



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Four Consents, Part 1” Excerpted from The Spiritual Journey Part 3, Paradigms of the Spiritual Journey

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THE FOUR CONSENTS	
An invitation to love life and to appreciate the human vocation and the gift of being a member of the human family.	
1) Childhood	Consent to the basic goodness of our nature with all its parts.
2) Early adolescence	Consent to accept the full development of our being by activating our talents and creative energies.
3) Early adulthood	Consent to accept the fact of our non-being and diminution of self that occurs through illness, old age, and death.
4) Adulthood	Consent to be transformed.

THERE'S A VERY BEAUTIFUL, INSIGHTFUL WAY

This time I would like to present another view of the spiritual journey. By presenting the dark side of our personality and the emotional programs for happiness that won't work and all the damage they're doing in our lives, I'm afraid you might get too negative a view of the spiritual journey, although we've tried to show that this is a path to freedom. But still, when you are talking about this much damage and the disasters, the impression could get across that might be a little bit discouraging. Another view that is a positive view of the spiritual journey might help to balance any such misapprehensions as I might have inadvertently communicated. There's a very beautiful, insightful way of looking at the spiritual journey that is called "The Four Consents." I'd like to talk about that this afternoon in the context of looking at this whole journey from another perspective. This conference is based on an insight of John S. Dunne, who is a professor of theology at Notre Dame University. I was very much impressed with it when I first saw it and have since integrated it into some previous thinking. And so, here is how it goes.

HUMAN LIFE FROM BIRTH TO DEATH

This is the idea that the spiritual journey is correlative or corresponds to the natural evolution or stages of human life from birth to death. And that at each stage God asks of us to consent to what is

appropriate for that particular stage of human development. The first stage, roughly, is from one to eleven. During this period John Dunne suggests that God asks us to consent to the basic goodness of our being in all its parts. As we know and have observed, the various parts of the brain gradually develop at this time through external stimuli, and there's a natural development of experiencing life and experiencing our own faculties, and of developing our imagination, and language, memory, play, relationships – both family and then the extended ones that occur later on, socialization; so that about the year of eleven, our basic human faculties are pretty much in place. And so that this request that God makes of each of us is to accept the goodness of our being, our faculties, our life, as a gift from him and to be grateful for it.

GOD'S UNIQUE GIFT TO EACH OF US

Unfortunately, because of the vicissitudes of our early life that we've already discussed in showing how the individual self is formed with its ways of coping with life, if our environment in early life is filled with terror, rejection, ambivalent signals from one of the parents ... of love or hate, if we feel abandoned, or if we have some physical injury like a handicap and can't play with the other boys and girls, then the emotions hesitate to give a full and total emotional consent to life and its goodness. When I speak of the acceptance of our being or our basic goodness, I don't mean what we can do or do better than others; but rather, that basic goodness of our being which is God's unique gift to each one of us and which is loveable before we do anything. Okay. And this hesitation to consent emotionally is one of the reasons why we develop ways of trying to bolster up that hesitation and go on living, trying to find some kind of meaning or happiness when there are various holes in our heart. And we hesitate. We're not quite sure, are ambivalent about life.

TO BEGIN TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES

It's true that the biological need to survive gets us through these things, but I'm speaking of the emotional consent as we're not capable of a rational consent in the first seven years, at least. And so, we then bring into the next stage this hesitation. The next stage, he says, is from about eleven to twenty-two, or something like that, in which we're invited to accept the full development of our being and our talents, our creative energies. In other words, our capacity to do, and the goodness of that capacity. This is the period when the sexual energy arises with some force. But this is actually only the physical side of a much broader energy that emerges at that time of life which is our creativity, our capacity to relate to other people, to emerge out of our isolated little world of a child, and to begin to assume responsibility for ourselves, to think of our future life, and so on.

SOME DISTORTION OF THIS WONDERFUL ENERGY

That first, maybe twenty years or so of life, is designed, you might say in general, to accept our being with all its capacities for doing, and this includes our capacity for transcendence. That is, our capacity to go on growing beyond biological growth, which "The Four Consents" is then finished, into spiritual growth and into divine union. Now, once again, if, because of the vicissitudes of the human condition, this creative energy is repressed or oppressed, or the sexual energy is awakened perhaps too soon, before the emotional life can handle that kind of experience, then there may be some distortion towards this wonderful energy that God has given to people as a manifestation of his own divine love. This means that this appreciation for this gift can be distorted and relationships can be difficult. Once again, we may hesitate to give full consent to the goodness of all of our human potentialities.

PRETENDING THAT DEATH DOESN'T EXIST

Along in young adulthood, another consent emerges. And this is the beginning of God's invitation to accept our non-being. That is to say, the diminutions of self: old age, and physical death, illness. Physical death may now come into focus because, at this point, we may have friends or relatives who pass away and this is always an invitation to consider our own death, or you may be in an accident or a near death experience. We feel invited to face this situation in life. Now most cultures try to avoid this as much as possible by creating various means of avoiding this thought or pretending that death doesn't exist, and when it happens, you cover it up as much as you can with whatever cosmetics are available.

WE'RE INVITED TO ACCEPT

Here the invitation is not to think of the morbid side of death ... of being put in a coffin, and prayed over, and then disposed of in some dignified way. It's rather the acceptance of the consequences of physical death that we're invited to accept. The consequences of physical death are going to be the letting go of everything we love in this world: persons, places and things ... and moving on to other relationships with these things that we don't know anything about yet. And we can only hope as we don't have direct experience of it. This is a very, very poignant and deeper kind of request to consent to than the previous ones, and it probably builds on the previous ones. If we haven't made the previous ones, this one is probably more difficult. If we had a death experience early in life, the loss of a parent, for instance, we may have an exorbitant fear of death, or excessive fear. We may have been wounded by it; and, hence, again we hesitate to make this consent which is actually a part of the whole rhythm of life. The capacity to consent to life, physical life, with all its beauty, and so on ... which includes also the beauty of this world, and of nature, of the universe, and also the willingness to move on to something beyond and hopefully even better than the good things of this world.

A FOURTH CONSENT

There's a fourth consent, which is the most difficult one of all, and this is the one that we've been kind of focusing on through the middle part of this retreat, and that is the consent to be transformed. Now you'd think everybody would be "gung ho" for this, but even the holiest people, when they begin to perceive what's involved in this process are inclined to say, "Well, let's wait a minute and let's not rush this thing," and so on. Because transformation means the consent to the death of the false self, which is the only self we know at this point and which does not drop dead upon request. Whatever harm it's doing us, at least we have it and we know it and let's get on with it. What might the true self be? Most people are afraid of the death of the false self- system even more than physical death. The perception of this is sometimes so poignant for some people that in late adolescence, when they begin to face physical death or the death of their emotional programs for happiness, they opt out for suicide, or something. The suicide rate is extremely high in the high school age at the present time, as you know. These confrontations are so difficult for this generation, perhaps because the first two consents, which would have been a preparation for it, are also so difficult. And so many people now coming into young adulthood have experienced so much pain in their youth from various sources and just from the pervasive sense of doom that they just don't have the confidence to accept or consent to this loving invitation to accept the mystery of our non-being in the sense of the diminution of our physical being.

TRYING TO MILK A COW THAT'S RUN DRY

These four consents are invitations, really, to love life and to appreciate the human vocation and the gift of being a member of the human family and the gift of being offered a place in this marvelous universe with its beauty and potentialities. This consent, of course, is not so much to the things themselves for their own sake ... that would be idolatry ... the love of things just for themselves. This is the problem with the energy centers which want security, which want esteem and affection, and power/control, just for the sake of those things. As we know, there's nothing wrong with a reasonable amount of any one of those things. The mistake is that, because of the fixations of our emotions on these particular programs for happiness, we treat them as absolutes. In other words, instead of appreciating a reasonable amount of security because of the compulsiveness and the fantastic nature of our needs or demands, we try to milk from these limited goods an absolute happiness which they can't give. Hence, disappointment, frustration. It's like trying to milk a cow that's run dry. It just can't give you what it hasn't got. And partial goods can't give you the kind of unlimited happiness which is the way we were made. Hence, this gradual training in consent, beginning with what is most positive and easiest to make, is the school in which God brings us gently, step by step, to accept more and more of his plan and then to move into the divine union that vastly transcends what any human eye or imagination can even grasp in the smallest degree of what he has in store for those who make these consents, who love him.

A LITTLE DEATH

We consent to God and to his will in the enjoyment of these things and in the letting go of these things because we're always invited to move forward into greater and greater levels of happiness. Each level requires something of a little death, a kind of preview of death from where we are. Thus, the child has to be willing to die to being a child to become an adolescent. The adolescent, in a sense, dies to being an adolescent in that world in order to enter as an adult. Most people don't object to that in principle. In practice, we sometimes hang onto our childish world even as, physiologically, we move on into physical and more adult worlds.

WE ONLY LEAVE BEHIND THE LIMITATIONS

This is really what the Chain of Being means: that as we grow, we don't reject any states that we've been through. We only leave behind the limitations and die to those as we grow into more human and higher states of consciousness. The beauty of a child's simplicity, innocence, its immediacy with reality – these are qualities we should maintain all through life. But the tantrums, and the ignorance of the child, and its limitations, we leave behind. Similarly, the spirit of adventure of the adolescent, its search for relationship and for personal identity and growth, these are values that we should keep all through life. But the emotional turmoil and the panic to establish an identity – these belong to the limitations of the adolescent and are left behind as we become an adult. Thus, a true asceticism, the asceticism that is presented to us in the Gospel as well as emerges in the other world religions, is not so much a world-rejection but rather the acceptance and consent to everything that is good and created, including the legitimate pleasures of life and learning how to use the good things of this world and our faculties rightly. It isn't a question of rejection, but of learning to use all the good things rightly. And the best way to use everything, of course, is to use it in relationship to God as his gift and to appreciate it and to love it.

I GUESS HE LIKES IT

I've often noticed in people on the spiritual journey, that when they have reached a certain point, God often asks them to rethink some judgment from early childhood which was a rejection of his gifts, or of their being, or of their goodness, or of the goodness of other things. In other words, he invites them to take another look at what their hesitations were and now to realize that those hesitations were based on the circumstances of their early life and their inability to handle emotionally the traumas of early life. And now he asks them to take another look at the beauty of this universe, the good things of life, the beauty of a meal together, the loveliness of a sunset, the beauty of music, the enjoyment of swimming, the enjoyment of resting, the enjoyment of good food, if you can get it. And so, God is a tremendous supporter of the universe and of his creation.

THE ABUNDANT LIFE

He is also a great supporter of life. As Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly." An abundant life is this openness to the higher states of consciousness and union which require a foundation on the human level of acceptance and integration. A true asceticism, then, is the appreciation of what was good at every level of human life from the moment we were conceived on upwards, integrating each level of human consciousness into the next one and expressing it now in the more mature way. This is what integration really means the unification or unity or union of our experience as we perceive it from higher vantage points where we can make a greater synthesis. This pattern seems to continue beyond the levels of consciousness that are listed here [points to Uroboric and runs hand up to Mental Egoic in the Evolutionary Model] into the higher states of consciousness. There are also the good things of the beginning of our spiritual journey. They are appreciated but also, we are willing to let them go as we move into a more spiritual relationship to God, a more mature relationship to him. It's not that we reject the consolations of an earlier period, but that we now no longer depend on them as we did in the beginning and are prepared to keep growing into ever more mature levels of relating to the Ultimate Mystery and to everyone else because that's involved in loving God, as we know. We cannot love God without loving what he has made and also loving him in everything that he has made.

HIS GIFT TO US

In any case what I'm trying to say is to consent to God's world, to one's own goodness, to the goodness of others, and also to consent to the inevitable diminishing of one's physical powers and the letting go of what we love in this world is the way God brings us gently to the final surrender in which we are willing to let the false self die and the true self emerge. And this can happen early in life; but if it doesn't, then the rhythm of life itself contributes to it. Such as the mid-life crisis, which, no matter how successful you've been professionally or otherwise, one begins to wonder whether one's succeeded or accomplished anything anyway. One experiences going downhill, going towards retirement, and illness begins to appear; then we have old age, Alzheimer's, etc. So that the rhythm of life tends to nudge us into these consents if we haven't been able to face them by means of the spiritual journey itself. There's more than one way, I think, God has of bringing us to this point. And what happens in the process of dying may be a marvelous way that God corrects all the mistakes we made during the rest of life and gives us the greatest chance we've ever had to choose to consent to the goodness of this universe and especially the goodness that is his gift to us.