

A Personal Guide Through
Six Spiritual Disciplines

EXPERIENCING GOD'S *Presence*

A NEW APPROACH TO THE ANCIENT PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

DAN MCGEE, PhD

Experiencing God's Presence

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Ancient Practice
of
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*Dedicated to Sandra, my partner in marriage for
a half century, and the one who sacrifices daily
for me to invest myself in the mission
God has placed before me.*

Over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. Strained by the very mad pace of our daily outer burdens, we are further strained by an inward uneasiness, because we have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than all this hurried existence, a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power.

Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*

Acknowledgments

Beginning in my adolescent years and continuing sporadically through college and seminary, a quiet place of prayer and meditation became a necessary ritual in my church ministry years as a young minister. Upon arrival at a new church I would explore the facilities until I found a remote hideaway which became my place of connecting with God.

Those who “covered” for me, especially when these sessions became lengthy, and congregants became impatient, were my loyal secretaries and assistants. I had never heard the term “Spiritual Formation,” but for those who explained my lack of availability and protected these special hours of spiritual formation I express my deepest appreciation. Without them such an offering as this would never have happened.

I would like to express my gratitude to colleague, Annette Miller, MBA, for format design, editing skills, and the contribution of her “Building Your Personal Mission Statement” guidelines found in the Appendix. Annette is responsible for the operations function of DMA and is well trained as a professional coach.

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Simplicity is profundity disguised.

Silence, the venue for listening.

Solitude, God's gift of himself.

Surrender, the essence of faith.

Sensitivity, a lifestyle of awareness.

Service, the application.

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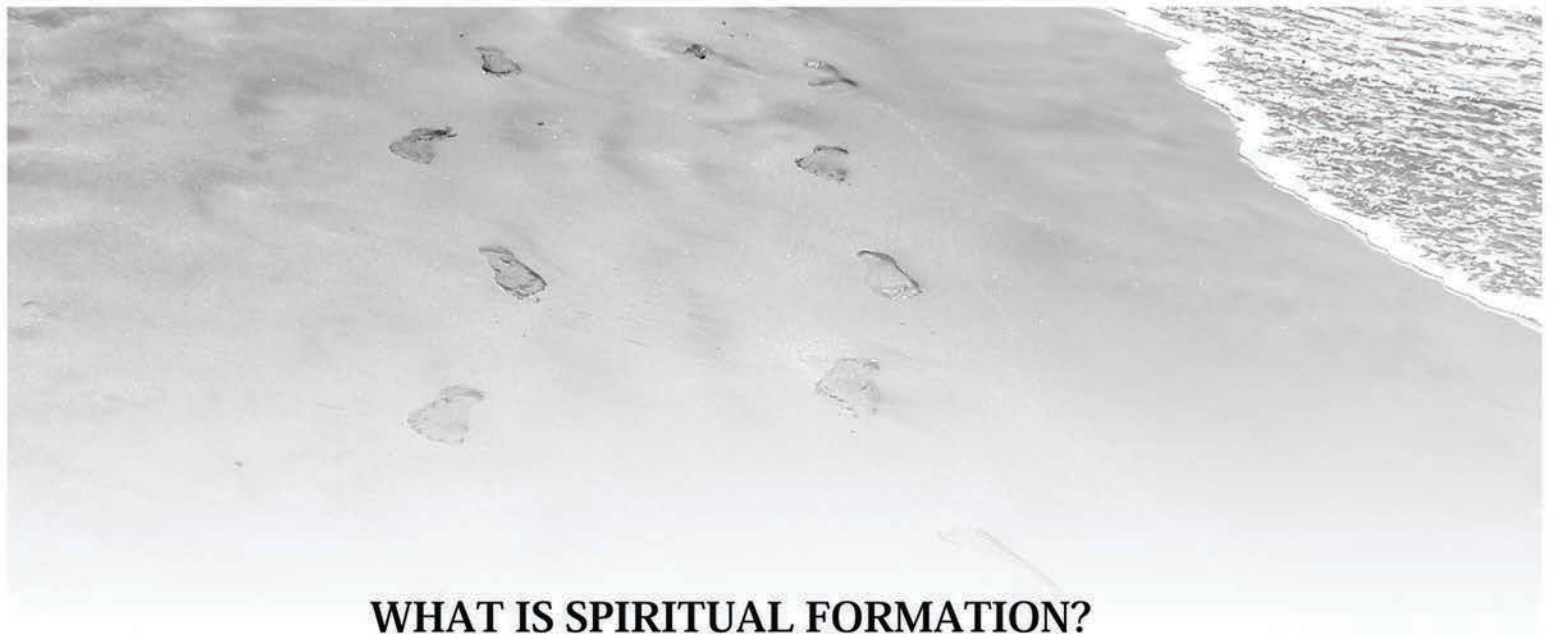
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WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

Do you ever get the feeling that people who talk about spirituality are describing something foreign or alien to your own world of experience? You believe in God. You attend church. Maybe you are a leader in your church. But you can't imagine your life resembling anything like that of a saint or those heroes of the faith who retreated to a monastery for a life of meditation and self sacrifice.¹

Almost all of us would like to be more "spiritual." But what does that mean? For many of us it means a feeling of closeness to God, a kind of intimacy with God. But it is hard enough to experience true closeness or intimacy with another human being, so what are the odds I can accomplish this in the world of the "spiritual?" Isn't God some kind of other worldly being that exists in a realm inaccessible to us? Maybe you believe that God is "out there" somewhere in space, in heaven, wherever that is, and you must work hard to find God by keeping a set of rules or doing good deeds.

But what if God is already seeking you? What if God exists within you instead of "out there" and is longing for closeness to you? Imagine a God who created you "in his own image" and awaits your discovery? This is the kind of God I have discovered: a gracious and loving God who is already actively seeking intimacy with me. I have spent a lifetime studying what other people think about God. Ironically, I have found that intimacy with God lies in my practice of certain disciplines designed to move me to a place where I am able to experience what I call God's "Presence."

First, let's dispense with the notion that experiencing God's Presence means we walk above the ground or glow in the dark. I've experienced neither of these, as my wife and friends will readily acknowledge. It doesn't mean we always do the right thing or make the right choices. It

certainly does not mean that our human limitations no longer exist. God's Presence is no guarantee of sudden wealth or fortune.

What closeness with God does do is enable us:

- to experience life at a deeper level
- to become more aware of what is really important
- to learn to listen better and attune ourselves to discoveries about ourselves and others
- to experience an inner peace that brings balance to our lives
- to surrender those things that destructively control us
- to reset our compass daily to eternal truths that will guide our choices
- to make us sensitive to our environment
- to engage in service to others that will make a difference in our world

Much like physical fitness, spiritual growth occurs as the result of a conscious choice to commit to certain disciplines. It is the outgrowth of forming daily habits of these disciplines:

- when you feel like it and when you don't
- when you believe they are "working"
- when you believe they are not

Spiritual formation is not another attempt at the age-old religiosity of rule-keeping and good deeds. It is a fundamental change in the way one experiences life. It is allowing oneself to be formed by the intimacy of God's Presence. Historically, Christians have found that human nature's propensity for complexity, for competition and self-absorption, represent obstacles to this intimacy. The Apostle Paul warns us against allowing the world to shape us. It is countercultural to practice the spiritual disciplines of Simplicity, Silence, Solitude, Surrender, Sensitivity and Service. Spiritual formation is a lifestyle of contrast to the

mold of our world. It is swimming upstream. But those who commit themselves to such disciplines find a freedom, a joy, an energy, a kind of integrity characteristic of a God who wants the same for us.

I will recommend books and other resources, some of which you will find enriching and challenging, and some with which you will disagree with at least in part. I've yet to read a book that fits perfectly my belief system. The object is not to find authors with whom you are in absolute agreement. The point is to allow their ideas to trigger discoveries God is prompting you to make. Reading biblical and inspirational passages with openness to God's Presence will help form you spiritually. Spiritual formation is about finding balance that is characteristic of the rest of God's creation. The spiritual disciplines of spiritual formation are as important to spiritual growth as nutrition is to your physical health.

The question remains, are you ready for such a commitment? As an educator I learned early on that "readiness" is vital to the learning process. Maybe the timing is not right for you. If not, these disciplines will not stick. Are you feeling the need for change? Countless times as a therapist I have had to walk to the door with these words, "Why don't we pause, put a comma right here, and try again when the timing is right for you? You haven't hit the brick wall yet."

We are not likely to create new habits until the old ones have failed us miserably. Major failure seems to be a prerequisite for major change. How far are you from the brick wall? You know what I mean if you've been there. If you are convinced that where you are headed will result in balance—that you just need to work harder—then you will not give these disciplines the priority they must have.

Negative indicators are:

- if things are going great for you
- if you are succeeding at every turn
- if you are obsessed to make your mark
- if you believe you can get there on your own
- if you believe you only need to work harder and success will follow
- if important relationships are not suffering

Then you really don't need to change anything, right?

On the other hand,

- if you have tasted what the world calls success and are disillusioned by it
- if you feel you have done it all right and still failed
- if you are questioning the values that are driving you
- if you need to recalibrate your destination
- if your marriage and/or family relationships are in jeopardy

If any one or a combination of these describe where you are, then the timing may be right for you. You may be hearing a call to discover the God who has invested a part of himself* in you.

Unrest: Prelude to Discovery

Remember those feelings of restlessness, a kind of agitation that will not let you go? You're not sure what's up but you just know something is out there—something more? Good, then you know the gift of “unrest.” You could call it “unpeace” or “un” something or other, but

*In the past I have attempted to write in a gender-neutral style and prefer to do so except in references to God. It is my firm belief that God represents the very best of what is found in femaleness and maleness. However, in deference to the biblical record's references to God, and its widespread acceptance within my audience I did not choose to create an obstacle in our common search for Spiritual Formation.

there is a hunger for something you cannot define, for a place you suspect you have never been before. For me “unrest” has always preceded a time of searching, seeking, asking, knocking and re-imagining.

For me the term Spiritual “Re-formation” characterizes the true nature of the cycle we experience in the process of seeking balance: unrest, searching, discovering and re-formation. This kind of re-forming is not merely another attempt at prioritizing. It is reordering our lives to a disciplined quest for intimacy with God. It comes from a hunger, a thirst that is never satisfied. It is nevertheless fulfilling in the sense that the ever deepening search for closeness with God is in itself its reward.

Unrest and re-imagination seem to be essential to every genuine passage of my life. One of these impasses led me to a retreat setting for ministers and spouses in the Colorado Rockies where I rediscovered some of the stories of my mentors and heroes and their quest for spiritual formation. Henri Nouwen’s descriptions of simplicity, silence, solitude, and surrender formed the basis of what I have since identified as “Six Disciplines of Spiritual Formation.” The two I have added are not only *outcomes* of the first four but, in my view, elements essential to a life of spiritual formation: sensitivity and service.

I have chosen these Six Disciplines upon which we will focus our attention in this guidebook:

1. Simplicity
2. Silence
3. Solitude
4. Surrender
5. Sensitivity
6. Service

This kind of re-forming is not merely another attempt at prioritizing. It is reordering our lives to a disciplined quest for intimacy with God.

(See the Appendix at the end of this book for references to other spiritual disciplines that are a part of spiritual formation.)

Application

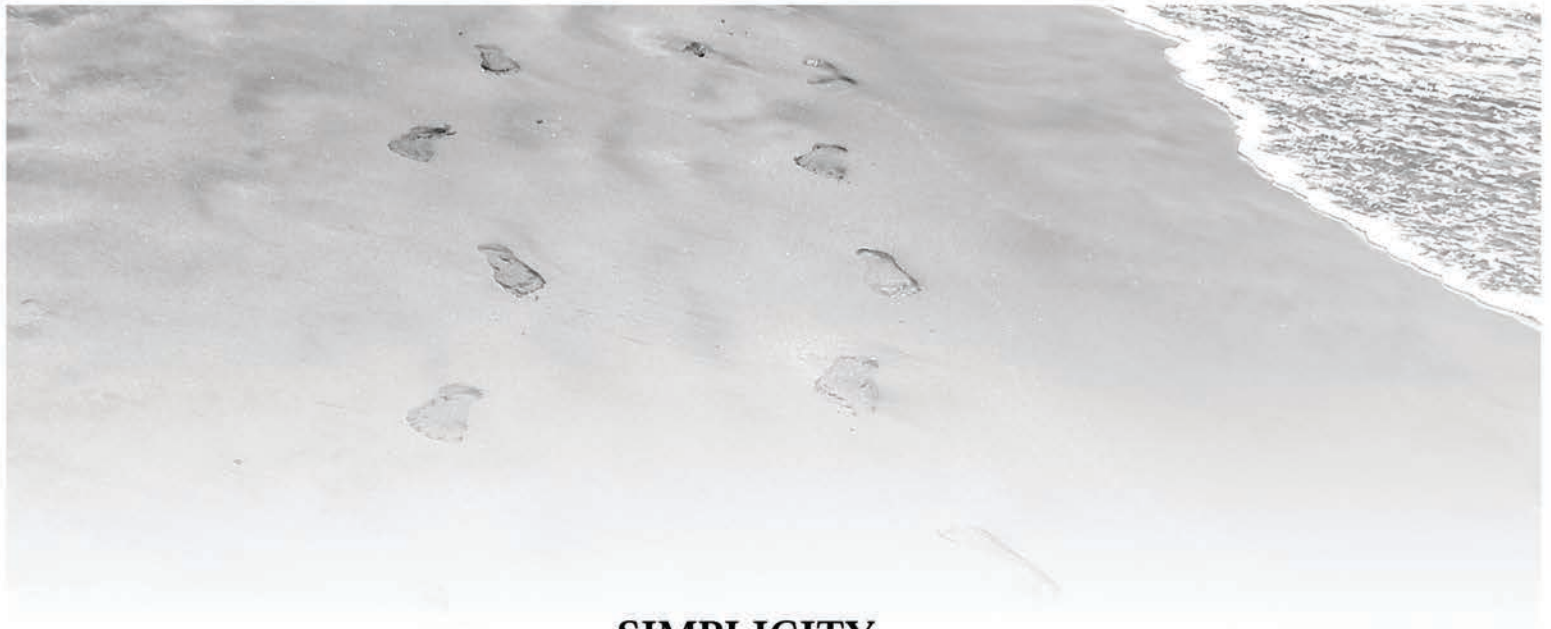
1. What is it you are engaged in when you suddenly discover you are experiencing your highest level of fulfillment, satisfaction and joy?
2. Describe below in your own words your personal mission statement^{*}.
3. List the obstacles to fulfilling your mission.

* A personal mission statement (sometimes called a purpose statement) is a unique description of how one views one's life focus. It reduces complexity to its simplest form by stating what is at the core. Companies create corporate mission statements to unify their employees and to bring attention to a common goal. A personal mission statement moves one from the inside out by identifying unifying principles and describing how they are carried out. See "Building Your Personal Mission Statement" in the Appendix for more information.

4. What role do you believe God plays in defining and enabling you to follow your mission?

5. Describe briefly your need for and your search for intimacy with God.

6. Discuss your readiness for spiritual formation.



SIMPLICITY

***is making decisions about what is really
important in life—removing the clutter that
distracts me from my mission.***

Simplicity is profundity disguised.

The first secret to a simple life is learning how to say no. Every no to someone is a yes to someone else, and sometimes the someone else is you. Taking charge of your life is the first step in simplifying it. Take the initiative. Make decisions and choices that keep life as basic as possible. It is complexity that disables our spiritual focus and exhausts us emotionally and physically, leaving us unable to prioritize. Literally, in a word, it's about *balance*.

The genuine affirmation of God's Presence can never be felt in the razzle-dazzle of our frenetic attempts to win the acceptance of others. Our lives cannot be a continuous grasping for significance if we seek spiritual reformation. There must be room for thought that deeply probes our own motivations. It begins with a simpler life in which the self-babble is diminished by God's peace.

How we spend our time is too often determined by decisions we never realize we make. These unconscious choices, frequently resulting from our need to succeed, or our need to please the wrong people, must become conscious.¹

Dan and Sandra McGee

You must ask one sobering question: If I continue on this pathway, where will I be in five years from now? Ten years?

All of my life I have been in a life and death struggle for simplicity. While at our Colorado mountain home I would repeatedly settle this issue "once and for all." I would reason with myself that I would stay in the mountains and live the so-called "simple" life. But the harsh winters of 20 to 30 degrees below zero were not simple. Nor was the stress of townspeople trying to earn enough the three months each summer to make it through the winter.

When I would return to the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex I would suddenly remember what a charge I got from the give-and-take of city life and the opportunities to make a difference in the stress of urban dwellers.

Since my childhood days in the mountains of North Georgia I have been in love with the wilderness that encompasses mountains, rivers, forests, and wildlife. I once spent six weeks alone in an old one-room Rocky Mountain log cabin adjacent to a roaring waterfall, where the bears and I would compete for the right of way outside my door. I worked in the town providing counseling as needed, cutting weeds around the house of a friend and preaching in the little mountain church.

But simplicity is not synonymous with geographical isolation. I learned that my life could get complicated wherever I took my brain and could be made simpler even within a fast paced city lifestyle. The secret lies within me and the discipline of a life ordered by making choices grounded in spiritual disciplines.

Simplicity allows space and energy for discovery and creativity.

It sounds easier than it is. How can I say no to opportunities I know I can do well, especially those that require no real preparation? The curse of being an “expert” is that you must live in your own bear trap. More people think they need your opinion, your input or evaluation. More challenges call out to you and, if you are not careful, the material and nonmaterial rewards make it easy to expend and exhaust yourself without ever creating time and space for new learning.

You did not need to buy this book to learn that the secret to a healthy life is to keep growing. But growing is often painful and requires training and discipline. For me, the most important discipline lies in simplifying and focusing on what it is I have that people need most. What is it that I

must say no to in order to do my best at what I do well?
For me, simplicity, as hard as it is to come by, is the secret
not only to my effectiveness in what I do well, but it
quietens the turmoil and internal competition between the
roar of self-centeredness and God's claim upon my soul.

Do not look at simplifying your life as an either/or
proposition. Don't dwell on the destination of the perfect
simplified lifestyle. Just start where you are. Examine
how much energy you expel to please some voice (or
voices) within that is not in harmony with the voice you
hear in silence and in solitude with God. This journey
requires a...

1. **Self examination** and a startling awareness of your
need for change. How is your life working?
Where is your current course leading? When it's
all over, is where you are heading now what you
want your life to be about? The Chinese compass
claimed to have 5 points: North, South, East, West
and the point where you are now. It will take a
genuine dissatisfaction with your present course
before you will have the motivation to simplify.
2. **Retreat** away from the complexity of your present
life. Such a retreat is not an escape, but a time for
reflection, self-assessment and redirection. The
retreat must be long enough to survive
“withdrawal” symptoms from your usual
environment—a place in which you experience a
taste of simplicity, silence, solitude, surrender—a
“Sabbath” resulting in a life of sensitivity to God,
self, and the world of need around you. (For a list
of resources and options for a spiritual formation
retreat, email us at info@danmcgeeassociates.com.)

3. **Decision** to embrace spiritual formation as a way of life, bathed in “ritual” that becomes a symbol of your decision. All decisions requiring change need to be ritualized in a spiritual setting and rehearsed in continuing practice of those actions rising from these decisions until they are automated.
4. **Personalized plan** for practicing and nurturing spiritual formation in your daily life.
5. **Participation in a support group** that encourages and empowers you.
6. **Commitment to a self-assessment process** that provides for a continual review that enables you to regularly evaluate your growth in light of your personal mission.
7. **Return periodically to the retreat setting** for renewal of your commitment to continuing spiritual development.

Simplicity vs. Productivity: Must it be either/or?

Some say, “Simply produce!” But I prefer to produce simply! When I focus and work hard toward a goal, then I can take control of my time and keep life simple. Simplicity helps me be productive. Saying yes to everything is a guarantee of failure. In the long run those who are thrilled with my yes will turn on my lack of productivity. I must be in control of the way I use time if I hope to be accountable to God rather than others. I must practice trusting God’s Presence and leave the results in God’s hands.

**Less is sometimes more,
but when it is, it is always
more of a challenge.**

Ultimately, you must find what some of us call your own “rhythm” of what works for you. I cannot prescribe a

protocol that fits everyone's unique personality and needs. Nevertheless, you must start somewhere. As you develop your own patterns and habits of spiritual formation you will find some of the following Application helpful and some less meaningful.

Sabbath

Rest was not an afterthought of a creator exhausted from flinging stars and digging oceans. It was a part of the rhythm of the cosmos invested in the inhabitants of planet Earth. Rest was and is as purposeful in the creative process as is labor, sweat, sore muscles or computer eye and neck fatigue. The body refuels, the mind recalibrates. It is the soul that the Shepherd restores in us as we lie in green pastures and drink from still waters.

Sabbath is not just an ancient practice of a wilderness wandering community. It is a metaphor for the Discipline of Simplicity God knew would result in choices made; choices about what will be important in our lives; choices about who's we choose to be. It would remind us who is in charge of the universe. Sabbath is a way of remembering our limitations and developing the discipline of patience. And the act of simplifying our lives allows not only for a day of rest, but serves as a reminder of the principle of rest throughout every day.

A part of the renewed interest in spiritual formation among 21st Century church leaders is the rediscovery of the Hebrew Sabbath. There are 72 passages of scripture referring to the Sabbath, 45 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The origin of the word Sabbath is confusing, but the purpose to the early Hebrew community

was clear as we see in this delightful description by Wayne Muller in *Sabbath, Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*:

Stop. Now. There is astounding wisdom in the traditional Jewish Sabbath, that it begins precisely at sundown, whether that comes at a wintry 4:30 or late on a summer evening. Sabbath is not dependent upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we complete our phone calls, finish our project, get through this stack of messages or get out this report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it is time to stop...

The old, wise Sabbath says: Stop Now. As the sun touches the horizon, take the hand off the plow, put down the phone, let the pen rest on the paper, turn off the computer, leave the mop in the bucket and the car in the drive. There is no room for negotiation, no time to be seduced by the urgency of our responsibilities. We stop because there are forces larger than we that take care of the universe. The galaxy will somehow manage without us for this hour, this day, so we are invited to relax and enjoy our relative unimportance, our humble place at the table in a very large world.²

During one of the most difficult times in my life my daughter, Meredith, sent me a copy of Max Lucado's incredible book, *Traveling Light*, from which I repeatedly read the words:

God's message is plain: "If creation didn't crash when I rested, it won't crash when you do."

There is an abundance of resources on the topic of Sabbath which I will include in our Resources section at the end of this book. In these you will find ways of prioritizing a special day of every week and how to celebrate the true meaning of Sabbath individually or as a family.

Simplicity:
A Practical Application for Daily Use

1. Practice silence and solitude early in the morning.
2. Use a daily devotional guide for scripture study and inspirational reading.
3. Review your own personal mission statement*.
4. Listen carefully for God's voice in the silence, solitude and written word.
5. Journal your thoughts, feelings and what you sense God is revealing to you.
6. List items you need to accomplish today, including those emerging from the above.
7. Prioritize your list in light of your mission statement and emerging concerns.

* See Appendix.

8. Negotiate to get reoccurring low priority items off of your list permanently.
9. Notify those who need to know today that you are reevaluating how you use your time and resources, and that you will be making choices you believe God is leading you to make.
10. Delete items that continue to contribute to complexity and prevent simplicity.
11. Select a phrase that captures the simplicity you seek. Use it as a prayer you will repeat throughout the day.
12. At the end of the day, repeat your chosen prayer, thanking God for the freedom he gives you to make choices—the ones you made today and the ones you will make tomorrow.
13. Rest in his Presence, knowing he is ultimately the One you choose to please.



SILENCE

*is quieting the relentless
self-absorbed voices in my mind
in order to hear the voice of God.*

Silence, the venue for listening.

Silence—an interesting concept for a man with very poor hearing and a condition (tinnitus) that produces relentless screaming of high-pitch sounds that intensifies in quiet settings. But what we are talking about here is not the *absence* of sound. We’re talking about *focus*. We live in an over-stimulated world. When attention deficit exists (as it does in me) distractibility is a second-by-second unrelenting reality—until I *center* myself and become able to do what Dr. Daniel Amen calls “hyper-focus.” Then I am able to go deeply into a given thought or idea, so deeply that insight is experienced at a level previously unknown to me.

While you may not struggle with ADD (it has indeed been over-diagnosed in recent years), most of us in this culture of overload will find that this kind of silence is hard to come by. You will notice the drain it has on you in the first few days of genuine retreat from it all, and the re-entry when your body is reacting to the return to a high stress environment.

Thank you, God, for the capacity to hear and experience beyond what I thought was accessible to me. That’s the point of “leading me beside the still waters” until my soul is restored.

Here I am speaking of *purposeful* silence. Silence that emerges from “centering” which we discuss later in this journey. Silence that enables us to hear messages that are passing us by day after day, moment by moment. , Jesus frequently repeated the phrase, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Obviously, Jesus was using ears as a metaphor, knowing full well that most of the crowds had the capacity to hear his physical voice. So much of what he taught was in parables in the hope that people would “hear” the truth within the story. It is another way of saying, “You don’t get it do you? You are so preoccupied

with the noise of life that you are missing truths that exist all around you.”

How many times has a minor response or a gesture in an ordinary setting been the voice of God and we missed it? Simplicity and silence prepare us for truly “listening” with another set of ears—those tuned into what God is doing all around us.

A child saves up her money for months to purchase a certain gift for a very special person in her life, only years later to discover the unopened treasure stored away in a closet at the home of the recipient. She is crushed to learn that something so meaningful to her was of little or no consequence to this special person in her life.

Have you ever been guilty of overlooking a special gift? Maybe you were distracted, too busy looking for something else and did not notice that something very special lay unopened, unacknowledged right before you. Something that might have made a difference in your life, your choices, your own happiness.

Simplicity and silence prepare us for truly “listening” with another set of ears—those tuned into what God is doing all around us.

That’s the story with our fast-paced lives. We emerge from the hamster cage, exhausted from running nowhere. Where did I sign on for this ride? At what point did I enter the trance in which I exchanged choice for the comfort of habit? Why does it take a tragedy for me to see how far off the pathway I’ve wandered? Why am I living my life out of someone else’s priorities?

I’m leaving the doctor’s office still lost in my own little world, considering the implications of the physician’s recommendations. I almost missed seeing the distinguished looking gentleman sitting alone in the waiting room. After a cordial exchange of greetings we began doing something unusual for our gender. We openly discussed what led us

to choose this doctor. There was a comfort level in our dialogue that was unusual, even for this extravert who makes a living doing therapy and public speaking. There was an unexplainable connection, as though we had each just stumbled upon an old friend.

Finally, we exchanged business cards and agreed to keep up and compare notes on our health progress. How many times have we met an intriguing person on a plane, enjoyed a discussion, exchanged business cards and promised to exchange emails with no serious intent to do so? But there was something about this connection that was different—as if we had known each other in another setting.

When I returned home I decided to check out his website and immediately knew what the connection was all about. This man was none other than Gordon Hempton, the world renowned acoustic ecologist who had spent a lifetime studying silence and the sounds of nature found in the dwindling number of places remaining on planet earth. Here is the guy who was famous for declaring a few years ago that there were only seven or eight quiet places remaining in the United States and none in Europe. Newsweek recently reported Hempton's warning, based on three trips around the planet recording sounds on every continent except Antarctica, that silence is facing extinction.

In our exchange of emails which followed I shared with Gordon my lifelong search for what he describes as places “where you can go and listen and not be distracted by human-caused noise.” I told him of my teen years climbing the mountains and gorges of north Georgia, discovering the deserts and rugged canyons of Texas, and decades of climbing the San Juan Rocky Mountains of southwest Colorado. We talked about my training in clinical hypnosis and the use of nature recordings in helping people block out

human-generated sounds. What we did not consciously know in that encounter in the waiting room was that we shared a fascination, perhaps an obsession, regarding the value of silence to the health and growth of the human mind, and the high cost of losing silence.

I speak often of God's Presence, but what does it really mean? As we will learn later about Spiritual Sensitivity, Presence is not just being there. It is being *really* there. We learn it from experiencing God's Presence. It is listening, sensing another's emotions and communicating respect. It is valuing another. I have felt one's "presence" in a phone call, a letter, and even in an email. I have felt God's Presence in the face of a child, the smile of an old woman, in the words of an author and, especially, in the music of a great composer. The psalmist reminds us that God's Presence is not fickle. It is always. It is everywhere. God's Presence is there in the depths of the sea or breadth of the heavens. It is what we experience in Presence and it is what we become to others.

I mentioned earlier the condition I share with millions of others, tinnitus, or ringing in the ears. It has been a gift and metaphor to help me grasp a broader lesson in life. Frequently my wife Sandra will say, "Why didn't you catch that phone call?" "Didn't you notice that the grandfather clock stopped last night?" "Did you know you left the water running in the sink?" She has patiently discovered over time that even though I wear electronically sophisticated hearing aids they are not able to overcome the high pitch waves of noise that block out a phone ringing, a clock ticking, or water running in another part of the house. A popular phrase today is "Perception is reality!" But is it? Is the phone not ringing? Has the clock stopped ticking? Is the water not running? Of course it is. I'm just not aware of it.

When I acquired tinnitus the birds did not quit singing nor did the wind stop moving through the Aspen leaves. Streams still flowed gently over the rocks and even the clocks on my walls continued their ticking. But I could not and cannot hear them over the sounds created between my brain and ears. This condition has given me a genuine appreciation for what I once heard in the normal course of life. It has helped me know that God is never really silent. It is the noise of life that keeps us from experiencing God's Presence and hearing all God wants to share with me. Until we create a respite from the noise in our heads and learn to listen to the Voice that really counts we will not know the joy of intimate communion with God.

At the time of this writing I am holed up in a cabin at Laity Lodge, a Christian retreat center in the Texas Hill Country owned by the HEB Foundation. I have now been here five days and will be returning home tomorrow. There were no retreats going on at Laity Lodge this week and I was able to roam the riverbed, canyon, rugged hills and finally begin to actually hear the river, the birds and the wind whistling through the cedars. How am I able to do so? Because day by day the ringing in my ears seemed no longer needing to compete with the urban noise of my "normal" world. My other senses somehow know to intensify as the ringing settles down. Day after day I have been drawn to a rocky ledge overlooking the deep blue-green river where I could see the thousands of years of history carved out of limestone by the relentless Frio River.

Until we create a respite from the noise in our heads and learn to listen to the Voice that really counts we will not know the joy of intimate communion with God.

At times the silence is deafening to this city dweller's ears. Here I take off my watch, cell phone (no signal in the canyon), my trifocals and hearing aids (my heart stent will have to remain in place) and try to experience God's creation without manmade filters of any kind. At first it is

nerve-wracking not to have background music, a television blaring, the sounds of 18-wheelers on the Interstate and roars of jets taking off and landing.

And then, your hearing begins to return to its natural state. You hear a brook running over rocks on its way to the river. You hear water lapping against the rocks from a gentle breeze coming up the canyon. You are now hearing at an entirely different level.

And that's what silence does for the soul also. The soul begins to observe what frequently is lost in the noise of life. Could it be the voice of God saying, "Be still and know that I am God?" Henri Nouwen shares the purpose of silence for the Christian on this journey: "But solitude and silence are for prayer. The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God."

Silence is not a place, but for most of us silence requires a quiet place. For Jesus the quiet place could be a mountain, the sea or a garden. He was continuously seeking the *solus* of the quiet place, away from the crowds and even his closest followers. On at least one occasion he took three of his closest followers with him. It was so quiet they fell asleep. It appears to have frustrated Jesus that they had not really come to grips with their need for withdrawal from the press of life—a place of prayer where they could experience what he found.

For me, the quiet place is first and foremost my opportunity to listen. Sometimes I am unable to filter out the clutter and nothing important seems to happen. Early on I would get angry at myself and blame it on my ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). Soon I learned that the Creator knows well my limitations and is lovingly patient, awaiting the breakthrough on the other side of the door. Now, I realize that there is mindful preparation that includes descending

through the maze, layer upon layer of mental distractions. I never know when or even if it will happen. I must not have conditions or expectations, for this is the God of the universe. It is not about me or some feeling I want to emerge. There must be no anticipation that something worthwhile will happen that I can write, teach or even share with a friend. In my immaturity sometimes God has to remind me that this is for me to experience his Presence and it may not be possible to describe it in words. It is then that I can let go of my human need for significance and listen—just listen and learn.

When some extraordinary breakthrough happens I am overcome with joy, insight, discovery, as if light has just filled all the dark places and words lose their meaning or value. Emerging from this encounter is awareness, humility, gratitude and celebration that will sensitize my spirit to all of God's creation. God's Presence attunes me to every creature, great and small, rich and poor, learned and disadvantaged. Judging others is somehow anesthetized. It must be what Jesus felt especially in the presence of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus as well as Pilate. You begin to realize that God has no need for us to be educated, well heeled or in a position of power to experience his grace and joy. Nor does God need ignorance or poverty, or for us to have a place of obscurity in our world. What God needs is openness, willingness, desire, an obsession to know him. No matter what our limitations he will then reach out and touch us and change us forever. Once this happens we are no longer satisfied with life apart from God's Presence. We see the world through another lens and we hunger for his encounter in our place of quietness.

Now, I realize that there is mindful preparation that includes descending through the maze, layer upon layer of mental distractions.

Practicing Silence

Once you choose the discipline of Silence be aware that you are now at war with the culture in which you live. Nothing about spiritual growth and discipline is compatible with our world. There is a cultural seduction, some call it, that sucks you into its vortex. Time you have set aside for silence will be challenged not by your enemies but those closest to you. When in my thirties I started running seriously I listened to runners argue over whether morning, noon or evening was the best time. I had met Ken Cooper, creator of the term “aerobics” and founder of the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, and frantically read all his books. I wanted to get it right. Statistics on those who stuck with the discipline of aerobic exercise favored strongly the early morning. I just couldn’t do it and fell into an evening routine. There was just one problem. Everyone is awake at that hour and it seemed everyone from my lovely wife and precious daughters to my church needed me just at dinnertime. And who wants to come in hot and sweaty from the Texas heat and eat dinner?

No matter what our limitations he will then reach out and touch us and change us forever.

I soon found that mornings would have to work since no sane person was awake at 5:30 a.m. and no one cared where I was at that time. I would just shut off the alarm, turn over and go to sleep hoping that it was raining anyway. It was like climbing the Great Wall of China. Finally, I learned that there was only one way to make this early morning routine work. The breakthrough came after months of setting the clock across the room and carefully piling my running shoes and sweats between me and the clock so that I would stumble over them several times on the way to the clock. By then my reasoning was, well I might as well stay up since I’m this far from the bed. I made a vow that I would never let the weather stop me. I

ran in early morning Texas heat much of the year, praying for rain, and sometimes roads covered with ice and snow in the winter. This was not prompted by discipline but by the lack of it. I knew well that if I ever found an excuse not to run I would miss one day and never run again. Over the following years wherever I traveled I marked off the miles upon arrival (often in a taxi) and ran at high altitudes and sea level, including a few mornings on Bourbon Street in New Orleans when the women and men of the night were still up from the night before.

This is how I got started with my quiet time in the early hours of the morning. Few people were likely to challenge me for that spot in the day. It became over the years my favorite time of the day. I am better prepared for the day when I've worked out physically and spiritually before the sun ever rises. There are times when an early flight or appointment beyond my control is set in the early morning, and I have to find a time in the evening or miss it altogether for that day. Along the way I sustained a back injury climbing in the mountains and have had to settle for walking or the use of a recumbent bike. But the time set aside for my spiritual health is all that has kept me sane through the crises and setbacks of life. In recent years I have studied the 23rd Psalm from every perspective I can imagine, and am still learning from it every day. I have been asked to include in this guidebook my version of the Psalm (see Conclusion), but my daily prayer for the past few years has been this one (next page):

Daily Prayer

God of creation, creating still,
Create in me a new heart
And renew a right spirit within me.

May I not be anxious over the things of this world,
But seek first your Kingdom,
And all these things will be added.

Give me the courage to
Ask, and keep on asking,
To seek, and keep on seeking,
To knock, and keep on knocking.

And give me the faith to believe that
In your own time you will answer.
That when I am ready, I will find.
And, in your own wisdom,
The right doors will open.

Application

1. Find a quiet place that becomes ***your*** private space of daily silence. Unplug or silence the phone or any other gadget of potential interruption. Notify family members or roommates that you are not to be interrupted unless there is an emergency.
2. Create or recall in your mind a peaceful scene. It may be a quiet flowering meadow, a seashore or a mountain stream.

3. Open your senses to that environment—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. Test each of the senses until you can experience this quiet place fully.
4. Take in a full deep breath and sustain it to the count of four. Feel the coolness of the air as it passes through your nostrils. Let it out slowly and feel how the warmth of your body has warmed the air passing back out into the space before you. Continue this exercise until you become aware of the silence—not the absence of sound, but the silencing of the clutter in your mind. Herein lies the early stages of “centering,” the capacity shut out the world and begin to focus on the Presence of God. Enjoy!



SOLITUDE

*is withdrawing from my world
in order to experience fully
the Presence and wonder of God.*

Solitude, God's gift of himself.

*M*onophobia: the fear of solitude. Who will fill the silence? If there is not noise, my anxiety will rise. Why? Noise distracts from my internal loneliness where rests the real questions I'm avoiding. Being alone with God is a scary scenario. We are unaware that what God seeks is not judgment but intimacy with us. He wants us to "rest" in him—to trust him to take us one step at a time towards a place of peace. What we fear, then, is what we most need. Yet we struggle to let go of the "control" we think we have, but don't.

My first struggle with solitude was that I did not get it. It was like looking at a complex machine or electronic part that had no meaning outside of its context. You can imagine all kinds of ways it might serve a purpose. It looks good, it has a fancy name. But it makes no sense. How does being alone solve anything, I asked? I knew what simplicity was though I'd never tried it. I could even imagine the value of silence, without ever "hearing" it. Surrender and service, I fully grasp. I just resisted them. But Solitude has to be experienced. One must be there to grasp any level of its meaning.

Solitude is not something you necessarily start out to find. So if none of this sounds relevant to you, don't worry about it. All of my life I have seen photographs and paintings of the magnificent waterfalls deep in the rain forests of Hawaii's most remote islands in the Pacific. I recall seeing films capturing their majesty from helicopters high above and observing the misty clouds they create as they crash into the rocky pools hundreds of feet below.

I longed for the chance to be in that helicopter, or more accurately, to see these natural wonders up close. But never did I imagine that one day I would trek through

those very rainforests, fording a winding river with my daughter, Meredith, and grandsons, Griffin and Jordan. They had made their home there along with husband and father, Dr. Dan Shuman. Together they provided medical care and love for the people of Molokai. Never could I have imagined that one day I would stand in the billowing mist at the foot of Hawaii's highest waterfall as it formed its own weather and shoot photos of my child and grandchildren swimming in paradise.

Herein lies the understanding of the difference in reading about solitude and experiencing it. All I could do in the roar of the waterfall was drop my jaw and raise my eyes and behold the wonder of God's artistry.

As I struggled with understanding solitude I did what I usually do when I don't understand something. I read every book on solitude I could get my hands on. My library is loaded with what people have said about it. I gathered file folders of articles on the subject. I did what the human brain calls for: take what I know and build upon it. I remembered that as teenager I was fascinated by the experience of climbing north Georgia mountains and spending endless hours taking in the view from their peaks. I would ride horseback across some of them, dismount and stand mesmerized watching the effect of the sun and lengthening shadows on the mountain ranges, creating scenes that could never be captured on film or canvas.

It was there I first sensed God's Presence. Over the turbulent years of adolescence I became convinced that God's hand was at work in my life, and it was in the solitude of the mountains that I wrestled with my doubts. There was abuse in my life that made no sense, but I could go to the mountains and calm my anger and come away with clarity about a calling to make a difference in my world. A Christian leader saw something in this skinny kid that was untapped and he recruited me into leadership

positions. With responsibility came the fear that I would fulfill the harsh descriptions hurled at me by my father—that I was stupid and could never do anything right. But in those hours of solitude God reminded me that I had a mother who believed I could do and be anything, and a respected leader who entrusted to me the lives and wellbeing of hundreds of kids not much younger than I.

So that's what Solitude is, I thought. Then I remembered throughout my college and seminary years the many retreat settings, some of which I attended and some I led. Often they were in remote settings where I renewed my faith in the God of my youth.

**Solitude is both the absence
of something and the
Presence of Someone.**

I recalled the year I joined a group of Christian leaders for a week of self-examination and spiritual insight on a college campus in Indiana. I had been serving in large urban congregations and was experiencing isolation from the people I felt called to serve. I knew God was making me very uncomfortable and nudging me toward something entirely new, but I had not a clue as to what it was. It was a time of Solitude that led to the decision to leave church ministry, launch a counseling service and later return to graduate school for my Ph.D.

I hope that my story has elicited memories of yours. I want you to know that Solitude is what you experienced when you withdrew to a quiet place to bare your soul and found rest in God. It was a time when you were able to retreat from the day-to-day demands to experience God's grace. Contrary to my first attempts to understand it, Solitude is what happens when your openness and God's initiative connect. It is more than being alone. And yet, separating yourself from the world is necessary. Preparing to listen is a prerequisite. Waiting on God and relinquishing your agenda is a must. Whether or not you come away with a

feeling of exhilaration, you are making yourself available for God's Presence.

The word "solitude" has its origin in the Latin form of *solitude* or *solus*, meaning "alone." My use of the word with the capital "S" includes isolation or seclusion but far more than a physical setting. In referring to Solitude I am describing a state of aloneness with God. For Solitude to exist there has to be a physical separation from the routine of daily life in which one experiences the Presence of God. You control only the isolation, the physical space, and your openness to perceiving God's Presence. God will be there. No question about that, for God is everywhere. The issue of Solitude is about your readiness, your openness, your capacity to listen. Awareness is the issue.

**They who wait for the Lord shall
renew their strength . . . Isaiah 40:31**

My experience is that Silence precedes Solitude. Sometimes by hours, sometimes by seconds. Not the absence of audible sounds but the silencing of mental verbosity, the ceaseless mind chatter. (See "Centering Prayer" pages 56-57 and Appendix D.) It is the meeting of my discipline with the initiative of God. It is like opening the door and finding God standing there knocking. The "hound of heaven" is forever seeking intimacy with us. An amazing thought—that God pursues me. Even more astounding—that I'm too preoccupied to create the space for his Presence.

The risk of preoccupation is especially high among Christian leaders who've chosen a life of vocational ministry. To paraphrase Henri Nouwen, "*The biggest obstacle to intimacy with Jesus is serving Jesus.*" Can you imagine a pastor so busy taking care of congregants that he/she misses Jesus altogether? Of course you can. We all have been there. Two guys walking on the road to Emmaus never knew that the stranger who walked with them was

Jesus, until he was gone. Today Jesus may be found in the tears of a child, the groans of a wounded soldier, the music of a street merchant, the parent of a missing teenager. In Mother Teresa's words, "The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unloved—they are Jesus in disguise."¹ But unless we have experienced his Presence we will not recognize his voice reaching out to us the faces of the people he came to restore.

Solitude is all about Presence. God's Presence in us and, through us, to others. And occasionally, it is God's Spirit in us greeting God's Spirit in another. Now let me share some of the challenges we face in making ourselves available to God's Presence.

Charles Ringma, in his devotional book entitled, *Dare to Journey with Henri Nouwen*, provides the most candid counsel to those who dare to make this journey of Solitude:

To have a quiet place does not mean that we will have a quiet time. There are also the distractions of the quiet place. Our restless senses, a feeling of futility, a lack of quick results, and fears in truly facing ourselves can all invade the quiet place.

But before we capitulate to these pressures, we need to give ourselves a much longer time. There are no quick results in the quiet place. It is in the ensuing months that small green shoots will begin to appear on a frequently blighted or barren personal landscape. Because they usually will not appear in a matter of days or weeks, patience and persistence will need to be a part of the practice of solitude.²

Everything works against a quiet place and a quiet time. For me the clutter of ADD fills my waking moments. My brain springs from one flower to another unable to taste the beauty of any. Sometimes it ain't a flower—it's one manure pile to another. I can shut my eyes to cut off the visual stimulation only to be greeted by a kaleidoscope of

colors and images flashing across the back of my eyelids, creating replicas of the outside world.

The training I received in behavioral medicine with cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University Medical School prepared me for the discovery of a simple “centering” exercise I have used personally and with clients as a means of shutting out these kinds of distractions. I will include a copy in the Appendix for your reference. These tools make use of our amazing and God-given brain’s capacity to enable us to focus and bring the mind to a “neutral” state where we can let go of the pressures of day-to-day living. Combined with prescribed breathing exercises these resources may help you reach a state of readiness for God’s Presence.

Solus of the heart is recognizable by its owner in the surprising calmness he/she feels in the midst of conflict, danger or uncertainty. Others are drawn to this person as a moth to light. They cannot identify what sets this person apart from the crowd, but they recognize the difference. This individual may be large or small in stature, educated or rough around the edges, articulate or colloquial in their communication, but nothing matters as much as being near them.

What is this “something” this person possesses? Why is it they have no need to flaunt it? How is this sense of peace so integrated into their lives as to appear seamlessly guiding them from one task to another? These are the marks of one who practices Simplicity, Silence and Solitude. There is a “presence” about them that engenders peace wherever they go.

But let’s not focus so much on the results of solitude that we find ourselves trying to mimic behavior without the experience. There are no shortcuts to intimacy with God *or* God’s creation. In our book, *Celebrating Sex in Your*

Marriage, Sandra and I listed ten ingredients of an “Inti-Mate Marriage.” Spending time together ranks near the top of the ten ingredients for emotional and sexual intimacy. If true in human relationships, what role do you think the discipline of Solitude with God has to do with spiritual intimacy with God?

In my experience it truly does begin with being alone-- which creates the fertile internal space for Solitude of the heart. In the pendulum swing between isolation and overstimulation, *solus* of the heart flourishes.

I would be dishonest not to admit that Solitude is as painful sometimes as it is exhilarating. In *The Way of the Heart* Henri Nouwen refers to Solitude as our “furnace of transformation.” He describes it as “the place where God remodels us in his own image.” He calls it “the place of our salvation ... where we are freed from the victimizing compulsions of the world.” I see it as the crucible of our spiritual re-formation, where we bring our broken selves for healing. It is a place where God’s vision for us stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing culture of our world and a choice must be made to succumb or surrender.

Balance remains the fundamental characteristic of God’s universe.

Balance remains the fundamental characteristic of God’s universe. And true to God’s nature, the crucible of our re-formation also embodies what I call the “Grace Embrace.” In the words of Charles Ringma, “Thus, while the place of solitude is the place of honesty, it is also the place of grace. It is not only the place of revelation; it is also the place of embrace.”³

The test of solitude

From a logical perspective we can see the potential for narcissistic self-worship in Solitude. When is it the voice of God’s Spirit and when is it our own agenda being baptized in withdrawal and isolation? To me, and I am still

a child in the journey, the difference is not the subject content I take away from my quiet place. The question I ask myself is, “Do I come away from God’s Presence reflecting God’s nature, God’s character?” Is there an attentiveness to what has always been God’s agenda: loving his creation, his people, his gift of life, and exhibiting this love in every dimension of my life? Does gratitude permeate my being? Do I begin seeing people as “unique and unrepeatable miracles?” Is there forgiveness where there has been resentment? Do I see those who harmed me as treasures in God’s sight? Am I more aware of my own failure to reflect the nature and character of God in my everyday life? Do I permit God’s Presence to illuminate my dark places?

Spiritual Formation is about being formed by God’s Spirit.

Following one of my quiet times when God’s Presence made transparent my disgusting habit of judging people, I wrote in my journal:

Father, now that I’m done with the log in my eye and I am free to see the splinter in his, why is it no longer worth mentioning?

Our team had finally gathered for our very first attempt at a Spiritual Formation Retreat. Months of planning had carefully brought together a representative mixture of devout Christian leaders from all walks of life. It was a group balanced in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, marital status and even theological persuasions. We had a thoughtfully selected spiritual leader with the knowledge and experience to guide us. In a nutshell, everything went wrong. At least, this was my perspective.

The Texas heat bore down relentlessly. The retreat site director had assigned us to a conference room with an air conditioning window unit so loud that we had to choose between the 100 plus temperature or being able to hear our leader’s voice. The room was so small and the chairs so

close that if someone crossed their legs the whole group had to do the same. The alarming observation I made was that people were not talking to each other. Politeness, but not much more. I felt so sorry for our gifted leader.

Have you ever felt like you were pulling, pushing, and almost begging people to engage in the activities that you had prayerfully planned for months? We felt we had done it all right and there was a lot at stake. Our offices had invested a lot of money in this project. But even more important, we suspected that this kind of retreat featuring long periods of silence, contemplative prayer, and *Lectio Divina* was going to be distinctively unfamiliar to this diverse group. And we were sooooo right!

Several hours into the first day of the retreat one graciously irritated rural pastor had taken about as much of this as he could handle, and in his best Texas drawl he asked, “May I say something?” I was so thrilled that now we were getting somewhere. Somebody was about to participate. I didn’t give the leader time to respond. I nearly fell out of my chair, leaning as far out as I could to overcome the roar of the air conditioner I said, “By all means, pastor. Please say something!”

He asked, “Maybe I’m not the best educated person in the room but I just now figured out why we are here. This is about prayer, right? Is this a prayer retreat? Well, why didn’t you just say so? All this talk about silence, solitude and contemplation . . . and *lego divinci* or whatever his name is . . . I don’t know about all that, but I do believe in prayer.”

So let me make it clear that Spiritual Formation is about being formed by God’s Spirit. It is not about talking, it is about listening. It is about getting ourselves to a quiet place where we can gradually block out all of life’s distractions and hear what God has for us to hear.

Expectations are left behind. Openness, honesty and humility provide a pathway to God's Presence where we simply rest from our weary attempts to be good enough. A place where we experience his easy yoke and light burden. It is a place of self-discovery that leads to other awareness. It is a place of enlightenment. It is a place of grace. But, it is all about prayer. Not where you "say" a prayer but where you become a prayer.

Now that you know this is about prayer—something you have known about since "Now I lay me down to sleep," the question is, "Why does my prayer life not lead me to this kind of experience of God's Presence?" Because you are human. Because our lives so easily get out of control. We all need to simplify. We all need to experience the silence that precedes listening. We all need a quiet place to experience Solitude with God.

Contemplation? Let's examine what it is. How can *contemplative* (pronounced conTEMplative) prayer help me find intimacy with God? How have our Christian fathers and mothers from other centuries found this balance in their lives? We look to centering prayer which prepares us for contemplative prayer. But first, we look at how they "prayed the scriptures," something they called *Lectio Divina*.

Contemplative Prayer (Experiencing God's Presence)

As you read more about spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines you will encounter terms like, the "contemplative life" or "contemplative prayer," originating from our more familiar use of the word "contemplation." To contemplate is "to consider carefully and at length; meditate on or ponder." Additional definitions include "to meditate," or "observe pensively."⁴ My interpretation of contemplative *prayer*, however, is that it is a process of experiencing of God's Presence.

I have believed for a very long time that prayer is not so much something we do, like kneeling, folding hands together, closing our eyes, or especially attempting to speak in King James English. Of course, there are times when a prayer is “said.” There is a place for prayer in and on behalf of a congregation as a part of worship. I have offered a “Call to Worship Prayer” in the setting of a cathedral, or what is described in a memorial service as “The Prayer of Comfort,” or in a gathering under the stars at a retreat. I frequently journal a prayer that is occasionally used in corporate worship.

But in terms of one’s communication with God at the most personal and intimate level, prayer is an *attitude*. Prayer is a condition, defining a relationship existing between one and God. Prayer is the state of being with God. It cannot be defined with a beginning and ending. It is better defined as a continuing awareness—an experiencing of God’s Presence. In this sense, I use “God’s Presence” and “Contemplative Prayer” interchangeably.

Protestant and evangelical Christians have recently been turning back the pages of Christian history to recover some of the meditative traditions that empowered the early church. One who has influenced the contemporary use of contemplative prayer, and more specifically, “centering” prayer, is Thomas Keating. A Cistercian priest residing at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, Keating defines contemplative prayer as

. . . a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union. One’s way of seeing reality changes in this process. A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers one to perceive, relate and respond with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through, and beyond everything that exists.

Centering Prayer

Keating describes the difference in contemplative prayer (above) and centering prayer:

Centering prayer is an effort to renew the teaching of the Christian tradition on contemplative prayer. It is an attempt to present that tradition in an up-to-date form and to put a certain order and method into it.

For the sake of clarity it seems best to reserve the term centering prayer for the specific method of preparing for the gift of contemplation . . . and return to the traditional term contemplative prayer when describing its development under the more direct inspiration of the Spirit.

Following our very brief description of *Lectio Divina* below I will give you the guidelines Keating uses for Centering Prayer. But first, it is important to know how Christians for centuries have “prayed the scriptures.”

Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina means “divine reading.” Once in a spiritual formation retreat the Baptist pastor leading our worship explained this concept and asked us to divide into small groups and practice it. As I pondered this strange concept I envisioned little cherubs lighting on our shoulders to the tune of chanting monks. But instead it involved listening repeatedly, eyes closed, to a passage of scripture. With each repetition we listen silently to hear whatever God’s Spirit was saying to us. It turned into a deeply moving sense of God’s Presence that was described later in a variety of ways by every member of our group. I was sensitized to God’s message for me in that passage and in that setting that impacted me for days, maybe months. You may want to learn more about *Lectio Divina* by

*You will find expanded materials on this topic in Appendix E, reprinted with permission by Dr. Shane Kinnison.

reading *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* by M. Basil Pennington, retreat master at St. Joseph's Monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. Pennington describes *Lectio Divina* as

*. . . letting our Divine Friend speak to us through his inspired and inspiring Word. And yes, of course, it includes our response to that Word, to his communication to us through that Word. Lectio is meeting with a friend, a very special Friend who is God; listening to him, really listening; and responding, in intimate prayer and in the way we take that Word with us and let it shape our lives.*⁵

Keating believes that Centering Prayer is designed to build upon the practice of *Lectio Divina* and prepare one for Contemplative Prayer, or what I call experiencing God's Presence. He cautions that Centering Prayer is not supposed to replace other kinds of prayer. In his book *Open Mind Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, Keating provides his "Guidelines for Centering Prayer."

Guidelines for Centering Prayer

- 1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's [P]resence and action within.*
- 2. Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's [P]resence and action within.*
- 3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.*
- 4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.*⁶

I have been a student of the mind/body connection since the 1970s when I began to investigate the body's response to stressful events. I was fortunate to be in the presence of

Hans Selye, the acclaimed grandfather of stress research, cardiologists Friedman and Rosenman, developers of the “Type A Personality,” as well as other researchers as they reported their latest findings on the subject.

In 1984 I completed a research project and Ph.D. dissertation entitled, *Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention in Stress Management*⁷. My research required that I bring together the findings of various fields and study the impact of a treatment program I designed on a group of stress-prone individuals.⁸ As my program was expanded in the following years to treat patients in psychiatric hospitals as well as employees of various corporations, I began to see the spiritual implications of a stress-prone life. Some of my thoughts on these implications I will share briefly here.

Just as the brain is equipped to respond to a life-threatening event, or the perception of one, by setting off the FFR (flight-fight response) mechanism in the hypothalamus, so is it equipped with a mechanism to bring a state of calm or peace, beyond anything we commonly experience. This state occurs in part by reducing the electrical brain activity to such a level that we gain a capacity of both rest and awareness previously unattainable.

This calming mechanism is built into the biochemical and neurological subsystems of the body. It is precisely the physical state we seek in order to be open to profound revelations God wants us to experience. These new discoveries are essentially an awareness of those elements and ingredients of God himself that he has invested in us. We are blocked from these discoveries by the brain’s predisposition to cope with both real and imagined challenges of day-to-day living.

Centering Prayer plays an important role in preparing our brains and bodies for the encounter with God. It is not voodoo or hypnosis, nor some mysterious process only

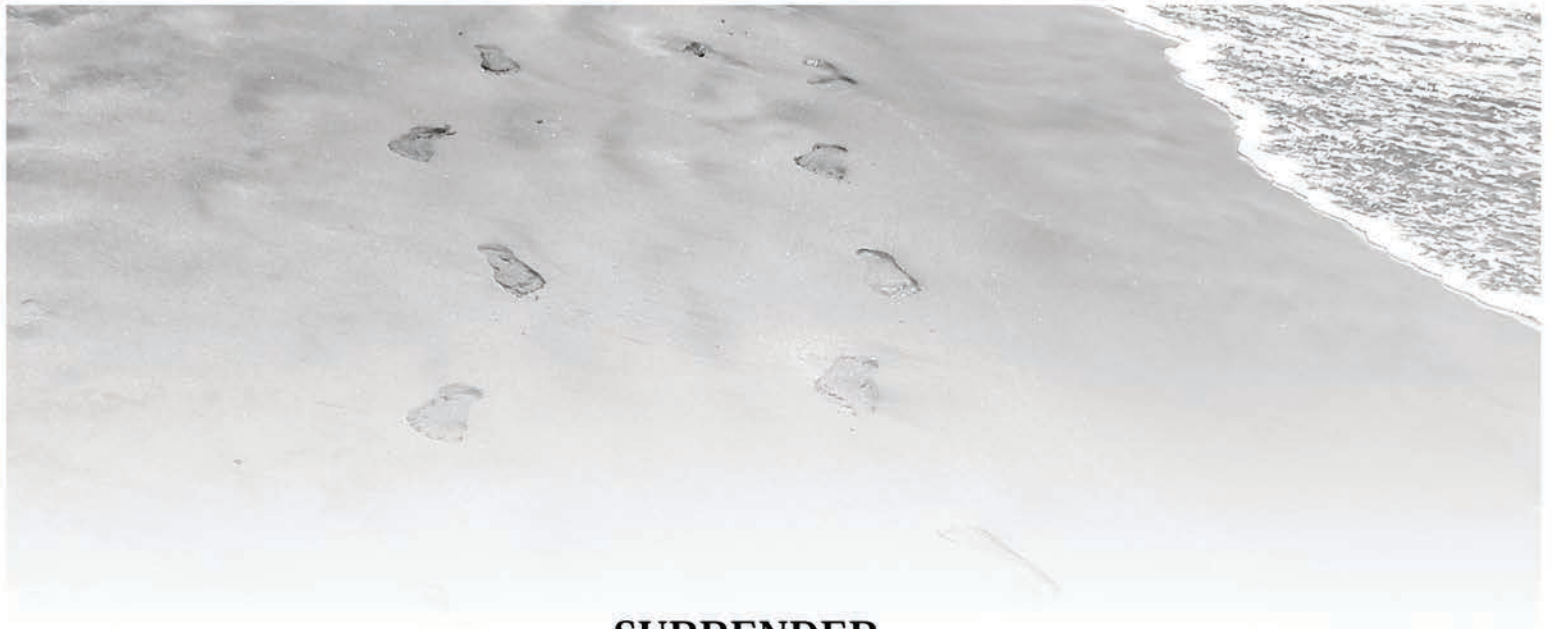
accessible to monks or priests in a monastery. I was taught a very similar relaxation technique before I discovered how effective it would be in preparation for Solitude and experiencing God's Presence. I present Centering Prayer as a tool that may be helpful to you in your spiritual growth. You may have, however, another pathway that accomplishes the same goal: to prepare for Solitude and an intimate encounter with the Creator of all things.

Adapted Centering Prayer

I have provided in Appendix D an extensive comparison of Centering Prayer and the Relaxation Response, including what they have in common and my own integration of the two techniques.

Application

1. Describe a time when you experienced what Keating calls Contemplative Prayer, or what we describe in this guidebook as God's Presence.
2. Describe the circumstances that led up to this experience.
3. What were the results of this intimate experience with God?



SURRENDER

is acting by faith on God's Presence.

Surrender, the essence of faith.

Surrender has to be discussed in the context of power. As long as I have the power to make things happen, then why do I need faith? What then is the meaning of surrender if I don't need to? It's not so much that a person of wealth, position and influence cannot use his/her power to make good things happen. Nor am I saying that power always prevents one from experiencing God's Presence. It has been my experience personally, however, and in my role as a student of human behavior, that it is far more difficult to experience total submission when one possesses an alternative. Human nature resists unqualified surrender—that state where weakness becomes strength and unqualified dependence on God the breakthrough to genuine faith.

Into your hands I commend my spirit, all that I am and all that I need to be for this day. Make of me today what you will, that the lives I encounter will feel touched by your Spirit and empowered for whatever lies before them.

During the wilderness of my own financial disaster some twenty years ago I realized that what I had called faith during my days of wealth was spiritual nonsense. Less than a year after I co-authored *Beyond Termination*¹ and appeared on platforms as an expert on the subject, I found myself an unemployed former CEO. From riches to rags is a different kind of journey. A year earlier I had a CFO who screened the people trying to borrow tens of thousands from me.

What did I learn about faith? Losing all of your possessions is one kind of pain, but the loss of relationships is quite another. When you have nothing you find out a lot about *who* you really are. It is then you learn *whose* you really are.

Remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking about eternal life? Why did Jesus ask him to get rid of all he owned and give it to the poor, and then follow him? The issue wasn't about wealth. And it wasn't about good deeds. This guy had kept all of the commandments. It was about total surrender. Why is it easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Because *absolute* dependency on God is *absolutely* necessary to a life of faith. Note that Jesus did not say this was impossible for a rich man. He clarified his seemingly harsh statement with, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Matthew 18:18-27.)

When you have no other option but to turn God's direction, it is then that spiritual babble turns into genuine faith. In the almost two decades since the bankruptcy of my company I've been asked many times if I miss living in the mansion and driving luxury cars. My company filed a mega-million dollar lawsuit against the corporation that breeched the contract leading to our demise. We watched month after month as the defendant self-destructed. In the end, their own bankruptcy prevented us from realizing even a penny from our losses. Three years later as I was scrambling to recover, a friend said, "Dan, don't you wish you had those millions from that lawsuit now?" My reply remains true. I said, "No, not if it meant I would have to return spiritually to where I was then. Besides, it ain't faith if you can write a check for it!"

How long has it been since you went to bed hungry? Millions do so every night. How long since you came to the end of the money and had some month left over? Remember back to days when the only direction you could look for help was upwards. Many of our fellow citizens are experiencing losses they never imagined a few years ago. Losses from which it takes years to recover. Losses

that mean no college tuition. No health insurance. No savings. No retirement fund. Losses that produce a level of stress that cause marriages to crumble and families to disintegrate.

Having nothing has the potential of producing wealth in profoundly new ways. We had friends who loaned us money. We had a church that never stopped believing in us. Sandra and I had often prayed that I could be free from a relentless administration overload in order to write, that we could be free to travel together leading marriage enrichment conferences. Remember the caution, “Careful what you pray for?” There was suddenly plenty of time for writing. Unemployment clears your calendar like you wouldn’t believe. We were forced to live by the truths we shared with couples in our book and in retreat settings all over the country.

God, may I bring all that you have invested in me to the task and joy of helping others discover and surrender to your claim on their lives—by understanding themselves better and appreciating the differences others bring to this mission.

Faith was an hour-by-hour thing. For us, Surrender meant placing ourselves in God’s hands day after day, month after month, trusting that God had not forsaken us; that God loved us and was teaching us what we could never have learned from the mansion lifestyle.

You don’t have to have power to be confident. It depends on what you are confident *of*. If your confidence is in the power that money gives you, watch out! Even if your confidence lies solely in your own skills, watch out! If your confidence is placed in human beings, watch out! Any or all of these can disappear overnight. This counsel comes from an optimist who tends to expect the best. It also comes from one who has suffered losses in each of these dimensions.

Of what are you confident? Material things are temporal. Skills are vulnerable to injury. People are trustworthy, except when they are not. What then is worthy of your confidence? Who is it you can trust? These are the questions you must answer.

Whenever I consider the risk of Surrender, the image I see is that of the trapeze artist approaching the point of decision. Will I reach for the bar swinging my direction or

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.²

Helen Keller

hold on to what I know will protect me from a catastrophic fall?

Surrender is about going for the paradigm shift of pseudo self-control to faith in the One I claim to trust.

As a child I often heard the preacher say, “I don’t know what the future holds, but I do know who holds the future.” To live by faith means you

are surrendering to God’s Presence. Future is nothing more than today’s tomorrow. Time has no meaning for the One who created it and lives apart from its limits.

Surrendering is not an event in time, it is a process. It does not mean the absence of stress. Surrender does not mean the answer I want. Surrender means I place my life in the Shepherd’s hands. Things could get tougher, not easier. There are no mountains without valleys. I just have to be open to the Shepherd’s Presence in either setting.

Perhaps the best way I can be of genuine help is to invite you into one of the moments of Surrender in my life. I’m very cautious about opening this door because it is so very personal. Let me share one of the most profound quotes attributed to Henry Nouwen:

That which is most personal is also most universal.

Why is this so profound? Because we are all created in His image. The Creator's touch is common to all of us, making us brothers and sisters who share God's "DNA." When we reach deeply within ourselves and reveal to others our joys, our pain, our struggles and celebrations, we are in fact experiencing the God within each of us and confirming our humanness. This connectedness does more for us than "answers" ever can. In that spirit I open the unedited pages of my journal to you. Experience with me the attempts to manage my fears at a specific time of crisis, and my moment of Surrender:

Surrender is the window to God's promises and the door to my discipleship.

I am going to let you do, Father, what I cannot do for myself. A simple thought erupting from my soul this morning. In the depths of fear, shame at my own immaturity, and wrenching of my soul, I ask you to take from me the urge and attempts to build a bridge over the present troubled waters. I know, Father, that nothing I can construct could survive the storms and floods of this present life. So, here and now, at a depth of despair I have hidden beneath pseudo God-like behavior, I hand over to you the pen that will chart my course through these turbulent times. I do so knowing that you reveal your way a brush stroke at a time while I long for, beg for, the full landscape.

In my prayer just now I described the ultimate risk of surrendering the future to you—for you could lead me in some direction that I cannot manage. Your Spirit replied through the wailing of my tears, "No, Dan, the ultimate risk is NOT to surrender, for it is such that has left you in this barren state."

So, Father, it is all about trust. Do I trust my own entrepreneur skills, my own brain, my own ability to persuade? All of these have failed me miserably over a lifetime. Why would I place a gift of life and service to such fragile resources? Or, do I trust YOU—the One who gave me life, safety as a child in a violent world, wonder as an adolescent, hunger

for learning, and a thirst for you that is never quenched? Do I trust the One I claim is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all, who is still in the creation business? The One about whom I can write and speak eloquently—as long as it is limited to mere words?

Father, you truly are my only Shepherd. The One who urges me towards the green pastures and still waters in order to restore my soul. You are the One who offers to guide me in paths of “righteousness” that reflect your character and nature. You are the One who takes away the fear in the valley of the shadow of death, and applies your resources to my needs. You are the One who honors me in the presence of my enemies so that my heart is overflowing. You are the One who promises “goodness and mercy” that will shadow me the days of my life. You are the One who welcomes me into your eternal family of faith when these earthly days are ended.

So why, Holy Father, would I resist trusting you and return to building bridges prone to wear and tear and vulnerability to even the slightest turbulence?

Create in my heart what is necessary to surrender to trust—trust in you who are the future. Trust in you who defies human attempts to limit you to words, paintings or sculpture.

Here, Father, I remind myself of my own prayer of recent years to “. . . not be anxious over the things of this world, but seek first your kingdom, and all of these things will be added.”

Here and now, Father, I surrender to your voice, your gentle hand on my shoulder. I will do what is no risk at all—I will trust you not to silence your voice nor remove your hand from my shoulder. That is a risk I cannot live without, were it truly a risk.

Listening forward . . . Dan

Growth is the central theme of God's creation. Without it comes stagnation and death. Without surrender there is no growth. Following the crises of my life I try to assess what I've learned. A few years ago I sat down to assimilate these lessons into a list I have shared with my clients. I'm sure you will immediately recognize some of them as you reflect on your own challenges. Write your personal notes under each lesson and use this exercise as a "Thank You" note to God for the outcomes of Surrender. I call them "15 Lessons from Tough Times."

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Isaiah 43:1-2

15 Lessons from Tough Times

1. You discover what's important in life.
2. You discover gratitude for what you do have.
3. You discover that life goes on.
4. You discover the power of your mind:
 - The destructive force of catastrophic thinking
 - The productive force of focusing

- Your capacity to alter emotions with healthy thinking habits
 - The potency of imagination
5. You discover the importance of a support system.
 6. You discover the power of your spiritual resources.
 7. You discover that change is a natural part of a healthy life.
 8. You discover that risk is never an option.
 9. You discover that balance is the secret to a happy life.
 10. You discover that events do not cause success or failure.
 11. You discover more resiliency than you thought you had.

12. You discover your ability to believe in yourself.
13. You discover the importance of taking the initiative.
14. You discover how to make powerful emotions work for you.
15. You discover your need for intimacy.

Here, we are focused on surrendering to *faith*—a matter of the heart that leads to behavior God wants for us. The potential for imagination is for us God's greatest blessing and worst curse: it enables us to see something not in existence and predisposes us to worry about what we can't see. Surrender is for what we can't see.

Anyone can surrender when all is going well. People of faith will do so even when they feel forsaken and there is no clear direction. I have been there and survived in the path of the storm.

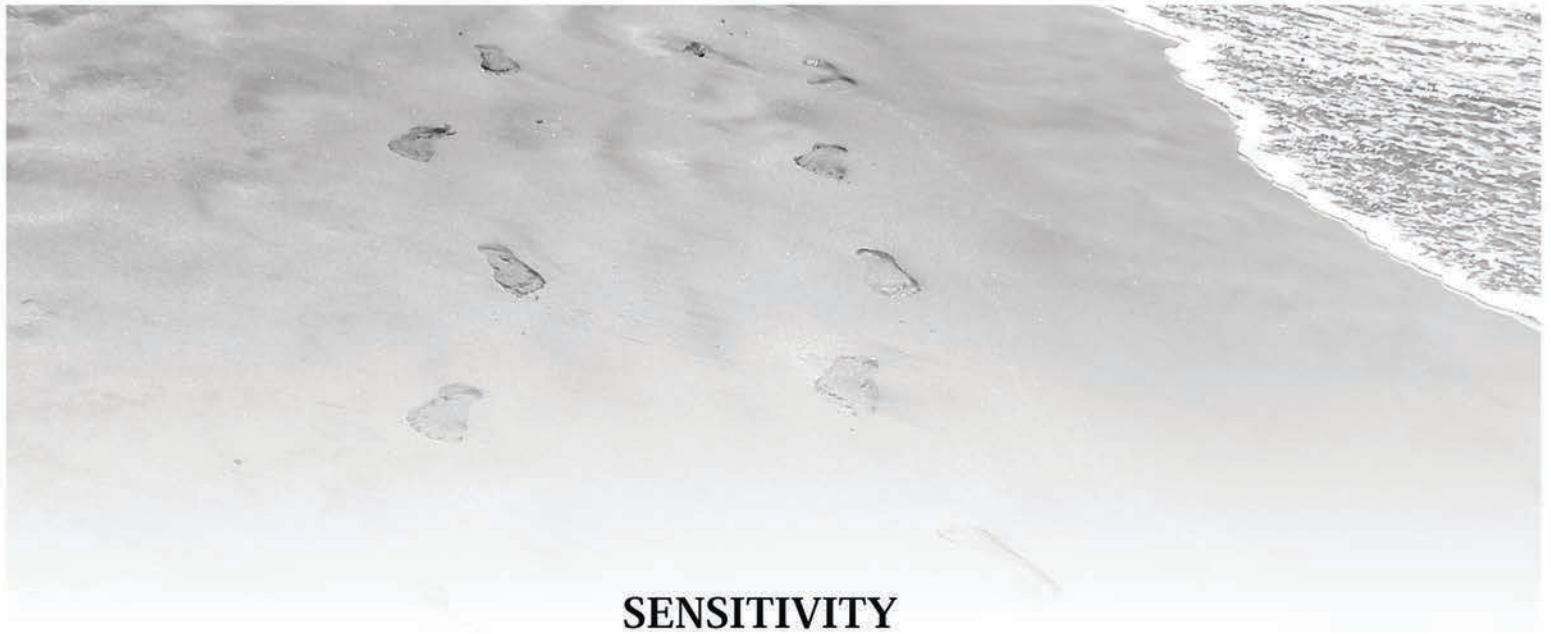
Application

1. Name three resources (other than God) worthy of your confidence. What is it about these resources that guarantees they will be there for you in tough times?.
2. Describe a time when one of these failed you.
3. Was there a time of Surrender when your *faith* was all that got you through? What did you learn from this experience?

4. What steps can you take that will enable you to Surrender to God's Presence as your true source of faith?

5. Which options can you act upon today?

- 1) Simplify your life;
- 2) Begin the practice of Silence in a quiet place;
- 3) Prepare yourself for Solitude—getting away to prepare yourself for God's Presence.



SENSITIVITY

***is experiencing God's Presence in
everyday events, ordinary people,
and nature all around me.***

Sensitivity, a lifestyle of awareness.

A friend once invited me to a special event in her life, but I was too busy to work it in. I explained wearily that I was teaching a full load of classes, directing a counseling center, directing a graduate program, managing a private practice and editing a professional journal. Her response haunted me for years. “Why?” Only a real friend or a child would ask such a direct question, and either should be taken seriously.

I was speechless for a moment. No one had ever asked me the big “Why?” All the stock answers ran through my mind, having to do with financial needs, expectations of the university, but none of them rang true. I had to answer truthfully, “I really don’t know.”

An honest answer would have been, “Because I still need to prove myself.” But her answer would have still been, “Why?” And, I wasn’t ready to be that transparent.

In order to practice Sensitivity I would have to be at peace with my own “demons”—those internal voices that dominated my search for significance. How many others had I said no to because my own life was out of control? No telling what the body count was in my wake! I was neither aware nor sensitive to anyone’s need to be affirmed. I obviously needed to simplify my life but can you imagine where I would find Silence or Solitude at the pace of such a schedule? I then fit well the description I once heard about a Type A Christian who “would probably make it to heaven if he didn’t run past it.”

Father, may the things I say and do that touch people’s lives today merely be the window through which they see you.

Another missed opportunity to celebrate a friend’s accomplishments. Another chance to affirm—a moment

passed that I cannot recover. I can do nothing about the insensitivity of the past but by Simplifying my life, by practicing purposeful Silence, by opening the door to Solitude, and by Surrendering to the intimacy God seeks with me, I can begin to practice Sensitivity to those important people in my life seeking acknowledgement.

What I needed, and still need, is grace in my life. The freedom to live out of my intimacy with God, trusting that the Good Shepherd will make what *he* gives me to do, enough. Enough, no matter what the messages in my head keep saying. Enough, regardless of what others are demanding. Enough.

What if our interruptions are in fact our opportunities, if they are challenges to an inner response by which growth takes place and through which we come to the fullness of being?

Henri Nouwen¹

Spiritual sensitivity is practicing “Presence.” Being God’s “Presence” to the hurting, the grieving, the dispossessed. Being sensitive to God’s voice in and around his creation, looking for God’s message among the simple expressions of God’s handiwork.

I recall guests arriving at our mountain home high in the Colorado Rockies. They were so taken by the view from our front deck, the river flowing beneath them, the high snowcapped “fourteeners” (mountains at least 14,000 feet above sea level) surrounding us. All along I’m thinking, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, landlubber. Wait until you jeep, hike and climb these monsters, or ride horseback in the snow and see the world from God’s viewpoint.” Some never do, out of fear, ignorance, or lack of interest. Blows my mind! I know what they are missing when they leave those mountains without leaving a single footprint above the tree line. But, do *they*?”

Imagine the mind of God as we pass opportunity after opportunity to experience his grace in the face of a child,

the eyes of old woman on the bus, or the stress-prone office worker on lunch break. Mountain peaks untouched forever lost to us out of fear, ignorance or lack of interest. Must blow God's mind!

Spiritual Sensitivity is living the heart of God in a world that is still being created, and learning how to contribute. I believe that in experiencing God's Presence we learn how to live in the present. Jesus taught us not to be anxious about tomorrow, that tomorrow has its own set of troubles. And, he asked, how is it that worry helps to resolve them? Living in the present is not easy in our day. How many television commercials do you see urging you to stop and drink in the beauty of today, to raise your awareness of what is going on around you now? Everywhere you turn someone is trying to entice you to use their product in order to thinner, prettier, wiser, or wealthier tomorrow. Magazines are stocked with advertisements (and often little else) with "Before" and "After" photos designed to show you what you could be tomorrow if you used their product. No one seems to be saying to us, "Stop the merry-go-round. Get off and celebrate today."

"The goal of education and formation for the ministry is continually to recognize the Lord's voice, his face, and his touch in every person we meet."

Henri Nouwen

God is in the *now*! Only those who are open to experiencing the *now* will ever experience God's Presence. And without this Presence we will not attune ourselves to what God is up to in this very moment, in our very presence. God's wisdom, God's love, God's grace is alive and well in the present. And when you are experiencing God's Presence, it is impossible to miss the action.

Thomas Merton, in his *Seeds of Contemplation*, helps us grasp the significance of being sensitive to every moment—every opportunity:

*Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of invisible and visible winged seeds, so the stream of time brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them.*²

It can be a smile, a look, paying attention for a moment, a speech, a book or a phrase. Even the flutter of a sparrow's wings—it all counts for something. It makes a difference if offered in God's name.

**Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?
...on the heights beside the way
...in the paths. . .beside the gates
...at the entrances
...O simple ones, learn prudence;
O foolish men, pay attention.**

Proverbs 8:1-5

As I listened to the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” I was reliving the *Wizard of Oz* that I had discovered as a child. Rainbows conjure up all kinds of things in our imagination and I began to unload these words in my journal (see “Chasing Rainbows” next page).

To be present, to be mindful, to be attentive to the moment is to be aware of those whom God has placed across your pathway today. As God's Presence enables you to practice the discipline of Sensitivity you will make discoveries that will astound you. Your antennae are extended, your sensors are tuned, and you will learn. You will be touched. You will make a difference in someone's life today. And because you are not trying to fill your own cup, it will overflow.

One of the treasures I have found among meaningful writers is Coloradan, Ken Gire. As I devoured his book, *The Reflective Life: Becoming More Spiritually Sensitive to the Everyday Moments of Life*³, I honestly could not contain my excitement. He quotes from Henry David

Chasing Rainbows

*Those of us who have caught the rainbow know
that it is merely mist reflecting light . . .
that it has no end,
no gold awaiting us.*

*For some the rainbow is about things.
Things that wear out and get broken.
Things that offer security
and deliver the appearance of affluence.*

*For others it's about fame.
Being noticed among the crowd,
as if acknowledgement could bring fullness
to an empty heart.*

*Some believe it's about being included.
They offer their soul for the chance to be inside looking out,
only to find they live in fear of losing it.*

*There are those who believe the rainbow is knowledge,
and find it barren of comfort
and far too illusive to ever attain.*

*I see rainbows as serendipitous experiences
either taken in the moment or lost entirely.
I find the value of the rainbow
In what it helps us to see.
I find that searching for a rainbow is futile.
It is a gift of the God of nature
to remind us to be present. . .
to live fully the moment
and in doing so
experience the breath of God.*

Thoreau's journal, "The question is not what you look at, but what you see."⁴ Gire identifies what he calls "the three habits of the heart" that nurture sensitivity to one's day to day experiences.

1. Reading the moment or basically observing what our eyes see "on the surface."
2. Reflecting on the moment or looking below the surface to uncover what lies there—what God has for me to discover.
3. Responding to the moment as "giving what we have seen a place to live in our heart, allowing it to grow there, upward to God and outward to other people."

For me, sensitivity seems to emerge from tough times. During the time I was reading *The Reflective Life* my son-in-law was deployed to Baghdad in the early days of the invasion of Iraq. It was a dangerous time in the war when so much was unknown. He was an Army physician responsible for supervision of a large number of medical personnel. When the bombing of the United Nations building occurred in Baghdad, we were exchanging emails. He and those he supervised became responsible for sorting through the carnage and getting medical treatment for the survivors. My youngest daughter back home was facing the most traumatic time of her life as an army wife and parenting two small boys alone.

My other son-in-law had just left my older daughter and a divorce was imminent. Three children there were thrown into turmoil as they tried to make sense of it all. Trying help my daughter stabilize and move through all of the legal, emotional and financial issues facing her consumed my days and my energy.

While my wife and I were en route to a professional conference, we stopped to spend the night on a Canadian island. During the night Sandra fell from the second to the

first floor, knocking her unconscious, breaking several ribs and puncturing a lung that almost took her life. When we finally reached a trauma medical center on the border between Maine and Canada the surgeon reported that she probably had less than a half hour to live. Because of the lung damage she was not able to leave the hospital for several days and could not receive medical clearance to board a plane for Texas.

In this same year I suffered an accident in a place of business, was knocked unconscious and suffered shoulder damage that later required shoulder reconstruction surgery.

If I trust God, if I do not rely solely on self-knowledge, if I acknowledge God in all ways, then he will clear the path for me.
(paraphrase from Proverbs 3:5-6)

During the ambulance ride to the hospital I became convinced that this was not a good year for the McGee's. I suffered severe dizziness over the following months, was diagnosed with post concussive syndrome, and took medical leave from work. A back injury from a climbing accident many years prior had introduced me to chronic pain, but was not remotely comparable to the recovery from shoulder injury.

Again and again, I practiced Ken Gire's "three habits of the heart," taking in the moment at surface value, reflecting on its deeper meaning, and responding in ways that would change how I related to each event or circumstance. Ken is big on journaling as am I, and my journals for that year overflowed from my heart into my filing cabinet. There is no question that I and my family have been shaped by our responses to that year from hell. The years since have been about recovery and growth for all of us. There is no question that we see the world differently and our hearts are fertile for sensitivity to the world of pain about us.

There is a filter through which all incoming data must pass as we encounter stimuli in our environment. The filter was

not purchased at Kmart or the local auto parts store. It is formed over time as information passes through literally millions of connections between brain cells, forming pathways that enable us to construct beliefs, attitudes—conclusions about life that result in patterns of behavior.

The upside of this Creator-given process is that we don't have to "reinvent the wheel" every morning when we greet a new day. The skill of driving a car, for example, remains in place until we need it. By means of this filter we pay attention to some things and ignore others. The downside is that the embedded elements of this filter often prevent us from "seeing" or "listening" or perceiving a great number of things in our lives. Metaphorically, we have eyes but don't see, and ears that don't really hear. We do not pick up on important stimuli that contain cues to our own mission or "calling" in life. We look over or past messages God has for us, including those contained in the faces, behaviors and pain of those who cross our pathway.

How skilled are you at reading holograms? Remember those paintings that, on first glance, appear to be random colors with no recognizable images? I've stood in a gallery and watched people pass them by for a landscape or still life that captures them. It's as though the lack of spontaneous insight into the deeper images presents too much of a challenge. In order to see the "secrets" within a hologram you must look "through" the surface images. Some people see these images within seconds, but I have known people who never see them.

Our filters prevent us from seeing "through" the surface of our environment to the messages God has for us. Messages not so much directed toward the meeting of an unperceived need in others, as one unmet within us.

A lonely old man whose face tells a story through scars and bloodshot eyes. The searching eyes of an abused child.

The hardened teenager whose toughness is his defense against trusting ever again. But because of what Jesus said about giving and receiving we could be missing the enrichment that comes in a brief conversation with the old man, eye contact with the suspicious child, or the risk of engaging in conversation with the adolescent whose odds of surviving the year are poor at best.

One who emerges from and carries within him/her God's Presence cannot help but *be* his Presence to those seeking it. They may not know or understand what they hunger for but we find examples of it in the encounters with Jesus—encounters that altered lives, and sometimes the course of history, whether they responded to his love or not.

I am saying that his Presence changes things by changing us and those we “see” in our daily living. As a student of human behavior I have found that in order to alter the filters that blind us from seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus there has to be a catharsis of the spirit. The emotions accompanying Surrender, often preceded by Solitude (The Presence of God), enable the brain itself to retain the significance of decisions made and alter the filter through which we see the world about us.

Life-changing decisions are often accompanied by powerful emotions which can improve the brain's capacity to follow through with new patterns of behavior. It is easy to recall events that carried with them exceptionally strong emotions. The plasticity of the brain during a spiritual catharsis equips it for modifying the lenses through which we perceive our environment. It is then we are able to be more sensitive to those we encounter and more able to learn from what we “see” and “hear.”

Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord. . .

Proverbs 8:34-35

Application

1. Imagine a place you frequent, such as a doctor's waiting room, the dry cleaners, that place you like to eat where the same person is always there to serve your needs. Pretend for a moment you are there now. What will you look for? What would you want God to help you "listen" for?
2. Think about a quiet time when you truly felt the Presence of God. What difference did it make in the hours and days that followed?
3. Think of a time when you truly did see, hear and experience something you so easily could have missed. What difference would it have made had you not become aware of God at work in that event?



SERVICE

is taking God's Presence into our world.

Service, the application.

Spiritual Service is applying discoveries made in the Solitude of God's Presence to the needs of the world. Service is the application of spiritual formation. We are formed spiritually for one reason: To be the hands of God among the people of the world. Service is the setting that gives spirituality meaning:

. . . as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me. Matthew 25:45 (RSV)

In the context of a spiritual discipline, Service takes on an entirely new meaning. The true spiritual notion of "Service" requires a paradigm shift from duties performed to being God's Presence. It becomes service that rises from the other disciplines of Simplicity, Silence, Solitude, Surrender and Sensitivity. Service is not the performance of a "to do" list or even, for clergy or church leaders, a job description. It rises from the intimacy with God as he forms us spiritually. Service is not a part of God's plan solely for feeding the hungry or providing care for the neglected. It is not good deeds to make us feel better. It is God's way of revealing himself to the world. It is God's way of letting us participate in the continuing creation of his world.

The first poem I can remember ever attempting came as a very young man passionate about the joy of sharing Christ in daily life:

*He was. He is. He ever will be.
But, who will know except through me?
He could have chosen countless ways
his message to proclaim.
But when others see his love in me
we're neither one the same.*

Service as a Spiritual Discipline is not measured by how many hours of service is performed. God is not impressed with our “goodness fatigue.” It is Service emerging from being in his Presence. Indeed, it is serving unaware. Unaware of who is watching. Unaware of rewards. Unaware of how physically or emotionally difficult the Service may actually be. It is Service compelled by God’s Presence, guided to those in need of his Presence, as you are being graced by his Presence.

In psychology we study human development and personality traits, among other interesting things about humans and their relationships. Over the years I have had a running debate with colleagues as to whether or not, once established, human traits change. When changes would show up in a person over time, as measured by psychological testing, the friendly contest would take on new fervor.

“Well, can you trust the test’s validity when the subject has already taken the test previously?”

Over the years I have had a running debate with colleagues as to whether or not, once established, human traits change.

“If people cannot change, then what are we doing here?”

“But that test was a self-report measure. How do you know he’s being truthful?”

“Let’s do a 360 (tests based observations of those who know the individual best) and see if his family or colleagues observe change in him.”

And the dialogue goes on and on.

Now you know where I’m headed. Do Spiritual Disciplines lived out over time change a person? Does an insensitive person develop spiritual Sensitivity to those

around him/her? Does a self-absorbed individual truly begin representing (however imperfectly) the nature and character of God in Service to others? My answer is that it is possible; I have witnessed it occurring. For many years we taught that the basic personality of an individual is determined very early in life and remains generally stable throughout life. Of course, we've always known that various developmental stages of life reveal distinctive changes in behavior. But is an adult with definitive characteristics changed by the practice of or exposure to Spiritual Disciplines? Again, I have seen what I believe are indisputable changes in people who practice, even to a limited degree, a number of Spiritual Disciplines.

Can we scientifically document these observations? No. Not yet. We have, however, introduced to our consultants a testing instrument (see “DSP®” on page 135) that measures stress levels driven by high scores of mediator scales (personality characteristics associated with high stress) that reveal a *self-driven need to accomplish, exaggerated self-importance, an inability to be aware of and sensitive to one's environment, and a lack of trust in others*. Additionally, these high scores describe a *tendency to judge self and others by material and observable accomplishments*. These are traits (or sub-traits) that are the antithesis of the spiritually-formed person. Over time we intend to do pretesting and post-testing with this highly regarded assessment tool and see if we can document changes that appear to be occurring in people who practice our “Six Spiritual Disciplines” in the *ABCs of Stress™* program (see page 135.)

Recent studies support the assumption that we retain the capacity to change throughout adult life due to the ongoing

neural plasticity of the adult brain. The results of such structural changes in the adult brain include:

1. A reduction in the density and volume of cortical gray matter (fewer neurons) that allow the adult brain to be more focused, specific and efficient;
2. Subcortical volume loss is much less pronounced during aging, meaning less dependent on environmental factors and show less variability;
3. White matter changes that increase in volume until midlife that allows continuing organization and connection of neural systems until 40-50 years of age¹.

Those studying the impact of the environment on the brain report that as much as 50% of the brain is formed by the environment, and that its lifelong process of interaction with the outside world gives it the capacity to change and adapt. To quote Daniel Siegel,

*The brain becomes literally constructed through interactions with others. . . Our neural machinery. . . is. . . designed to be altered by relationship experiences.*²

Yes, indeed, I do believe that we are changed by the Presence. We are changed by those disciplines that lead us to God's Presence. For example, I do not believe one can emerge from Contemplative Prayer and maintain the practice of judging others. Experiencing God's Presence purges self-righteousness and replaces it with humility and

**Jesus: "What is impossible with men is possible with God."
Matthew 18:27**

gratitude for every aspect of life and compassion for God's created ones. It is as though God has peeled off layer after layer of self-pride and arrogance. What is left is a threadbare soul who sees itself as the undeserving recipient of the gracious God who

wants to invite everyone to the party. You emerge from the contemplative experience of God's Presence with a transformed set of eyes, ears and hands.

The Contemplative Prayer is a state of union with God. The contemplative life is prayer in action.

I recall on one occasion emerging from Contemplative Prayer and wanting to stop cars in the street and yell out loud, "People! Stop and take notice. You're are not alone. God wants so much more for you than this rat race you are living!" Then I realized it would have no more meaning for them than if I were selling papers curbside.

Contemplative Prayer living enables us to see the insanity of our lives and culture—the stresses of our lives that have us in a headlock grip, draining our resources, squandering our potential as we elbow ourselves through life with no awareness of the abyss into which we are headed.

Every disciple of Jesus knows we are to love, even the unlovely. And, the effects of *being* loved are truly life-changing. But loving's most powerful impact is upon the giver of love. I am amazed that when I love you it changes me. It increases both my joy and capacity for loving others. Loving presents me with the rare opportunity of being an agent of God's love and of being changed in the process.

Love has never been more passionately expressed than in the words of Jesus in his prayer for his disciples recorded by his beloved John (John 17:6-26). You will recall that Judas was across the Kidron valley waiting in the shadows with a band of soldiers and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees. As the sun was setting over the horizon a confrontation awaited Jesus and his disciples.

It was somewhere between four and six decades later that John sat down to record what has often been referred to as

Christ's intercessory prayer. This is the same John who *almost* witnessed the powerfully moving prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, along with Peter and James. Three times Jesus had returned to the trio and found them sleeping, with no clue to what was going on.

Later at the foot of the cross, Jesus will assign to John the care of his mother. But in this final moment before his betrayal and arrest, Jesus pours out his heart to his Father. This time John is wide awake as Jesus pleads with his Father to keep his disciples in his care, to protect them, to bring them together as one, even as he and his Father were one. Jesus concludes his prayer asking that the kind of love the Father has for him will be in his disciples, and that they may know the Presence of Jesus as they take on his mission in the world.

I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. John 17:26

Jesus knew that no lesser love would empower them to serve spontaneously the needs they would encounter. No lesser love would sensitize them to the call of the Father in the eyes of the neglected, the forgotten, the abused, the burned out, the hardened and even the religious seeking God's Presence.

And, just in case you missed it, this was not just a prayer for the disciples gathered around him that day. It is a prayer for you and me. Listen to his words recorded some two thousand years ago and hear for yourself:

I do not pray for these [the disciples] only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

Did not Jesus pray that even as God the Father and Jesus are one, you and I will experience their Presence? It is only in this Presence we find anything worthy of giving, and it is in this Presence that God's love is lived out through us one moment at a time.

During the time I served as an adjunct professor at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, I ended my final class of the semester with the words of the anthem, "Here I Am, Lord" by Daniel L. Schutte. I would read the stanzas and have the students respond with the refrain. I believe the message (next page) captures how our time with God elicits the words of its refrain.

Finally, it is Service that is available to and through the "interruptions" of our daily lives. It is Service that becomes a lifestyle of awareness and response to the voice of God in the most unlikely people and places. Each of the "Six Spiritual Disciplines" we have discussed are woven together into one tapestry of intimacy with God and response to his Presence:

Simplicity is profundity disguised.

Silence, the venue for listening.

Solitude, God's gift of himself.

Surrender, the essence of faith.

Sensitivity, a lifestyle of awareness.

Service, the application.

“Here Am I, Lord”

by Daniel Schutte

I, the Lord of the sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?

***Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.***

I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them. They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone,
I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?

***Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.***

I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them. My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide 'till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life for them. Whom shall I send?

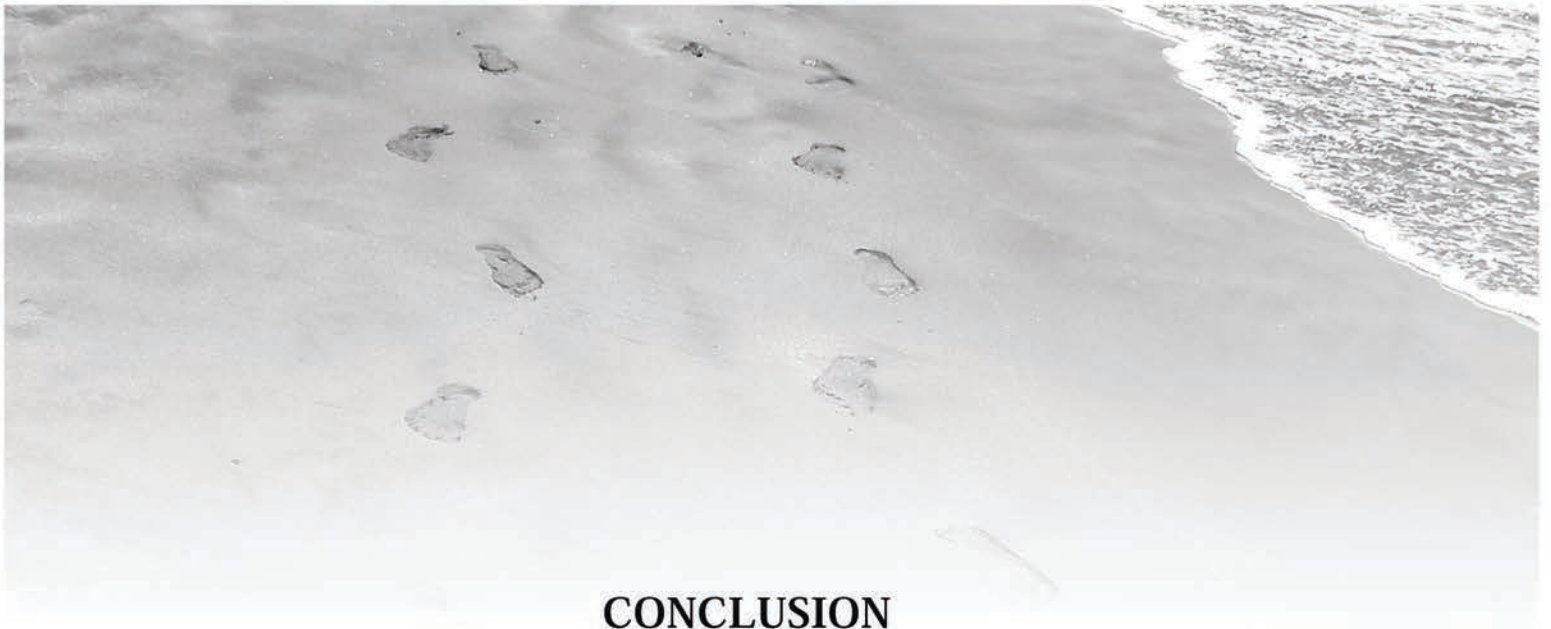
***Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.****

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Application

1. What is the difference in good service rendered as a part of career responsibilities or in response to some specific need expressed by your church or others, and Service as spiritual discipline we are describing here?
2. Where are you on this journey to be God's Presence to others in the course of your daily living?
3. Having studied "Six Spiritual Disciplines", why do you think we have listed Service in last place?

4. Identify a time in your life when you were sensitized to your environment and found yourself being an agent of God's love in Service to others. What feelings do you experience as you recall this experience?
5. What did you learn about yourself? About being God's Presence to others?
6. What resources do you need to support you in your quest to be the Presence of God in Service to others?



CONCLUSION

Much is said and written about the “Fall of Man” represented in Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience to God and the grand entrance of sin into the garden of the world. I struggle with this concept in light of the innate goodness within people even in the absence of a proclaimed faith in God—that is until I’m exposed to the innate evil that emerges unannounced within the depths of so-called good and bad people.

I believe that God invested a part of himself in each person; “Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26). I do believe also that we are incomplete, merely possessing the potential of God’s likeness, until we surrender ourselves to him in faith. Like a rocket ship designed to soar through space but sitting indefinitely in storage, until the risk of liftoff it remains a museum piece, a mere shadow of its design. Faith provides liftoff to the space journey towards God.

One cannot reason oneself into belief in God or close all the gaps between the physical and the spiritual world. We must exercise faith *first* in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Once en route by faith, another dimension begins to unfold and continues to evolve in the intimacy of this relationship with God. It is a gross *under*-description to call this merely a *new* dimension of life. It becomes for the believer who seeks and practices a life of faith, the foundation for *all* of life’s choices. Herein lies a paradigm shift so profound that Jesus chose stories and symbols to allow God’s Presence to be heard by those hungering for something more, as were Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman.

I believe that God created us with a part of himself invested in each of us (the process is unimportant though interesting.) By God’s initiative and our response of faith,

we uncover God's Presence within us that otherwise lies dormant. I believe that the power to respond to God's initiative lies *within* us—that God may and does use people and anything else (nature) to provide a pathway to this “reunion.” This leap of faith is our liftoff followed by a lifetime of midcourse responses to God's initiative. And like space travel, we will never run out of frontiers. A final discovery will never come. The greater the exercise of faith and the intimacy that evolves, the greater the understanding of God and the greater the mystery. The spiritual formation of our lives defines our purpose in this world and is foundational to our health and growth, psychologically, physically and relationally.

A focus of my quiet time for the past three years has been Psalm 23. Like much of holy scripture its depth is inexhaustible. David knew something about God's Presence. I offer it to you as I presented it at the memorial service of my best friend and brother-in-law, Dr. Leroy Yarbrough, at the First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio, January 3, 2009.

As Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1952 through his death in Africa in 1961, once said, “Explosive power lies not in the flame, nor the oil, but in their meeting.”¹ The power of the 23rd Psalm lies not in the words or language of the text but in your openness, your readiness to allow God's Presence to breathe into these words what you need in the very moment of your reading. That is exactly what I hope you will do today as you read this Psalm of Comfort first in the classic words of King James Elizabethan English and then in a paraphrase I have written.

Psalm 23 (KJV)

1. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
2. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*
3. *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*
4. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*
5. *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*
6. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Psalm 23 (McGee Paraphrase)

1. *When my shepherd is the God of creation I lack absolutely nothing and will never be without resources.*
2. *Because of his love for me he insists that I rest quietly in green pastures and safely beside still waters*
3. *In order that he may restore my soul. He even guides my thoughts so that my actions will reflect his nature and his character.*

Note that at this point the psalmist moves from speaking *about* this Shepherd to speaking *to* Him. The psalmist continues:

4. *And as I walk through the dark valley of grief, it is You who take away all of my fears. And just as the shepherd comforts his sheep with his rod and staff, You place resources all around me that I may feel the security of your shepherding presence.*
5. *Just as certainly as there will be those around me who wish me no good, much like the gracious host at a banquet dinner You will honor me in their very presence—so much so that my cup will overflow with joy.*
6. *Just as surely as You have promised that goodness and mercy will shadow me every day of my life, You will empower me to be the instrument of goodness and mercy to others. You have promised that upon my departure from this life You will welcome me with open arms into Your eternal family of faith where, among my loved ones gone before, I will live with You forever.*

NOTES

NOTES

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² Ringma, Charles. *Dare to Journey with Henri Nouwen*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press, 2000).

³ Ringma, "Reflection 105".

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⁸ These materials have been developed into *Stress Assessment Guide* by Dan McGee, Ph.D., which incorporates "McGee's ABC Stress Assessment" and "ABCs of Stress™ Model". The workshop *Choosing Balance: The ABCs of Stress™ Management* is available to the public and as a certification course for counselors, trainers, consultants and lay leaders. See page 135 for more information.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

The Desert Fathers

The Desert Fathers originally were made up of hermits, ascetics and monks who lived primarily in the Scetes Desert of Egypt in the third century. Actually, they were what many consider as the first Christian hermits who abandoned the cities of the pagan world to live in desert solitude. They believed that the Roman Empire had become so decadent that even when in 313 Christianity was made legal, they remained convinced that the desert was best suited for spiritual discipline. Their desire was to follow the examples of Jesus, fasting in the desert, and his cousin John the Baptist who himself was a desert hermit.

As their desert lifestyle of discipline continued into the fourth century, they began to be known for their holiness and wisdom. Eventually, organized patterns and rituals evolved as the community grew. In time, monasticism produced some of Christianity's most revered leaders, such as John Cassian and Augustine of Hippo.

Three major beliefs held by the Desert Fathers and Mothers* were:

- There is no such thing as a “Christian” state. Even though by the fourth century their emperor was officially a Christian and the cross had become a symbol of the state, they did not believe the way to produce a Christian society was through the state's power. Change came through love and purity of the heart.
- They insisted on the primacy of love over everything else—that without love even the spiritual exercises have no meaning. Love was interpreted as spiritual identification with one's brother, treating everyone as they would treat themselves. They believed that love was born of death to their own desires, their own being.
- If there was a single principle of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, it was that God's authority was above all else in life. Spirituality started with a break from the world, a death to one's attachment to the world's values, best accomplished through solitude, labor, poverty, fasting, charity and prayer. With this purging came awareness of one's secret self and its merging with Christ into one spirit. They believed that this spiritual purging enabled one to see clearly the reality of the world vs. the inner self anchored in God.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Fathers

*The Desert Fathers included many Desert Mothers. Indeed, early church histories regularly made mention of women dwelling in the desert, having forsaken the cities for the solitude in or near monastic communities. One early source, Palladius, estimated that women outnumbered the men two to one. From *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*, by Laura Swan (© 2001 by Paulist Press).

APPENDIX B

Building Your Personal Mission Statement

To build your personal mission statement, you need a little imagination and a lot of hope. It is taking the essence of who you *are* and expanding it into *becoming*. Forget restrictions and “see” beyond the horizon. “Who” did God create you to be?

Sometimes I ask clients to develop an extravagant metaphor to get them out of a mental rut, to move them beyond the current place. Awareness (sensitivity) helps them to write it. It might describe how they relate to those around them using words from nature:

“I am a giant waterfall misting tropical plants with light moisture and at the same time flooding the fields with rivers. While I can lead gently, I can also command firmly. Appropriateness is my creed, flexibility my method.”

This extravagant metaphor reveals the influence (responsibility as a leader) this person has along with their sensitivity to their surroundings. It also shows something about their character and values: responding appropriately according to the people and conditions around them.

To develop your own mission statement, you could start with an extravagant metaphor. Also, reflect on these:

- What unique gift or special attribute do I have that benefits those around me? (encouraging the underdog, going first and lighting the path, helping people to see their potential...)
- What passionately drives me? (injustice, watercoloring, children...)
- How do I operate? (energetically, methodically, emotionally...)
- What are my driving values? (integrity, honesty, trust...)
- What is important to me? (career, relationships, adventures...)

You may read inspirational texts and research famous people to give you a sense of what you might include. It may also be helpful to study mission statements of companies. Other activities that would be beneficial include identifying your values, taking a motivational/personality assessment such as The Birkman® Method* and working with a life coach.

The *process* of developing a personal mission statement is as important as its conclusion. The art of self-discovery combined with the rhythm of God's Presence blend into a whole. Re-evaluate your statement periodically and realign yourself with it regularly.

It is unlikely you can create a personal mission statement quickly that satisfies you. Let this process be a months-long process of discovering who you are and where the path leads you. Study, evaluate, learn, unlearn, relearn...this is life.

by Annette A. Miller, www.lifesync.com

*The Birkman Method® is a motivational self-assessment that identifies your strength behavior, stress behavior and motivational needs behavior. For groups, organizations and individuals, it is used in professional development, executive coaching, career development, ministry leadership, conflict resolution, marriage counseling, personal effectiveness and more. For additional information, email info@danmcgeeassociates.com.

APPENDIX C

Dr. Herbert Benson/Relaxation Response

I met Harvard cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson at a weeklong seminar entitled “Advances in Behavioral Medicine” in Boston in 1989. It was a gathering of specialists and researchers active in the study of “mind/body” issues. I had completed my research project at Texas Woman’s University designed to measure the impact of cognitive-behavioral intervention among stress-prone individuals. The findings had been far more important than I could have imagined.

Most of us were there to learn what Harvard University Medical School and its affiliated hospitals were finding in their use of Dr. Benson’s broadly acclaimed “Relaxation Response” (RR), a method of counteracting the harmful effects of stress. I was surprised to have ample opportunity to visit with him one-on-one and learn of his interests in the potential effects of prayer when used in conjunction with RR, and further surprised to learn of his interest in the cognitive-behavioral treatment approach I had used in reducing certain dimensions of stress in stress-prone patients. On the final day of the seminar I was able to present my research findings to the group and respond to questions.

Among other responses, Dr. Benson recommended that I experiment with RR just prior to the cognitive-behavioral techniques used with my hospital patients to measure the difference in their progress with and without RR. After the session I discussed the implications of this option with him and he invited me to return, regardless of the results, and share my findings with medical staff members working in the Harvard-affiliated hospitals. I’ve regretted in the years since then that my schedule never allowed that to happen, but my clinical observations left no doubt in the efficacy of his recommendation.

In the years since, I have used RR with hospital and outpatient individuals, my undergraduate and graduate psychology students, and even in marriage enrichment retreat settings across the country. When I became involved in what seminarians call “spiritual formation,” I discovered the writings of Thomas Keating and his approach to what he calls “Centering Prayer” (CP). In the use of CP I discovered the almost identical process Benson had found so powerful in reducing stress, but with the even more powerful addition of prayer. It was then I remembered Benson’s recommendations to people of faith interested in RR: that they use a prayer or a phrase that has particular

spiritual meaning to them in place of the “mental device” (a neutral word or phrase) used in RR. You will find more of his findings about prayer in the book that followed *The Relaxation Response, Beyond The Relaxation Response* (1984).

APPENDIX D

Summary and Adaptation of Centering Prayer

Before proceeding, let's review the difference in *Contemplative Prayer* and *Centering Prayer*.

Contemplative Prayer:

...the development of one's relationship with Christ to the point of communing beyond words, thoughts, feelings, and the multiplication of particular acts;" Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, p. 146

...is a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union.
Keating, pg. 4.

Remember that Contemplative Prayer is not "a prayer expressed in words in a given time frame." It is an ongoing dialogue with God that goes beyond mere words. In my perspective, Contemplative Prayer is experiencing God's Presence ultimately in a lifestyle of consciousness of God, intimacy with God. One that enables us to see our world through the eyes of Jesus and respond in Jesus-fashion. Living God's Presence leads to actions that are often countercultural, and not necessarily in one's own best interest at the moment. It is reflected in the spirit of the martyrs who did not need to give lengthy thought or consideration when given the option of allegiance to another or death. To paraphrase Dallas Willard, the Kingdom of God was their reality.

Centering Prayer:

...is a method. . . to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift.

During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else. Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, p. 139.

Centering Prayer is a method, a technique for elicitation of readiness on the part of the one seeking to consent to God's Presence and action within. In a word, it is getting oneself ready to experience God's Presence by blocking out distractions and focusing on a word or phrase that symbolizes one's willingness to experience God and surrender to his initiative.

How does Centering Prayer differ from the Relaxation Response?

As a cardiologist, Dr. Benson's research was designed to extract from the meditations of various religions the *process* used to elicit a physical state of relaxation accompanied by lowering of the heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and muscle tension. Thomas Keating and others, including myself, believe that the existential questions of the meaning and purpose of life underlie all other issues human beings face. I believe there has to be more to life than relaxation and feeling physical relief from stress. Note that this comes from a researcher in the field of stress and creator of a model for reducing stress. It also comes from one who has used the Relaxation Response individually and in college classrooms, retreat settings and other groups for some twenty-five years. Before I knew the term Contemplative Prayer, I sought God's Presence in my life. Before I had heard of Centering Prayer, I was using the Relaxation Response to "center" myself in preparation for listening and responding to what I believe to be God's grace-filled guidance of my life.

I believe we have the option of gaining benefit from both techniques. It is my hope that one using the Relaxation Response will experience the One who *designed* the parasympathetic nervous system as a pathway, not only to stress reduction, but to a life of intimacy with the very same Designer. The same One who gives meaning to our lives through a life of faith. It is likewise my hope that believers will not be threatened by a process built into the body by the very same Designer, but will enjoy the health benefits that may add years to their lives and enrichment beyond measure.

What do Contemplative Prayer and Centering Prayer have in common?

1. Both advise sitting quietly in a comfortable position
2. Both recommend closing your eyes
3. Both recommend the use of a word or phrase as your focus
4. Both encourage a minimum time to experience the event
5. Both encourage returning to chosen word or phrase when distracting thoughts occur
6. Both encourage remaining still for a few minutes afterwards
7. Both discourage the exercise following meals
8. Both recommend using the exercise two periods a day
9. Both indicate that the effects of the exercise have residual or accumulative value over time
10. Both discourage analyzing the experience during the event, having certain expectations or attempting specific goals

Preparation for Adapted Centering Prayer (ACP)

Before beginning the ACP discipline, determine why you are doing this. I would encourage you to have *no* expectations at all; no ideas of any sort of supernatural or mystical experience, just that you are opening yourself to experience whatever God has for you today. ACP is about readiness, openness, awareness of God's Presence and whatever implications that may have specifically for you. No one can tell you what that is or is not. This is a unique experience between you and God, if you are open to it. There may be no emotion or there may be a great deal of it. Whatever you do or don't feel is not a measure of its effectiveness in the long run. This is a discipline, not a onetime shot at God, or God's onetime shot at you.

1. **Choose a sacred word.** It can be any word that has a deeply spiritual meaning for you. I started out using RR with the word, "one," which was recommend by Dr. Benson due to its neutrality of meaning. It was not neutral to me, however. I capitalized it and made it my own. From our Lord's "intercessory prayer," (John 17) he prayed passionately for his disciples and even for us today [bold type mine]:

Verse 11: *Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be **one**, even as we are **one**.*

Verse 20: *I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be **one**; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me.*

Verses 22-23: *The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be **one** even as we are **one**, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly **one**, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou has loved me.*

Verse 26: *I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. ["one" implied strongly]*

Over the years I have chosen other words and phrases such as, "I love you, Lord." or "Thank you, Lord." But, I find myself going back to "One" because of the meaning it has brought to the experience and the memorable associations I've had with its use in when I felt "One" with God and my brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. **Choose a quiet place and specific time.** Allow twenty minutes for the exercise. As you become more proficient you will be able to take

ten-minute breaks and still gain benefit from it. Practice it twice a day for two weeks before you draw any conclusions as to its effectiveness for you. Make it your place and time for spiritual formation. Phones deactivated, computers silenced, pagers off, doors closed, others trained to respect that space and time frame. Be persistent and consistent that you will dedicate this time to be open to God's Presence. Set no alarms, but use, if necessary, a clock or watch you can check briefly.

3. **Choose a comfortable position and close your eyes.** For most people this requires sitting with feet flat on the floor, hands resting in lap and back comfortably straight. If you have on tight fitting clothes you may want to loosen them or choose something else to wear.
4. **Practice progressive muscle relaxation.** Start with your toes and work through all muscles, including head and facial muscles. Focus on each muscle group letting go of the tightness and sometimes even tightening those muscles and releasing them so that you can feel the process of relaxation better. Visualize a warm wave of relaxation moving over your body as you move toes to head, releasing the tension from your body.
5. **Practice centering breathing.** Begin to inhale, drawing the breath through your nostrils, down deep in to the center of your body. Feel the coolness of the air as it passes through your nostrils deep into your body. Make the breaths long and deep, counting to four slowly as you inhale and beginning to notice how warm the air is as it leaves your body. Imagine the oxygen you are drawing into your body filled with life-giving and healing powers as it permeates your entire body, repairing it and enriching its organs. As you exhale, imagine all the harmful toxins leaving your body and being replaced with healing and life-giving oxygen as you breathe in. Thank God for your amazing body and the gift of life.
6. **Begin using your sacred word silently as you exhale.** Continue to count to four as you inhale until you no longer need the counting to extend your inhaling sufficiently. As you exhale through your nose silently repeat the sacred word. As you continue this process your mind will be inclined to wander off, chasing all kinds of thoughts. No problem. Just let them pass through your mind and return to the word, repeating it each time as you exhale. If you continue to bring your focus back to the word (while exhaling), then try following the air as it passes through your nostrils deep into your body. Mentally traveling with the air in and out as you repeat your sacred word (while exhaling) will, most of the time, elicit a state of rest equal to many hours of sleep, although you are awake.

This condition, sometimes referred to as the “alpha” state, creates a capacity for awareness (sometimes called “mindfulness”) that enables you to listen, to “hear” at a level you may never have imagined. But it is beyond the limitations of the senses. It is here that you may experience God’s Presence and either be aware of it or recognize it in the hours and days to follow. One thing is for certain. The accumulative effect of this discipline over weeks and months will do two things: First, the positive effect on your health is a given, backed up by years of research. Second, in the experience of the Christian seeking intimacy with God, there is a very good possibility that you will experience something that will over time change the way you see yourself and the world. My own story is that I doubt I would still be alive without this discipline. I consider it a gift of God through which he has enabled me to see myself, God and others through a different set of lenses.

7. **Rest in God’s Presence.** It has taken me many decades to bring myself to write about what contemplatives have described as resting in God. Why? Because I am a novice, and always will be learning. Oh yes, this approach to prayer will impact what you do professionally, but you cannot go into it with a “continuing education” mindset. Just drink it in. Enjoy being “One” with God. Celebrate in your private moments what it’s like to go inward to find God and outward to share him. This time with God will open your mind to passages of scripture you have read a thousand times and never imagined the deeper messages specifically for you. You will see people differently, even those you can’t stand. This time with God will make you painfully aware of how big your sins really are and how painful it is for God when you judge others so harshly.

I would recommend using the above copy as you begin learning to use this Adapted Centering Prayer (ACP) discipline. As you use it again and again, it will become a part of your memory and you will need no guidelines at all. You may see this discipline as nothing more than a relaxation or stress reducing exercise. It is up to you to apply these guidelines to your own spiritual formation. If you are not seeking to know God more intimately, there is no mechanism that will help you. But the core of this discipline has been a part of the Christian experience for many centuries, and Dr. Benson’s research into the essential ingredients of this type of meditative practice has authenticated its value in reducing stress and producing many other positives results on our health and well-being in a stress-prone world.

APPENDIX E

Dr. Shane Kinnison serves as Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Waxahachie, Texas, a part of the sprawling Dallas–Fort Worth Metroplex. For two years he served as the retreat pastor for a series of four three-day Spiritual Formation Leadership Retreats sponsored by the Congregational Leadership Team of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a convention of some 5,600 Texas congregations.

Although I had been a learning participant in spiritual formation for most of my adult life, it was not until this series of retreats that I began to see the potential of incorporating these ancient practices of the early Christians into the life of 21st Century Protestant, evangelical, or free church congregations. I am grateful to Dr. Kinnison for his permission to reprint a portion of his Spiritual Formation Guidebook related to our understanding of “Sacred Reading”, known to these early believers as “lectio divina.”

– Dan McGee

Lectio Divina (Divine Reading)

What Is Sacred Reading?

Sacred reading, or divine reading (historically known as Lectio Divina), is an experiential hearing of the Word of God. It is hearing through spiritual listening. It is listening to God who is present in his Word so that the Word is the Divine Presence of God. It is a two-way communication between God and you in such a way that God gets to speak first.

– M. Basil Pennington

Sacred reading is the most historical way of cultivating a spiritual friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the God of scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and he was suggesting the topics of conversation. Our encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of love and trust. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing, which has come to be called throughout Christian history as “resting in God.”

– Thomas Keating

Sacred reading is not seeking ideas, concepts, insights or motivational graces; it is seeking God himself and nothing less than God. It is an interactive listening that says, "Speak, Lord, your servant wants to hear." It is a listening in which God gets to speak the first word and that word expands our listening. Therefore, sacred reading becomes prayer at a deep experiential level through spiritual listening.

– M. Basil Pennington

He who speaks is God, in His infinite power able to enter into us. He is man, one with us. He is the Crucified One, who won a perfect righteousness and a divine life for us through His death. He is the glorified One, who from the throne gives His Spirit to make His presence real and true. He speaks – oh, listen, not to His words only, but to Himself, as He whispers secretly day by day: "I am the true Vine! All that the Vine can ever be to its branch, I will be to you."

– Andrew Murray

A Brief History of Lectio Divina

The origins of the *lectio divina* go back to St. Benedict, the father of Western monasticism. Benedict of Nursia lived in Italy in the fifth century. Having tried to live the ascetic life as a hermit, Benedict was invited to become the abbot of a group of monks who lived at Monte Cassino. His own experience convinced Benedict that spiritual formation worked best in a community with a balanced rule of life. The key to St. Benedict's rule, in fact, was balance. This balance consisted of each member manually working to support the community and themselves while maintaining both corporate and personal worship. St. Benedict was concerned that each member of the community earn his bread through manual labor. Even the old and ill were expected to be engaged in some kind of work. At the same time, St. Benedict prescribed that labor be balanced with both corporate worship and personal, prayerful reading of scripture, or *lectio divina*. His rule was not ascetic but just a healthy way for the servants of God to live. Benedictine spirituality values both mind and heart equally. Worship is the center of the life of the community.

“Rule 48” from the *Rule of St. Benedict* states:

Idleness is the enemy of the community; members should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.

What St. Benedict meant by prayerful reading, *lectio divina*, was the reading of scripture in a spirit of careful attention, expecting that God would speak to one through God's word. Sometimes the monks read the scripture aloud to involve more of themselves in the process. The monks were to read a brief passage of scripture and then listen for God to speak some word to them personally. Once they heard God's reply, they would make a response to God's word with a verbal prayer of commitment or thanksgiving, allowing the message given from the word to sink deep into their hearts.

In the Middle Ages, a Carthusian monk, Guigo II, finally labeled the steps in the *lectio divina* as follows:

- A. Reading: Actually listening to the word of God.
- B. Meditating on the word heard until a specific word is given to you.
- C. Praying: Responding aloud to God in gratitude for the spoken word.
- D. Contemplating: Allowing the word to sink down inside – sitting quietly with the word until it becomes a part of you.¹

¹ Talbert, Betty. *Lectio Divina*. Spiritual Formation Laboratory. Waco, TX: George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

What Is Lectio Divina?

- A. The translation of the word *lectio* literally means “reading”.
- B. *Lectio divina* is an experiential hearing of the Word of God. It is hearing in the context of a certain listening. *Lectio divina* is listening to a Person present. God lives in his Word. The Word is a Divine Presence.²
- C. *Lectio divina* is an actual experiential meeting with God in and through the inspired Word. And it is the Holy Spirit, who inspired these texts and who dwells in us to teach us all things, bringing to mind all that Jesus taught us, on whom we depend to bring the experience about.³
- D. *Lectio divina* is the gateway to the spiritual journey and to that particular spiritual practice which we today call centering prayer. The spiritual journey then begins with listening, hearing the invitation, and letting it have the space in us that it needs to call forth from us a total, transforming response.⁴

The Ingredients of Lectio Divina

- A. To refer to “*lectio*” is actually to imply a whole process or way of spirituality – a journey into God, deep into the inner life of the Trinity. “*Lectio*” implies the whole process of *lectio – meditation – oratio – contemplation*; or, *lection – meditation – oration – contemplation*.⁵
- B. *Lectio*, or *lection*, is the practice that involves reading the scripture in order to listen to it.⁶ Reading the scripture in order to listen to it is the first element of *lectio divina* so that we will gather the sacred text and pluck the word that we will use all day to remember God’s message to us.⁷
- C. *Meditatio*, or meditation, is the reflective aspect of *lectio divina* in which we ponder the words of the sacred text. In the practice of meditation, the word is received not only mentally but also affectively, expanding the listening that we are doing, opening us to allow the fullness of Reality to come in, to see things as God sees

² Pennington, M. Basil. *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998) 4.

³ Reininger, Gustave, ed. *Centering Prayer: In Daily Life and Ministry* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998) 22.

⁴ Reininger 25.

⁵ Pennington 57.

⁶ Keating, Thomas. *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum international Publishing Group, 1986) 20

⁷ Pennington 59.

them, forming in us the mind of Christ. Meditation is both a receptive process whereby we allow the word to break open and reform us and an active process whereby we assimilate the word received throughout the processes of the day.⁸

- D. *Oratio*, or oration, is the spontaneous movement of the will as our response to the reflections, or the meditation, on the scriptures. Oration is an affective prayer of thanksgiving, praise, petition, repentance and adoration which is our response to God.⁹
- E. *Contemplatio*, or contemplation, is the state of resting in the presence of God as we express our love of *being with* God. In the word “contemplation” the suffix “-tion” means “an abiding state”. The prefix “con” means “with – communion, union with”. The root “*templa*” was the segment of the heavens that the pagan priests of ancient Rome used to watch; by observing the flight of birds through the *templa*, they came to know the will of the gods. In time, “*the templa*” became “*templum*”, or the “temple”, the place one went to know the will of the gods and to worship them.¹⁰ Thus, contemplation means the state of abiding in communion with God by resting in his presence and consenting to him.

The Cooperative Relationship of Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer in Contemplation

Lectio divina is a comprehensive method of communing with God that begins with the reading of a scripture passage. Reflecting on the text moves easily into spontaneous prayer, and, finally, into resting in the presence of God. Centering prayer is a way of moving from the first three phases of *lectio divina* to the final one of resting in God.¹¹

Lectio divina leads us to the place where we let everything else go and just sit quietly in centering prayer¹², consenting to the presence of God.

⁸ Pennington 61.

⁹ Keating 21.

¹⁰ Pennington 65-66.

¹¹ Keating 29-30.

¹² Pennington 66.

Silence

Silence is a central element of the Christian tradition, including the ancient Hebrews of the Old Covenant, the life and ministry of Jesus and the ancient Church. The practice of silence has remained strong throughout the history of the Church in both the Eastern and Western traditions of the faith.

The first step in deepening your relationship with God is learning to be alone and quiet. This is the beginning of silence.

As you begin to exercise silence, you learn to still the onslaught of activity in your mind and body so that you start to consent to the presence of God in your life. Silence is the way that you begin to shut out the invading noises from both the outside world and the interior world, learning to come to a halt outwardly and inwardly at the same time.

As you begin to exercise silence, you may be overwhelmed by how “unsilent” your mind and body are. It is important that you do not scold yourself into being silent, but be very gentle with yourself. In your gentleness, you begin to recognize that silence is not about you, it is about God in you. Also, do not give up on silence and abandon it in frustration because your mind is being bombarded by thoughts. Simply and gently attune your attention to the presence of God that is in you.

– Morton T. Kelsey

A Christian often feels the need of solitude, which for him [or her] is a vital necessity – sometimes like breathing, at other times like sleeping. The fact that he [or she] feels this vital necessity more than other men [or women] is also a sign that there is spirit in a man [or woman] after all, and it is a measure for what spirit there is.

– Soren Kierkegaard

Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity.

– Thomas Carlyle

Aids in the Practice of Silence

TIME – Making time to practice silence is essential to the journey of your spiritual quest. Develop stopping times throughout your day when you can “Stop – Look – Listen” in your spiritual journey. These stopping times need to come from your prime time so that some of the best parts of your day are given to reflection and openness to God.

A QUIET PLACE – Create a space where outer disruptions can be shut out, where bright lights do not break in, and where something is allowed to happen deep in your soul. It is important as you begin to learn silence that you create a space in which you eliminate practically all outer sensations.

BREATHING – Breathing is the function of your body that is most sensitive to your inner state. The practice of deep breathing from the diaphragm is effective in quieting both mind and body as it enriches the body with oxygen; thereby releasing muscular tension and diminishing stress.

FOCUS – You may find it beneficial to focus your attention on an object, a scene, a surrounding or a Bible verse while exercising silence. Any one of these options may allow you to focus your attention and re-collect your thoughts toward God.

PRAYER – You can use a simple, short prayer throughout the period of silence to focus your attention toward God. A most ancient Christian prayer is the Jesus Prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

JOURNAL – Keeping a spiritual journal will enable you to record any thoughts that bombard your mind so that you are set free from them in your period of silence. A spiritual journal will also enable you to record your personal reflections after you have completed your period of silence.

Guidelines for the Practice of Lectio Divina

Helpful guidelines for you to follow as you exercise the spiritual formation discipline of *lectio divina*. Follow these same guidelines each time you practice this discipline for the purpose of continuity.

- A. Create a space for spiritual formation that is quiet and private, with as few distractions as possible, i.e., telephones, pagers, televisions, computers, books and other things that remind you of your daily responsibilities. A simple table, a straight-backed chair and adequate lighting are important. A lighted candle and meditative music are helpful options if they are not distracting.
- B. Sit erect in the chair with both feet flat on the floor, allowing the chair to hold the full weight of your body.
- C. Place your hands on the tops of your legs, with your palms either facing up or down.
- D. Breathe deeply, relax, and rest in silence for a few moments, recognizing the presence of God in your life and that you are consenting to his presence during this time.
- E. Say a verbal or silent prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking for illumination during this period as you listen attentively to God speaking to you in the scripture.
- F. Read the assigned Bible passage for the period. Read it twice, pausing in moments of silence between the two readings. Read the passage out loud and slowly in order to enhance your intention to listen.
- G. Reflect out loud or in written form in your journal regarding what you are hearing God saying to you through the text as you are listening.
- H. Respond to God in spoken or written prayer regarding what you are hearing him say to you through your listening to the text. Express your thoughts and feelings openly to God.
- I. Take a “word” from God with you – a word, a phrase, or a verse of scripture – and use it throughout your day. You can write the “word” from God in your journal and expound in your journal about how this “word” relates to the situations of your day.
- J. Rest in God through the spiritual exercise of centering prayer that leads to contemplation.
- K. *Lectio divina* spiritual formation exercises are intended to last ten minutes or so, excluding the time you spend in centering prayer.

Example of Sacred Reading (Lectio Divina)

“⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Mark 1: 9 – 11 (NRSV)

Spiritual Journal Entry for Sacred Reading

Date:

Sacred Reading Bible Passage:

Most Meaningful Word or Phrase:

My Reflections and Responses Regarding the Word or Phrase:

[illegible]

RESOURCES

RESOURCES

Spiritual Formation

Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin have collected classic works of known and little known contributors to spiritual formation from across the centuries of Christian history. Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines was published in 2000 by Renovare, HarperSanFrancisco and is a frequent companion of mine as I travel. Both broad and deep, it represents a legacy of sojourners of the Christian faith.

—Dan McGee

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About the Author

Dr. Dan McGee is first and foremost a learner. Throughout his professional life as a writer and speaker he has remained a student of issues related to spirituality, psychology and leadership. He has served as a minister in many positions and settings, marriage and family therapist, CEO of three organizations, psychology professor, researcher in the fields of stress and leadership, and administrator of a network of mental health providers.

Dr. McGee holds degrees from Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Texas Woman's University, and completed two years of post graduate work at the University of Texas at Arlington. He has been recognized at the highest levels in behavioral medicine and stress research, medical psychotherapy, and clinical sexology. He has been married for over 50 years to his college sweetheart, Sandra, who co-authored a book with him on emotional and sexual intimacy. For many years they traveled together across America leading marriage enrichment seminars and retreats. The McGees are parents of two daughters and have eight grandchildren.

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—DR. CHARLIE MOORE, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist



Dan McGee, Ph.D., LMFT-Approved Supervisor and former psychology professor, is a published author and acknowledged leader in the fields of stress management and leader development. He has been a Birkman consultant for over 30 years and has consulted with business clients across the nation in leader identification and development. As an ordained minister, Dr. McGee has wide experience in providing and teaching pastoral care and led the leader research and product development program at the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Dr. McGee is the president of Dan McGee Associates, Inc. based in Arlington, Texas.

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