

A Brief Introduction: Create an Inner Workshop

Peter France, the former host of the popular BBC radio program *The Living World*, relates in his book *Patmos* that this Greek isle has long had a remarkable healing impact on people. He notes:

It changes people. . . . In the age of myth, Patmos was a place where the veil that separated the everyday from the eternal was thin. Some feel it remains so [today]. . . . [Spiritual father] Christodoulos traveled to Constantinople to ask the emperor for permission to create what he called “a workshop of virtue” on the island. . . . There was a sense of the numinous here, a presence even I felt as a prompting to awe.

The question this book will ask is the following: What if such a “workshop” could be created or strengthened within us so we could move forward in the spiritual life with the tools we need when we face the challenges of the unknown future? However, for this to be possible, we must be willing to do inner work with discipline, complete honesty, and openness. As spiritual mentor and psychologist Jack Kornfield notes in his enchanting book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, “to sustain a spiritual practice demands our steady attention. The first task, then, in almost any spiritual voyage, is to quiet ourselves enough to listen to the voices of our hearts, to listen to that which is beyond our daily affairs . . . [to] step out of our usual roles . . . [and] to become receptive and open.”

Crossing new spiritual thresholds in life takes great faith. It is a little like walking down a familiar street and being aware that we must eventually turn the corner and not know what we will find there. But what we need most is not simply knowledge, as important as that is. While passion is also required, that too is not enough. Beyond these, the development of an inner workshop calls us to a *radical change in attitude*. This change in attitude is expressed well by the twentieth-century French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who said, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” How often do we hear from our coworkers, our family and friends, and even in restaurants and stores the phrase, “No problem!” What if we were to start thinking about our spiritual lives in this way? Imagine the inner space that this might create, allowing us to see our inner lives as blessed gifts to be fully enjoyed and freely shared with others. That would be, indeed, a radical change in attitude.

Yet, such an attitude of intense freedom and openness is like the shy stag of a mystical forest: it is elusive and cannot be sought directly, although when it is present it is easily recognized and felt. We can feel it in the presence of persons who seem to embody such virtues or traits as gratitude, natural compassion, humility, and a deep appreciation of the necessity of healthy interest in *both* self and others as a way of being open to God. This is what inner formation and what this book, for that matter, is about.

Why I Wrote This Book Now

Recently, I decided to move away from my full-time teaching position at Loyola University Maryland. My goal was to open up more free space to write and give presentations on resilience, maintaining a healthy perspective, and the integration of psychology and spirituality. This turning of the *next* corner in my life had, and I suspect will continue to have, many foreseen and unforeseen consequences. Past approaches may not be sufficient. New ones will need to be created or gracefully greeted. A lot remains unknown, and the mystery of life, as I view the brief time ahead, is surely precious. As I quietly reflected

on this reality, I realized again—this time with a seemingly greater sensitivity because of my own situation—how important inner formation is throughout all of our lives.

As other writers on the inner life would remind us, there is no spiritual retirement. Our healthy psychological attitude and spiritual outlook are the elements that can turn sadness into new learning and greater inner depth. On the other hand, a negative psychological attitude and spiritual outlook can result in our missing so many of the beautiful ordinary joys before us. And so in the preparation of this book I wanted to revisit some of the simple, but essential, lessons of inner formation. I made this inner workshop for myself and wanted to also share it with others who may be turning the next corner in their own spiritual life.

The Approach Taken

The chapters are quite brief, and the approach suggested is quite straightforward. Simply read a chapter either in the morning or evening, and seek to take to heart the story and point made over the next twenty-four hours. Don't analyze it. Don't ask yourself whether or not you were already aware of the point being made; as a matter of fact, I would be surprised if you weren't. Formation isn't about the new; it is more about how we can *renew*, come home to ourselves . . . and God.

“Simply” carry the themes and stories provided within you for a while during the day and reflect back on them for a few seconds as you go about your daily activities. Remember as well to recall them before you fall asleep. This will give the themes, drawn from both the saints and sages of the past and current spiritual guides, an opportunity to be seeded and ripen. In other words, in your busy day give yourself some room to reflect and breathe. In this way you will be inviting God to come to occupy the space within you. That's what an inner “workshop of virtue” requires.

And so each theme presented is an invitation to enhance the spirit of receptiveness and openness to an alternative, richer path than that which the world can offer. In the process of developing an inner

“workshop of virtue,” we can change, and our compassion toward others can deepen as well. Why is this so? Our lives become centered on God. When this occurs, we know it, for we feel greater freedom, peace, love, and clarity. Where does a person begin such a profound process? *Just start where you are.*

Following these twenty chapters of reflections, a brief section is presented on Jesus’ central call and the three doorways we must continually walk through in the spiritual life. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate where the twenty lessons are meant to lead us.

Finally, the last section, a month’s worth of simple questions and exercises, provides a way to truly actualize one’s own unique “workshop of virtue.” It allows the reader to personalize and fulfill in a profound way the one thing necessary for the spiritual life, which until now may have been—at least partially—missing: living in Christ with depth, peace, meaning, and compassion. In time, the process may offer us the chance to turn over a new leaf and live more transparently, simply, and joyously so others can, in turn, benefit from the journey with us *now* . . . the journey we have possibly only wished for up to this point.

Before delving further into the main three parts of this book, each of us should ask ourselves this question: How much do I really want to do the work that this inner workshop requires? There is no partial spirituality or spiritual retirement once we have committed ourselves. Personal inner formation is not about adding a few things to Sunday Mass. It is about being open, in St. Paul’s words, to putting on the new self, to *change*. It is not about simply deepening your prayer life, although that is certainly a significant part of it. It is about changing the total character of the way you live, see yourself, reach out to others, and let go.

Spiritual formation is undertaken so we don’t waste our time in life. This book is about offering ways to soften our soul so the truth and fullness of what God promised is welcomed more completely.

The messages are simple. The possibilities, with God’s grace, are profound. The openness and commitment needed are complete. Yet, if the desire is there, then God is already alongside us. You don’t need to put on any special clothing or be at a certain level of interior maturity. Just take each step as it comes. *Just start where you are.*

Part I

Twenty Lessons in Personal Inner Formation

I.

Live (Don't Only Say) a Simple Prayer

One of the great joys in my life has been the opportunity to meet so many dedicated, talented, and compassionate people in my mentoring and therapy work. Among them was a very committed Christian who demonstrated her love for God and others through acts of charity, attendance at daily Mass, and faithfulness to her prayer life. Despite all of this good work and spiritual discipline, she was a gold-medal worrier. This was not only a problem for her, but it weighed heavily on her family as well. Negativity is very contagious. When someone who is troubled enters the room, you can immediately feel the spirits of those present lower a bit. When that person is someone you live with (or possibly you!), it is even worse.

In response to the heaviness both the woman and her family were feeling, my first goal was aimed at helping her to recognize and then challenge her dysfunctional cognitions (ways of thinking, perceiving, and understanding). To some extent, this psychological process lessened the amount of negativity she was carrying and inadvertently sharing with her family. However, it became obvious to me that her situation needed to be addressed on a deeper spiritual level as well.

And so the next time she came in for a session, I said to her, "You seem to be such a very prayerful Catholic. Yet, you seem to neglect the one prayer acknowledging a simple call from God that is at the heart of the spiritual life." As I anticipated, she looked surprised and

asked eagerly (because she was very open to deepening her inner life), “What prayer are you talking about?”

“Well,” I responded, “maybe it is best demonstrated through a brief story. If you gave a little girl a present at Christmas or for her birthday, what would be the best way for her to thank you? Expressing her gratitude in words would be nice. However, how much richer her statement of gratitude would be if you saw her fully enjoying the gift and freely sharing it with her friends and siblings. The same can be said about the gift of life we have been given by God and our grateful response. Sure, we could say our thanks in words, and as the psalmists suggest we should do that. But how much more real and compelling our prayer of thanks would be if we could totally enjoy the gift of life God has bestowed on us and share it naturally with others without expecting anything (not a smile, a word of thanks, or their following a suggestion we might offer them) in return.”

The example of the child and the gift must have struck a chord in the woman. She seemed to be awakened to looking at her life differently and ready to act on this insight in ways that would make her life a little lighter and her compassion a bit more joyous.

The call to live in peace and joy and to share it with others is quite simple. Yet, for most of us at different turns in the day, week, month, year, or our lives in general, it is still not easy. Self-compassion and compassion for others go hand in hand. Just as Jesus calls us to see others as being made in the image and likeness of God (what is referred to as *“imago Dei”*), we must simultaneously remember the same about ourselves. When people can see that we are giving not out of duty, guilt, or fear that someone will think less of us, the gift they receive from us will be greater. The reason is that it is being given naturally out of our own sense of being gifted. And, in gratitude to God, we are enjoying these very gifts to the full rather than ignoring them.

Scripture scholar Walter Bruggemann called such an underappreciation of the graces around us “under-living.” To live in such a manner is so foolish, given how short life is. Also, “under-living” doesn’t set the stage for increasing our compassion toward others. Instead, it

simply limits our ability in the long run to share ourselves with others. Foolish, isn't it?

Robert Ellsberg, in his insight-filled book *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*, pointed this out with respect to Dorothy Day, who many consider a modern-day saint because of her steadfast commitment to the poor. Ellsberg writes:

Keenly attuned to the suffering of others, [Dorothy Day] remained equally sensitive to the signs of beauty and ever mindful of what she called "the duty of delight." She read the news in the light of eternity. And she had the remarkable effect, when you were with her, of making you feel that you could change the world, and be a better person, and that such an understanding would be an enormous adventure. . . . No one who ever observed how she savored a cup of instant coffee or the rare luxury of a fresh roll, how she enjoyed watching the shifting tides of Raritan Bay off Staten Island or listened raptly to the Saturday afternoon opera broadcasts on the radio, could fail to detect the quality that Teilhard de Chardin described as a "zest for living."

Jesus, in John 10:10, said, "I have come to bring you fullness." The simple question for us is: How are we embracing that fullness in gratitude and freely sharing it with others? How we live in response to this simple, powerful question is at the heart of the spiritual life and our personal inner formation.

2.

Rediscover the Lost Virtue of the Desert

My daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren were sitting around the kitchen table for dinner. Once the meal was done, my daughter looked at her children and asked, “What are you particularly good at doing? In other words, what gifts do you think God has given to you so you can help others?”

My granddaughters love these types of questions and launched into sharing a pretty full list of what modern positive psychology would call “signature strengths.” After hearing this recitation by both of them, my son-in-law asked, “Well, what about humility? Neither of you mentioned that.” To which my youngest granddaughter, Emily, immediately asked, “What’s humility?”

My son-in-law is not so young that the Internet is his only source of information, so he said in reply, “Well, get the dictionary, and let’s look it up.”

In response, the youngest scurried to find the dictionary, grabbed hold of it, and handed it to her dad. He found the entry for “humility,” read the definition out loud, and then asked, “Well, what person comes to mind when you hear this description?” Both of them and their mother immediately responded with great enthusiasm, “Mom-Mom!” referring to my wife. My son-in-law then asked, “Well, what about Pop-Pop?” to which they all shook their heads from side to side and said, “No, not Pop-Pop!”

No matter how much we may value the spiritual life, the virtue of humility is an elusive one—especially for Pop-Pop! Yet we must all seek it every day because it is the very “soil” in which personal spiritual formation grows. Without humility, response to God’s call is nearly impossible. Without it we will not be able to take our place in the world while not being *of* the world. Yet, despite this reality, humility is in short supply today.

As we look around the world—and even the Church—we rarely see the face of humility. That is one of the reasons why I suspect that the choice of Pope Francis was such a particular cause for joy among so many Catholics, whether they called themselves conservative, middle-of-the-road, or liberal. True ordinariness is tangible holiness, and we experience this holiness for ourselves when we encounter the spirit of humility in another person or, without labeling it as such, in ourselves.

The reason that humility is also at the heart of the spiritual journey is as follows:

When you take knowledge and you add humility, you get wisdom. And when you add that wisdom to compassion, you get love, and God is love.

Knowing this, though, is only part of the challenge since humility cannot be sought directly. To do so would paradoxically be an act of pride and egoism. Humility is a grace freely given to us by God. However, this doesn’t mean we should do nothing to enhance the soil in which humility can grow. For instance, here are some of the ways we can welcome and respect this gift:

- Recognize times when we compare ourselves favorably—or unfavorably, for that matter—with others; when we don’t over- or underestimate ourselves, life is much more pleasant. A fruit of humility is the ability to recognize *both* our gifts and our growing edges with a sense of equanimity.
- Appreciate how much others have played in our successes—no matter how hard we also may have worked; no achievement is obtained by one person in a vacuum.

- Notice when we draw attention to ourselves and our accomplishments and possessions, not as a celebration of gratitude for the blessings received, but as a sign of our own superiority.
- Avoid, or catch ourselves when we are tempted to use, sarcasm or humor at the expense of others.

These are but a number of simple steps to keep us aware of the need to see ourselves and our lives totally, clearly, and gratefully. Humility is certainly the spiritual ingredient that makes life so much more tasty and easy to live without a sense of distress. It is also tied to the psychological ability to have sound self-esteem because it helps us avoid the dangers and distortion of overconfidence on the one hand and inordinate self-doubt on the other. Humility clears the lens in which we view ourselves and allows us to enjoy the gifts we have been given and to share them freely, not being concerned about their limits. Instead, we do what we can, enjoy what we have been given, and let God take care of the rest.