



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"The False Self in Action, Part 1"

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 2, The Human Condition

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Our emotional programs for happiness formed in early childhood and fossilized into energy centers as a source of motivation for our thoughts, feelings, reactions and behavior manifest themselves at every level of our human functioning. And, as we were seeing last time, they manifest themselves in desires for the symbols of whatever our particular emotional program is as crystallized in the culture. For instance, a materialistic expression of our desire for security might be expressed in money, power, insurance policies, houses – or whatever is the symbol of security in the particular culture that this human being might be in.

You might think that once we begin the spiritual journey, then, and have bought into the values of the Gospel and the work and practice of the spiritual journey, then we would be safe. Not at all. The abstract, intellectual, conceptual or decision to buy into the Gospel values doesn't touch the unconscious motivation which is firmly in place by the time we reach the age of reason and probably even firmer in place by the time we hear the invitation of the Gospel to repent; that is, change the directions in which you are looking for happiness.

We find ourselves sometimes in Centering Prayer in moments of dryness, racked with emotional confrontations with our primitive feelings, sometimes dried out, sometimes feeling God is absent. The impatience one feels at that time, the annoyance, the boredom, as you reflect upon it once again – that very reaction – is the sign that you're trying to manipulate God. In other words, you're saying, "I don't like this. Please change. Not me, but you. I'd like to stay the same." And God says, "Won't you please remember that the purpose of prayer is not to get what you want or to change me, but to change you, dear heart!" Okay. So that takes a long time to get that message. And so, the complaints that holy people make about their prayers is simply trying to get God to come around to their ways of seeing things.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Just a personal example; since I'm the one I know best. And when I emerged from the early formation period at the monastery where I entered first (it later burned down), I

had joined the community because I was sold on the idea of giving my life to pursuing contemplative prayer, which was my understanding of the spiritual journey in those days. It didn't have quite that name that it has developed in the 60's and 70's and 80's. I looked around for the most difficult order that I could find and I think I succeeded. The Trappists then were extremely strict – you could only speak to one or two people, the abbot and the novice master, who were your superiors, who could send you away at any time. So, having that much authority over you, it doesn't help a kind of easy relationship of friendliness. Friendship was discouraged, and you couldn't do it anyway. And the only thing that was allowed was the sign language which was supposed to be limited to necessary speech or functional speech for work or for calling people's attention to something useful, not for ordinary human exchange. And so, in those days I think the climate was that the more penance you did, the closer you would get to God. And the harder the life was, the more likely you were to make progress in divine union or in contemplative prayer. And since that's what I had come to identify with as my goal in life, I naturally wanted to spend as much time as I could in prayer, formal prayer, that is, prayer in Church.

Here I was trying to keep all the rules as strictly as I could, and I had bought into them – hook, line and sinker. We had some free time, but not much. The vocal prayers were much too long -- very long -- and took up a lot of time and energy. We also had a lot of work, hard work. And you got up at two in the morning and you went to bed about seven at night. There was a lot of fasting and the food wasn't too good. The vegetables out of the garden were a little bit tired by the time we got to March. And so, it was a tough life. I thought that the only way I could survive this thing was to pray, to get on my knees and beg God's help, and so on. I used to go at every free moment, which was maybe a couple of hours a day, into the church. Once again, the church in those days was believed to be the ideal place to pray. Well, in actual fact, since we had no private rooms and were only allowed to go to the dormitory to sleep and had to read in common, you were never alone. And so, the only place to go to pray, really, seemed to be the church.

Well, the rule was if you pray in church, you either must stand or kneel. Sitting down was looked upon as a "no, no," so even to sit down for a few moments of Lectio (up until late in the twentieth century) was considered slightly ungenerous.

So here I was, this generous young man who had given up quite a bit: family, friends. And some people assured me I'd have a good career as a diocesan priest, and so on. Might become a bishop. And all that stuff just turned my stomach because I was "gung-ho" for humility, and I entered the order, actually, as a lay brother; that is, someone who does not go on to the priesthood, because there again, I thought that would be more difficult, more generous. And I was ready, you know, to go the whole way, thanks to God's grace and certain misconceptions about what the spiritual life really is, which took me about 25 years to find out. Well here I was getting these calluses on my knees and hanging in there and experiencing from time to time some encouragement from the Lord, but not much. I was certain that if I stayed there at least I would survive in this order and be able to fulfill my commitment.

Now I'd been there for maybe about a year or so, a little longer maybe, and another person comes in who seemed to have had the same idea, generally. But he was an older

man. I think he was in his 40's. He was a widower, actually, and he started coming to church regularly during all the intervals. It wasn't customary to spend that much time for most of the other monks. They used to read or do other things. He evidently had enough sense to get permission from the abbot to sit down during his prayers. That would be a "no, no" for me. Any relaxation of the Rule, I would not be able to stomach at that point. I had to keep the hard and narrow way.

Well, this went on for a few months, and he would spend as much time there as I was. And sometimes I'd find him in there when I, after great pains, had come rushing in from work and washed up very quickly and rushed upstairs, put on my cowl, got on my knees – praying! To my horror, after a few months, instead of my prayers, certain thoughts started floating through my mind: "How did he get in here ahead of me? How did he get permission to sit down while I'm kneeling?" And then, every now and then, I couldn't help when I came in to take a furtive glance at whoever was in there, he seemed to have this beatific smile on his face. And I said, "How is it.....?" My thoughts went like this, "How is it that here I am on my knees, killing myself, and this guy is sitting down and he seems to be in the lap of the Lord, just sopping up bliss right and left – and here I am!"

So, now I began to recognize that these thoughts are what is called – envy! Now jealousy is what protects your own good or what you think is good. Envy is what wants to take the good that others seem to have away because it's hurting your esteem or pride or something. There's no worse feeling than envy. "Green with envy" is, as you know, a popular description. But here I was feeling in this holy place, in the most holy position (kneeling), in the most holy church, and trying to enter into Divine Union (the most holy kind of consciousness) and here I was committing the greatest sin it seemed to me there was, which was to desire to take away someone's spiritual good! Well, I knew enough about theology to know that that's the worst kind of envy and so naturally, the thought came to me, "I was better before I came into this place!" So, the thought comes, "Maybe you would be better in another place; why don't you leave?" This is what is called temptations of the demons.

Well anyway, this went on literally for weeks or months – not necessarily in the same intensity – with many feelings. "I'd better give up prayer because whenever I come in, it starts." But I had enough sense to realize you shouldn't let your evil thoughts make you give up prayer. There must be some other way of doing it. Well, I really didn't have too much instruction except that our abbot was very consoling and encouraging about persevering in prayer through thick and thin. He himself was a man of prayer with great devotion to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, which is usually reserved in the monastic church. And so, he also was very much aware of the purification that begins when you enter a life of strict silence and prayer in which, you know, one's unconscious motivation begins to emerge into consciousness, if you give it a chance. Well, it not only emerges into consciousness, the dark side of our personality begins to emerge existentially into your feelings. And so, as I was sitting there, feeling this horrible feeling and wishing it would go away, and praying for it to go away, and it just kept getting worse, or it would go away a little while and then come back worse than before. Well, every now and then as you're sitting there, especially on a bad day when you've had a few other put downs, and maybe you're fasting; and your stomach is

groaning and groaning, then this feeling almost translates into taste. So, I could taste this feeling of envy! And I would think to myself this must be what it's like to sink your teeth into a piece of juicy manure! And I'm the manure. This is me, for gosh sakes! And here I was, thought so highly of before I came in – this generous young man who went to Mass every day, and taught catechism and all this stuff, and prayed.

I assure you, when we begin the spiritual journey, there often is a period of great enjoyment and great reassurance, and freedom because the worst part of your life is kind of cleaned up and you experience a certain freedom. But this is only like pruning a few branches on a tree. You still have to deal with the root. And so, when the dust settles, you begin to confront your old temptations – worse than before – because now you're more honest, you're more open and vulnerable, because of your sincerity and honesty, to the truth. And so, I'm sorry to say, for those of you who don't like this teaching, that the truth is inevitable. Whatever it is, it's going to come up. The only way to avoid it is to be a phony or a fraud. Just sit there and soak it in without being discouraged – that's the great struggle – not to get discouraged. And it's so hard not to, especially when the divine assurance or reassurance or affirmation begins to recede. It seems that God wants us to know experientially just what he's been dealing with throughout our life, and he expects us to receive this not as a reproach but as a secret, as a friend revealing a secret to a friend. And he's so surprised when we don't like it because this is the first time he's really allowed us to see the full truth. And so, instead of saying, "thanks," we're about to get up and walk out and stay out.

After about four or five years of struggling with it, on and off, this gentleman and I were thrown together in a situation after the fire where we got to know each other, and I discovered that he had the same problems I had in trying to get into church and to fight for a little free time in order to pray. And, in sympathizing with his situation, my problem vanished, and eventually we became great friends and he was a great support to me throughout the time I was an abbot. Relationships can change. But when they're not good, and you have no guarantee that they'll ever change, it's a very deep kind of trial or temptation.

I imagine the equivalent of that occurs in other forms of life, of other forms of community life, because on the spiritual journey, there always is someone in our life, our family, business or religious community or our social action whom we can't stand, who has a genius in bringing out the worst in us. And no matter what we do, we can't seem to improve this relationship. Well, this was the nature of my jealousy or envy toward this other religious. He hadn't done anything wrong. He wasn't doing anything. He was just minding his own business. It was my problem. You see, God used this other person to reflect back to me what my problem was. The person who gives you the most trouble in this world is the greatest gift that you have from God, if you can continue the spiritual journey. Because there are some dark places in our personality that even prayer or contemplative prayer doesn't light up. God works on us both from within or from without. There's an old famous cliché in religious circles about purification: it's a battering from without and a boring from within. There's no escape, it seems, at certain times, when purification is deep. God sort of gets after us with his compressor and starts digging – Burr! Burr! Burr! – into the inmost corners of our defense mechanisms which are hiding the worst parts of ourselves and he loosens it up

that way. When it arises, it's heavy. It's heavy! If you can learn that this is a gift – this is really the problem – our attitude towards it. If we think it's the end of the world – as we usually do, naturally – but if there was a little more information about the spiritual journey, that this is an invitation to a new depth of love, a new depth of relating to God, on a more spiritual level which requires a little scrubbing, a little emptying out so that we can relate or hear that marvelous communication, that transmission of divine life which can't come through if the noise of the false self is too strong. So, it really is a great gift.

GOD IS TOTALLY ON YOUR SIDE

We also must learn at this point in our spiritual journey – because we've started, and once you start, God is totally on your side. There's no danger of that, whatever psychological experiences to the contrary that you might have. Everything works together for good for somebody who's on the spiritual journey, no matter what you think or feel. You've got to believe it. And if you believe it, you save yourself an enormous amount of trouble analyzing, self-pity, ring around the rosy, and so on. To learn to be content in one's human misery -- what in some Buddhist circles is called *Maitri* – exactly the same insight I'm speaking about here -- which is to welcome this dark side and to sympathize with it and to have compassion on it.

And that's the truth, because most of our misery is rooted in the damage that was done to us, knowingly or unknowingly, by adults in our early life and are the means we took to cope with intolerable situations, when we didn't have any kind of reason to evaluate what was happening to us. This is part of the journey and the reason is very simple but very profound, as most simple things really are, and that is, that unless our heart is purified, God can't give us the Kingdom because we would appropriate it for ourselves as long as these energy centers are in place, or as long as there's a trace of them left, of any significance. And since these are emotional programs, God's purification involves the emotions. And what he first teaches us, or rather alternates, is that our emotional programs are damaging and that our emotions are damaged by these programs. They don't faithfully record life just as it is because they have to be filtered through the false-self system before we perceive them. And also, we need to feel the love of God at other times – the peace, the consolation, the deep quiet, the capacity to surrender, which heals the emotions of some of their wounds and their emotional judgment that life isn't what it should be, and that nobody loves me, and nobody could love me, especially God. All that baloney has to be healed and it's not enough to read about it. You have to be convinced on the emotional level.

That means emotional, or the feeling of God's love, as well as the feeling of our misery are correlative, and these are the poles that he works with as he gradually brings us out of these immature levels of relating to him and to everybody else and to ourselves into an ever-increasing liberation, freedom, the capacity to give, the capacity to give to others the compassion we've learned to give to ourselves. And the deeper the experience of God's mercy, the more compassion you can show to others and the deeper your experience of your need of God, desperate need of God for healing, is the measure in which you experience the infinite mercy of God. So, that at some point, when you have nothing left, it suddenly dawns on you that you have the infinite mercy of God, nothing else. But, my God, what else do you want? If you have that, you don't need anything else. And when that dawns on you, then the spiritual journey is not

going to be put off by any trial whatsoever. Trust emerges with such force in that confrontation -- and it's trust that leads to perfect love, nothing else, certainly not fear. Fear in our Lord's words is useless. We ought to believe the Gospel.

I think I've said enough, then, about that experience, but just to conclude it: Why was this young man, fairly generous by any standard, I dare to claim at this point -- though somewhat naïve and ill-informed -- why this generous young man, who has given up so much, comes into the monastery, does everything he's supposed to do, kneels down, prays as much as he can, fulfils all the injunctions of the superiors, *ad amplius*, which means even more than they've asked, and he suffers such thoughts -- where did they come from? He experiences envy, the most primitive emotions, jealousy. What was my problem? Evidently, one of these programs in the unconscious was still in place. Was it security? Was I using that time of prayer as a security blanket? Maybe. Maybe not. Or, was prayer in that monastery, where the abbot was talking it up, and where the whole life was oriented towards contemplation, was I secretly in competition with the other monks, somewhat like that guy who fasted everybody under the table, was I sort of praying everybody under the table? And prayer, you see, with my idea of prayer. And that's something else that God sometimes attacks.

And after I got through that particular trial, another one occurred. They come pretty regularly at that time in the spiritual journey! I probably had this further residue of thinking: to really pray and become a contemplative, I've got to pray in church for a couple of hours a day.

What did God do with that? He gave me a little illness that caused me to be sick for two years, mostly in bed, and in a place where I couldn't get anywhere near the Blessed Sacrament. This business of dealing with the Lord or following him is like dealing with somebody else, you know, who not only is a psychotherapist and has insights into what's wrong with you, but has all kinds of other gifts (who happens to be God). So God, with this incredible accuracy, constantly -- if we're game -- puts his finger on exactly the spot that needs attention. And it usually involves giving him just a little bit more than we want to -- not too much, just a little bit more. So, it's always more, always, "Would you let go of this little thing?" And we've given up almost everything and we're just hanging onto this one last shred of possessiveness. And sure enough, he comes along and says, "Oh, won't you please give me that?"

You've got to have a sense of humor and you've got to realize that this is what is called friendship! and training! and love! But this God of ours is like no earthly parent. He's incredibly wise, incredibly generous, incredibly patient, but incredibly honest. And that's what is a little painful every now and then, if we aren't honest. But he's training us like a father to his little son. And in the great poem of Moses in Deuteronomy, he compares God's training to an eagle training its little eaglet to fly. And, at least in their day, their understanding of that bird was that the way that the eaglet learns to fly is by being pushed out of the nest before it can fly. This is a marvelous image of what happens to us. God is constantly pushing us into something that we feel totally incapable of doing. And so, if you look over your shoulder, you wonder whether he still loves you. But he pushes you out nonchalantly. "Go on -- just fly!" The poor little thing is flapping and it's not working and he's heading straight for the abyss. And all of a sudden; the mother bird with absolute accuracy comes swooping down and

catches it on her wings just before it hits. So, after this has gone on a couple of hundred times, the darn thing learns to fly. After we've been treated this way about a hundred times, you begin to realize that maybe it's not so dangerous as it looks or felt the first time, and you not only begin to be content with your dependency on these thrilling escapes from certain death or misery, but you begin to trust God, to be content with his action in the way he treats you, and you begin to trust in his love beyond your psychological experience. That makes the relationship a lot more pleasant.