

2.

The Journey Begins:

First Steps into Spiritual
Formation





What does my life add up to?

Is there a larger purpose behind my existence?

Is there anything that ties the world together?

How am I connected to something or Someone larger than myself?

If I could do anything at all, I would

How should I understand my own longings for something deeper and more in life? I have a vague notion that something important lives inside me and longs to be expressed in the world, but I don't know how to give expression to it.

How can I make my life count?

Why am I unable to break destructive life-patterns that keep me tied to cycles of behavior leading to guilt, shame, and disconnection from others?

I suspect that these – or similar – questions live within each of us. They make statements about me and us and it (the world), statements about our desire for meaning and significance, statements about our longing to be connected to one another, to the world, and to something or Someone numinous.

When we were young, people asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up. We had grand dreams of doing something significant. We were firemen and ballerinas in waiting, doctors and nurses yet to be, famous ball players in training, even aspiring Presidents and world leaders! In some way, we wanted to make a difference. We wanted to leave a mark.

As adolescents the dream shifted, but lived on nonetheless, as we made plans for career and adult life. We considered the training we would need, perhaps the education required to pursue our dreams. High school and college commencement addresses are full of dreams and visions of bright, glorious futures.

Somewhere along the way, dreams fade. The desire to make a difference gives way to earning a paycheck, succeeding at work, making a name for oneself, and comparing one's life to the person next door.

I have two adult children. I told each of them, at their college graduation ceremonies, "Life is about to get real serious, real fast." It was my "dad-way" of splashing cold water in their faces. I didn't intend to smash their dreams, but I did want to trump the utopian commencement address they had just heard.

I hope my ill-advised counsel didn't scar them too badly. Both live creative and zestful lives, so perhaps I didn't do permanent harm by throwing them a badly timed reality check.

That's how life is. Always, there seems to be someone at the door, knocking for our attention, telling us to get serious, drop our dreams, and "live in the real world." Adult life seems more about survival than living.

Even so, some questions we cannot skirt forever. Some things are written into the very fabric of our being, indelibly imprinted on us so that no matter how far we get from our original intention and design, we can never outrun them. They are upon us and within us, a part of our landscape. These are the questions of meaning, questions about our design, about our connectedness to what is most Real in life.

Most of us don't come back to these basic, foundational questions until pushed into them. We may have held the dreams close for years as children, adolescents, or even into young adulthood, but we let them slide in favor of more pressing demands, more immediate concerns. So we make our way at work, we invest ourselves in a paycheck, we give ourselves to doing what needs to be done. We can do those things, even those good things, for a long, long time and never ask the deeper questions about meaning and purpose and significance.

The deeper questions usually resurface when life happens unexpectedly, when it slams you in the face.

Someone close to you dies.

The doctor looks at you and says, "Cancer."

Your supervisor hands you a slip that says, "Downsizing."

Your spouse of three decades walks away.

A fire destroys everything you own.

You are "asked" to retire early.

You get to mid-life, look around vacantly, and ask, "Is this all there is?"

Generally, in the painful darkness we are invited back to the core questions, the foundational questions. We come back to questions of meaning and significance and purpose. We wonder aloud, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing?" We ponder what is most central to existence, to *our* existence, and to the existence we share together.

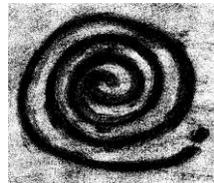
Poet Mary Oliver frames the question this way:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life? ⁱ

I think of these life-events as border experiences, because through them we are ushered to the edge of life, pushed to our very limits. They provide us with the perspective we had lost. We *will* die at some point, and it will likely be “too soon.” When we finally come face to face with our human limitations, we are ready to acknowledge that we do have only *one* life; therefore, the *one* life we have must be *wild and precious*.

Spirituality is about these questions we ask of life's essence. As we explore the shape of our God-given lives and open ourselves to the unknown future, we find ourselves molded in new ways. We notice ourselves once again yearning for the kind of passion, meaning and significance we thought had passed us already. We begin to discover the shape of our own soul. We become familiar with our deepest passions, and give expression to the long-pent-up soulfulness that resides within us.

Perhaps most of all, we discover ourselves deeply and intimately connected to God, more compassionate toward ourselves, generous with others, and respectful of the created world.



Ongoing Formation: The Work that Never Ends

Spirituality and spiritual formation are not specialty corners of Christianity. They are not religious niches for introverts or ways for mystics to find affirmation within the institutional Church. The process of formation (forming, shaping, molding) happens continuously to human beings. We are constantly shaped by culture, relationships, expectations, media and more. It is impossible to escape formation.

In the simple act of turning on the television or meeting a friend for lunch, we are being formed. We may not realize what is shaping us or how we are being shaped, but at all times there are forces working on our interior landscape, shaping the frameworks from which we live life.

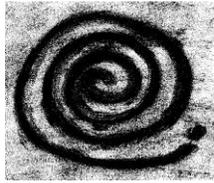
The question, then, is not, “Will you undergo formation?” None of us can escape formation.

The real questions are, “By what will you be formed?” and “Who will shape you?” We can continue to be formed blindly by the elements of

our culture, or we can open ourselves to a molding and shaping that is spiritual in nature, a formation whose author is God.

Spiritual formation refers to the process of being formed by God, so that God's Spirit shapes human spirit in a way that enables the human person to live a life of fullness and abundance. This is how I have come to describe spirituality:

Spirituality is a deepening connection with God that makes a difference in our relationship with God, self, others and the created world.



The Common Experience of the Restless Heart

Spiritual formation is not a recent discovery. While the terminology is used freely by churches for a wide variety of ministries and programs, it actually suggests the shaping work of God in our lives as an act of the Spirit.

The current popularity of “spirituality” reflects our common heart-hunger; yet, spirituality is not a passing fad. Augustine of Hippo, in the 4th century, said what we know to be true from our experience: “You [God] made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”ⁱⁱ

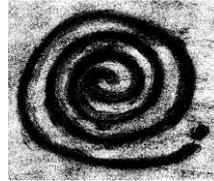
This inner restlessness fills the world and the Church. We are surrounded by persons who restlessly seek God, who are hungry for something they cannot name, thirsty for something they know vaguely in their hearts.

Spirituality addresses the restlessness we feel and know from our experience. The spiritual life concerns the very center of the life. It is not an accessory, not something for the very pious, the overly serious, or those who have gone overboard with religion. It is not an optional attachment to life for the Christian.

Alter the language a bit, though, and spiritual formation is about discipleship; that is, how we are connected to God as Jesus was connected to God. As Jesus lived in union (oneness) with God, so we are invited into a growing oneness with God. This is discipleship, the essence of the spiritual life. Christian formation, then, is about how the life we live connected to God is expressed in the real-world context of our lives.

Spiritual formation is not lived out in an ivory tower, secluded from the ebb and flow of daily life. Rather, our God-connected lives get worked out in the warp and weft of relationship, work, service and worship. Spirituality is not divorced from real-life, but is woven into it.

Seen in this context, then, spirituality is for everyone . . . those who consider themselves religious and those who find the institutional Church stultifying . . . contemplatives and actives . . . introverts and extroverts . . . all are invited to participate in this spiritual life, this shaping work that is initiated by God.ⁱⁱⁱ



A Big Room and a Small Corner

This workbook is simply a place to begin this part of your journey with God. Other experiences have gone before, and others will come after. At this moment in your life, though, you are here.

I hope to lead you into a small corner of a huge room. For centuries women and men have opened themselves to God's grand work of spiritual transformation. Some of those women and men wrote about their experiences in hopes of assisting others who wanted to make a similar journey.

In that spirit, I offer you this material. The room is huge. So much awaits discovery, so much is waiting for your eyes to notice. I can only take you to a small corner of that vast room, the corner to which I have been present. This is a very small taste of what can be said about how God works in a human life.

Personally, I've had help with this corner of the room. Certain women and men have been my spiritual guides. Many of them lived centuries ago. A few of them are contemporaries. I've come to befriend them as I've shared their experiences, read their words, felt the commonality of our struggle and wrestled to live the spiritual life in my setting as they wrestled to live it in theirs. I would be naïve to think that my corner of the room has not been influenced by their journeys. I cannot ignore the presence in my corner of Benedict of Nursia and Ignatius of Loyola; of Francis, John, and Teresa; of Fr Keating, Fr Rohr, and Br Jim; of Rilke, Oliver, and Stafford; of Sr Adeline and Sr Ann.

I also would be naïve to believe that the small corner I have discovered is the only corner of the room. There are others. Many others. And you are invited to discover the shape of your corner of the room. My corner will not be your corner, and I cannot tell you the shape of your corner. But I write what I have experienced. This is the way I know, and perhaps as I share what I have seen, heard and experienced, you will find help for your own journey of exploration.

Beyond the influence of these spiritual guides, my corner has been shaped by persons in classes and retreats who have dared to share their journey with me. My life has been enriched by those thousands of contacts. These sojourners, sensing a desire for something significant and real, hungry to open their lives in fresh ways, have opened up their lives to me. In their willingness, their playfulness, their earnestness and their intentionality they have shaped me and shaped my corner of the room. I'm deeply grateful to God for each one.

To each new *Spiritual Foundations* class, I offer these words. They continue to be appropriate as we stand at this beginning:

This material, in and of itself, will not change you. It does not have that power. Its purpose is to point you toward the God who is able to transform. The readings, exercises and prayer practices are beneficial only as they help open you to God's work within you, the work that brings about inner transformation. In that openness, God shapes us, so that we can partner with God in shaping the world.

When you come to the end of this material, you will find yourself at a launching place. In a sense, the end of this course is a new beginning. There are no prizes for working through a body of exercises. There are no graduation ceremonies in the spiritual life.

You may feel a sense of accomplishment. You also may sense yourself to be farther from the destination than when you began. That's okay. Life-with-God is a marathon, not a sprint. In the spiritual life, we are always beginners. We will never be more than beginners.



A Spiritual Practice: Touchpoint Prayer

The most familiar name for this first spiritual practice is “common prayer.” Over the years, though, I’ve come to name it “touchpoint prayer.” The phrase “touchpoint” accurately represents the aspect of this prayer that makes it a foundational spiritual practice.

Its basic methodology is simple: We stop what we are doing at various intervals in a day to touch base with God. The prayer time itself

becomes a touchpoint. In a sense, we stop our work or our activity to check-in with God.

Touchpoint prayer is also called “fixed-hour prayer.” It refers to the designated times of the day when a person stops her work or activity in order to offer a brief prayer.

In Benedictine communities, for example, prayer is offered at the same hours every day, sometimes as many as eight times a day. At the appointed time for prayer, the bell rings and calls members of the community to gather for prayer. Some prayer periods last up to 45 minutes. Most take about 10 – 15 minutes. These times of prayer through the day provide touchpoints, opportunities for persons to be reminded of God’s presence, times to reconnect consciously with the One who is the Source of all life and work.

This prayer discipline comes out of the centuries-old practice of fixed-hour daily prayer. Over the years, this prayer has been prayed by the Church using resources that enable persons in all places and time zones to pray in common. The daily prayer, sometimes called praying the hours, the divine office, or the daily office, takes its shape from the Old Testament Psalms and from other scriptures. God speaks through the scriptures, initiating a conversation. We offer our prayer as an intentional response to God.

Many Christians use touchpoint prayer as a way of staying aware of God through the day. At one time practiced only in monasteries, this form of daily prayer now draws persons from a variety of traditions and backgrounds who desire the regularity and discipline of common prayer.

As a way of stepping into touchpoint prayer, you might consider a format like this:

1. The evening before you want to begin touchpoint prayer, decide how many “touchpoints” you want to have the next day. In other words, how many times do you intend to stop and pray during the course of the day? If you are starting from scratch, set a reasonable goal. Three or four times would be a good number of touchpoints to begin with.
2. It is helpful to plan when you will touch base in prayer. What time will you stop whatever you are doing in order to pray? For instance, you might want to have three brief prayer times in the course of the day: one in the morning, one around lunch time, and one before going to sleep at night. Be as specific as possible about the times you’ll stop for prayer.^{iv}
3. When it comes time for the touchpoint prayer, stop whatever you are doing and pray. If you find that you can’t

think of things to say to God, try a prayerbook. ^v If a prayerbook is not comfortable for you, try a method for listening to God (I'll suggest a few in upcoming chapters) rather than talking to God. Touchpoint prayer does not have to be long. The point is not to be lengthy and eloquent. The point is to touch base with God and to be conscious of your connection with God in the midst of other ordinary activities. 5 – 7 minutes is probably a good amount of time for beginning touchpoint prayer.

4. When you finish the prayer, go back to your work, your activity or your meal. You may notice as you return to your activity that you do so with a greater awareness of God and a deeper sense of God's ongoing presence with you.

Four other matters related to touchpoint prayer are important.

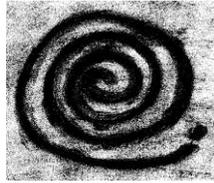
First, this prayer needn't be a solitary form of prayer, but may be offered together by a family, among friends or by a group of work associates. Because the prayer often involves a prayerbook, it is easily accessed by those who want to pray together.

Second, even when alone, you may sense that you are praying in concert with others around the world who are praying at that particular hour. This is the spirit of "common prayer" at the heart of the touchpoints. We pray these prayers in common with others. As we offer them to God, we join a vast praying symphony, and we literally pray in harmony with others who are touching God as we are.

Third, know that sometimes touchpoint prayer will speak with amazing clarity and move you in stirring ways. At other times, however, the prayer will seem dry, rote and uninspired. In those times, it is good to remember that you are not praying alone, but rather alongside a vast company of the committed. You may not be able to offer the words of the prayer with a whole heart at that hour; however, someone else in another part of the world is offering their prayer, even as your own spirit sags.

Fourth, when the words seem uninspired, it is a healthy practice to continue the prayer time anyway – a fulfillment of our intention to spend the time with God, even when our senses are dulled. When you are faithful to the practice, you may find yourself praying on behalf of someone half a world away who needs your prayer at that particular moment. Further, it is worthwhile to maintain the practice of regular prayer and praise out of a love for God that transcends our up and down emotions.

Common prayer roots us. Our prayer grows steadily over time as we check-in with God. The consistency of the prayer keeps us grounded, so we are not constantly chasing our changing emotions. Touchpoint prayer offers us a stable and reliable means of deepening our awareness of God in everyday life.



Spiritual Exercises

These spiritual exercises are intended to help you interact with some of the ideas in this chapter. Notice the ones that seem to stir you, and stay with them for a few days.

- What life-events have shaped you? Think about one or two significant periods of your life for a few minutes.
 - Replay the event in your memory. Remember the circumstances . . . the people involved . . . the issues at stake for you in that event.
 - What, if anything, did you reevaluate during that time? Or to put it another way, what were some different questions you asked about life as a result of that experience?
 - Where did you land on the other side of this difficult experience? Where are you now?

- This chapter described spirituality as a huge room in which we each have a corner. Our corner does not look like anyone else's corner, but is unique. Still, there are certain people who have influenced what your corner of the huge room looks like.
 - Who is in your corner of the room? Who are the persons who have been your spiritual guides to this point of the journey?
 - Make a list of the persons who come to mind . . . living or dead . . . teachers, family members . . . persons from history. The list doesn't have to be comprehensive. You can always add more names to it, but at least get the list started.
 - In prayer, thank God for each person on your list. If you can name their contributions to your life, do so.

- Try touchpoint prayer this week. Use the guide above for establishing the times of the day in which you will stop to touch base with God.
 - For content, you may want to use one of the prayerbooks I've suggested in the endnotes.
 - If you are not comfortable using a prayerbook for the touchpoints, try this:
 - In your first touchpoint prayer of the day, pray for your family, friends and the people you carry on your heart. Make this a time to pray for others.
 - In your midday touchpoint prayer, pray for the activities in which you are engaged for the day . . . your work, recreation, relationships or whatever you are engaged in at the time.
 - Make your prayer at the end of the day a time for thanksgiving. For what are you thankful? Spend a few moments offering your thanks to God.



NOTES

ⁱMary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 60.

ⁱⁱ*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by Hal M. Helms (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1986), 1.

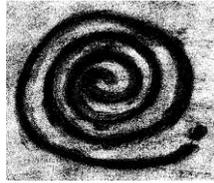
ⁱⁱⁱ In the Church, persons in positions of leadership have a particular role in spiritual formation. As a spiritual entity, the Church offers a unique context to help persons ask ultimate questions and in doing so, to assist persons in living into their own unique design. Sadly, for too long the Church has not produced the kind of spiritual leadership that gives direction to the spiritual journey. Those in a position to give spiritual guidance have not been open to a deepening connection with God. Like everyone else, leaders resist life-altering spiritual practices and put off wrestling with core questions that lead to a full and fulfilled life. As a spiritual entity, a Church without spiritual leaders at her core is an impotent Church.

^{iv} I find that persons who are not specific about their commitment to the “touchpoints” often don’t ever get around to the prayer. When we say, “I’ll pray whenever I get time to pray,” we usually don’t pray. Something else seems to squeeze out time for prayer. Be specific about the number of times for prayer and the time for the touchpoint.

^v Many good prayerbooks are available as helpful resources for touchpoint prayer. At various times I have used *The Divine Hours* series by Phyllis Tickle; *Common Prayer* by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro; *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants of God* by Reuben Job and Norman Shawchuck; *Venite* by Robert Benson; *Celtic Daily Prayer* by the Northumbria Community; and others.

3.
Naming What We
Do Not Know:
A Deepening Connection





Consider two statements that speak directly to the restless longing that stirs within every human heart.

First, this statement:

You cannot know what you do not know.

I realize the sentence sounds like double-speak, but it is not intended to be a riddle. It seems self-evident. But stay with the statement for just a moment before you hear its corollary.

You cannot know what you do not know. As human beings, some things will always be outside the bounds of our knowing. We cannot know everything. We cannot see everything. We cannot predict the future. We are human and to be human is to be finite, limited and boundaried.

You may nod in agreement at the statement, but our actual lives usually betray us. We live as if it is possible to know everything, as if we can accumulate the right information or gather the appropriate knowledge to work out problems and crises. We judge the actions of others as if we knew their hidden motivations. We expect ourselves to know more than we do. In elementary school, our children hear the mantra, “Knowledge is power,” as if the right knowledge would bring “success” in life.

Because we think we know, we think we can control. We try to manage our lives and to control others.

In reality, we *don't* know what we don't know. We don't know what lies outside our experience. We don't see all the gaps in our lives and because we don't see them, we don't know what it will take to fill them. We don't know what we are missing in life. We are restless, but we don't necessarily know why.

If I asked, “What do you need in life?” you could only answer from what you see of your life, from what you know about your life as it is. It would be unreasonable to expect an answer that you had never personally heard of or experienced.

What you do not know far outweighs what you know.

I remind you of St. Augustine's well-known words from the 4th century: “You [God] made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”¹

This basic, foundational human longing is familiar to every human being on the planet. But Augustine wrote in hindsight about the Source of rest that calmed his restlessness. Before finding his rest in God, Augustine

tried a long laundry list of sensual pleasures trying to appease the inner longing of his soul. He knew the stirring of something inside him, but he did not know what he did not know.

For some, growing into what they do not know comes slowly, over time. For St. Augustine, there was a sudden epiphany, a revelation in which he heard a Spirit-voice speaking audibly to him, leading to a life-altering encounter with God.

Like Augustine, I may know full well that my heart is restless, that my heart is uneasy, but not know the nature of that uneasiness. Our modern world is full of as many addictions as there are people, each of us trying to still the restlessness of our hearts, each of us looking for something to calm the stirring within us, even when we do not know the nature of that stirring.

The second assertion is a corollary of the first:

*I can know **that** I do not know.*

I do not know what I do not know. That is an important starting place in spiritual formation. But it is also crucial to affirm *that* I do not know. It is important to affirm that there are things outside my realm of experience, to confess my smallness, to recognize my limited vision.

Again, this may sound self-evident, but I'm convinced that most people live in a fog, wrongly believing that they have all the pieces to life that they need. They believe that if they work hard enough, get enough therapy, take some classes, select the right friends, go to the right church, find the right job, read the prescribed books, then all the pieces of life will fall into place. Many of us, then, spend a lifetime accumulating knowledge and experiences and addictions in hopes of filling this void.

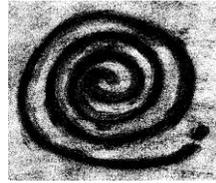
It is a huge acknowledgement, a pivotal confession to recognize our limitations, to say, "There are things I need to have that I don't have . . . things I need to know that I don't yet know."

Actually, it takes a great deal of humility to confess that we don't know. In our world, we are more likely to pretend to know, to "make it up" as if we knew, and to plow ahead on bluster and bravado. It takes humility to confess our unknowing. This confession of our limitation is crucial as we begin a spiritual journey.

As long as we believe that we can see it all, that we know it all, and that everything is already at our fingertips, the spiritual life will be a waste of time.

A growing spirituality acknowledges that there are places for us to go we have not yet seen, things for us to do we cannot imagine, and a life waiting to be uncovered within us that we have not fathomed.

You cannot know what you do not know; you can, however, acknowledge that you don't know. Hold onto this confession as you move down the path toward a deeper connection with God.



Basic Understandings in Spiritual Formation

Before my first trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, a friend described the city and surrounding area to me. He talked about the beautiful vistas, the majestic mountains, the lush public areas and the ocean setting. His recommendation was five-star!

In addition, I looked at books and magazines, read up on the area, and prepared myself as best I could. I wanted to take in as much as possible.

After arriving in Vancouver, I was not disappointed. In fact, the verbal descriptions and magazine photos could not match the overwhelming beauty of the area.

Even my everyday experience of Vancouver, however, did not prepare me for what I experienced one afternoon. I explored a highway that wrapped around a mountain north of the city, ocean vistas to my left and steep incline to my right. Glorious.

And then the curve . . . a sudden turn north around a mountain outcropping . . . and a scene opened up that left me speechless. Full-bodied pines lined the road and snow-capped summer peaks popped up miles beyond the bay, which was rendered emerald green by a distant glacier. Never before had I seen anything like this. Overwhelmed, I pulled my car off the road and stood there for almost an hour to stare, marvel and inhale the extraordinary scene. Thinking back on that afternoon, it may have been the first time I ever prayed with my eyes open!

Had I been told about the beauty of British Columbia before the trip? Certainly. But I hadn't been there, hadn't experienced it with my own eyes. When I did experience the beauty, it far exceeded anything I could have imagined at the mere telling. I realized that even the professional magazine photos had not done justice to that magnificent land.

Even though I knew something of what to expect, I didn't fully grasp the immensity of the beauty until standing before it myself. I had some basic understanding of British Columbia's appeal, but could not fully appreciate it and live into it until making the journey myself.

Spirituality is something like that. In the pages that follow, I'll lay out some general paradigms for spirituality, some basic understandings about the landscape of spiritual formation. You can read this material, understand it, and be able to recite it through and through; however, until you actually make the journey yourself, you can't fully know what you haven't yet experienced.

For that reason, the spiritual journey cannot be studied, only experienced. You can only acknowledge *that* you don't know fully where it will take you, what it will look like or how it will take your breath away.

The spiritual journey will take you somewhere you haven't been before. God shapes and re-creates the human soul. This work of God transforms our hearts so that we embody God's presence in the world.

A Deepening Connection with God. I state my most basic understanding of spirituality this way:

Spirituality refers to a person's deepening connection with God that makes a difference in their relationships with God, self, others and the created world.

I realize it's an understanding that leaves out a lot, and in which much goes unsaid. It seems to be a helpful way, though, of helping people step into a life-giving connection with God.

The definition invites us to be intentional about the spiritual journey, recognizing that a more spiritually-focused life does not come by chance or by accident.

It also builds upon the understanding that we are each created by God and for God, and that every human person is created in the image of God. We are connected to God at the level of soul, whether we are aware of that connection or not. Spirituality speaks to the process of deepening that connection and becoming more aware of God's life that already exists within us.

Finally, spirituality makes a difference in the four essential realms of life, the four areas of relationship in which we each live: God, self, others and the world.

First, spirituality makes a difference in our relationship with God. We grow in our awareness of God and in our love for God. We become more settled in God's love for us. In reality, spirituality is a never-ending journey deeper into God, further into the heart of God. Jesus himself invited us to love God with the totality of our being, with heart, mind, soul and strength (Lk. 10:27).

Second, spirituality makes a difference in our awareness of self. In order to live as fully-formed human beings, we are invited to a deepening awareness of our own interior landscape. The process of growing up and becoming fully formed persons is a lifelong process. We are growing up into the design for which God created each of us, and this design moves us to an ever-greater awareness of our own inner world of desires, motivations and giftedness.

Third, spirituality is not simply about God and myself. Authentic spiritual expression always moves us toward others. It transforms relationships. It leads us to regard others with new eyes, not as labels or

categories, but as human beings who are gifted and wounded, joyful and hurting. In fact, Jesus encouraged us to love God with our total being, and also to love others as we love ourselves. He called these two imperatives, “the great commandments,” in which all the other commandments were encapsulated and given meaning.

Finally, we live our lives in the context of a created world. Creation, in its own way, witnesses to God’s love and majesty. I have found that most everyone who intentionally steps into the spiritual journey begins to see and think about the created world differently. They become more aware of their connection to nature. Their eyes open wider with wonder. The created world becomes an expression of God’s love that is not to be abused, but honored as a love-note from God to us.

Key images and ideas. I offer you another way of considering spiritual formation, because it includes images that will be helpful as we move through this workbook and explore the path of deeper connection with God.

Spiritual formation refers to an intentional pilgrimage in which one opens up to the shaping work of God’s Spirit in order to be the person God created him/her to be. The journey is rooted in a lifelong process of growth into wholeness in Jesus Christ (a journey inward toward the Center) and a growing life of self-giving and attentiveness (a journey outward toward others and the world).

Let’s put some flesh on the bones of these words.

- The word “intentional” is important. We do not wake up one day and find ourselves with a deepening connection to God. In order to participate with God in a spiritual stance toward life, we must set our lives toward it. The spiritual path is an intentional path. It does not happen by accident.

Our world forms us subtly, apart from our awareness that we are being shaped by it. We are molded simply by living in a particular family system . . . or in a specific nation . . . or with particular political and economic assumptions. This shaping work happens quietly, underneath the surface of our lives, and begins when we are young.

Because it begins when we are young and continues throughout life, we don’t question it. We assume the frameworks are true because they seem to give us assurances of security and support. Furthermore, they tend to be the only paradigms for life most of us have ever known.

On the other hand, a life of deepening connection to God provides radical alternatives to these external frameworks. The interior shift from the dominant framework of culture to a new paradigm centered in God requires more than a revival-time altar call. It is something like letting go of old wineskins, which are inadequate to hold the new wine of God's Spirit (Mt. 9:16 – 17). Releasing the old and taking up the new wineskins are not simple tasks! They happen only with intentionality, and usually include the pain of struggle and letting go.

- I paired “intentional” with the word “pilgrimage.” More than merely a trip, pilgrimage refers to a specific journey. Pilgrimage is not simply travel, but travel with a purpose.

The word denotes movement. The movement in pilgrimage may not always feel like progress. In fact, sometimes for pilgrimage to be meaningful, time and energy must be expended in one place before moving on. But always there is movement, a setting out for that which is beyond sight and beyond understanding.ⁱⁱ In spirituality, we move into and with God.

Jesus called himself “the Way” (Jn. 14:6) and the earliest Christians were known as people of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 24:14). Since that time the images of path, journey, road and quest have been important to Christians who sought to follow Jesus.

Pilgrimage, by its very nature, is intentional. Because pilgrims typically face difficult conditions, rocky terrain, uncertain seas, uneven paths, and severe weather conditions, intentionality is required to stay the journey. Pilgrims without discipline and firm intention don't last long.

- Spirituality requires openness. “Opening” one's self is at the heart of spiritual transformation.

The very image of openness suggests that this is not the place for tightly-held suppositions, close-fisted certainties, and my-way-or-the-highway ultimatums. Transformation does not happen as we hold onto the old wineskins!

The image of a simple, open hand has guided my own spiritual journey. An open hand reminds me to hold things loosely, to receive whatever comes to me before judging it, and to let go of those things to which I'm attached.

Openness and receptivity are at the core of spiritual formation. They form the basis of contemplative life and practice. In fact, being “contemplative” does not refer to a certain prayer or meditation practice. At the root of contemplation is openness and receptivity. Contemplative prayer is prayer that opens us in the depths to a deeper reality, to God who is the more real Real.

Contemplative life refers to a way of being in the world that stays open to what is central to all of life.

- Spiritual formation is about being “shaped by the Spirit of God.” We do not shape ourselves. We participate in God’s shaping by our intentionality and openness, but we do not cause the shaping to happen. We are not in control.

God is the Primary Actor in the spiritual journey, the First Mover. God is not a bystander.

God initiates. We receive.

In grammatical terms, God is subject. We are the objects.

God acts. We are acted upon.

The major factor in our spirituality is not how many spiritual disciplines we undertake . . . not how often we attend worship services at our local church . . . not whether or not we are ordained. Most important is God’s initiative, God’s action, God’s shaping hand.

- The process of spiritual formation leads us toward “becoming the persons God created us to be.”

In our human condition, we have lost a sense of our life’s design, the spiritual DNA that is woven into our soul. In the midst of our work, social life and family responsibilities, we become consumed with matters of day-to-day survival. We struggle to get by. We wrestle with the nuts and bolts of life. Good things call. People who are important to us need our attention. Work must get done. Over time we grow separated from our original design, from the God-seed that has been planted within us. We lose touch with the Divine imprint stamped upon our heart and soul.

The spiritual journey invites us to attend to our connection with God. It invites us to a deepening life with God, so our daily lives are centered and grounded. We pay attention to our own inner rhythms in a way that leads us back to the life that is our birthright, the life stamped upon our souls.

This formative spiritual work can lead us to uncover the unique, one-of-a-kind purpose for which we were created, so that we live life out of our soul’s essence. We discover that “who we are” precedes “what we do,” and that ultimately, all doing flows out of being.

At our core we discover a connection with God that cannot be shaken, that holds us resilient amidst the flames of life, and that shapes the way we serve God in the world.

- Spiritual formation is a “rooted journey.” It is travel that has a solid foundation and anchored in a solid God who is firm enough

to hold the weight of our being. Like a huge live oak whose roots stretch downward and outward to hold the massive tree, so our spiritual journey is connected to God at the roots.

That same live oak in the dry season hungrily stretches its roots to find nourishment and sustenance in the same way that our souls yearn for meaning and for God. We are connected at the Source – a move inward toward the Source of our being – in order to move upward and outward, offering our lives in love and compassion to the world.

Without solid roots, without a firm connection to God beneath the surface, we cannot move far from the trunk. Our outward reach cannot exceed our downward connectedness. In spiritual formation we live into both realities: the inward, downward yearning for God . . . and the outward flowering of fruitfulness in the world.

- Spiritual formation is not a quick fix, but a “lifelong process.” Transformation takes a lifetime and is seldom complete in the span of our lives. We are beginners and will always be beginners.

As a process, we step into it slowly and incrementally. Sometimes the process seems painfully slow. At other times we make quick leaps in awareness. Either way, we do not come to maturity and complete development all at once. The process of becoming fully human takes time.

- In spirituality, there is an “inward journey toward the Center.” This is a movement into God.

In other words, spiritual formation provides a setting for “growth into wholeness in Jesus Christ.” This growth is an inward movement, connecting the center of who we are with the Center (God) already present within us and closer than our next breath.

“Growth into wholeness in Jesus Christ” implies that we are not whole as we are. Something is fundamentally wrong in and around us. We live broken, incomplete and fragmented lives. We scurry from place to place, from responsibility to responsibility, from relationship to relationship in search of meaning and significance. In spirituality, “wholeness” means that God puts back together the fragmented and wounded pieces of our lives.

In the spiritual life, this work of putting together is sometimes preceded by a deconstruction, by a taking apart. Often an intentional spiritual journey begins in earnest as a response to personal tragedy or a crisis that triggers a search for meaning. Those tragedies and crises begin the work of deconstructing our lives, telling us that life doesn’t always work out the way we believed it would. We learn that the rules for life, which we

assumed were valid, don't work all the time. Bad things happen. People get hurt, some get sick and we all die. These "edge" experiences cause us to question our long-held assumptions and may lead to the deconstruction that is necessary for transformation.

This part of spiritual formation rarely feels good, but in the spirit of full disclosure, I know no other way to enter a spiritual path honestly. In fact, one of the assumptions we may have to let go of (deconstruct) is the notion that life should always be fair and feel good!

The notion of "wholeness" is rooted in the New Testament idea of *teleos*, often translated "perfect." A better translation would be "complete" or "whole." It refers to something that is everything it is intended to be.

When Jesus said, "Be perfect (*teleos*) as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleos*)," he encouraged his followers to be as fully human and fully alive as they were created to be, just as God is fully God and everything God is to be (Mt. 5:48).

- Finally, spiritual formation includes an outward movement, which I've characterized as "growing in self-giving and attentiveness."

There are some folks who start here, who claim that Christianity is all about what we do, how we serve and where we go. They are eager for mission. I have no qualms with doing, serving and going, but this is not where spirituality begins. Again, doing flows outward from our being. Who we are shapes what we do. Just as importantly, who we are shapes how we do what we do.

As we are formed inwardly by the Spirit of God, we have new resources with which to serve. From our inner reservoir, we give to a world which is hungry for mercy and compassion. We grow in our capacity for self-giving, that is, sharing ourselves with others. We become more aware of the world, and reach out toward it from our own loving center.

Transformed people transform the world.



Particularity

The words and images above provide road markers for our journey deeper into God. I've written in very general terms what will be a very particular and focused journey for you. The best I can do is share

generalities, because I don't know the particular shape your own spiritual path will take. In fact, no person can know that for another person.

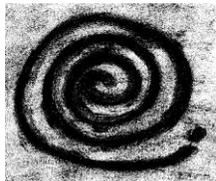
The journey is particular – that is, unique to you – and it is participatory. You have to experience it for yourself. You have to make your own way through it as God's Spirit leads you and shapes you. There are some guides available, and perhaps this material will be one such guide. Ultimately, though, I can only speak in generalities, then entrust you to God. I can only provide a vague outline that you may live into. The specific shape will come from God as you make the journey.

From where we stand, we can't know what we don't know. We can't fully imagine what we've never seen.

But even from here, we can confess that we don't know everything, that some of life is outside our capacity to see.

We can intend to open ourselves to a deepening connection with God that makes a difference in how we relate to others, the world, and even to self.

And we can intend to embark on the journey, even if we don't see or understand where it will take us. In Christian spirituality, this is the life of faith.



Spiritual Reflection: A Practice for Deepening Connection

“Spiritual reflection” refers to the practice of gathering up the pieces of our lives in order to bring ourselves as completely as possible into prayer.

The purpose of reflecting on life is not merely to “think about” who we have seen, what we have done and where we have been. Rather, when we intentionally reflect on our lives with “spiritual” vision, we look for inner meanings and God-threads that are woven throughout the various events of our lives.

Spiritual reflection, when practiced regularly, is an exercise in attentiveness. We seek to be more aware and mindful of God, others and the world. Further, regular periods of spiritual reflection lead to a deeper awareness of our own life-structures. When practiced regularly, spiritual reflection reveals our own inner landscape to us, even the terrain that we have not noticed before.

The most common method of spiritual reflection is the practice of keeping a spiritual journal. A journal differs from a diary. Diaries tend to be records of daily events. Journaling, on the other hand, seeks the meaning beneath the events. And more, spiritual journaling seeks the “spiritual” meaning beneath events. It intends to be open to the interior movements of God underneath the surface happenings of our lives.

In keeping a journal, we consider reflections, awarenesses and insights that come to us, prompted by God’s Spirit. They come to us for prayer. They come to us for integration. Journal-keeping can be a helpful way to experience the presence of God within us and around us.

The material for journaling is daily life. Sometimes we are impressed to reflect on an event. Sometimes we might want to ponder a passage of scripture or devotional material we have read. At other times, something in the created world stirs within us. We reflect on encounters with other people, or how we felt about the events of a day, always seeking the spiritual meaning of the events.

In spiritual reflection, and especially in the practice of journal-keeping, the most important prerequisite is honesty. Journals are not intended to be read by others. Unless you have a covenant with a group that assures confidentiality and openness, journal-keeping is not a public process. If you take steps to guard the privacy of your journal, you will find the freedom to be honest, raw and uncensored in your journaling. Spelling and punctuation are not important. Grammar is not important. Authenticity, on the other hand, is *extremely* important.ⁱⁱⁱ

Personally, I experienced a huge spiritual breakthrough when journal-keeping became an honest expression of my real life and my experience of God. I came to realize, almost in a flash, that God loves the *real* me, not the prettied-up, neat and tidy me that I had previously presented in my journal-keeping. When I found the freedom to be deep-down honest with God in my journal, I found myself becoming more open and honest in other areas of life as well.

For me, journal-keeping is a way to get what is inside me out into the open where I can see it more clearly. I regularly sit down to write in my journal and find that I’m writing things I hadn’t intended to write.

It may sound strange, but I often find myself writing things I didn’t think I knew. I have learned to pay attention to that voice, usually squelched by my rational brain, which lives in the deepest, most authentic parts of me. It is a soul-voice, a voice of creativity, a voice of passion and a voice of longing. The practice of spiritual reflection helps me to be more in touch with this essential voice that lives within me.

For some people, journaling provides the opportunity to say to God what they are unable to say out loud. Things that are difficult to verbalize and prayers that we haven’t been able to speak sometimes can be expressed in writing before they come from our lips.

I see God, myself and life more clearly when I am faithful to my journaling time. In the very act of writing, we begin to see connections in our lives that we previously missed. As we write, new directions open up for us. Reflection on our experience can clarify and even add depth to what we have experienced.

Remember, you are not journaling primarily to report on facts and occurrences, or to record insights about a scripture passage. You are paying attention to God's voice, speaking to you in prayer or in a particular passage. You are gaining direction. You are responding to God's prompting.

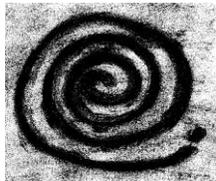
Thus, your journal entries will likely address God in the second person ("I-You"), not the third person ("I-God"). Don't write *about* God. Enter into dialogue *with* God. Talk *to* God. Tell God how you feel or what you resolve to do because of what you have heard. Tell God if you don't understand. Ask for help. Tell God if you feel contented and at peace. Address God directly: "*You . . .*"

For some people, writing is extremely hard and keeping a written journal is frustrating. As an exercise in spiritual reflection, journaling can be accomplished in other ways. You might try drawing or sketching, for instance. Play with colors, shapes or lines.

Some people prefer to write poetry as a means of journal-keeping. Perhaps you are drawn to magazine images that graphically represent your inner landscape. You can keep a day-book, recording phrases, words or brief thoughts that come to you in the course of daily activities.

Some persons keep a record of their daily experience with the scriptures by simply writing down the word or phrase that stirred them in their scripture reading.

The key is to find the method of spiritual reflection that is best for you. You might find it helpful to try several different methods before settling on one that seems right for you.



Spiritual Exercises

Explore some of the ideas in this chapter a bit further through these spiritual exercises.

- Take a moment to consider this past week. As you gather these pieces, reflect on them either by writing or creating artistically.
 - As you reflect on the work you have done this past week, notice the ways your work brought joy and fulfillment to you. Give thanks to God.
 - Also notice the times your work was dissatisfying. Offer those times to God.
 - Are there times this week when you sensed yourself participating with the purposes of God? When? How do you feel about that?
 - Are there times this week when you sensed yourself resisting the purposes of God? When? How do you feel about that?
 - What would you like to say (or write) to God about anything above?

- Revisit the exercise above. This time, instead of considering your work, reflect on some other part of life . . . your family or your leisure, for instance.

- Reflect on the material in this chapter about the landscape of spiritual formation.
 - Are there any *sticky points* that are uncomfortable for you? Write down words, phrases or images that describe how you feel.
 - Are there any words, phrases or ideas that stir up excitement and anticipation within you?
 - As an act of prayer, ask God to give you a tangible image for this excitement or anticipation. For

example, a flowing mountain stream might represent freshness and life. An open field might represent freedom and new possibilities, and so on.

- Sit still for a moment. Allow God’s Spirit to prompt a memory within you of a time when the actual experience of an event far exceeded your expectations. How was your actual, lived experience of that person, place or thing different from your prior expectation of it?

- This exercise in spiritual reflection combines both written and creative expression.
 - Consider this question: “What season of my life am I in right now?” You might think of the question in terms of the actual seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter) or in terms of a month of the year. Either way, think about the current season of your life.

 - Identify feelings and connections you have with the season you have identified. “Why do I feel like this is the season of my life?” Or, “What does it feel like for me to be in the season of life?”

 - Thumb through a magazine, looking for images that represent this season and the way you feel about it. Note: You are not looking for snow scenes to represent winter (unless the snow represents your *feeling* about being in winter) or golden leaves to represent autumn (unless golden leaves represent how you *feel* about being in autumn). You are looking for images that represent the deeper realities of the season for you. As you find one or two images, clip them or tear them out.

 - Paste the images on a blank sheet of paper, then write a paragraph or two about the experience of being in this season of life. Use the magazine image as a starting place for your writing.



NOTES

ⁱ*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by Hal M. Helms (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1986), 1.

ⁱⁱThe Celtic world valued pilgrimage. The Celtic word *peregrinatio* suggests a person who sets out on pilgrimage without a specific destination in mind. Celtic pilgrims, called *peregrinati*, pushed out from shore in small, rudderless boats, trusting that wherever they landed, there God had led them. Pilgrimage was a huge act of trust that entailed a determined openness to the unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blogging may be one way to do spiritual reflection. I know many people who find writing a blog to be an important way for them to process daily life. I find, though, that a blog typically differs from a spiritual journal at this point of honesty. In my own blogging, there are some things that I will not put in print or on the internet. Also, when I prepare my regular blog post, I am concerned with spelling, punctuation and grammar. Spiritual journal-keeping, on the other hand, is not intended for others. In a sense, it is a record of my journey with God.