

COPING WITH A GENTLE GOD

John Powers

Dedication

**In Memory Of My Brother Paul, whose Life, Passion And Death Burned
God's Gentle Love Into My Life.**

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book for those who are trying to cope with the Gentle God of love. It is for those who desire to walk with God; searching, wondering, and seeking God in the midst of life. I wander with God attempting to live and love as a child of God. I too am one who needs help in coping with the power of God's creative love for me and the challenge that love brings. If you wander with God and wonder at God's gentle love, this is for you.

This is a book for those who wonder why they were created as images of God.

This is a book for all those who feel cursed in life yet believe in a generative and gentle creator.

This is a book for all those who feel they live too often as children of fear, anger, loss, or pain, yet know in their hearts they are royal children of God.

In this all too short limited book, I shall describe some of the characteristics of the maturing Christian – primarily how he or she lives, loves, copes, and walks with God.

This is not so much a book of answers as a book of questions and wonderments. I learned long ago that the foolish person is the one who tends to have all the answers, while the wise person usually has the next question.

CHAPTER ONE - A MATURING CHILD OF GOD

Thousands of years ago there was a small tribe known for its fervent faith; a simple people who tended to the telling of stories as often as they tended to their flocks and fields. It may even be said that this tribe of believers needed stories as much as food itself. The stories they told gave them and their children life.

Throughout the lands, this wandering tribe was known for its faith and tradition. It was known for its deep belief in a God with a name so sacred that it would not be spoken or written.

A certain small group within this tribe of faithful people felt a deep need to ask questions. They were searchers, wondering about life itself. They were a reflective lot. As days built upon days and years upon years, this special group of wonderers gathered often to ask big questions of one another and of this nameless God. They talked, argued, told stores, and all the while, listened for the *Great Nameless Companion* to unfold for them the Story of Beginnings. The sacred stories this tribe told helped them encounter and cope with God.

They were ordinary people wondering about extraordinary questions. It is said that a member of this group rose one day at the table and posed the mysterious questions, “Why do I exist?” and “When did life begin?” Certainly no human can adequately answer these questions, so the group of wonderers sought their answers from the Nameless God.

They had heard many stories of the great beginning of creation. Some stories spoke of the earth resting upon an ocean of water; other stories of great birds that carried the earth upon their wings. This special group of searchers sought however, a deeper story. They listened for Divine words in human stories, the tales that captured Divine meaning.

The wonderers continually asked the Nameless God to open to them the great story of beginnings that they might understand from where they came and toward what they traveled on life’s path.

After many years of wonderment and questioning, the Nameless One told a simple story. God whispered it in the hearts of all wonderers, giving

direction and purpose to the journey. This same great story of beginnings is passed on today to each searching heart. It is the story that unfolds every day in the wondering hearts of those who walk with a Gentle God.

The Searching Heart

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.” (Gen 1:1-2).

Every human being wonders at some time in his or her life about the purpose of life. The questions, “Why do I exist?” or “For what reason do I live?” are on the minds and in the hearts of every individual who takes life seriously. Often these questions are ignored until a crisis is experienced. When someone fails at love or finds the pains of life overwhelming, he or she will frequently ask, if not scream, “Why?” “What is the reason?” Questioning our purpose and meaning is an essential part of human nature. We are a breed of wonderers who cannot leave a stone unturned. To those trapped in a vicious cycle of pain, whether emotional, physical or spiritual, the basic questions concerning purpose and meaning are quickly and often angrily asked. No growth takes place, however, without asking questions. No answers are found for the meaning of life and its difficulties without a searching heart.

Never before has the path of searching been so crowded with travelers as in these insecure days of turmoil. The quest for purpose, meaning, and happiness strives in the hearts of millions of searchers. We need only look at the vast numbers of books being published on the subjects of human growth and human potential. An explosion of membership has taken place in groups proposing the ultimate answers to life’s most important questions. Positive and valuable self-help groups provide an atmosphere for recovery to increasing numbers. The wide variety of Eastern religious paths attract large numbers of followers in the United States. Some young searchers have found security in cults that give narrow-minded answers. Christians of all types find solace in charismatic groups, Bible sharing, or in their traditional communities. Therapies of all kinds become ever more popular as more and more individuals feel the deep need to ask questions of their dreams and

imaginings. The questioning heart is not dead. It lives within each human being struggling to uncover the mystery of meaning while coping with a gentle God of Love.

We who profess to be Christians must have hearts that beat with wonderment. For, as with all others, purpose and meaning for a Christian can only be found in asking and seeking out the answers to the great question: "From where do I come?" "Where am I going?" and "How do I get there?" As our forbearers, the wandering Hebrew community asked great questions and found answers in the words of God, so Christians must walk also with the words of God; for in the scripture story, our meaning, purpose, and identity unfolds.

The Genesis story of creation, as quoted above, was written by a group of people much like us. They were human beings who needed and wanted to answer some of the most basic questions about God and about the human family. It was in their encounter with God that the story unfolded. The Genesis story did not answer all the questions asked with detailed descriptions of how God created, however. The purpose of its telling was not so much concerned with the "how," as much as it was concerned with "why" God created.

God is Creativity

The first and most important point of the story of creating is that God does create. God is the Royal Creator. All that exists, exists because of its relationship with God. Nothing is, without God. What the Genesis story of beginnings tells us is that God is, in essence, the power of creativity.

The word of God spoken in the beginning is power, and is effective in the speaking. When God said, "Let there be Light..." (Gen 1:3) light became. The time reference is unimportant, for in God there is no time. The story rather points out that when God speaks, the reality becomes. God speaks one word, Himself, and when God speaks Himself there is a giving, a flowing, an expressing, a moving, an activity of creating. God is continuous *creative activity*.

Since it is God's nature and essence to be creative it is also God's nature to create large gifts. God is the *great gift giver*, generating life as a path to be walked, a gift to be unwrapped.

Traditionally, we have called this generative, creative, and personal giving, God's 'grace.' We can say then that all creation is the personal grace-giving of God. God expresses Himself gracing all into life. God generates Himself into all reality.

God is Relational

But God does not simply create and then step away from that which has been generated and given. God's creating is personal and relational. God has created all as a self-expression. Therefore, God walks always in relationship to that which He has created. God has established a covenant love, a personal binding relationship with all creation, a bond that is never broken. Whether the image of God you prefer is that of father, mother, brother, spirit, sister, higher power, or geo-gravitational field of consciousness, by calling reality into existence, the one God has established a permanent and personal relationship.

"I am God, the Almighty. Walk in my presence and be blameless. Between you and me I will establish my covenant, and I will multiply you exceedingly." (Gen 17:1-2)

God declares that it is He who has created and continues to create this relationship between humanity and Himself. God is the first force, the thrust and initiation. But the generative God is not one who merely starts the ball rolling downhill and then turns away. This Nameless God cannot turn away from Himself. There is an intimate involvement of God with all that is created. We can use the limited example here of a parent who participates in the creation of a child. Once a child is born a parent cannot cut off the blood relationship with that child. A mother or father may deny that the child is theirs, may even physically ignore the child, but forever they are parent and child bound by the fact of creation. What flows from a person's creative power is part of that person for all time. If this is true of limited human beings then it is even more true of God. God is forever not

only bound to but also personally relating with and generating every aspect of creation.

We may feel at times abandoned by God, left alone to make it on our own, as though we have been forgotten. We may feel not only alone but also lonely. To our feelings of isolation and loneliness God responds with an affection and warmth described by Isaiah, “Can a woman forget her own child and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. Jerusalem, I can never forget you! I have written your name in the palms of my hands.” (Isaiah 49:15-17)

God is Purposeful

The God of the story of beginnings does not create and express Himself into reality out of whim or as the ultimate joke, however. God is generative and relational for a purpose. Every living being has a purpose – a reason for being. The Book of Genesis tells us clearly what the purpose of creation is, “Walk in my presence and be blameless...”

The terminal purpose and value of life is unity with God. To the wondering of every questioning heart comes the ultimate answer of ‘walk with me.’ The writers of this creation story know that apart from union with the Nameless One there is no ultimate meaning.

Union Along the Way

The story of creation is clearly told to make the points that God is creativity, God is relational, and God creates with purpose. But creativity does not stop with one burst of making. God’s generativity is not complete in six short days; it flows forever.

God does not rest on the seventh day because He is particularly tired, as we might be from labor. God rests on the seventh day in order to be – for all time and beyond – participating with the reality of His creation. God desires to rest in union with all aspects of creation, reposing on the seventh day with all reality. God created to be with creation in rest.

“So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested...” (Gen 2:4).

The image that comes to my heart, of God’s resting on the seventh day, is not so much the picture of an old man lying down from exhaustion. I see our God resting as we would rest after having made or fashioned something. I see parents resting in union with their first child, simply enjoying a being that has flowed from themselves. I see an artist appreciating and enjoying a painting or sculpture. I see a woman watching and playing with her grandchildren with a sense of pride in her family. This is the resting of God on the seventh day. God rests in joy, not just with a sense of accomplishment but with a sense of participation. Forever will God walk and rest with all that is, in the garden kingdom.

Beginning in the garden and moving toward the kingdom we continually attempt to cope with the creative relationship and purposeful love of God. As God is creativity, so humanity is created with the power of creativity that each person may make a place for God to rest in their lives.

As God is relational, so each person’s vocation is to become intimately involved with God, walking with God as companion. As God is purpose, so each person must find their meaning on the path of God.

God has created so that creation may choose to be in union with Him. God has generated so that humanity may be generative. The Nameless One creates a sacred people that they may creatively choose to walk as co-creators and companions of God.

Children of Choice

“You are the children of the Lord, your God. You shall not gash yourselves nor shave the hair above your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people sacred to the Lord, your God, who has chosen you from all the nations on the face of the Earth to be a people peculiarly His own.” (Deut 14:1-2)

Each human is created free, a mirror expression of God, capable of responding to the gifts of God's creation. Whether we want to be or not, we are first and foremost children of the royal creator.

“The spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God, but if we are children, we are heirs as well: heirs of God; heirs of Christ; if only we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him.” (Rom 8:16-17)

Being a child of God is not the choice. Living and walking as a child of God is. We can choose to live as children of God, coping maturely with God's love for us, or we can choose to live as children of whatever it is we give power to – money, fear, liquor, anger, lust, food, or the need for power and independence. Every human being is not only the writer of their own acts, but in a very special way the co-creator of their lives. Humanity has the power of God, given by God, to creatively choose the path they will travel.

“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.” (Deut 30:19)

God did not create a finished adult. God created children that have the potential to be self-creators. God who is generative generates generative children.

In a very real sense we are self-creators. We choose the path to walk and the companions with whom we travel. We can walk as children of God, or travel as children of fear. We can choose to respond to the personal love of God, encountering God as friend, or we can run from our true identity as children of God and live as children of pride or ignorance. We are the children of whatever it is we allow to form and to influence us.

In the book of Genesis the story of the first great rebellion against the personal creative love of God (Gen 3) is told. It is a story of a man and a woman who rebel against their very nature. They cannot cope with the reality that God loves them fully so in their fear they refuse to walk with God in the garden kingdom. This is the Adam and Eve within us all, for we too rebel against our true identity. Rather than encountering God along the

path of life we look for another road. The love of God is just too much to bear, so rebellion is the way.

Each of us knows what it is to refuse the identity and name “child of God.” Each person has turned, at one time or another, from walking as a child of God to walking as a child of fear, envy, pride, hate, or violence. The great human sin is a lie, a warping of the truth, telling us that we need not walk with God.

We dare not accept the powerful but gentle, challenging yet tender love of God, for then we must cope with God’s love by loving in return. We dare not see ourselves as God’s children for to be so would demand a maturity of vision that seems beyond our ability. We dare not face the truth of God, for we must then face the illusions of our own lives.

We know that we are children of God, but we have turned from this knowledge and have forgotten our way. Our vision is unclear as “We see indistinctly, as a mirror” (1Cor 13:12), we crawl as “infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1) instead of walking as royal children of God.

Infants, however, can grow and those who see indistinctly now, as a mirror, can gain sight. We can, if we choose, live and walk as children of God, but this demands that we labor in our own self-creation. Every human being is called to a personal transformation, a conversion, a change, a renewal, to return to the path of maturity.

Because the human family has rebelled against its own child-likeness to God, each must now strive to grow as a child of God; to become what he or she was created to be.

“Return, rebellious children, says the Lord, for I am your master.”
(Jer 3:14)

We must learn to run the race; not alone, but with God at our side.

“It is not that I have reached it yet, or have already finished my course: but I am racing to grasp the prize, if possible, since I have been grasped by Christ. I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line.” (Phil 3:12-13)

The Kingdom Path

The garden kingdom is the goal of the maturing child of God. Having once rejected the garden we must travel in search of the new kingdom. This is an image that Jesus himself held very close to his heart. The kingdom that we seek, the garden kingdom of God, will not, however, come like the evening newspaper. It is not something that will merely be delivered one day in a rapturing burst of cosmic information. Rather, Christ describes the kingdom as something ‘close at hand’ (Matt 4:17), or ‘within us’ (Luke 17:21). The kingdom is a ‘treasure in a field’ (Matt 13:45) for which we would give all that we own to possess. The kingdom is the gift of God’s companionship calling to be accepted. Receiving the gift of the kingdom and coping with the Gentle companion along the way is the task of the maturing Christian.

Story of the Gift-Giver

There is a story told of the Great Gift-Giver, who for seven days went out to share his gifts with those in need. As the Great Gift-Giver was distributing his many gifts to those in need, he noticed how differently the gifts were being received. Some of those to whom the Gift-Giver shared his wealth, paid little or no attention to their gifts. They were far too busy to receive some insignificant trinket from someone they did not even know. The gifts were merely ignored, pushed aside, and forgotten until a dull day when life’s distractions would not be so inviting. Occupied by the need for excitement, busy with taking what they wanted, these people ignored the gifts of the Gift-Giver. The gifts sat idle, unwrapped, ignored, unused, and unnoticed. These were not people who knew how to receive. They knew only how to take.

To others with whom the Great Gift-Giver shared his wealth, however, the gifts were received with shallow excitement and enthusiasm. Opened with a fury of curiosity, used for what they could give, these gifts were soon put aside. Momentary excitement passed into boredom, childish curiosity into disinterest. These people tore their gifts open, were infatuated by their newness, but soon broke their gifts as they scrambled to reach for more. These were shallow gift receivers. They did not receive

their gifts with thanks. They were more concerned with the thrill of getting than with the beauty of what was given.

There were others, however, with whom the Great Gift-Giver shares his wealth, who knew their need. They received their gifts with open arms and thankful words. These were true receivers so thankful for their gifts that they hesitated to open them too quickly. They asked for the Gift-Giver's help. These were true receivers who accepted their gifts with care, appreciated what was given them and used their gifts well. No gift was too small for these gracious gift-receivers, for they knew they could not live long with happiness and purpose without the Great Gift-Giver.

It is told that the Great Gift-Giver was saddened by the lack of receptivity on the part of some but was moved ever more deeply by the many who welcomed his gifts as a blessing. Because so many were receptive, the Gift-Giver decided to extend his gift giving from the original seven-day plan to an open-ended giving. Now, every day in every way the Great Gift-Giver goes forth to share what he has and who he is with all those in need. It is only those, however, who are open to the Gift-Giver who will know what the gift truly is. It is said, however, that the greatest gift is a kingdom with roads and paths that lead to happiness.

The kingdom path of God, on which God and humanity will walk forever as friends, is not a place far off in the future. The kingdom is the gift of yesterday, held in the memory of the garden. It is the kingdom of today as God continues to generate love. And it is the gift of tomorrow as God continues to walk with us. To walk with God in the kingdom of today demands effort and labor, an imaginative self-creation. The question is whether we will accept the gift of God, walk with our Gentle God, and mature in the process.

In each of the following chapters, I will share with you some of the important characteristics of one who walks with a Gentle God. I shall describe the maturing Christian traveler on the way of the kingdom.

CHAPTER II – BLESSED BUT BROKEN

A maturing child of God, or one who walks with God as companion and friend and not enemy and judge, has a breakthrough in vision, seeing all reality in a constructive and realistic way.

A child of God sees all creation as a blessing from God. Creation is a cornucopia of God's blessing, an out-flowing of who God is.

“God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of swimming creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw how good it was, and God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the Earth.’ Evening came and morning followed – the fifth day...God looked at everything He had made and found it very good.” (Gen 1:21-23, 31)

When you travel with God, you walk with a positive and realistic image of the world. The maturing Christian knows that the presence of God is uncontrollable, that God is united with all creatures. God is all around, completely enveloping creation. God is in all creation as a blessing, and all creation is in God. True children of God conspire to breathe together the atmosphere of God's ever present and creative love. Any talk of God which places God outside of what has been created – “out there somewhere” – is a limited and incomplete awareness of God's blessings. The Book of Genesis recognizes and makes clear the unlimited presence of God in all creation. Creation is the blessed expression – the noise – of God. All reality cries out with the presence of God.

The Dignity of Being Human

There is a story of a young monk who asked his great spiritual master, “Is there anything more miraculous than the wonders of creation?” It is said that the master answered, “Yes, your awareness of the wonders of creation.”

The closer you walk with God the clearer you see those wonders. To the blind, perhaps God's presence seems sudden, a break into nature from out of the blue. To those whose eyes are open to the movements of this

dynamic God, every moment is filled with revelation, every thing and person bursting with God. Waking up to the fact that all creation swims in, is surrounded by, and breathes the blessing of God is the first step on the path of Christian maturity. To live happily in a world we did not create we must come to see all creation as an expression of the blessed love of God.

Since creation flows from the Royal Creator and is therefore blessed, it would follow that the peak of that creation would be whatever bears most closely the image of the maker. God does not just bless the birds of the air and the fish of the sea into creation – the Royal Creator also creates royal children. We must take quite seriously the principle declared in the Book of Genesis, that man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God:

“God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them saying, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Gen 1:27).

No other aspect of God’s creation is God’s image and likeness; only man and woman hold this royal position. In writing the creation story, the authors wanted to capture the important point that the person is the peak of God’s giving, the clearest expression and noise of God.

“Mankind, looking on that which is below him, is an ‘image’ of God, and knows not but that he is God; but looking upwards, he becomes a ‘likeness’ of God, as the sheath is the likeness of the sword.” (Coventry Patmore, p.8, *The Rod, The Root and The Flower*)

It is as though by placing the creation of woman and man on the sixth day, the authors of this powerful Genesis story were trying to say that somehow God had to work up to the creation of man and woman, that this took greater expression of creative love. It could be said that for God to create was easy, but when it came to the creation of human beings, God went so far as to make a mirror image. In the Genesis story, only man and woman are made in the image of God. All things bear the mark of this creator and the Creator within all, but only the human is made in God’s image, blessed in some mysterious way as a reflective likeness of the Creator.

The royal dignity of being human is again expressed in the Genesis story when God blesses man and woman and sends them forth to multiply and subdue the Earth. Only man and woman can subdue and be creative as God is creative. All creatures may be an echo of God, but man and woman are the voices of God. God spoke creation into existence, gifting humans with the ability to speak and to be creative. It is important to note here that the Genesis story of beginnings states clearly that it is males and females that are created in the image of God. It is not just the male of the species that is created in likeness to God, as we may unconsciously assume. Rather both the male and female are in likeness to God. This is not only a first statement of the equality of men and women, but it is also a clear statement about God. If women and men are created in God's image, then should we not approach God as did the early writers of this story, as masculine and feminine. To attribute maleness and femaleness to God is to place a limitation upon a reality beyond limitation. To interpret properly the Genesis Scripture passage of creation however, one must open oneself up to the equality of men and women as they reflect God's image, recognizing that God is neither male nor female but embraces all.

There is, then, a basic dignity in being human, in being created "little less than angels" (Ps 8:5-6). It is a dignity we all too often forget or allow to be overpowered by unrealistic negativity about ourselves and the human family.

A Hidden God

Many would find this positive and constructive view of humanity hard to accept, however. Some would find the previous statements describing God as an overflowing, a blessing into all reality, as simply too saccharine and flowery. How can anyone in the face of human pain and suffering, declare or believe that God creates all things blessed? In the face of world problems, personal agony and family pains, it seems that God has created all things, especially man and woman, cursed, not blessed and loved. In the despair and loneliness of life, a positive view of God, others and ourselves seems to be a pious over-simplification that denies the reality of evil and suffering. Our basic dignity and original righteous relationship with God is often lost or forgotten in the deep pains of life. All too often we find it difficult to see God anywhere; God seems so hidden in

our lives. At times, life can seem to be not a blessing but a curse. It seems somewhat easier to believe that God is present in us and in all creation when our lives are peaceful and in order. When chaos reigns, however, we feel God has chosen not to walk with us. If we attempt to live as children of God, walking with God as Christians, we must learn to approach all reality with a positive perspective, even in the midst of pain. It is especially when hurting that we need to walk closely with God.

As children of God we are called to be amazed at creation, to be awestruck at the grace-filled world around us. We are called to life as a great gift, not as something forced upon us with no choice of our own. God is the Great Gift-Giver, who takes enormous delight in giving Himself in creation.

The Curse of Being Human

We so very often take our own blessed creation for granted. We easily fall into cynicism, using and abusing ourselves, others, and God as objects. For many the world is not a gift, but a curse, marked with crushed hopes and dreams. We all too often feel God as chosen not to walk with us when it is actually we who have refused to walk with God.

We all too easily forget the fact that we are royal children of the Royal Creator. We are forgetful of that garden experience, when we lived in original righteousness, resting and walking with God. The memory of our child-likeness to God becomes dulled by the pain and negativity we experience in life. We complain that we live in a world we did not create, while we desire to recreate it in our own image.

I am not denying here that profound evil exists in the world. Nor am I offering a sentimentally sweet, artificial picture of blessed creation. What I am saying has been better said by Coventry Patmore.

“To him who waits all things reveal themselves, provided that he has the courage not to deny, in darkness, what he has seen in light.” (p. 27 The Rod, The Root and The Flower)

We have seen in the light of God's love that God has created all reality blessed, with man and woman in His image and likeness. The truth is that the human family is blessed but broken; created in God's image, yet destructive of that image; created as royal children, while refusing to walk with the royal Creator. Only by seeing with the light of courageous faith can we develop and accept a constructive yet balanced view of humanity. It is only with a positive yet realistic view of life that we, as children of God, will be free enough to grow and develop with a basic trust in the future of the human family.

Need for Awareness

A maturing child of God must bear within himself or herself a vision of life that can account for and synthesize the fact that the human family is created blessed but lives wounded. To focus on only one or the other of these realities would be foolish optimism or destructive pessimism, neither of which is a healthy Christian attitude, encouraged by true spirituality. To recognize that we are blessed and good, without also recognizing our tremendous potential for evil and hate would be a simplistic point of view which denies the reality of human freedom. We cannot, as maturing children of God, approach the world as a child would approach a bright flame...eyes wide with curiosity and awe, mouth open in surprise, hand reaching out to touch. As maturing children of God we have the knowledge that fire will burn, that evil is real. Every one of us has the potential to love, to give and to be creative, as well as the great potential for destruction and hate, envy, and violence. Within each person lives the same murderous thoughts and shadows of destruction. As we walk with God, we learn to see life not so much as an accident or curse but as a blessed adventure guided by God, the path maker.

Sin – Walking without God

The sinful attitude is the fall of forgetfulness; a walking without God, while not missing Him. We all too easily forget that God creates the path of life. We ignore who we are – royal children of the Royal Creator. We forget or refuse to live as blessed images, echoes and bywords of God.

The choice of living in the awareness of our child-likeness to God or of living as a child of fear, hate, destruction, or self-centeredness, is a choice that belongs to each human being. Each of us is Adam and Eve within and is given the original freedom of living as God’s children in the garden kingdom or walking the path of the lesser god of self-sufficiency.

Sin is the displacement of God from life’s path, replacing God with lesser gods of our own making. Rooted in collective and inherited amnesia we forget our original source and path.

In the story of the great fall, Eve, the image of us all, is approached by the cunning serpent. The serpent presents a lie; that if the fruit of the tree is eaten, she will not die. The serpent is warping the truth, bending God’s work, tempting Eve and Adam to forge their own path rather than live as created children of God. Sin, then, is the displacement of truth – the truth that God is the creator, source and root of all. Sin is a placing of our will at the center of life, while pushing aside the creative blessing of God. Sin is self-seeking rather than God seeking. It is profoundly human, for only man and woman can ignore and forget their own image and likeness. Only the human family attempts to walk without God.

The story of the prodigal child captures clearly the rebellious and sinful attitude of forgetfulness and denial. The son demanded:

“Father, give me the share of the estate that is coming to me.” (Luke 15:12)

The young man must have felt trapped by the traditions, ways, and love of his father, so like many young people he preferred to strike out alone, to find his own way. Of course, he did not leave the Father until he had taken the gifts he felt were due him. The father did not force his son to remain but to his demand for independence the father responded and divided up the property (Luke 15:12).

The rebellious child forged his own path and traveled alone. The prodigal son believed he could make it on his own, that he did not need his father’s care, kindness, assistance, or help. It was not until his solitary path led him to “feeding the pigs” (Luke 15: 14) that he realized that he had compromised his very identity as a child of God.

This young prodigal may have learned a great deal on his solitary road but perhaps his greatest lesson is fittingly captured by this Oscar Wilde quote:

“In this life there are two tragedies, one is not getting what one wants, the other is getting it.”

The rebellious son of the prodigal story suffered both tragedies until he awoke to his true need, companionship. As Ann and Barry Ulanov have written in their perceptive book, Religion and the Unconscious: “We cannot know ourselves by ourselves, we cannot save ourselves by ourselves; isolation is the path to destruction.”

Brought low, in desperate need, lonely and tired of walking along the rebellious child finally awoke and returned to his patient father. In shame he felt unworthy to be called a child but declared himself a slave to the father. Yet waiting on the path was the gentle father who “ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

The son refused to walk with his father, but the father never forgot to wait for his son. When his son returned the father treated him as a friend and not as a slave, a companion and not a servant. As the father of the prodigal story welcomed his son, when he finally remembered his need and identity, so God waits on the path to walk again with those who remember they are royal images of the Royal Creator. The sinner falls into forgetfulness, thinking he can live without the love of God, only to discover one day that to cope with the chaos of life only God’s gentle love will suffice.

Adam, Eve, and the prodigal live today in the hearts of all those who act as though self-sufficiency is of greater value than faith, isolation more prized than companionship, self-will more important than union with God.

As no person is exempt from the collective amnesia, of forgetfulness, so no child of God will ever be excluded from the continued blessings of God. Whether we desire to walk with God or not, God will always desire to walk with us. We can refuse to walk with God, but we cannot prevent God from walking always with us.

Returning to the Path of God

As the child in the story of the prodigal, so maturing children of God must come to face the truth that they are created blessed but live broken away from the grace-filled covenant path of God. Children of God know that apart from and in spite of their extreme littleness and sinful forgetfulness, they are still the royal children of the Royal Creator.

Remembering who we are is the task of the Christian. Remembering that God is behind, within, and surrounds life is the attitude of one maturing in the ability to cope with God's love and blessing with grateful receptivity. We must take very seriously this story told by a Rabbi:

"Every person must carry two stones with them at all times. On one stone should be written, "I am a Child of God, and the world was created blessed for me." On the other stone should be written, "I am but dust and ashes, a rebellious, forgetful child." We should carry these stones in our pockets as reminders of who we are and how we live."

The stones of truth remind us that we are blessed but broken. When we need to recall our child-likeness to God, we must return to our source, the path of God's creative love. When we have been forgetful and have ignored God, we must look deeply at the rock of sin that prevents us from walking with the gentle companion.

To be humble is to be truthful about who and what we are, blessed but broken. We are loved but flawed. There are no perfect people, there are only children of God maturing toward perfection. Most people seem to think that the goal of life is to be perfect, thinking that perfection is to be without any flaws or failures. They hold high the example of the canonized saints as though they were perfectly without sin. If you look closely at the lives of the saints you will see imperfect human beings who were weak and forgetful. What distinguishes the saints and makes them perfect is not that they were without sin and failures but rather that they achieved perfect unity with God because they gave everything to God. Christian perfection is not being without sin and weakness but rather perfection is a giving, a turning over of our whole selves to the companion on the path toward the kingdom.

When you walk with God, you come to learn and believe that despite your brokenness and rebellion, God continues to walk with you. God is constantly blessing His children with life. As God said to Abram in the Book of Genesis, so He says to each of us:

“I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing, I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.” (Gen 12:2-3)

Seeing the human family as blessed but broken should leave an authentic optimism in the hearts of each of us. We know full well the beauty of humanity, and we are well aware of the rebellious forces that live within. No foolish optimism can be held by a maturing individual. Too much evidence shows the destructive potential of man and woman. Still a cautious optimism in the future of humanity is a healthy Christian attitude, for each person has within the seed of God, the spark of God’s light. A balanced, constructive and realistic view of the human family is a sign of a maturing child of God.

Each of us knows that life is almost impossible; that it has always been so; that you must be more than just human to face the realities of life; that you must live and walk as a blessed child of God.

CHAPTER III FEARFUL YET LOVED

Our God is a mentoring God, gently loving us despite our brokenness, gently teaching us to love ourselves.

“All the world is maddened by the mystery of love, and continually seeks its solution everywhere but where it is to be found.) (Coventry Patmore, The Rod, The Root and the Flower)

The solution to the problem of love can only be found as you walk with God. Authentic Christian self-love is impossible without first accepting the love of God. You cannot learn to love yourself by yourself, learn to love others without the example of others, or learn to love God without facing the terror of walking along. To love self and others you must first accept the love of God.

Fear of God’s Love

There is a basic fear that prevents us from accepting the love of God; a fear that places obstacles, barriers, and roadblocks in the way of God’s affirming love. In fear we refuse to accept the acceptance of God. To allow God to love, cherish and care for others is far easier than to accept the fact that God created me and remains with me in love. Perhaps born out of the collective fear of losing our own identity, we continue to run from the powerful yet gentle love of God. Perhaps this fear is the curse that the human family brought upon itself when it rejected its true identity in the garden.

Perhaps the effect of the original turn of humanity from God’s way has been to instill the way of fear in the human heart. Afraid that love means losing freedom, individuality, and independence, we push God off the path of life striking out on our own to forge an identity that we think we can control. We are terrified of that which cannot harm us and desire that which cannot save us.

It is the enemy, fear, that tells us that we are unworthy, merely flesh, unloved, and sinful beyond redemption. It is fear that works to convince us that if we accept the love of God and learn to love ourselves we are

becoming prideful and arrogant. Our fears keep us from hearing and accepting the blessed noise of God resounding with the message that we are not only loved but respected by God.

For many years it seemed the most effective method of teaching revolved around fear. Threatening gets much quicker results than does teaching with a mentoring love. This simple anonymous story describes for me how deeply ingrained is our fear of God's love.

“One night Steven, who is six years old, goes off to bed, is tucked in by his parents, and falls to sleep with ease. Some hours later in the darkness of the night, Steven awakens with a fright, thinking that he hears someone moving in his room, making a noise. Steven yells for his parents and throws the covers over his head to protect himself from the noise of the intruder. His parents wake and rush to his room; this is very unusual behavior for their son. They enter the room and turn on the light, while Steven tells them that there is someone in his room making noises. His parents look around the room but find no one, so to comfort their child they tell him that it is God who is in the room.

Steven accepts his parents' explanation and calms down. His parents tuck him back into bed and begin to leave the room. As they close the door they hear Steven say quite clearly, “OK, God, you can stay in my room, but just don't make any more noise or I'll be scared to death.”

How many people have learned to relate to God as the child does in this simple story? We may allow God to be, but when it comes to accepting the noise of God's love in our lives we pull the covers of fear over our heads. It is all right to allow God to live, bless, and move within the local church or in the lives of those around us in need or when we are in desperate pain. In times of necessity we find it easy to accept God's presence, wanting God to comfort and console us, heal us and take our pains away. But when it comes to allowing God to make noise in our everyday lives, challenging us with love, it is often another matter.

Until we accept the noise of God's love, however, we cannot come to a deep and abiding self-respect. Until we face the fears that drive us from God, we cannot learn to love ourselves or bless another. It is only through the mentoring God of love that we learn how to love ourselves as blessed

but broken, worthy yet sinful. Despite the fact that “supreme happiness is found in the conviction that we are loved – loved for ourselves; say rather loved in spite of ourselves” (Victor Hugo), we continue to cling to the fear that divides us from God and ourselves. We are afraid “to fall into the hands of God” (Heb 10:31). Despite the fact that the hand of God embraces us as friends, guides us to royal children, heals us as broken people, and holds us up in value and worth, we stand in terror.

As we continue to refuse God’s love, however, God continues to bless. The noise of God’s being is love. Before God is righteous, judge, merciful, victor, savior, or redeemer, God is love, and what God is, God gives.

What we fear is the power of that love, that it will consume us, control us, and ultimately destroy who we are. It is only those who are courageous enough to let go of such fear who will discover that by accepting God’s love they can become who they were created to be, royal children.

Poor Self Image

“My child, in all modesty, keep your self-respect and value yourself at your true worth. Who will speak up for a person who is their own enemy, or respect one who disparages himself?” (Sirach 10:28-29).

You can only learn to love yourself as you learn to accept the love of God that has, is, and will always create and bless. The odyssey is difficult, filled with dramatic and dynamic events. You can’t learn to love yourself, respecting yourself as you deserve, in a five week course or by reading a pop-psychology book. Self-care is born, grows, and expands in direct proportion to one’s honest acceptance of God’s love.

What may seem easily written by the Gospel writer, Mark, “Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength...and your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30) is perhaps the most difficult task on life’s journey. It seems far easier to fear and avoid, deny, and reject the love of God as something you can live without. The problem is, however, that if you do not learn to

cope with the love of God, you will condemn yourself to carry the burden of self-hate.

It is fear that deprives us of a healthy self-image, victimizing us with uncertainty and insecurity, inferiority and inadequacy. Trapped in fear, we become a phony, hiding behind masks we think will be pleasing to others. We begin to measure ourselves against what we imagine others to be or have: education, good looks, personality, things that manner. Rather than striving to be who we are, fear drives us to be better than others. We bend over backwards to please others because of our insecurity. We defer to the opinions and feelings of others because we lack confidence. Constantly trying to prove our worth, we seek to attach ourselves to something or someone that will give us a sense of value. Not satisfied with what has already been given us by God, we search for a God that will love us unconditionally, but on our terms.

Having a poor self-image, a warped concept of our own value and worth, is not something recently invented by pop-psychology. The phrase 'poor self-image' is not just psycho-babble. The lack of authentic self-love is real. The lack of honest self-respect is not only real, it is the foundation of sin. Unwilling to accept who we are in the eyes of God, we seek to live as who we wish to be. It is the lack of self-love that leads humanity to compete for control, war in violence, and marginalize others with prejudice. Deprived of self-respect we attempt to prove our worth by controlling others, displacing God in our lives for power and prestige. Striving to make a name for ourselves, we deny the name given by God: children. Trapped in feelings, of insecurity, uncertainty, inadequacy and inferiority, we find it difficult, if not impossible, to build positive and healthy relationships with God, others, and with ourselves. The image and likeness of God is not found in a poor self-image. As royal children of a Royal Creator, we can walk with strength and health, knowing full well that we are blessed: broken true, but first blessed then blessed again.

Human Value and Worth

**"The human form divine. It is actually divine; for the body is the house of God, and an image of Him, though the devil may be its present tenant."
(Coventry Patmore, p. 27, The Rod, The Root and The Flower.)**

The devil is self-hate, the tenant disrespect. When I am given the opportunity to participate in the healing service of confession, or sacrament of reconciliation as it is called, I become most disturbed when someone confesses their sins with a remorse and guilt far greater than their sinfulness deserves. Fear has taught them that God is first a punisher not a creative lover. In such situations I find myself trying to convince someone, usually with little success, that despite their brokenness they are of enormous value, profoundly worthy of God's love.

God not only blesses those broken, but blesses and loves especially those who have broken from his path only to return in sorrow. Only God's love can break through the barriers of sin and the loneliness of a poor self-image to love us into loving ourselves. Only God can evict the devil of self-hate with a love so powerful that it cannot be denied.

Children of God can be described as those who have a growing acceptance of themselves as they are, not as they would wish to be. They can recognize their beauty and failures, talents and faults. They can be themselves, putting aside the masks they wear in order to be acceptable to others. They can be honest with their own feelings and opinions, without worrying that if they let themselves be known they will not be accepted. Children of God love themselves enough to know that it is not the love of others that makes them worth something, but the love of God that has already created them with essential dignity. Children of God grow in the knowledge that it is not so much what they can do that makes them valuable because their worth is based first upon who they are in the eyes of God.

Human worth and value cannot be measured simply by what we do, or do not do. Human beings are not instruments or tools of production, accountable for a certain amount of output or achievement. If human success and personal accomplishment were the norm for value and self-worth, then those who have done much would have the greatest and healthiest of self-images. This is often not the case. Some of the most illustrious and so-called important people are those riddled with the most gnawing of self-doubts and fears. Social status does not take the place of authentic Christian status. Only by walking with God can we become free of the fears that measure us, imprison us, and control us. It is only by walking with God that the status of authentic Christian self-love is found.

As we grow courageous, confronting our fear of God, so we will come to believe that all creation, including “me,” is continually being created by a God who everyday;

**Speaks me into splendor,
Touches me into tenderness,
Guides me into compassion,
Looks me into loveliness,
Seduces me into serenity,
Breathes me into beauty,
Embraces me into gentleness,
Caresses me into courage, and
Loves me into self-acceptance.
God gives what God is.**

Love is Relational

Authentic self-love can only be found in the dynamic and honest relationship we establish with God, others, and ourselves. Called to a friendship with ourselves, built upon confidence in God’s friendship, we learn to befriend others. The dynamic element of love is most beautifully captured in a Scripture passage already referred to, the Parable of the Great Commandment.

In this story of the young scribe, found in Mark’s Gospel 12:20-31, Christ sets before us the dynamic trinity of love, a relational trinity of God, others, and self. In order to love yourself you must first accept the love of God’s lordship to love God you must love your neighbor, to love your neighbor, you must come to love yourself. No one exists outside his circle of dynamic love. We live and grow only in the atmosphere and context of relationships. As I relate to the world, neighbor, God, and myself, I am defined in personality and identity. Christian growth depends primarily upon the recognition, appreciation, and acceptance of this circle of blessing. Blessed first by God, humanity has broken the circle of love, yet remains and continues blessed by God. Blessed and loved enough, we can learn how to bless and love others and ourselves. The maturing Christian cannot say that “alone I will get it all together and then I will share myself with others.” Nor can one walking with God say “I will take care of

my relationship with God, and then I will share with others.” Children of God mature only as they recognize that they cannot grow in isolation.

We learn to accept God’s love as we take the risk of sharing love and accepting love from others. Because our relationships are dynamically interdependent, we can work at honestly loving ourselves for the sake of loving God, work at loving others for the purpose of union with God, and work at loving God in order to grow closer to others and to ourselves. It does not matter where you begin in the creative trinity of self, others, and God. If you work honestly at one relationship, it will directly influence and affect the others. When you walk openly with God, you walk truthfully with yourself and lovingly with brothers and sisters.

CHAPTER IV BLESSING OTHERS

When a maturing child of God walks with God, bravely accepting love, he or she becomes a blessing in the lives of others. Children, made in the image and likeness of love, become that love in the world. God has already given all that He is. God cannot bless or love any more than He has already given. There won't be any more of God tomorrow than there was yesterday or is today. We may come to discover and find the more of God that surrounds us, but we cannot convince God to give more than already given. The task of maturing Christians is not to convince God to walk ever closer to them, but to convince themselves to walk ever more closely with the ever-present and affirming God.

As we come to walk with God, we realize that God is not alone on the path. God has a great deal of company. In fact, the way of God is quite crowded for God walks with our every neighbor, teaching all of us how to love and bless one another.

Who Am I Neighbor To?

There is a Gospel story that can help us understand first, who it is we are called to love; second, what love is not; and third, what love is. The parable of the path, or as it is most commonly referred to, the Good Samaritan story, begins with a lawyer's questions. Seeking everlasting life the lawyer asks Christ "Who is my neighbor?" Christ answers the lawyer's question not with a statement but with another and perhaps even more important question. The question Christ asks concerns how we bless or do not bless, love or do not love others.

"There was a man going down to Jericho who fell prey to robbers. They stripped him, beat him, and then went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road; saw him but continued on. Likewise, there was a Levite who came the same way; he saw him and went on. But a Samaritan who was journeying along came on him and was moved with pity at the sight. He approached him and dressed his wounds, pouring in oil and wine. He then hoisted him on his own beast and brought

him to an inn where he cared for him. The next day he took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper with the request, 'Look after him; and if there is any further expense, I will repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who fell in with the robbers? The answer came, 'The one who treated him with compassion.' Jesus said, 'Then go and do the same.'" (Luke 10:29-37)

In this parable story, Christ takes the question of the lawyer and reverses it. Jesus presumes that every person is our neighbor, especially those most victimized and marginalized by society. All individuals are our neighbors, with a special emphasis upon those who suffer and hurt. To Christ the more important question is whether we act in a neighborly way toward others. How we love or refuse to love others is far more important a question than who we should or should not love.

The above story of the path tells us a great deal about what love is not. The characters of the priest, Levite, and robbers are good examples of those who refuse to love.

These individuals certainly did not treat the man on the path with the attitude and care of a neighbor. They did not even see him as their neighbor. To them he was unimportant, insignificant, or even less. The robbers physically pushed the man going to Jericho off the path he traveled. They abused and beat him, robbing him of his basic and essential dignity and rights. The priest ignored the man as someone of little value, while the Levite marginalized the man as unworthy of his attention. The robbers victimized the traveling man, proclaiming that they were in control of the path. The Levite and priest walked with arrogance as though the path belonged to them. Neither robbers, Levite, or priest knew enough of love to care for an injured man.

The greatest violence we can do to others is to marginalize them, pushing them off to the side of the road. Because others are different or do not do as we want them to do, we easily decide that they do not belong. We do great violence to others when we marginalize them, casting them out of our way, because we need and desire control. When you have a poor self-image, it is much easier to compensate by knocking others down, climbing on top of them in order to feel important, rather than by learning how to care for another with sacrifice. Most often, we hurt others not

because of who they are but because of who we are. When we feel unworthy, we think we can become valuable by finding another as scapegoat. When we feel insignificant, we think that by controlling another we will have achieved some modicum of importance. We marginalize others not because they are so different from ourselves but because we are afraid that we are different from others. Violence flows from fear. Whether we marginalize the unborn, the poverty-stricken, gays, women, handicapped, or elderly, it is primarily because of our fear of losing control of our own sense of importance. On the parable path of the Good Samaritan it was the game of power that was being played by the robbers, Levite, and priest. Because they felt powerless and poor, they took from the traveler the power of worth and dignity. It was not until the good Samaritan walked the path that we meet someone who had learned how to love. The robbers, Levite, and priest tried to put the traveling man in his place, off the path of significance.

The Samaritan man tried to put himself in the place of the injured man, climbing off the path of power to help someone victimized by power-seekers. To the Samaritan, those most victimized, marginalized, and powerless were his closest neighbors. They were important enough to help by giving them an opportunity to climb back on the path of equality. The Samaritan did not discriminate between neighbor and non-neighbor as the priest, Levite, and robbers did. To the Samaritan it was more important to love well than to decide to whom he should or should not give love. It was more important to bless than to look for a return on his blessing.

What Is and Is Not Love

St. Paul, the great letter writer of the Scriptures, shares an often-quoted description of what love is and is not. We have seen in the story of the Samaritan the characteristics of one who is or is not neighbor to another, but perhaps this scripture passage will help bring out the differences more clearly. The parentheses are my own.

What love is not.

“Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. (It does not marginalize.) Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking (It does not isolate or victimize.) it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries. (Love does not exclude.) Love does not rejoice in what is wrong...” (Love does not ignore.) (I Cor 13:4-6)

What love is

“Love is patient; love is kind. (Love includes.) Love...rejoices with the truth (that all are created royal). There is no limit to love’s forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. (Love blesses as God blesses, eternally.) Love never fails.” (It slowly and gently overcomes.) (I Cor 13:6-8)

Love is, first of all, an attitude, a predisposition for the good. Problems often arise, however, because of language. English is limited to the use of one word, love, to describe a wide variety of experiences. Frequently we confuse love with infatuation, a mere shadow of real love. When we speak of Christian love we are speaking of an attitude, an inner movement toward the good for the loved object. An attitude of Christian love is not built merely upon likes, dislikes or romantic feelings that swing high and low depending upon mood. Although Christian love deeply involves the emotions, it is not based only upon attachments or emotional inclinations. Love of neighbor is a call beyond our feelings and beyond our moods. Christian love is a manner of relating out of the attitude that recognizes our neighbor is blest no matter how we feel.

A child of God grows in the ability to love, seeing God in all things and people. When one wakes up to the reality that God is in every neighbor one becomes predisposed in attitude to do in action whatever is good for that neighbor. Love then is both an attitude and an action.

How Christ Loved

If we look within the words of Scripture we will meet the living attitude and action of God’s love in Jesus Christ. To encounter the birth,

life, and death of Christ is to meet face to face the movements of God's love and blessing. Christ is "my beloved Son. On you my favor rests" (Mark 1:11). Christ is the expression of God's favor. When we walk with God, we encounter Christ, the attitude and action of love made visible on the path of life. The very purpose of Christ is to be the expression of God's favor. God's love lives, walks, dies, and rises in Christ. To discover what love is, we look to Christ for it is the mentoring Christ who can teach us how to love.

Christ Recognized Worth

Christ lived and died in order to love, affirm, and bless others. The ministry of Christ was a stream of blessings to call others to bless and love as they have been blest and loved by God.

Christ affirmed and blessed His neighbors, first and foremost, through His basic recognition of their unique value and giftedness as persons. Christ recognized each person as a full child of God. He was aware of their goodness and worth just by the fact that they existed. Christ encountered each person in His life as a gift of God, and He rejoiced in the value of each. Every person was included on that path. Christ simply enjoyed people. His sense of love for His neighbor was not conditioned on whether they produced for Him or even followed Him. Rather, His love was based on the fact that each was a child of God. This fact moved Him in attitude and action to rejoice at the unique dignity of His brothers and sisters.

Christ included the little children that the apostles tried to exclude and rejoiced with them saying,

"Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. It is to just such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. I assure you that whoever does not accept the reign of God like a little child shall not take part in it." (Mark 10:14-15)

Christ rejoiced in the goodness of the woman at the well, blessing her with a gift. She was a Samaritan woman, outcast among the Jews. But

Christ, a Jew, not only spoke with her...He offered her life-giving water. (John 4:4-16) He included even her as one of God's own.

In Christ we find the example of love in that He constantly recognized the unique goodness and worth of others, despite their surface façade. In every person Christ saw Himself.

Christ Shares the Path

Christ not only recognized the worth of others but felt attracted to and found delight in sharing with others. Christ developed intimate friendships with the most diverse types of people. To a man who was going to deny Him, Christ said,

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18)

Christ chose to stay at the house of a swindling tax collector caught in a sycamore tree, to spend the day and share his table. (Luke 19:1-10) Concerning a woman caught in adultery, Christ declared,

“Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her.” (John 8:7)

Christ saw the goodness of those people He met and walked with, blessing them with words of forgiveness and healing. Even the woman caught in sin, looked down upon by the culture's prejudice toward women in general, Christ affirmed in His love. Christ walked with each person as the grace-filled presence of God. Christ's love included all, especially those most excluded by others. Christ chose to share the path with those most victimized and marginalized.

Christ Touched

Not only did Christ always see the unique goodness and value of others, he also expressed His love. Love without actions is not Christian love. To love as Christ loved we must communicate affirmation in word and

deed. Christ's love was very tactile, very much a love expressed in physical touching. Christ was constantly touching to heal and forgive. To the leper who begged Christ to heal him of his disease:

“Jesus stretched out His hand to touch him and said, ‘I do will it. Be cured.’” [Luke 5:13]

To the blind men of Jericho who begged the Lord to open their eyes Christ also reached out:

“Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes, and immediately they could see.” [Matt 20:34]

As Christ showed His healing love with touch , so many sought to touch Him , believing that if they could just have some physical contact with the power of His love they would be healed. Christ emanated love through Himself. To be touched by, or to touch Christ, put one in close contact with the very power of God's love.

“Indeed, the whole crowd was trying to touch Him because power went out from Him which cured all.” [Luke 6:19]

Children were brought to be touched by Christ [Luke 18:15], for

“All who touched Him got well.” [Mark 6:56]

Christ's love was an attitude alive in the action of His touch. His love embraced in a physical way the child of God in every person that He met, **“Then He embraced [the children] them, and blessed them, placing His hands on them.” [Mark 10:16]**

Called to Touch

To love our neighbor in heart, mind, soul, and strength, we must feel in our hearts an attitude of love, know in our minds the worth of others, share in our spirit a kinship with all, and express in our touch, care for our brothers and sisters. Authentic love is a doing. It is a giving of yourself in a

tactile and concrete way. To touch a child in pain, to caress a person in need of a sense of security, this is a doing from love.

A religious sister with whom I have become acquainted has a most difficult mission, working with young delinquents. She encounters in her work, children starving for food and affection. She sees young drug addicts hungry for someone to touch them with a real, affirming love. She sees parents who long to have their children express a tender touch of care. The need she recognizes she calls a “skin hunger.”

The sense of touch can be described as the first sense and perhaps the most important. It is born when we are born, awakened when we are cared for. The average adult has approximately eighteen square feet of skin, which carries about five million touch cells. Physical touch is a primary method of perception and communication, a much underrated path of learning.

Touch is the medium of human bonding. It is the glue that holds together families, gangs, couples, teams, and friends. Without physical touch we emotionally, if not physically, die. Touch is that important.

The nurturing and affirming power of physically touching another person has been overwhelmed, however, by sexual fears and cultural taboos that cause people to shy away from touching one another. ‘Men do not touch’ in American society, while in Israel they walk arm in arm down the street. Parents fall into the myth that holding a child will only spoil them while their children suffer untold damage because of being deprived of the need for the physical communication of care.

Touch is a language, a language of care and affection or the noise of violence and disrespect. Christ used the language of touch as a powerful language of love, teaching that love must be expressed in some tactile way if it is to be effective. An embrace, a kiss of peace, a simple handshake done with confidence carries more words of love than a volume of books. A child of God recognizes that ‘skin hunger’ is as important in many respects as food hunger.

Called To Give

Christ shows us the greatest example of concrete, physical giving of love in His carrying of and dying upon the cross. The cross stands today as the greatest sign of one man's expression of love for another.

"There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

The cross is the most tactile expression of love in the history of the world. Christ accepted even death on a cross to physically express His affirming love toward the human family. Christ was never silent when it came to expressions of love. His every action of healing, His every word of forgiveness, was and is a loud announcement of His great love. His cross was the ultimate, most powerful and transformative touch of His love.

As Christ, the son of God, was called to give in love, so we, as children of God, are also called to give. As Christ, the Royal Son, was called to affirm and bless with His Life, so we, the royal children of God are called to follow in His example of blessing and affirming.

Called to Be Compassionate

Jesus is our model of love, our mentor in how to live and to walk as a blessing in the lives of others. We are to love as Christ loved.

"Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Pardon, and you shall be pardoned. Give and it shall be given to you." (Luke 6:36-38)

Love is a giving of compassion, a letting all creation be as it was created to be, the gracious goodness of God. Christ is compassion incarnate, the Great Reminder who calls every person to be compassionate and loving as God is.

Compassion is a way of seeing life as surrounded by and swimming in God. To be compassionate is to develop attitudes and actions of justice,

giving every person his or her proper due. Every person is due forgiveness when sorrowful, freedom when imprisoned, care when ill, food when hungry, and justice when wronged. By the fact that we are children of God we are entitled to a basic dignity and respect. No child of God can deny another his just due.

Rather, children of God must work to build up and make firm their brothers and sisters, affirming them in heart, mind, soul, and strength. Children of God show compassion by: 1. allowing others to accept themselves as they are with their failures and achievements; 2. allowing others to express their emotions in a constructive way; 3. encouraging others to let go of their fears that paralyze, and to become more assertive in opinions and feelings; 4. helping others feel that they are, in and of themselves, important and worthwhile; 5. constantly recognizing and pointing out the goodness of another; 6. being gentle with others; and 7. patiently encouraging growth in the life of another. As we accompany one another on God's path, we share with one another the blessings that God has given us.

Bless in Thanks

If we are thankful enough for what we have been given, we will bless as we have been blessed. A hundred times each day, we should remember those people who have been a blessing in our lives – those men and women, both living and deceased, who, through their labor and effort, have helped us learn of love. Having been blessed, we must realize that we must also exert ourselves in order to give in the measure that we have received, blessing as we have been blest. A hundred times each day we should remind ourselves that it is through the labor of our neighbor's love that we are able to experience the love of God. Those who have blessed us are our God-people, as we are God-people and soul friends to those we bless.

To labor in our efforts, to provide others with a beneficial atmosphere of trust, hope, and love is the task of the maturing Christian. As you walk with God, you want to help others walk with God. As you are blessed with the presence of God in life, you want others to experience that presence. In attitude and action a child of God wants to include as many as possible on the gentle and compassionate path of God.

CHAPTER V GROWING IN SELF- KNOWLEDGE

When you walk with the Gentle God, you constantly grow in self-understanding and self-awareness. Christianity is a religion of self-knowledge. The way to the garden kingdom of God is a way that requires further and continued self-awareness, without which the path becomes dark. The path of the ignorant is dark but the path of the child of God shines with the brilliance of consciousness.

“Hear, O Children, a father’s instruction, be attentive, that you may gain understanding! Yes, excellent advice I give you; my teaching do not forsake. When I was my father’s child, frail, yet the darling of my mother, He taught me, and said to me: ‘Let your heart hold fast to my words: keep my commands that you may live! Get wisdom, get understanding!’”
(Prov. 4:1-5)

To know Christ is to grow in wisdom and knowledge of one’s inner self. To remain ignorant and unconscious of one’s inner life is to remain blinded to the Christ within. Self-awareness can lead to Christ-awareness.

Maturity and self-awareness go as brothers and sisters throughout life. You cannot love as a child of God, blessing others in a mature fashion, until you first come to a realization of who you are. How you love or do not love flows from how you understand and imagine yourself. You certainly cannot go out to another until you have truly gone within yourself.

The great commandment of Christ is to “love the Lord your God with heart, mind, soul and strength.” You cannot give in love, however, what you do not know and possess. Simply put, you can’t give what you don’t have. You cannot share yourself with another in love, sacrificing for the other’s good, until you have possession of your own emotions, moods, thoughts, desires and needs. Truly, the loneliest person in the world is the person who does not walk with himself: who is not his own companion: who does not know his own thoughts, feelings, intuitions and needs: the person who is a stranger to himself. It is when we have become a stranger to God that we lose contact with ourselves and with others. We may walk alone through life but we need not walk lonely, for God walks with us. As we walk in the company of God we learn to love with ‘all’ that we are.

In order to love authentically, you must know, be aware of, and possess 'all' that you are. Love flows from self-knowledge. As you come to a deeper self-awareness, confronting the negative and shadowy figures and motivations that lurk within yourself, so you will become free to love both yourself and others for the sake of loving God. As you come to a deeper awareness of yourself, you will realize that just as Christ lives within you so Christ lives in each person, despite what surface behavior may indicate. Self-knowledge teaches you to see through the façade of darkness with the eyes of compassion. Knowledge and awareness of self leads to compassionate consciousness of others.

In the story of creation, already referred to in an earlier chapter, it was knowledge that Eve and Adam found most tempting. This "knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 3:5) was held before them by the cunning serpent, the father of lies. It was not merely human knowledge that the serpent held high in temptation, but the supreme knowledge of power. Knowledge in and of itself is not bad, rather it is an essential part of our humanity to grow in awareness. The sin of believing that knowledge will make us as gods, equal to, self-sufficient from, and independent of the one God, is the great human fallacy. We must seek, as part of who we are, to know ourselves in order to love ourselves; know our neighbor in order to love our neighbor; and know God for the purpose of unity with God, self and neighbor. We do not seek knowledge for its own sake or for selfish power. We seek knowledge of ourselves, not to become gods, but rather to become who we are, images of God.

The Inner Self

A great mystic, Meister Eckhart, stated it clearly when he wrote,

"To get at the core of God at His greatest, one must first get into the core of himself at his least, for no man can know God who has not first known himself. Go to the depths of the soul, the secret place of the Most High, to the roots, to the Heights; for all that God can do is focused there." (Meister Eckhart. Trans. R. Blakney, p. 246, Fragment #37)

For Eckhart and for all true searchers of God, the way to God is along the path of self-knowledge. It is a journey within to discover the

inner self, the inner kingdom. To live only in the outer world of things and jobs, schedules, and senses is to deny the other half of ourselves. We live within ourselves first, in a kingdom of emotions, dreams, fantasies, thoughts, attitudes, memories, hopes, and images. We have within us a family of dreams and a community of memories all clamoring to be heard. A child of God does not reject his inner world as though it were merely irrational nonsense. Our inner world may not be wrapped in the same logic and language as our conscious world but it is through the irrational that God speaks. If we can but listen to the images, symbols, and noises of our own unconscious, we can hear the power of the Gentle God.

The one who desires to live as a child of God must travel and cope with his own inner family if he is to know when it is not the voice of Christ speaking in his heart but rather the voice of fear, anger, pain, envy, or hate. The path of self-knowledge is a path of inner confrontation with 'our least,' with all the limitations and illusions that stand as obstacles to our living and loving today in the garden kingdom. We must be awakened, as children of God, to the adversaries that live within us, the illusions that trap us into living as children of power, children of righteousness, children of rebellion, or children of violence.

In order to discover our true identity, we must peel through all the layers of skin that cover our inner worlds. We must recognize and name all our needs and desires, emotions and unconscious motivations which, although they are not evil in and of themselves can, if ignored, become destructively evil. What you ignore within yourself you give the power to destroy you. What you come to terms with, name and cope constructively with, you can befriend and learn to walk with.

There are some who feel, however, that this mysterious path of self-knowledge is only for the mystics and saints. Quite the contrary. Each and every child of God is called to wake from the sleep of ignorance. As Jesus called the young man in the Gospel of Luke to wake from his sleep, so every Christian is called to get up and become all that he or she is and can be.

“Jesus went to a town called Naim, accompanied by His disciples and a large number of people. As he approached the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of a widowed mother... Then

(Jesus) He stepped forward and touched the litter; at this time the bearers halted. He said, ‘Young man, I tell you get up.’ The dead man sat up and began to speak.” (Luke 17:11-12, 14-15)

Christ calls us, as children of God, to wake up from the death of our self-imposed ignorance of ourselves, of others, and of God. We are touched by Christ and awakened to an awareness of who we truly are. We cannot fully know ourselves, or God, we cannot fathom who we are, in our true royal dignity, without the waking touch of Christ. We cannot come to know ourselves by ourselves; we need a mentoring guide to lead us on the path, into the unmapped territory of our inner lives. The Gentle God guides us with grace to a gentle self-understanding. It is the Christ who teaches us how to cope lovingly with ourselves, who guides us toward a greater awareness of heart, mind, soul, and strength. The more aware we become of the adversaries that live within, the more we can become free to recognize the gift that we are and the more we will learn to share that gift with others. The more we confront the illusions that enslave us the more we can walk freely with ourselves and God.

Fear of Darkness

Yet, despite the guidance of Christ, we stand fearful of the darkness within. We are insecure, afraid, if not terrified to look deeply into our own inner space. Perhaps the fears are justified. Honest self-awareness demands deep personal courage as well as the strength of God. To name and confront the lies we tell ourselves, illusions of power, the needs for security, and the adversaries of ignorance that live within us is a frightening challenge. The path of self-awareness is difficult and narrow, but it is the path of a maturing child of God who seeks self-consciousness for the sake of God-consciousness.

“Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man blinded by possessions to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Luke 18:25)

No one can know and experience the light of the garden kingdom of God who has not first known the darkness within himself. Imprisoned like

the man in the following story, we cling to what cannot save us terrified of looking within our dark cells.

“There is the image of a man who imagines himself to be a prisoner in a cell. He stands at the end of this small, dark, barren room, on his toes, with arms outstretched upward, hands grasping for support onto a small barred window, the room’s only apparent source of light. If he holds on tightly, straining toward the window, turning his head just so, he can see a bit of bright sunlight barely visible between the upper-most bars. This light seems to be his only source of hope. He will not risk losing it. And so he continues to strain toward that bit of light, holding tightly to the bars. So committed is his effort not to lose sight of the glimmer of life-giving light that it never occurs to him to let go and explore the rest of the cell, he never discovers that the door at the other end is open, that he is free. He has always been free to walk out into the brightness of the day if only he would choose to let go.” (p. 143 – If You Meet the Buddha On The Road – Kill Him, by Sheldon Kopp)

Like the prisoner, we are called to a letting go of all the illusions in which we have wrapped ourselves for protection. We fear to let go of our glimmer of light, the surface images we have of ourselves, in order to face the chaos that moves within us; a chaos of mixed motivations of love and hate, ignorance, and power. To look within ourselves, naming the fantasies and swelling desires, the powerful loves and murderous hates, is our task. To look within is to search for the true child of God, the spark of God’s light in the center of a circle of fearful children; hurt, envious, and manipulative children. It is only by letting go of our need for self-sufficiency that we will discover that the freedom to be who we are has always been given us by God. The project and purpose of self-knowledge is to let go of that which is not God in order to grasp the God within.

As the prisoner in the previous story, we constantly seek fulfillment, stretching ourselves toward the limited, clinging to narrow desires, needs and accomplishments. Ultimate fulfillment, however, cannot be found in the limited. The prisoner of our story will never find freedom by wrapping his hands around the bars of forgetfulness, remaining locked within an unlocked cell. Nor will the prisoner’s deep hunger for freedom be fed by what he has found outside the cell’s narrow window. To discover the

unlimited God we must reach out for what transcends all reality yet lives within all. Honest self-awareness leads to true God-awareness.

Communicating with Self

In order to develop a deeper self-awareness we must learn to talk with and listen to ourselves. As we do, we will learn the symbolic language in the art of self-communication. I would like to present a method and example of communicating with yourself for the purpose of greater self-awareness. This method is especially helpful at times of high stress and anxiety but can be utilized on a daily basis for deeper peace with self, others, and God. Some refer to this tool as 'inner dialogue.' I prefer to look upon this method or exercise as an 'inner family discussion.'

In utilizing any method of self-communication, we must first allow our imaginations to be free, allowing the images and pictures to rise up from our unconscious to speak with us. Images from the unconscious help to concretize the inner experience so that dialogue and learning can take place. Let me give an example of how one person learned to walk and talk with himself.

A young man of perhaps twenty-five years shared with me a story that took place within his inner kingdom. Because he had been working at and befriending himself for some time in a therapeutic atmosphere he was able to describe many of his emotions, needs, desires, ideals, and values with the images of 'my inner family.' He was able to recognize, as he looked at himself, what he referred to as 'the many characters within.' He saw within himself many sub-personalities, many different attitudes, virtues, feelings, tendencies, moods, and inclinations which he described as 'different people' living through his life. For example, this young man of courage saw within himself the desire for spiritual meaning and faith. A part of him truly searched to walk as a companion with God. He called this faithful and wise aspect of himself "The Monk." He also, through self-observation and imaginative articulation, was able to recognize and name his attitude and tendency toward evil. With much difficulty he began to face his own potential for bitterness and manipulative anger. He called this cunning sub-personality "The Wolf Within." This dark image of the wolf was a powerful one, for, in so naming the wolf within, he was able, to some extent, to accept his own sinfulness. Another inner family member was the

“Pilgrim Within.” This image captured and identified the young man’s tendency to hide in fear and ignorance. He saw the inner pilgrim as that part of himself that was stuck in laziness, sitting back in conscious, and controlled comfort. To the pilgrim, everything along the way seemed in order only because he was avoiding the disorder of his own inner world. The inner monk had visions of God and walked ever more closely with God, the inner wolf snapped at the monk’s feet to cause a fall, while the inner pilgrim was trapped in inertia, afraid to face the realities and challenges of life itself.

After naming these inner aspects of himself, the wise monk, the evil wolf, and the fearful pilgrim, the young man was able to tell a story. The story this young man tells is a tale taking place within the inner world each day as he struggles to grow in honest self-awareness. I share with you this unique and anonymous dialogue that you may see the importance of the imagination in the work of self-knowledge. As this young man was able to articulate his inner story, so we are called to do the same. Perhaps this tale will help you look more closely at your ‘inner family,’ so that you too may let go of the fears to which you cling. Your images may be different but the realities are the same. Within every person lives the child of God. Within every person also lives the demon wolf attempting to control and manipulate toward destruction. Also living within each human heart is the fear of knowledge, the ignorant one within us all. Perhaps as you read this young man’s dialogue with himself you may be able to identify some familiar characters.

The Monk, The Wolf and The Fearful Pilgrim

On the outer edge of the city was a great Holy Place where it was said that God made His abode. The Monk often went there to pray, though he knew that God made His abode in every created thing. He went there because he loved the quiet stillness of the cool stones that had stood for ages, as steadfast and unmoving as the fidelity of God. He loved the dark stillness within, where he could almost hear, in the perfect silence, the very heartbeat of God.

A Pilgrim sat in the rear of the holy place. He heard the door slowly open and the footsteps of the monk, broken by a genuflection, as the monk

proceeded to the altar where he knelt to pray. But the monk's were not the only footsteps, for a wolf had followed him in – a wolf wildly untamed, prancing swiftly this way and that, but staying behind the monk the whole while. His nose sniffed wildly, his tongue hung from his mouth, his sharp teeth glistened in the faint candlelight. From his throat came a wild steady snarl. When the monk knelt at the altar, the wolf continued to pace behind him. The monk, unafraid of the wolf, began to pray silently.

The pilgrim, when his eyes finally distinguished the beast, jumped to his feet and cried out, "Out, animal!"

The monk, not turning his head, said quietly, "Please be still."

The pilgrim cried out, "Surely it is an offense to God to have this wild creature within these holy walls!"

The monk said in a low tone, "No. It is an offense to you."

The pilgrim retorted, "Good monk, I know that you are a holy man. I have heard of your renown throughout the land as a man who walks closely with God. I have also heard that you had a wolf as a pet. Please, explain to me how you could allow this dirty and wild animal to enter this holy place with you?"

The monk was silent for a moment, and then, still facing the altar, he replied, "Good sir, I have no pet. For, as you can see, this wolf is wild. He does not have a name – I do not even call him 'wolf' for even that is too much. This wolf follows me as night follows day, as shadows follow man – and we will always be together. You see, I allow him to be a wolf and because I do he loves me."

"So he is tame if he loves you!" the pilgrim said.

"No. He loves me; but he would kill me in a minute if I were to treat him other than he is." The monk raised his tunic, showing scarred ankles. "These are from the many bites he has given me, all of them from when we first found each other. We would fight. I would wrestle him, trying to break him. He would jump me from behind because I was trying to tame him, capture him, or run from him."

“Scandal of the most high,” cried the pilgrim, “staying close to that flesh devouring beast and bringing him to the altar!”

“Good Sir,” replied the monk, “you too have kept company with a wolf, only you never turned to see how close it is at your heels – for he lurks in the shadows and evades your glance, and becomes daily more vicious as he watches you grow fat. He awaits the day of his attack. For he knows that for all your prayer you are still flesh, as he is, and that it is passion that he has in common with you, and that is why you would taste so good to him.”

“You are mad!”

“Yes, if you call it mad when a man no longer fears the wild but respects it, and learns to see God’s name written in the footprints of the wolf.”

“But it is not worthy of God for you to pray beside a wild and mangy beast.”

“Only God is worthy to pray to God,” replied the monk, “I cannot pray except that the wolf is near me.”

The pilgrim felt a deep emptiness and great confusion, for he was afraid of the wolf. He dropped his head onto his arms and fell into a deep slumber. The monk, understanding the forces of fear that sent the pilgrim into slumber, uttered this prayer for him:

“May you, pilgrim, be soon bitten by your inner wolf – the bite that will show you that you are only half-living; the bite that, like the bite of the apple in the garden, will open your eyes to your naïve ignorance; the bite that will set you free to look deep within, face your wolf, and walk with God.”

This is a powerfully imaginative dialogue of one man confronting his own ignorance. The pilgrim in this tale wants to avoid the wild, untamed, evil and shadowy elements within himself: the wolf. The pilgrim is so afraid of his potentially chaotic tendency toward evil that he preferred to

hide in rigid and conscious piety. He is indignant that anyone would come to respect the power and strength of evil itself. The pilgrim is all of us, afraid of our own wolf, our own inner enemy. But as the wolf lives within, so the monk is constantly present, helping us walk ever more closely with God. The monk within is that curious one who seeks always to know himself for the greater purpose of knowing God. The task of the maturing Christian is to learn to befriend both the wolf (evil) and the monk (wisdom) for only by naming these characters and tendencies can we grow in the knowledge of God's presence. We must, as St. Paul writes in the Acts of the Apostles,

“Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the Church of God, which He has acquired at the price of His own blood. I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come among you who will not spare the flock.” (Acts 20:28-29)

The Attack

Very often, self-awareness is forced upon us in a crisis of life, as the so-called wolves attack. When the untamed chaotic elements of ourselves break loose from the unconscious, we can be easily overwhelmed with hurt and suffering, confusion, and disorder. Chaos within forces us to seek guidance in order to understand ourselves and grow through the turmoil. All of those who have sought counseling, therapy, or spiritual direction, know of the chaos, which can disrupt a surface and seemingly control existence. Those who have had to face depression, alcoholism, or deep personal loss, know of the importance of self-watchfulness. The alcoholic, for example, knows that each day he or she must keep careful watch over the inner desire to escape, for forgetfulness can only lead to another fall. Those addicted to lesser gods know that in order to find freedom they must first find the path of the Higher Power, and then they must walk daily along the ways of awareness.

Letting Go

The realities of our inner world can become manipulatively destructive or profoundly creative. Within each of us is the same potential

for the greatest hate and evil that any person has ever expressed in the history of humanity. Within us also is the potential for the most transforming love that has ever lived – the blessed love of God.

We must risk our comfortable ignorance in order to enter the inner world for the sake of meeting God. I am not simply advocating a self-wallowing or trendy self-exploration, as though pop-psychology were the Christians' new way to Christ. I am declaring a basic element of Christian maturity: to love God, self, and others, one must come to know God, self, and others. The beginning of self-knowledge is the love of God: the purpose of self-knowledge is the love of self and others in the name of God. We must enter a real dialogue with ourselves in order to encounter and befriend all that is not God so that we can be blessed by all that is of God. Our knowledge of ourselves and God is limited knowledge, but we are still children, growing, maturing toward the garden kingdom of Christ-consciousness:

“When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways aside. Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then I shall know as I am known.” (1 Cor 13:11-12).

Christ knows what is in us, and He chose to die for what He knows. Should we not strive for greater self-awareness for the sake of greater God-awareness. Should we not die to the selves that estrange us from God, befriending the adversaries within, so that we can walk freely with the living God? The only one who can prevent us from walking with God is ourselves, our inner fears, insecurities, and rebellious egos.

CHAPTER VI BECOMING AWARE AND EXPRESSING EMOTION

Encountering and integrating our life of feeling is an important task for a maturing child of God. Our feelings and emotions are a vital part of our identity. To deny our own feeling-life is to reject an essential part of our whole selves. We are not just mind (intellect), soul (spirit) and strength (body), but heart (emotions) as well. As children of God we are called to a self-acceptance of all that we are, as flowing from the image and likeness of God.

I realize that for the past twenty years there has been a marked increase of interest in the area of emotional development. To talk about 'how you feel' has in some so-called sophisticated circles become another game to dabble in. Pop-psychology has become the rage, with books on this or that newly developed therapy filling whole sections of local bookstores. You can find in almost any bookstore a book on how to 'influence enemies and gain friends' or 'how to deal with anger.' Pop-psychology has become such big business that you can find today almost as many books published taking a critical stance toward the "Me Generation" as you will find books published on the newest and most innovating method of self-development.

The 1970s has been called the decade of the "Me Generation," and described as a time when psychobabble became the American language. Psychobabble can be described as the compulsive use of psychological words and phrases as a replacement for experiencing the "real" feelings. Pop-psychology has gained many enthusiastic zealots who have read almost every new book in the field or made every available seminar or workshop. Pop-psychology has also gained many strong critics who believe that far too many people have become narcissistic and surface psychobabblers, wallowing in the sentimental and chaotic land of emotions.

Despite the trendy surface tendency toward over-simplification of our emotional life, I would say that, generally, the surge of interest in the reality of feelings and in how they affect us has been beneficial.

For too long, the Christian community allowed the emotional life to take a second place to an over-intellectual view of human identity. Emotions for many Christians became demons to be repressed or exorcised, frequently identified directly with sin. The renewed interest in the reality, influence, and value of the emotions has, however, helped the Christian community to free the life of feeling from the prison of misunderstanding. We can no longer justify placing the life of our emotions one step below that of our intellectual development, nor can we identify feelings as sin. We have come to realize that we do not walk with God only as mind and body but also as people of intense feelings.

Name Our Feelings

As humans we feel far more deeply than we are usually willing to recognize. We feel hurt and pain, loss and grief, anxiety and depression, great joy and quiet peace, love and enthusiasm. As children of God, we must constantly work toward recognizing the heart's movements, growing in awareness of how we feel while developing the ability to express those feelings in a constructive way.

Maturity demands, first, a recognition of the reality of our emotions. In order to focus upon our feelings and name them for what they are, we must come to believe that knowing how we feel is better and more conducive to maturity than ignorance and avoidance of emotion. Because feelings are such a unique and personal part of our human experience, however, recognizing and naming them can be most difficult. Our deepest emotions can be powerful threats to our sense of security, causing us to defend ourselves by avoidance. Feelings of remorse or guilt can be so intense that we feel vulnerable to their power and fearful of the unpleasant possibilities if we attempt to uncover and name them. We all too often seek the comfort of ignorance rather than opening ourselves to the pain of self-awareness.

Because we are threatened by the power of our feelings and have developed so highly the habit of avoiding our own emotions, we have repressed not only our so-called negative feelings, such as anger or guilt, but we have also buried to some extent our more sublime emotions. If you tend to avoid and repress anger, you will also bury happiness. If the

feelings of hurt and guilt are buried in the coffin of ignorance, real joy and peace die as well. As humans we fear the power and strength of our misnamed negative feelings as well as our positive feelings. A maturing child, however, is willing to pay the price to integrate all that is felt.

A Part of Every Day Life

In reality, there are no emotions which are bad, or sinful in and of themselves. Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. They are part of the inner life of our unconscious. Why we feel a certain feeling can have many causes both within us and outside of us, but to judge feelings merely because they exist is incorrect and self-destructive. Feelings have no morality. What we do with how we feel can be judged as morally constructive or destructive but feeling guilt, hurt, envy, anger, or joy, is part of our basic human identity. Every person, every day, has the potential to experience every human emotion. No one is exempt from the wide range of human feelings. They are part of who we are as children of God. We can grow in our daily life through and because of how we feel, or, we can regress, terrified of the power of our emotions.

As mentioned earlier, the path of the child of God is toward perfection. Reaching perfection does not mean overcoming or dominating our emotional lives. To reach perfection is to strive to integrate all that we are, giving ourselves fully to God. To be perfect one must be whole, integrating the emotional life into one's relationship with God. In other words, God calls us to give to Him our "all," feelings included. You cannot walk honestly with God unless you have accepted your emotions as companions on the way.

To recognize, name, and bring to God our everyday feelings of guilt, anxiety, hurt, envy, and hate, as well as joy, peace, and awe, is part of loving God with all that we are. If we as Christians strive to follow the great command to "love God with heart, mind, soul and strength," we must be willing to reveal ourselves to God as we walk the gentle path. This can only be so if we allow ourselves to feel our real emotions, recognize them, and name them for what they are. Only then can we give our emotional selves to God in an attitude of self-revelation. When we walk with God, we must become transparent to His love.

The Emotions of Christ

One important reason we cannot equate feelings with sin or place a moral judgment on emotions is because Christ Himself was a full man, and therefore a man of feeling. Christ felt the full range of human emotions. He felt deep helplessness and anger, as well as great joy and powerful peace.

The Christian community has in the past attempted to overlook or ignore the emotional life of Christ, placing Him above the all too human reality of emotions. Perhaps it was felt that if we could remove Christ from the chaos of emotions, we could then have permission to avoid confronting our own feelings. No longer, however, can we deny Christ the right to His own unique personal emotional experiences, and no longer can we avoid our inner life of feelings. We must learn from Christ how we can mature in our ability to name, to integrate, and to express our feelings in constructive and appropriate ways.

Let us look at a particular event in Christ's life which not only reveals His deep life of emotion but also how He handled and coped with His most painful feelings. We encounter in the Scripture passage from St. Mark's gospels a man filled with the feelings of fear, distress, sorrow, and anger. These feelings demanded expression. It was in and through these feelings that Christ walked intimately with the Father as He shared Himself.

“They went to a place named Gethsemani. ‘Sit down here while I pray,’ he said to his disciples; at the same time he took along with him Peter, James, and John. Then he began to be filled with fear and distress. He said to them, ‘My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake.’ He advanced a little and fell to the ground, praying that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. He kept saying, ‘Abba (O Father), you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you would have it, not as I.’ When he returned, he found them asleep. He said to Peter, ‘Asleep, Simon? You could not stay awake for even an hour? Be on guard and pray that you may not be put to the test.’” (Mark 14:32-38)

Jesus has reached the climax of his life. He knows that he is to be betrayed by one of his chosen ones, by a friend. Jesus knows that He has given His enemies cause to destroy Him as a means of avoiding further

problems. He is facing on this Mount of Olives the personal rejection of a friend and the rejection of those He came to serve in love. Christ is here experiencing and confronting the seeming failure of His life. Sorrow, distress, fear, and anger begin to overwhelm this full man to the point that they would kill Him.

Does Christ run from His feelings for fear that they would indicate a lack or doubt of faith in His Father? No, Christ neither denies nor hides His deep emotions. His very purpose in climbing the Mount was to reveal his full heart, to open to the Father His anguish and pain. Christ came to the Mount to pray, to give to the Father all that was in Him. Christ faced on this Mount one of the greatest tests of the human family: that either we open our emotional lives to the Father and mature through them, or we reject our feelings for fear of insecurity. Jesus did not climb this mountain garden of olive trees merely to share in prayer the joy of being the Son of God. Rather, Christ climbed the mountain of pain in His own life, opened it to His Father, and prayed. Christ went to the Mount to relate and walk with his Father in and through these most painful human feelings that Christ drew close to God. Prayer can be defined as honestly and openly relating to God.

While Christ in this prayerful event is very much awake and aware of His deep feeling relationship with His Father, His chosen disciples sleep in ignorance. Jesus was justifiably angry upon His return to His sleeping disciples. They were ignorant of the meaning of His feelings and closed to the realities of their own inner chaos. The test that Christ held before them was whether they would open their eyes to the deep emotional life within them and experience the father through their feelings or fail the test in the sleep of avoidance.

A maturing disciple and child of God cannot allow the need for escape and avoidance to rule his life. Hiding or running from our emotions is very much a running from Christ. We cannot follow the narrow saying that promotes ignorance: "When I eat, I eat. When I drink, I drink. When I am troubled, I sleep." When you fall asleep to awareness, you ignore a real vehicle of prayer: your feelings. Ignoring your own human emotions is like placing a large stone on the path between God and yourself.

Christ, the Son of God, recognized, named, and integrated His human feelings. He did so as He expressed those feelings on the Mount of Olives in the most appropriate way He knew, by bringing them to the Father in prayer. The task of maturing Christians is not merely to recognize how they feel in some pop-psychology self-centeredness, but rather to recognize their emotions as a path to God, a voice of God. God can, and does, reveal Himself through and in our human emotions of fear, sorrow, hurt, joy and peace. To hear God through ourselves we must first bring our true feelings to God in prayer and open our hearts to His presence in our daily life. Christ accepted how He felt, expressing all he felt to the Father as He walked in the garden of the Mount of Olives. As children of God we must do the same. We must travel to our chosen mountain to share with God how we feel. Prayer is a path both of self-knowledge and self-expression.

Over-Identification

The basic attitude I want to state clearly in this chapter is that a maturing child of God learns to accept how he feels so that he can deepen self-knowledge for the sake of Christ-consciousness. When we avoid our feelings of anger or grief, joy or guilt, when we run from them, ignore them or turn them into enemies, we are actually equating ourselves with them, giving them control over us and our identity. Unconsciously we tend all too often to identify who we are with how we feel, rather than identifying that we have feelings, expressing them in some appropriate way. Identification with feelings often brings about inappropriate expressions of those feelings, while identifying that we have feelings can lead to conscious and constructive expression. Let me give an example of this point, giving special attention to our feelings of anger.

Anger is almost always seen as a negative emotion that must be avoided at all costs. In Scripture, anger is frequently associated with sin: that if you even feel angry, you are offending God. St. Paul the Apostle clearly associates angry feeling with wrong-doing when in his Letter to the Ephesians he tells them to:

“get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, and slander of every kind.” (Eph 4:31).

In another passage St. Paul warns that they must: “put aside now; all the anger and quick temper...” (Col 3:8).

By associating anger with a sin or a feeling we must “get rid of” or “put aside now,” St. Paul seems to be encouraging an unhealthy manner of dealing with perhaps legitimate and justifiable feelings. St. Paul does not, in these passages, seem to promote mature recognition, appropriate expression, and the giving of our feelings to God. Rather, he seems to promote repression and avoidance.

It would have been far more constructive if St. Paul advised his followers to identify, name, recognize, and deal with the reality of anger. Such advice would have been far more conducive to Christian maturity.

St. Paul is not alone, however, in his misunderstanding of how emotions fit into the dynamics of Christian growth. Our society in general teaches us to hide our so-called negative feelings from view. Many parents unconsciously teach their children that feeling angry is wrong, associating value and worth with how one feels, rather than how one deals with one’s feelings.

We have learned to measure maturity by how well we hide how we feel rather than how best we deal with, cope with, and identify with how we feel.

If a person has angry feelings and does not recognize or identify those feelings, he or she will ultimately over-identify with those feelings giving them great destructive power. We have probably all met someone whom we would describe as an angry person. The gesture, tone of voice, manner of movement, and facial expressions indicate that the person is angry.

Such a person has unconsciously allowed who he is to be identified with how he feels. He might as well change his name to “Anger.” When any of us allow feelings of anger to pile up within us without identifying that we have these feelings, we will eventually identify with them and become what they are.

A very good example of how someone can over-identify with how they feel can be seen in the following personal experience. As I ministered on a retreat team, I had the honored opportunity to become involved in the lives of some good people as their spiritual guide. One particular young man of 23 stands out as someone who ignored and avoided his angry feelings to the point that he became, to a large extent, those very feelings. This young man seemed quiet and reflective, finding it very difficult to share how he felt about himself or his relationship with others. Swelling beneath his mask of quiet, however, rage festered. For reasons only he knew, he felt very hurt by his mother's lack of love. For some ten years he labored with all his energy to "get rid of his anger," "to put a lid on it." He did not see, however, that the feelings of anger that he had, which may have been quite appropriate in response to the original hurt, were controlling his life. He so over-identified himself with his angry feelings that he could not speak of his mother without harsh facial expressions or without bitter and sharp remarks. The more he avoided his feelings, the more he became identified with and controlled by them to the point that people found it difficult dealing with his inappropriate angry outbursts and fits of depression. By ignoring his angry feelings he had given them power to destroy him and his relationships.

Appropriate Expression

As I worked with this young man, I attempted to help him find a constructive way of expressing his anger. I tried to guide him along the path of identifying his feelings with a specific name so that he could learn to relate to those feelings in a more appropriate and liberating fashion. In order to name, rather than merely identify with our feelings, we must first provide them with an opportunity to express themselves to us. We must give our feelings the atmosphere they need to be "vented," as we say, or revealed in some appropriate way. If we work at it, we can each find for our emotions a preferred path of self-expression and communication. For example, the young man mentioned that the best way for his emotions to be expressed was through music. We began, therefore, to listen closely to the music he had written to hear how he felt. It did not take us long to hear in his piano notes the anger swelling within him. Music was this young man's preferred manner of self-expression. Through his music he came to hear, name, and allow his emotions a voice. Others have found that the

best therapeutic atmosphere, one that provides their emotional life some form of self-expression, is through writing or talking, dancing or sculpting. Whatever helps an individual come into contact with how they feel will help them express those feelings in a constructive way. Most people find talking their feelings out to be most helpful. The phrase itself “talking out” indicates that one’s feelings have been in some hiding place and need permission to come forth.

Feelings of anger, grief, hurt, or pain are part of our human makeup. They are aspects of our emotional life that need some form of self-expression if we are not to be so identified with them that they control our behavior. If we are to mature as children of God, we must learn to respect and befriend our own feelings. Learning, for example, that anger can be an appropriate feeling in a given situation is a very important part of this maturing process, but just as important is learning how to express those angry feelings in some constructive way. Anger may not be sinful or destructive in and of itself, but what we do with it can become sinful.

If we are angry without just cause or if our anger becomes uncontrollable, or motivated only by hate, malice and revenge, then we are certainly trapped in a sinful anger. If we allow our angry feelings to overwhelm us and become the focus of our lives, then we no longer live as children of God but as children of anger.

However, if we learn to name, befriend and find an appropriate means of expression for our feelings of anger, they can become a source of great strength. Our angry feelings are righteous if they stem from wrongdoing and if we guide them into constructive and creative expression. As Christ angrily challenged with love His sleeping disciples on the Mount of Olives, so our anger can be the most loving response we can share in a given situation. In order for anger to be expressed lovingly we must attempt to find its root cause, attempt to name it for what it is, and express it in a manner that will help us and others grow emotionally and spiritually closer to one another and to God. If we want to walk with the Gentle God, we must first be gentle with our own emotional lives, giving our feelings permission to walk with us and God.

As we walk with God, we can share our every feeling of pain, hurt, joy, sorrow and anger. We may be able to hide ourselves from others for a

time, or even hide ourselves from ourselves, but we cannot hide from God how we truly feel. Prayer is an appropriate place to bring to God how we feel: not how we wish to feel but rather the emotions that are truly there. We are called to trust God with all that we are, even our most chaotic emotions of love and hate, joy and sorrow. God will cope gently with our emotions even if we will not. God will recognize and accept them even if we cannot.

If we name our anger and bring it to God, He can speak through it of peace. If we identify hurt and present it to God, He can transform it with gentle words of healing. If we recognize the chaos of our inner lives, God can speak through it of balance.

“Trust in Him at all times, O my people! Pour out your hearts before Him; God is our refuge!” (Psalm 62:9)

CHAPTER VII CREATIVE CHOICE MAKING

When you walk with God, you become a decision-maker formed in the image and likeness of the one Choice-Maker. As God is creativity, every person is the image of creativity, capable of conscious choice-making. We grow and evolve as children of God, guided by the creative Christ within, to the extent that we develop our ability to choose consciously. To the extent that we remain imprisoned in unconscious fears, needs, desires, or habits, or dependent upon external authority, to that degree do we remain ignorant of our potential to make moral and conscious choices.

Each human being was and continues to be created in an outpouring of creativity. We are created creative for the sake of choice. By the choice of God the human family was created for the purpose of choice. In order to fulfill the purpose of living each human being must discover and develop this innate choice-making potential.

It is only the human, however, whose purpose and meaning is intimately bound to conscious choice. No other creature of God's garden kingdom was given the blessed ability to live as co-creators, self-makers through choice. Only the human heart and mind can evaluate, discern, deliberate, and consciously choose.

Until the evolutionary and revolutionary development of the human family, creating existed merely to manufacture a brain and body capable of satisfying the need for security. All that lived before the development of human consciousness existed only to protect itself and survive. With the advent of the human ability to consciously choose came the desire to do more than survive but to create and build, to seek and find, to decide and plan. If the human family is to continue to develop and grow, maturing as children of God, it will depend upon humanity's utilization of its innate liberty.

Only the human is free enough to throw away that freedom in fearful ignorance or needful dependency. Only the human can choose the commandment of creation: Be and live loyal to who you are. Who we are is found in who God is, what we become is found in our ability to walk with

God, choosing freely. We are subjects to our power of choice. The command of God is that humans choose wisely.

“There are set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.” (Sirach 15:16).

Adversaries of Choice

Although we have been created as free choice-makers in the image of the One Choice-Maker, we find within our lives many adversaries to our decision-making potential. We are motivated and guided in life by a myriad of motivations, both internal and external desires, needs, emotions, judgments, preferences, and pressures. We are created free but live limited in the use of our freedom. We are limited in choice by the adversaries of unconscious laziness, ignorance, and fear, as well as by the pressures of a society that frequently seeks conformity to the status quo over the challenging risk of growth. We find our freedom bound by the chains of internal pressures and regressive ignorance while we live in a culture that teaches us to submit to what is defined as normal, usual, and typical. From outside ourselves and from within there are powerful forces that can, if we allow them, unconsciously control and manipulate our decision-making potential. Whatever stands as an enemy of choice stands as an obstacle to living and loving on the path of God. Let us identify and befriend some of the adversaries of choice.

Laziness

One of the most powerful adversaries and enemies of choice-making is the inclination to avoid effort, ignore potential, run from challenge, and hide from risk. Christian growth and choice-making are built upon the expenditure of energy in seeking, asking, and climbing. Curiosity is the mark of the child of God who searches out all the options available, working to grow in knowledge of self, others, and God. Laziness is a killer of curiosity, a great stumbling block on the climb to the summit of life’s mountain of God.

I have at times wondered, as I read the creation story in Genesis, what the man Adam was doing in the Garden of Eden as Eve was adventurously wandering among the trees in the Garden. I have focused in previous chapters upon the Biblical story of creation in order to point out the purpose and meaning of creation, but here I simply wonder why in the story it is Eve, the woman, who is having a conversation with the serpent.

The serpent asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the Garden? The woman answered the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die?’” (Gen 3:1-2).

We see in this story the woman Eve, walking in the garden kingdom of God. It is her curiosity that stops her and brings her into conversation with the cunning serpent concerning from which tree she can eat. While Eve listens intently, the serpent offers supreme knowledge and awareness. I wonder why the serpent did not offer the same tempting awareness and knowledge to Adam. Were Adam’s eyes perhaps closed in the boring bliss of unconsciousness.

It is true that the usual interpretation of this Genesis story emphasizes that Eve not only sought awareness and wisdom but also complete independence from God, rebelling against her childlikeness. It is true that in this divinely inspired tale Eve allowed her curiosity to rule her, breaking her from God’s way, but Adam strikes me as going nowhere at all. Eve sinned by choice whereas Adam seems to rebel by lack of choice. Is not a free conscious choice a fuller response to God than living in ignorant bliss? We seem rather willing to hold the woman of this story up as the rebellious sinner, content to leave the lazy Adam to his comfortable passivity. Eve’s curiosity may have led to the killing of her relationship with God, but Adam seemed already to be dead.

Many of us may be tempted toward Eve’s rebellious curiosity at times, desiring to make it on our own, independent of God, but are we not even more prone to a lazy attitude that seeks security and contentment away from the difficult choices of life? I believe that the stronger tendency in the human heart is not toward the attitude of challenging God with

questions, but rather is in the tendency of avoiding God in the laziness of “who cares.”

Being created as choice-makers, as free children of God, may be the reality; but how many of us prefer the seeming security of not having to make choices at all?

Responsible choice-making demands effort and work, the conscious output of energy. To choose to live as children of God, being guided by the values of the inner Christ, demands an all-out search effort. We do not merely drift into living as Christians, comfortably making responsible and moral decisions. Only the seekers and wonderers, willing to work at using their freedom, will become children of God. Those of us trapped in the unconscious need for the security of the garden womb are becoming children of avoidance or inertia, not children of God. As the Scriptures tell us (Matt 7:7); it is the seekers who will find. It is for those who knock that the doors of awareness and choice will open.

The adversary attitude of laziness that lives within us, inclining toward ignorance and passivity, is a major stumbling block in our relationship with God. To make responsible decisions is to create one’s own soul. Soul-making is linked intimately to responsible choice-making. As the potter devotes himself to the clay and wheel so children of God dedicate themselves to the making of their soul by the making of moral decisions, discerning right from wrong, what is loving from what is not.

Fear

As human beings continually facing the vast complexities of life, we frequently find ourselves unconsciously driven on paths we do not choose to travel. We often wonder why we have said certain things when we did not consciously plan to. We wonder what motivates us to choose what we do not want, to do what we did not plan, to say what we would rather have not said. In our decision-making we often feel “tossed by the waves of the sea” (Sirach 29:17), moved by our unconscious tendencies, needs, desires, and feelings.

As the need to avoid the difficulties of life's choices can drive us into an attitude of laziness, so our unconscious fears can be major adversaries to our constructive choice-making. If we are unaware of our unconscious fears, we allow them to become powerful enemies to our choice-making ability.

Perhaps we are afraid of what others would think if we chose a specific direction or, perhaps, we are unconsciously fearful of making an incorrect decision. Whatever fear prevents our free choice-making, it has power only because of our ignorance of it.

Fear is an emotion in response to what we consider dangerous or harmful. If we believe or have been taught that harm will come to us if we make a mistake or reveal some of our true feelings or thoughts, then, of course, we will avoid any instance that could cause either of these situations. If we have been told, either directly or indirectly, that there is danger in making a mistake because others will think less of us, and if we have not faced this fear as unrealistic, then we can easily see how our daily choices could be controlled by the need to be without flaw. When our daily activities are controlled by our fears we are not choosing but are rather being driven. Our fears can be such a powerful and driving force that they can almost take on a voice of their own. Perhaps if we open our unconscious a bit and allow the Fearful One to speak, it may join us in a dialogue such as the following:

SELF--Why can't I get rid of you fear. You have been nagging at me all my life, and I want to bury you once and for all. Just when I think I have overcome you, you rise up. I don't understand why I can't get rid of you.

FEAR--What are you, some kind of fool? You will never be able to rid yourself of me. I am too powerful. The best you will be able to do is attempt to understand me. Then perhaps you will learn that I can be your friend.

SELF--Friend! What kind of friend are you? You silently live within me waiting to throw all sorts of obstacles in my way. When I want to do something, you weave your web to push me where I do not want to go. You, fear, are a manipulator, not a friend.

FEAR--You may think me a manipulator. I would rather call myself your protector. I am the voice that keeps you from harming yourself with foolish behavior. You are far too trustful and open with other people. If I were not around, you would reveal too much of yourself to them. I protect you from danger.

SELF--I know that you are quite necessary and very important when there are real dangers before me, but why do you stand as an obstacle to paths I want to travel? You are not some nurturing protector but rather a deceitful enemy.

FEAR—Wait a minute. You make it sound like I exist on my own. I would not be part of you unless you wanted me around. I am not merely your parents' leftover anxieties. I exist because you want me to exist. I keep you safe and comfortable, far from risk.

SELF--You are right, fear. I am responsible to some extent for your being so strong. I give you your power to manipulate and deceive me because I have learned to be far too comfortable in my life. But I am no longer willing to pay the price for your existence. I no longer want to stay within the safe limits you have controlled for so long. I want a greater freedom to choose. I want to be liberated from the need to avoid, to run, and to hide in fear.

FEAR--Look, you need my limits. You are not capable of facing all the possibilities of life. You don't have the energy or wisdom to make all your own decisions. I, at least, give you some boundaries in which you can move.

SELF--You make yourself sound like a kind and warm-hearted friend, but I know all too well that you are afraid, Fear, that I will grow in confidence. You, Fear, are fighting for your life because you know that I am growing in the ability to take risks and make decisions. The more willing I become to take responsible risks the more you must take a back seat. I may never be rid of you, Fear, but at least I can take some of your power and utilize it for some positive decisions. That way growth will be the determining reason for my choices rather than fear.

FEAR--Well, if you think you have the strength to face all the complex and risky choices you have before you, then all well and good. I guarantee you

won't last very long. You may feel very confident right now, but we shall see. I am able to wait. When you wish to speak with me again, just let me know. I will be here.

SELF--Fear, I have not dismissed you yet. You may think that you can just slip into hiding to continue your quiet pressure upon me, but I want you to know I will be watching you very closely now. I realize, now, that the only way I can be liberated from your grasp is to get to know you very well. I will be paying a lot of attention to you from now on. You may go for now but remember, Fear, I am watching you very closely.

Choices based primarily upon fear are not decision. You can call it fate or destiny but not choice. In order to grow in our ability to make conscious choices based upon deliberate self-chosen values one must recognize and let go of unconscious fear of risk. Our fears will constantly attempt to undermine our responsible self-direction, but if we develop an attitude of self-observation we will experience liberation.

We can, through self-watchfulness, establish a reluctant friendship with our fears, even with our fear of God's love. Such a friendship will entail a careful listening to what our fears have to say. Even if our fears are saying some of the following negative statements we must listen and befriend their needs:

“Don't try anything new, you will only fail.”

“God is not a Gentle God, but a harsh judge.”

“What is old is good, what is new is bad.”

“You can't do that.”

“What will others think?”

“Stay safe, and you won't be sorry.”

The unconscious voices of fear only have validity if we give them power. If, however, we recognize such statements as the obstacles of growth that they are, we will experience a new freedom to choose.

Conformity

Another strong enemy to our choice-making ability is the collective voice of conformity which continually pressures us to think like every one else thinks, move like the masses and do what is usual, typical, common, and ordinary. The voice of conformity is the voice of fear telling us that to be different is to be wrong or bad.

Because of our feelings of inadequacy the powerful voice of conformity cuts us off from our individuality and uniqueness, choking off independent choice. When the “shoulds” of life become overwhelming, we are being driven by the collective tones of compliance, submitting to what we think others want. People who feel inadequate about themselves and fearful of being or doing something different have their antennae out all the time, listening to the moods and signals from those around them. These signals of expectations are then filtered through one’s need to be accepted and are unconsciously translated into behavior. Those of us with poor self-images, anxious about what others think of us, can all too easily be tossed around by what we think others want, because we are never quite sure of the expectations of others.

A very good example of the voice of conformity stands out for me in the story of a young woman I had the privilege to teach in a Bible study course. In one of the first classes we had she shared the fact that she had been what she called a “fallen away catholic.” After class she asked to speak with me for a moment. With great anxiety she told me a bit more of her story. She, like so many others, had participated in church activities because that was how she was taught. She felt that she had for many years gone to church because her parents had expected her to, not because she chose to. There was a point in her life, however, that was filled with crisis and rebellion. It was during this time that she stopped participating in church worship. There were a number of years then that were marked by a sense of aimlessness until she realized how much she personally wanted to participate in religious affairs. She had rebelled against the expectations of others, refusing to conform to what she thought was demanded. Once liberated from the fear and need to comply to the collective voice, she was far more capable of making a mature choice concerning her religious practices. She chose not only to return to her church but also to learn as much as she could about her religious

community, the Bible, and Christ. In freedom she committed herself to walk with God. Religion was no longer a necessity to please others but a personal requirement for happiness. Because she had faced her fears of being different, she was able to cope more maturely and constructively with the authentic call of God's love.

Social pressures, religious zealots, parental influences, peer expectations, requirements of performance and production are collective voices that can demand unreasonable conformity. They can steal our sense of identity as unique children of God.

Another very good example of how fear, laziness, and the need for security can control a person's or group's ability to choose can be seen in the dynamics of a present day phenomenon. Much like the religious zealots of the past, some of the present day so-called fundamentalist, born-again, cultic-oriented Christian movements tend to preach through manipulative tactics of guilt, condemnation, and fear. Some preachers, confusing political and spiritual goals, have learned the fine art of putting pressure on the weakest points in their listeners' and viewers' lives.

Thousands of true believers, or as one associate calls them "ferverts" – a destructive combination of perversion and fervor – mindlessly follow the tenets of the Moral Majority crusade or other cultic groups that have found the answers to all the questions of life. In such groups, the image and mold of the true Christian is to be conformed to no matter what the cost, even if it means putting aside one's ability to think for one's self. Such ferverts frequently become lazy in mind, fearful of heart, conforming in manner and appearance. The phenomenon of strict religious conformity is not new. Teaching with fear is an old tactic of insecure teachers. Preaching with the tools of condemnation, punishment, and fear is a style among preachers unable to accept their own weaknesses. They demand conformity to one rigid world and God view because the seeming loss of control to pluri-formity strikes fear into their hearts. Ferverts wrap themselves in the security blanket of God because they are afraid to face the realities of themselves and a world born blessed but broken by fear.

Christ never required His followers to turn over control of their lives to a person or movement that would deprive them of the freedom to think,

to feel and to choose. The Christ of Scripture calls every person to responsible free decision-making. Christ does not call His followers to be zombies or fervents. Rather He challenges them with the ideals of love, peace, hope, and faith, calling each person to freely choose these values in His name. A maturing disciple of Christ is not called to give up his or her unique personality, replacing it with a cardboard, smiling, phony façade. Christ asks rather that we choose to let Him and His love be born, live in and through our unique personalities. The enemies of choice: fear, laziness, and conformity are also enemies of Christ. No one can turn their choice-making ability over to a television preacher or allow a religious movement to manipulate him without falling victim to the enemies of freedom and creative soul-making. In my opinion, there are far too many victims of the so-called born-again, fundamentalist thieves. Far too many Christians and Catholics have allowed their minds, emotions, and personalities to be stolen in the name of becoming a pure born-again follower of the Lord. God creates us in His image not to turn that image into a shallow mold of rock but rather that we may live and love as creative and unique expressions of God. Christ calls people- weak, courageous, confused, creative, loving, and perplexed men and women to follow Him. Christ does not call angels but human beings to walk with the gentle God of love, not the demanding God of conformity.

The enemies of choice-making, whether it be conformity, fear, or social pressures, are powerful only to the extent that we ignore them. Laziness, fear, and the need to conform are adversaries only because we refuse to recognize them as potential friends. By facing the obstacles that stand in the way of our making free choices, we may be able to transform fear into courage, conformity into conscious integration and choice, and laziness into the ability to rest with the Lord in prayer. Imagine all the psychic energy required to run in fear and conform because of need. If we could but face the enemies of choice and release from them a small portion of the trapped psychic potential that they use to avoid, to run, and to conform, and apply that same energy to evaluate, to discern and to search for the best possible decision, think of the choice-making power we would liberate. With effort we can turn many of our inner and outer enemies, that act to prevent our free choice-making, into friends in the name of potential. It is possible to find friends anywhere, even within ourselves. You have to make enemies, however.

For a growing child of God the first friend of choice is trust. Without a confident trust in our own basic value and worth, fear will rise up and become a primary motivating factor. To believe that you are created blessed in order to bless, created free in order to live free, made in the image of creativity in order to choose creatively, is the self-image upon which trust is built.

“Fear is useless, what is needed is trust.” (Luke 8:50)

A realistic trust in oneself and the Christ within gives the freedom needed to choose what is truly important and valuable. Trusting in one’s identity as a blessed child of God is the anchor of choice-making that will help us remain steadfast to our own individuality and uniqueness.

The anchor of who we are is Christ, and it is the Christ within who can guide us in free, responsible, moral, and fearless choice-making. We may be pushed around by the surface waves of fear or peer pressure, but the anchor of the inner Christ will always guide us toward the shore of maturity.

“Let us then be children no longer tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine that originates in human trickery and skill in proposing error.” (Ephesians 4:14).

The supporting ligament, the anchor, the building block of free Christian choice-making is the acceptance of God’s acceptance of us. As we walk with God, we are not forced, pressured, manipulated, or controlled. God seduces us with a gentle love, calling us to live and to love as we are created. It is the inner Christ with whom we walk that can overcome our fears and needs to conform, with His healing touch and affirming words. Walking with God, in Christ companionship, we can befriend our fears, laziness, and need to conform, in order to walk in strength, firmness and confidence doing what is loving along the way.

As children of God we are created and called to be choice-makers, in a real sense making our souls. We make our souls, our relationship with God, to the extent that we maturely face the challenges and risks of life, choosing what is good and valuable for the building up of love.

A Christian choice-maker must be able to stand alone, at times risking the acceptance of others in order to be true to whom he is and what he believes. Yet a Christian choice-maker never truly stands alone. In confidence and trust he can be sure that in all difficult, challenging, demanding, and fearful decisions in life, Christ, the friend of choice, stands with him. No sea of fear, wave of conformity, or whirlpool of laziness can control a maturing Christian set free by the gentle love of God.

CHAPTER VIII LIVING IN THE PRESENT KINGDOM

A maturing child of God continually grows in the ability to live, for the most part, in the present moment, learning from the past, with a hopeful anticipation of the future.

The only reality the human family seems to neglect the most, use up the quickest, waste, and kill is the time of the present moment. We tend to throw away everything when we do not respect the importance and value of now. When emotions of guilt or remorse or the need for security trap us in the past, the present moment, with its opportunities and challenges, is stolen. When we become ensnared by the wishes of the future we steal from the reality of today. Next to God, our deepest and most abiding respect must be given to time.

Being human means to live in time, walking with and in the limitations and opportunities of moments, hours, and days. Learning how to live in the kingdom of now, being faithful to the kingdom of yesterday, while preparing for the kingdom of tomorrow is the task of the maturing Christian. To walk with the God of today and not only with the God of yesterday or tomorrow is the challenge of Christian growth.

The Tension of Time

The most difficult concept for the human mind to comprehend, however, is the reality of time. The problem of time rests in the fact that in God there is no time, no moment, no hours; God is beyond time, outside the present, past, or future, yet constantly flowing through time. God continually creates out of His kingdom of timelessness, into the reality of now, out of the land of nothingness into the process of life.

As limited human beings we find the idea of timelessness beyond us, and so, being rooted in the present moment, we look at everything through the narrow vision of “when.” We experience the timeless God through our tunnel vision of time, attempting to describe Him in inadequate words and images. As we struggle to, “see God face to face” (1 Cor 13:12).

We are caught in the seemingly dualistic tension of time and timelessness.

Called to live in the kingdom of God we are called to face the tension of time. The ultimate goal is to overcome the duality of time and timelessness, breaking through this division into a union with God. Wholeness is the signpost of the kingdom of God, and it is Christ Himself who leads us along the path toward unity. It is only through Christ, the Son of Unity, that the Christian will find the answer to the tension of time. Christ is, “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8), and it is in and through the ever-present Christ that we discover how to live now in the kingdom of God.

Return

To live in the kingdom of God today we are called to a great return to our original wholeness with God in the yesterday experience of the garden. It is an experience of reclaiming one’s roots, finding that the source of one’s blessed beginnings continues today. We are called to discover that source anew as we return:

“Though you may have been driven to the farthest corner of the world, even from there will the Lord, your God, gather you; even from there will He bring you back. The Lord, your God, will then bring you into the land which your fathers once occupied, that you may occupy it and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.” (Deut 30:4-5)

A child of God returns, through reconciliation, to the land of wholeness, where there is prosperous and overflowing unity. It was through the choice of humanity that wholeness was broken. Return to wholeness can also be through choice. The dualism and separateness of time and timelessness has its source in the rebellion of man and woman in

the garden kingdom. That original kingdom of God's unity with creation still lives in the distant memories of our minds and hearts calling for a great return. The path to the garden kingdom of righteousness demands a letting go of dualistic thinking which places God outside of time and beyond our reach. In breaking through the false division of time and timelessness we reconcile humanity and God, as well as the garden kingdom of yesterday and the Christ-kingdom of tomorrow.

Christ is the "Great Reminder" of the source of life and wholeness, and it is through Christ that the human family is redeemed to the wholeness of the Garden.

"Through Him (Jesus) we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins." (Col 1:14)

It is the death of unity and dualistic thinking that keeps us from recognizing that God lives in the now. It is through Christ that the sin of division and dualism is healed, as He reminds us by His life of the covenant wholeness that God has established with His people. By the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we are reconciled to the source from which we have strayed and to which we must return. We must learn to break through the wall of time's limitation, which prevents us from seeing the reality of God in the present moment.

In breaking away from the trap of time, we can discover the living unity of God in the opportunities of time. We must learn to say as the returning prodigal child declared:

"I will break away and return to my father and say to Him," 'Father I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son'." (Luke 15:18).

Perhaps we, as the prodigal child, have denied our rightful name as child of God and replaced it with such false names as child of remorse, guilt, or wishes. If so, we too must return to the family from which we flow; the family of God's unity. The unity of God lives both in and through time, flowing always from the source of God's love, returning all reality to God. To those who struggle to return to the unity of the garden kingdom, the Father will say:

“Let us eat and celebrate because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:23)

Once lost in the division of our own hearts, wandering without the unity of God, we are welcomed back to the present moment where the true life of unity reigns. It is a unity with the family of God that has been, is, and forever will be calling for all to return.

This return to the garden kingdom of unity, forsaking dualism and division, is not as we might wish it to be, however. Returning to unity is not merely a return to the security of the womb, where no choices must be made and no tensions faced. The kingdom of God is not an island of comfortable security but rather a community marked by the waters of life and the spirit of growth. In our need for a warm and effortless life we may strive to live in a false kingdom of ease, thinking this to be the kingdom of God. We may, with Nicodemus, want to ask our Lord,

**“Can a man return to his mother’s womb and be born over again?”
(John 3:2)**

If so, we will receive the same answer: that the kingdom of God is to be a community experience rather than a secure and isolating womb experience.

The Community Kingdom Is and Is To Come

The Christian process, as Christ describes to Nicodemus, is not so much a return to some mythic security of the past but is rather an entering into the community kingdom of the present, maturing toward the future. Christ declares that:

“No one can enter into God’s kingdom without being begotten of water and the Spirit.” (John 3:5)

To Nicodemus, a member of God’s chosen people, this rebirth was clearly presented as an inner spiritual change. Alone we cannot return to

unity or be reborn, but in community with the water and Spirit of Christ the kingdom path can be found.

The water and Spirit of Christ are not things that live in the future, however. They are found in the community of Christ, that struggling mass of people striving to follow the Lord. It is the entire community of Christians, the children of God who seek to walk the kingdom path that is now and is becoming. To paraphrase St. Catherine of Sienna “All the way to the kingdom, is the kingdom; if you walk with God.”

The ultimate tension every seeking child of God must face is that the kingdom of God is, but is not yet. It is both a here and now experience, as well as a future reality. The kingdom is, “Close at hand” (Matt 4:17) as Matthew’s Gospel declares yet, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)

Our life then must be as Nicodemus was told, a rebirth experience. It is a constant transformation and becoming, marked by the tension of time.

As a community of God’s children we pray for the future kingdom to come, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.” (Luke 11:2) Yet we know that when the Pharisees asked when the reign of God will come, Jesus replied: “You cannot tell by careful watching when the reign of God will come. Neither is it a matter of reporting that it is ‘here’ or ‘there.’ The reign of God is already in your midst.” (Luke 17:20-21)

Kingdom-consciousness is the challenge of the Christian who strives to be constantly aware of the reign of God that already exists. No one will ever be able to return to the womb of ignorance and innocence nor can humanity control the future. We can, however, learn to live in the present, the reign of God. As we attempt to walk the present kingdom path, we accept our vocation to be co-creators of Christ’s kingdom to come. We help build the future in the way we live today. If today we live in the community of the kingdom, tomorrow the kingdom will grow fuller. If we walk with God today, we will help others with God tomorrow.

Living in the Present

As children of God, then, we must let go of our wishful and wistful desires for the kingdom of tomorrow and our regretful and remorseful memories for the kingdom of yesterday in order to birth the reign of today's hope.

**“Now is the acceptable time” (2 Cor 6:2) and,
“This is the time of fulfillment” (Mark 1:15).**

If we look to the past as the time when we were happiest or closest to God, regretting real or imagined offenses, or if we look to the future for our fulfillment and happiness, we will be stealing from the hopeful opportunities of finding Christ and happiness today. The one reality a maturing child of God cannot neglect is the present moment. In it walks the timeless Christ. Certainly we must learn from and respect the past as well as prepare for and hope in the future, but for the most part, we must live in today. To find Christ in the movements and moments of now is the challenge of the Christian, the price of which is letting yesterday go while we stop shopping for tomorrow. We may be filled with the remembrance of yesterday or overflowing with plans for the future, yet it is the relationships, feelings, words, symbols, and people of today in which we will find the reign of God.

“Jesus said to the crowds: ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say immediately that rain is coming – and so it does. When the wind blows from the south, you say it is going to be hot – and so it is. You hypocrites! If you can interpret the portents of earth and sky, why can you not interpret the present time?’” (Luke 12:54-56)

In kingdom-consciousness we are aware that the reign of God was never more fully present in the past, nor will it be in the future, than it is today. Interpreting the present time means that we hear the voice of Christ speaking through the experiences and relationships of now. In the emotions and needs, joys and sorrows, hopes and works of today, Christ walks. It is in the midst of human experience that we can find the hidden kingdom of God. The kingdom may not be of the limited world of time, but it can be found in the timeless world of Christ among us.

In order to walk and live in the present with a kingdom-consciousness we must utilize our time wisely. We must, as this anonymous saying presents:

Take time to pray...it helps to bring God near and washes the dust of the earth from your eyes.

Take time for friends...it is the source of happiness.

Take time for work...it is the price of success.

Take time to think....it is the source of power.

Take time to read...it is the foundation of knowledge.

Take time to laugh...it is the singing that helps with life's loads.

Take time to love...it is the one sacrament of life.

Take time to dream...it hitches the soul to the impossible.

Take time to play...it is the secret of youth.

Take time to worship...it is the path to unity.

As we take care to utilize the present time with its challenges and opportunities, we will discover the timeless reign of God that lives in the common and usual events of today. It is by living well in the ordinary that we find the extraordinary. It is through our present time awareness as a child of God that we will experience kingdom-consciousness. On the path of life is found the kingdom of God, the reign of Christ, the pearl of great price, and the treasure of life itself, for in life is found the timeless Christ. The present time is grasped by the kingdom, every moment filled with the living Christ.

CHAPTER IX LIVING PEACEFULLY WITH DIVERSITY

Coping with the stresses, pressures, diversity, opposites, and conflicts of everyday life is impossible without the hope of the gentle God. The tensions and anxieties of life surround every traveler, but it is those who walk with God who can live with peace amid the seeming diversity and rapid changes in life.

Opposites abound. We have both the freedom and burden of living as individuals yet in community, in a world both secular and sacred. We experience the realities of our inner and outer worlds standing at times in seeming contradiction to one another. We feel the tensions between the traditions from which we have come and the innovations of new ideas and developments. As humans we must learn constantly to cope with the seeming duality of body and spirit, time and timelessness, emotions, and intellect. We must learn to understand and live with the conflicts of our inner world, when our hearts are divided in motivation. We love, yet hate; we are sorrowful, yet happy; we search out the new, yet cling to what is old; we seek in the spirit of adventure, yet hide in fear. Our choices are motivated by good intentions as well as selfish desires. When walking with God, you learn to live amidst the tensions of human life and the tangle of life's opposites, differences, diversities, contradictions, stresses, pressures, conflicts, choices, and changes with serenity. The quest of maturing child of God is to live peacefully in the face of diversity, anchored to the Prince of Peace.

We have all learned to deal with life's tensions and conflicts, in one way or another. Some of the ways in which we face stress and diversity are constructive and healthy while others are destructive and detrimental to our very bodies and souls.

We often tend to cope with the tensions and contradictions of life with extreme reactions, attempting to resolve diversity with an either/or response: either you control life or life controls you. We tend, either to deny and run from the conflicts and stresses of life, seeking comfort in ignorance, or, we fight the polarities in life with a narrow-minded perspective that denies conflict. We will not, however, find true peace in the face of life's real stresses and pressures if we attempt to either deny

their existence or attempt to lock them into narrow-minded structures or answers. Approaching diversity with arrogance or refusing to deal with it leads ultimately to failure, for serenity and confidence cannot be found in the shallow “fight or flight syndrome.” Serenity in the face of diversity can only be found in facing life as it is, insecure yet filled with hope, changing yet maturing, unfair yet highly democratic.

Fighting for Control

Every human being feels insecure. There is no person who is completely confident and without doubts. I learned this most vividly when I heard someone whom I thought was the picture of confidence and self-assurance say the old banner saying,

“I had it all together, but I forgot where I put it!”

To my young eyes, this particular individual seemed to have the secret answers to questions that baffled my anxious heart. He seemed to know where he was going and what he was about, yet I discovered as I came to know him better that even he felt insecure and unsure of himself.

I am certainly not alone in thinking that someone else has found the answers or has completed life’s course of maturity. Many people look to another with envy, thinking, “Now they have life all in place, if only I could be like them, do like them. If only I...”

Such a thought flows from the insecure one within us who knows that we are incomplete and unfinished. It is the insecurity that we share in our humanness that causes us, therefore, to approach life, with its diversities and stresses, as a fight. Depending upon our level of insecurity and doubt, we attempt to control life by denying its tensions with rigidity and hardness of heart. The insecure one within tells us frequently that when there are too many stresses and too many questions you can only win peace by hiding in the most comfortable answer.

All too often our insecurities and fears in life drive us to seek out the one answer that will give us some sense of having it together. We look for the one way of doing something or the one idea to which we can conform

our lives. All too often we try desperately to tie the stress, change, uncertainties, choices, and multiplicity of life to the most secure post available. Conformity, uniformity, and rigidity are all too frequently the responses of the insecure to the diversity, changes, and options of life.

We do not have to look very far to find the many groups in society that claim to have the answers to the mysteries of life's tensions. Many people are so insecure and need so much to belong that they can easily be drawn into a group that gives them a sense of control.

We even dare to attempt control of God. We close God into tight dogmas or rules of behavior that we are sure God will follow if harassed enough. The disease of dogmatism in any group, such as a church community, stems from the inability to deal with the real mysteries and insecurities of life. We can see how dogmatism or religionism can displace the mystery of God with a controlled image of our own making by looking back at what can be called "The Age of Tranquility"...the 1950's. The early 50's especially were a time of security both in church and state affairs. The churches had their rules, standards, and laws while the political scene was content in its quiet.

The overwhelming problem of this "Age of Tranquility" was that the rules, standards, and laws lost touch with the real diversity and pluriformity in life. Rules and structures are fundamentally for guiding and pointing, shedding light upon and building life. Life is not made for structures and rigid answers, but structures and answers are made to motivate and incite life. The "Age of Tranquility" however, came to an end in the "Revolt of Diversity." Dogmatism, structuralism, religionism, and the powerism of the insecure seeking control of life was challenged and attacked by the radical diversities and opposites of reality. In the 1960's and 1970's we saw an upheaval that cracked the over-security of the "Age of Tranquility." The revolts against dogmatism in church and state affairs were natural reactions at that time in history and continue to be necessary in the face of contemporary, rigid, and narrow-minded dogmatism. Neither the mysteries of God nor the polarities of life can be controlled by the structures of humanity. Any dogma or system that loses touch with the real choice and uncertainties of life will ultimately be overthrown by the human heart filled with questions, diverse opinions, new possibilities, and never-ending choices.

Recognize Life's Diversity

**When you are too rigid you will crack when asked simply to bend.
“He who hardens his heart will fall into evil.” (Prov 28:14)**

As individuals, we frequently attempt to deny the diversity and pluriformities in life by our over-identification with one path, or one feeling, or one concept. In our insecurity we all too often accept a given concept as truth, not because it is or isn't, but rather because we fear it to be anything but the truth. We see what we want to see and feel what we must feel because we are afraid to do otherwise. Individuals look down upon others, for example, thinking another to be inferior in race, creed, or religion because they need to be superior and are terrified that they are not. Prejudice, bigotry, and chauvinism are attitudes built upon the insecure attempting to over-compensate for their fears. Trapped in such insecurities we related to others as the Scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus challenged:

“They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry, to lay on other men's shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.” (Matt 23:4)

The heavy load we must each carry in the name of Christ is the demand placed upon us that we seek unity amid life's diversity of opinions, community among the differences of people, and serenity in the face of tensions and pluriformity. We cannot live the Christian life while denying change, running from diversity or building a tower of dogmatism and self-righteousness against the real insecurities and tension of life. We cannot avoid the stresses of life by erecting secure castles of thought or feelings, structures, or rules that deny the complex uncertainties of living.

Change and the stress of diversity are facts of human life. Nothing remains forever: no idea, no feeling, no structure, no person. Everything is in the state of change. But change can move so fast and furiously that the stresses of pluriformity become too extreme, too difficult to bear. If our stress level is low, we will be able to cope only with a limited degree of change and diversity. If our stress level is higher perhaps, we will be able to deal more easily with the pressures and tensions of life. Dealing with change, however, by denying its existence and closing ourselves off in a

narrow dogmatism is a most dangerous pattern. Such avoidance does not encourage Christian growth.

Dealing With Life's Diversity

Neither will we grow as children of God if we allow the many conflicting forces of life's stresses and pluriformities to toss us about as though we were ships drifting at sea, changing our minds from one minute to the next, like a, "reed swaying in the wind." (Luke 7:24)

Insecurity can not only lead us to over-compensate by controlling life in a false dogmatism, but it can also overwhelm us so that life becomes a storm of conflicting directions. Running from change and possibility causes stagnation and rigidity, while too much change and diversity can cause chaos and possible illness. Too much change can be just as destructive as too little. Guiding and dealing with the rapid rate of change and the vast complexities of life is not an easy task in a world that seems to move as though everything that is new is good while everything that is stable and old is bad.

Not Either/Or but Both/And

Our response to the rapid change in our daily lives and the great polarities of human existence does not have to be either you control it or it controls you, either this is the answer, the right way or that there is no answer and no way. The response of a maturing child of God is not to be either rigid or unstable, but rather to face life and God both with an attitude of flexibility balanced upon a stable relationship with Christ. A Christian can grow in the ability to reconcile what seems to be in opposition, not by denying change or being overwhelmed by it, but by living flexibly in the midst of change. We can, as maturing children of God, live and accept the vast pluriformities of life with serenity, steadfast in Christ-consciousness.

"Be sincere of heart and steadfast, undisturbed in time of adversity." (Sirach 2:2) and: "If possible, live peacefully with everyone." (Rom 12:18)

The stresses and polarities of daily living cannot be dealt with maturely without a sense of serenity and peace of mind, for: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste. Any house torn by dissension falls.” (Luke 11:17)

We must be anchored in flexibility and peace if we are to live maturely with and grow through the tensions of life and the stresses of change. We must be anchored, not in dogmatism, but in the peace who is Christ.

Christ gives us peace in His continued creative presence, and it is our Christ-consciousness that will give us the serenity to live among the stresses of change and the turmoil of opposites.

The Gift of Peace

In serenity and calmness we can walk with the realities of good and evil, the facts of tradition and innovation, the tensions between individuals and communities, and the seeming conflict between flesh and spirit. A child of God can live with stress and change because Christ has given the gift of His peace.

“Peace is my farewell to you, my peace is my gift to you, I do not give it to you as the world gives peace. Do not be distressed and fearful.” (John 14:27)

The gift of Christ’s peace is the mainstay of our security in an insecure world. The gift of Christ’s peace is the confidence needed in the chaos of uncertainty and mystery. Walking through life with a consciousness of Christ’s peaceful presence helps us to recognize, accept, and integrate, in a constructive way, the diversity, conflicts, differences and polarities of life.

When a wise Rabbi was asked where God dwells, he quietly answered that God dwells wherever and whenever we let Him in. A child of God lets God dwell in the midst of the strife, tensions, conflicts, and stresses of the everyday. If we recognize Christ dwelling in our personal

life, with its ordinary insecurities and stresses, we will be able to live with the flexibility of peace. In the peace of Christ, opposites can be reconciled, conflicts healed, divisions united, differences accepted and pluriformity lived with in hope and confidence.

“Then the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kids. The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra’s den; and the child lay his hand on the adder’s lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountains; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.” (Is 11:6-9)

Peace is not living without conflict or stress, in contentment, and ease. Stress, change and tension are necessary for human and Christian growth. The peace of Christ is the gift that enables us to live confidently in the face of conflict, flexibly amid life’s pluriformities, and hopefully in the turmoil of differences. Peace gives us the security we need to mature through and in the very inconsistencies of life. God gives us peace as we walk with Him.

CHAPTER X RESTING ON THE SEVENTH DAY

In this final chapter, as I continue to describe the characteristics of one who walks with God and copes with God's gentle love with an attitude of acceptance, I shall look at the Christians maturing ability to rest with God on the seventh day: a day that lasts forever.

As our society becomes increasingly complex, more of us cry out for a time of relaxation, a break from the burdens that lay so heavy upon us. Our American culture, obsessed with compulsive doing, seeks desperately for time off, rest, and relaxation. A very good friend's song of late has been "Make the world go away, and get off my shoulders," surely a symptom of compulsive activity. From our youngest days, we have become convinced that our worth and value is based upon productivity and activity. How much you produce is how much you are worth.

Competition and production have become primary building blocks for our educational system, locking young people into behavior patterns that give them little respect for authentic rest and recreation. As a culture, we have become so compulsively production-oriented that we are even beginning to work at relaxing, trying to produce rest.

One of the fastest growing industries, and a highly competitive one at that, is the leisure service companies. Spas, health clubs, leisure resorts, and relaxation therapy centers are popping up in large numbers to fulfill the growing demand for rest. A new need has been discovered, so an industry has been built to serve that need.

I could not help but be startled into an awareness of how much people, including myself, are beginning to work at relaxing, than when I attempted recently to make an appointment with a professional woman concerning a matter of urgency. We spent a fair amount of time in our first meeting trying to find a convenient hour for an appointment meeting with another group.

We worked at trying to arrange our calendars for some time with little success. When she finally turned her calendar toward me in frustration, to show me that she was impossibly booked for an entire week, I saw written

on one page in bold red letters, “Get to the club to relax and work out.” Americans have turned their need to rest and relax into another thing to do, among the many other things to do. Resting and relaxing have become burdens to be blocked off and attacked. I am certainly not saying here that we should not give ourselves the much needed time for healthy sport activities, nor am I taking a swipe at the health clubs and leisure spas that have grown so rapidly in the recent past.

Every person has an authentic need to rest and relax. But the need for rest is not merely a surface desire to give the body a break, but rather a deeply felt requirement to live with a positive purpose. Many people are so overworked, so production oriented, so trapped in a vicious competitive maze that they not only become emotionally and physically burned-out or browned-out, but they become spiritually ill as well. The illness of burnout of body, mind, and soul is finally being recognized as an authentic disease caused by unreasonable stress. As the body is over-strained, the emotions overtaxed, so our spiritual energy becomes blocked and drained away.

Workaholism is a disease that has no respect for the person. It takes its toll upon the whole person, ultimately hindering the soul from its purpose of walking with and resting with the Lord.

The Seventh Day

Perhaps the most enjoyed sermons preached in churches today are those concerning rest. For the weary, overworked father or mother, the professional person or the students working their way through school, what could be more comforting than the words of Christ, “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.” (Matt 12:28)

These words of Jesus are most accepted by those who feel harassed by life. Of course, this presumes that those who feel overwhelmed by the burdens of life and stress have not already stopped participating in church worship, believing it to be just another strain.

As I have mentioned previously, a maturing child of God grows in the ability to work in creative self-expression and live peacefully with

pluriformity, but he or she must also develop the capacity to live each day resting in the Lord. A Christian is called to a life attitude that recognizes God's presence in all creation. God's presence is one of repose.

The primary and final purpose of human creation is to rest with God on the seventh day. This ultimate or terminal vocation is established from the beginning in the story of creation, "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for on it God rested." (Gen 2:3)

The last day or ultimate goal of all creating is to joyfully experience repose with the source of all that is. All creation flows peacefully from God, called always to return to the resting place of God. The seventh day is the sacred and sacramental experience of union with God in the ordinary and everyday activities of life. Life itself is sacred, for God restfully dwells in it for all time. The seventh day of Genesis is not to be taken literally as a twenty-four hour period. To interpret the Genesis details of time and space in a literal fashion would be to approach the meaning and message in a superficial manner. Remember, those who wrote this story of beginnings were trying to say something about a God beyond time, yet within time, beyond space, yet intimately involved in human life. In doing so, however, they could only use what was available, time-entrapped and limited human language.

The seventh day and all the days of creation never end. They continually flow in and out of the generous giving of God. God is creativity and is even now creating time. The seventh day is the ongoing process of creation. It is the first day of God's activity, the last day of all activity, and it is today. The seventh day of God's blest and holy rest is yesterday, today, and forever. God dwells in all the moments of human history and life with an equality of rest and repose. God is as present right now in this day and moment of time. There are no days in the life of God, only ongoing giving. Right now God is creating and generating in a continued process of Self-expression. Right now, God rests in life. It is the wisdom of God that rests evenly throughout all the days of creation finding its abode in the hearts of those who believe. The wisdom of God is like a mist covering and filling every corner of life.

"From the mouth of the Most High I (Wisdom) came forth, and mist-like covered the earth. In the highest heavens did I dwell, my throne on a

pillar of cloud. The vault of heaven I compassed alone, through the deep abyss I wandered. Over the waves of the sea, over all the land, over every people and nation I held sway. Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose inheritance should I abide?" (Sirach 24:3-7)

God's wisdom, created from the beginning, rests in creation continually, mist-like covering the earth. The wisdom of God wanders throughout creating, seeking a resting place, an abode in which to dwell, a receptive and open land in which to wander and walk. It is the direct command of God that His wisdom should find its rest among His chosen children. The tent of God's wisdom is the heart of every child of God. Each human being, in his or her deepest identity, is the resting place for God and His Holy Wisdom.

Letting God be at Rest

The task of the maturing child of God is one of building and preparing within himself a quiet place of repose for the creative mist of God. We must construct an inner sanctuary letting God be God in us.

"See, then! The Lord has chosen you to build a house as a sanctuary. Take courage and set to work." (1 Chron 28)

The work of building a resting place for God within is not a burden or a doing; it is rather an allowing. We do not have to toil to find God or to search God out, for God continues to search us out. Although God may seem like a man who hides in the dark in order not to be found, it also seems that He makes just enough noise for us to know that He has always been there. God has already found His resting place within us. We would not be if this were not true. Our work is to allow God to be, dwell, and walk where He is. If we do not cast the Lord out of our hearts, filling ourselves with lesser gods, we will be allowing God to be as He promised, resting within. We do not have to produce a resting place for God, but rather, we must let go of all those obstacles and enemies, which may prevent the Lord from living and walking in our inner sanctuary. The work of letting go is not merely another thing to do but it is rather an attitude toward life itself. Fearful as we may be, the yoke of living as one of God's children is light

and easy as compared to the yoke of pain and the burden of meaninglessness.

“Take My yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for My yoke is easy and My burden light.” (Matt 12:29)

The yoke of letting go and allowing God to walk within on the eternal seventh day is the work of a maturing child of God. God’s yoke is easy not in the sense that it does not demand effort but easy in the sense that to carry any other yoke is to burden oneself with the impossible task of living contrary to one’s nature and creation. Authentic and true rest can only be found in God. All other repose is a mere shadow of what one can experience through a receptive heart.

“Only in God is my soul at rest.” (Psalm 62:2)

To rest and repose in God, one must give Him a quiet atmosphere by letting go of all noisy activity that fills us with what is not God. We are called to free ourselves from the compulsive and addictive doing that causes us to avoid the gentle grasp of God.

Resting in God, however, is not an escape into inactivity and passivity or a retreat from the reality of daily life. It is rather a purgation of obsessive doing and running; a letting be and letting go of those feelings, needs, and desires which preoccupy our hearts, minds and bodies; a letting go of the many distracting noises which fill our daily lives preventing us from hearing the peaceful words of Christ. We must, as maturing Christians, listen to and then quiet the voices that entice us to run, produce, compete, make and do, so that we can be refreshed by the real tones of God’s gentleness. We can come to the pastures of rest along the rivers of Christ as we learn to allow God to repose within all that we say and do. The Lord will flow restfully through our minds, hearts and bodies teaching us to walk the pace of love. Here is a beautiful paraphrased prayer of Psalm 23 that can help us learn that it is Christ who is the pacesetter for those striving to live as children of God

Prayer of Christ the Pacesetter

**The Lord is my Pacesetter, I shall not rush.
God makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals,
And provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity.
I am led in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind.
The guidance of God is peace.
Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret,
For God is present here;
The timelessness and all-importance of the Living God will keep me in balance.
Refreshment and renewal are prepared for me by God in the midst of activity,
By anointing my mind with the oils of tranquility.
My cup of joyous energy overflows.
Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours.
For I shall walk in the pace of the Lord.
And dwell in the House of God forever. Amen.**

The right path for a child of God is along the ways of God; Who rests in all our comings and going, doings and makings. It is in the midst of all of life's stressful and difficult activities that God's river of rest flows, if we will but seek it. God sets a peaceful pace if we will but let go of our need to accomplish, finish, and arrive.

Prayer: Letting Go

Christian prayer is best described not so much as a doing of something as it is a letting go of whatever prevents the something of God from resting in our lives. There is really no such thing as prayer. There are only human beings letting God rest in the center of every activity. Prayer is not a thing but a relationship. It is an attitude that predisposes us to let go and turn to that relationship which is central to our existence. Prayer is better described as that which takes place between ourselves and God as we walk together.

The holy and blessed seventh day of God's repose is found in the present process of human life. Prayer is the desire to search for the seventh day in the movements, activities and rest of today. Prayer is a coming to, a walking with, a relating with God. In an attitude of prayer we transform the stressful, hectic, and busy doings of our lives into a restful experience of God. You can transform your compulsive, production-oriented lives into lives of prayer if you; "Come by yourselves into an out-of-the-way place and rest a little." (Mark 6:31)

It is in pausing during our daily activities that we can refresh our souls with the awareness that God walks with us, giving us His gentle grace, and favored Son. If we build into our routine moments of activity a time of remembering from where we have come and with whom we walk, we will find our minds uncluttered, our stressful emotions eased and our fatigued bodies refreshed. Prayer-pauses can transform distress into creative energy, conflict into positive tension and toil into self-expressive work.

Christ calls us to prayer-pauses so that we will develop an attentive and constant consciousness of God resting in life. We are called to a new way of seeing the reality of life, so that we will find our purpose and meaning as we find our source in the repose of God. As we develop the habit of stopping in prayer-pauses, catching glimpses of the seventh day repose of God, we learn to, "pray constantly and attentively...." (Eph 6:18)

A child of God is by nature a praying-person, created to walk and rest with God. It is only through prayer that we can constructively cope with the gentle yet seductive, peaceful yet powerful, refreshing yet challenging love of God. It is Jesus who teaches us how to not only put up with and endure the love of God but how also to encounter that love in prayer. Jesus teaches us with His mentoring life to live in a constant state of God-awareness.

Praying is not always the act of saying prayers but is the state or condition of being in tune with the gentle noises of God. As we grow in sensitivity to the presence of God's voice in our lives, we become free from the distracting and loud noises of stress, conflict, and competition. The soft tones of God's voice still the restless and shrill noises of pain, toil, compulsion and sin.

Through a letting go of all that we cling to, that which stands as an obstacle to God, we come to rest in prayer-pauses. Such an attitude does not mean that we do not work or fulfill our ordinary responsibilities. Work can be prayer if we live with an awareness of God resting in our tasks, needs, burdens, feelings, and moods. With prayerful pauses we can develop a restful stance in the midst of the most busy, hectic, and complex activities. Christ-consciousness can fill every moment of our doing. Work and rest are not opposing forces in our life. What we do should flow from who we are, and, who we are, should and does flow through what we do. We are sanctuaries of God's repose, the dwelling place of the Restful One. As we anchor ourselves in our true identities as children of God, we recall the long lost memory of resting with God on the seventh day in the garden of Creation. When you remember, you bring to life again the reality of the memory. In prayer-pauses we can in a sense bring to life the garden of God, in which we were created to walk for all time. That garden and that seventh day are in today and every tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

There is a community of today known for its struggling faith; a complex and anxious people striving to walk with God as they were called to be, children of God. This family of believers flows from the ancient tribe of storytellers, who spread the tale of the Nameless God to the children of every nation.

The ways of the Nameless God have been handed down from generation to generation, growing as they were passed and eventually becoming flesh in the mystery of the person Jesus Christ. The identity of the Nameless One was expressed in the words and deeds of this Jesus, known to be the greatest of storytellers. It was the story of God and the ways of God that were revealed in the tales and ways of Christ's life, and it is the powerful words of Jesus that live today in the tales of His community and followers.

The disciples of Jesus are an anxious lot. Their history is marked with sin and prejudice. They have at times tried to force their way into the lives of others. At times they have been the victims of persecution, at other times the persecutors. At times they have been scorned and pushed aside as fools, while at other times they have been the ones who marginalized and victimized their neighbors. To some they are called Christians, to others they are called Catholics but all can be called travelers along the way. As children so love to pass on the tales of their elders, so the ways of God and the tales of Jesus continue to be told and retold by the disciples of the way.

It is in the lives of the many children of God that we can glimpse the divine God and sacred Christ today. These children are wanderers still, filled with questions and wonderments. They seek answers to the same great questions their ancestors asked: "From where do we come?" "Why do we travel so?" and "Toward what are we moving?" The wondering never stops for a sincere traveler of the way. Neither do the whisperings of the Nameless God or the parables of the Christ stop telling us the story of how it is to walk with God. The great story of beginnings goes on and on in the unfolding of every child's life. As we walk with God, the great Companion recounts again the why of who we are as He shares the gentle love of who He is.

The story of God’s way begins ever anew in the constant creative outpouring of God into the hearts of all His companions. The God of faith never stops His creative work of giving and forgiving, cultivating and nourishing, seducing and resting with all that He has created. Every child of God can begin again his or her journey from God to God. For thousands of years the story of God has remained the same, only to be told again by the great reminder Jesus Christ. As we walk with God along the path of the garden kingdom of today, we can hear again the generative and gentle words of God. It is only through these words that life can make sense to a traveler of the way. Only through these words can the gentle love of God be encountered, endured and coped with in joy: “In the beginning, when God created the Heavens and the Earth.....”