people don't know how to come to terms with it, and souls have no preparation, then the only thing is to be eternally young and in pursuit of pleasure, and further sexual and hedonistic horizons."*⁴¹

³⁶ Deut. 30:15f.

³⁷ Cf Mt. 16:26.

³⁸ Olivier Clément, *On Being Human: A Spiritual Anthropology*, New City Press, 2000, 10.

³⁹ Dennis O'Rourke in Catherine Keenan, "Through a lens darkly," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Spectrum, April 23-24, 2005, 6. An interview with documentary filmmaker, Dennis O'Rourke, director of *Cunnamulla*, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* and *Land Mines: A Love Story*.

⁴⁰ Magda Szubanski in Bryce Hallett, "Magda's charter," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Spectrum, April 23-24, 2005, 8.

⁴¹ Saul Bellow, cited by J Howard, "Mr Bellow Considers his Planet," *Life*, 68 (April 3 1970), 60.)

(13) *“One need not be a chamber to be haunted;
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.”⁴²*



(14) *“Whatever the situation may have been in the past, today the supernatural as a meaningful reality is absent or remote from the horizons of everyday life of large numbers, very probably of the majority, of people in modern societies, who seem to manage to get along without it quite well. This means that those to whom the supernatural is still, or again, a meaningful reality find themselves in the status of a minority, more precisely, a cognitive minority – a very important consequence with very far-reaching implications.”⁴³*



(15) *Why did the lamp go out?
I smothered it with my coat,
To protect it from the storm.
That’s why the lamp went out.*

*Why did the flower fade?
I pressed it to my heart
In fear-filled love.
That’s why the flower faded.*

*Why did the river dry up?
I built a dam
To keep it all for myself.
That’s why the river dried up.*

*Why did the harp-string snap?
I wanted to force a note from it
That it could not give.
That’s why the harp-string snapped.⁴⁴*



⁴² Emily Dickinson.

⁴³ Peter L Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Penguin Books, 1969, 18.

⁴⁴ Rabindranath Tagore.

(16) *There is one way for thee; but one; inform
Thyself of it; pursue it; one way each
Soul hath by which the infinite in reach
Lyeth before him; seek and ye shall find;
. O joy, joy, joy to fill
To fill the day with leagues! Go thy way, all things say,
Thou hast thy way to go, thou hast thy day
To live; thou hast thy need of thee to make
In the heart of others; do thy thing; yea, slake
The world's great thirst for yet another man!
And be thou sure of this: no other can
Do for thee that appointed thee of God . . .*⁴⁵



(17) *"This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then be asked what you make of it and have to answer, 'Scientific humanism.' That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic, that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight; ie God. In fact, I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don't see why anyone should settle for anything less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and wouldn't let go until God identified himself and blessed him."*⁴⁶



(18) *"When the wonder has gone out of a man he is dead. When all comes to all, the most precious element in life is wonder. Love is a great emotion and power is power. But both love and power are based on wonder. Plant consciousness, insect consciousness, fish consciousness, animal consciousness, all are related by one permanent element, which we may call the religious element in all life, even in a flea: the sense of wonder. That is our sixth sense. And it is the natural religious sense."*⁴⁷



⁴⁵ *The Spirit of Man: An Anthology of English & French from the Philosophers and Poets made in 1915 by Robert Bridges, O.M. Poet Laureate & Dedicated by Gracious Permission to His Majesty King George V, Longmans Green & Co Ltd, 1916, #402.*

⁴⁶ From an interview with Walker Percy in Patrick Samway, editor, *Walker Percy: Signposts in a Strange Land*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991, 417.

⁴⁷ D H Lawrence, *The Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D H Lawrence*, Viking Press, 1936.

Suggestions for further reading

- Bellow, Saul, *Dangling Man*, Penguin Books, 1944/1971.
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- Carey, Gabrielle

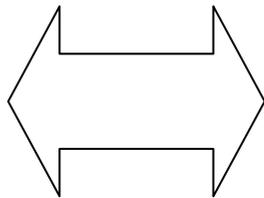
In My Father's House
So Many Selves, ABC Books, 2006.
- Cinema:
The Razor's Edge (1946) – Dir: Edmund Goulding, with Tyrone Power; adaptation of Somerset Maugham's novel of a man in search of meaning.
Cinema Paradiso (English sub-titles, 1988) – Dir: Giuseppe Tornatore, with Philippe Noiret, Jacques Perrin and Salvatore Cascio as the little boy.
Crimes and Misdemeanours (1989) – Dir: Woody Allen, with Alan Alda, Caroline Aaron.
American Beauty (1999) – Dir: Sam Mendes, with Kevin Spacey.
Koyaanisqatsi (1984) – Dir: Godfrey Reggio; music by Philip Glass. (The word *Koyaanisqatsi* is a Hopi Indian word meaning is a religious expression meaning "life out of balance" or "a way of life that cries out for an alternative way of living." This is a demanding film, with no dialogue!)
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Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams, Chiron Publications, 1986.
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THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

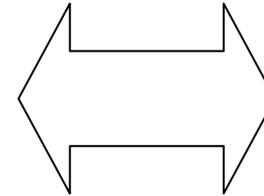
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Although the Great Mystery (however we name it) is the beginning and end of our searching, concretely our yearning for relationship with that Mystery begins with an awareness and acknowledgment of our own life story. In this sense we say experience is the great teacher. We actually begin by taking ourselves and our experience seriously. Personal experience, however, can only be understood in the context of a larger network of relationships, a bigger story that gives context and meaning to my individual story. Life is always mutual, an ongoing conversation. In order to develop a well-grounded spirituality we must engage in a self-transcending conversation which will help us to hear and heed who we are as unique and communal expressions of the Great Mystery.



CONSTRUCTS AND PRINCIPLES

In order to engage personal experience in a way that at once listens to it seriously and effectively and also opens it to transformation through contact with multiple sources of wisdom, the study of spirituality must develop a frame of reference for this conversation to occur. In particular, the discipline of spirituality must seek and endeavour to articulate absolute foundational principles (ie principles that apply to all people at all times) and relative foundational principles (ie principles that apply to people in certain circumstances) and particular thought constructs that enable and ground the individual's conversation between his/her personal experience and the multiple sources of wisdom available to us. These principles and constructs act as a kind of mid-



MULTIPLE SOURCES OF WISDOM

Broadly speaking there are two sources of wisdom:

- ◆Scientific and
- ◆Pre-scientific.

Of the scientific sources of wisdom we can distinguish:

- ◆Remote sciences (ie sciences which deal primarily with ideas, such as metaphysics, ecclesiology, biblical exegesis and spiritual theology etc) and

- ◆Proximate sciences (ie sciences which deal directly with experiences, such as the sociologies, anthropologies, psychologies etc).

Of the pre-scientific sources of wisdom we can distinguish:

- ◆The arts (eg literature, painting, cinema, music etc),
- ◆The oral and written memories of cultural and religious traditions (eg scriptures, myths, legends) and

Authentic spirituality constantly attends to the question: **What is happening?** We may do this in a more or less intuitive or more or less disciplined way. The way of intuition is often haphazard and more or less unfocused. The more disciplined method – diagrammed above – can open up the wellsprings of both our own potential and the many sources of wisdom available to us far more quickly and effectively. In so far as the disciplined study of spirituality is intent upon releasing the deepest potential of the human person, it may be considered the primordial science. In the Christian tradition we have tended to fall into the grave mistake of considering spirituality as a mere branch of theology. Spirituality comes before theology and gives birth to theology. Firstly, it deals with the most significant aspects of human experience *as human*; it then deals with those experiences as embraced by God and liberated in and through the Incarnation. Christian theology is therefore best seen as a branch of spirituality.

FURTHER COMMENTS

WHAT IS SCIENCE?

Science (from the Latin scientia meaning knowledge) is here used to refer to an ongoing and substantial research endeavor or pursuit of knowledge that (a) has objectively verifiable research processes; (b) has its own specific focus with aims and objectives that are evidenced in both its methodology and conclusions; (c) develops a coherent and expanding body of knowledge that is always open to critique and further development. The word science is sometimes "claimed" for the exclusive use of the so called hard sciences. This is too restrictive and probably indicative of the limits we allow to be placed by a rationalistic and functionalistic world view - typical of the modern Western mindset. Sometimes the words science and scientific are indiscriminately claimed for endeavors that do not exhibit the characteristics we have listed. Regarding spirituality as a genuine science reminds us of the need to engage it seriously and methodically, always submitting our findings for intersubjective validation by competent others.

SPIRITUALITY AS FORMATION SCIENCE

The word spirituality carries different connotations for different people. One of its dangers is that it focuses the mind on something understood as "spirit" and generally contrasted with something else called "body" and "spirituality" becomes - implicitly or explicitly - "the liberation" of "the spirit" from "the body". This is deformative thinking, though it may in fact be rather common. Authentic spirituality is about facilitating the emergence of an authentic form or expression of human life - it is about becoming who we are called to be. It may be more useful to speak of "life formation" rather than "spirituality". The science of life formation is a proximate science. It emerges from and feeds back into the efforts of people to become the unique and communal person God has called them to be. It is possible to have a rational grasp of life formation science without having integrated the principles into one's own life. The lived integration is the goal.

SPIRITUALITY - SCIENTIFIC AND PRE-SCIENTIFIC

Spirituality - or life formation - may also be considered as a pre-scientific dynamic. That is, it is the ongoing conversation people pursue daily in their commitment to developing a well-grounded and authentic spirituality. Considered as a scientific discipline, spirituality - or life formation - calls for research, considered reflection, deliberate inter-subjective validation and careful reading of the multiple sources of wisdom. Not everyone is called to - or needs to - engage spirituality in this scientific manner. However, society needs people who have in fact reflected carefully on this depth dimension and are able to offer guidance through an authentic articulation and application of the principles involved. The affluent West is showing itself very vulnerable to bogus "spiritualities" because we have developed a society devoid of authentic spirituality - we tend to be more focused on doing and having, and in that we are forgetful of being, more focused on ego and self-promotion, and in that we are narcissistic and forgetful of relationships. In all this the human heart does not cease to yearn for the More Than, the Beyond. The hunger remains. The memory of how best to feed the soul has gone. Those who do search often find responses that range from the moderately helpful, through the innocuous and the comical, to the tragic and downright evil.

