

The Authentic Self

By Burt L. Burleson

Lord, may I know myself in order that I might know you.

- Augustine, The Confessions

Session One – Recognizing the Small Self

When you look at the heart of spiritual teaching, what you find is a word about what can be... what a human being is created for...who we are as persons, in reality. There is a truth about that... and we need spiritual teaching because we believe a lesser truth, we just do. The “world” will always have a limited notion of what is true... and most people have centered their lives in that lesser notion.

“A spiritual teaching challenges the conventional view of personality... and calls us to another level.” (Helminski, Living Presence, 46). In other words, we are conditioned to live life at a certain level... we’re enslaved in some ways, to a lower level.

Something scares us and we react.

We feel angry and lash out.

We didn’t mean to be but we found ourselves jealous.

We’re hurt. We withdraw.

There is a stimulus and we respond... a tug and off we go.

We are marionettes, not complete human beings, and puppeteers are pulling our strings. Some of these puppeteers are cultural and familiar to us... some are not so familiar. Some of our puppeteers are unique to certain persons and have been created by past experience or by habit or by lack of attention. Some of these puppeteers are known to us... many are not.

We are marionettes and, for the most part, we’re asleep to that fact. We don’t know we’re being controlled. We don’t know we’re being limited. We think, “This is it.” The deepest spiritual teachings want us to awaken to a higher vision of what it means to be a human being and what it means to be alive. (LP, 47).

That’s the aim of what we might call “Inner Christianity.” For sure, an important part of our faith experience is more outward. It’s important that we learn teachings that are ethical, which help us to do well and help society to be good. It’s also important to learn teachings that are doctrinal, so that our thinking is coherent and guided by the truths revealed to us.

All that is important but many, if not most Christians, stop there, which is not only sad but deadly... because, as Scripture says, “it’s the spirit that gives life...” not the law and not doctrines. In reality, they only lay the necessary foundation for the inner work we must do in cooperation with the transformative work God is doing in us.

This is what God wants for us and what Jesus’ teachings are about. “I have come that you might have abundant life.”

So, where to begin? In a way, it's very simple. You begin by saying that you are limited and that your knowing is limited. You don't see all there is to see. And that what you are able to hear is limited... conditioned. Thomas Aquinas says, "Whatever is received is received according to the mode (the disposition, the way of being) of the receiver." (Basil Pennington, True Self, False Self, 22-25)

It seems simple but in actuality it is profoundly difficult... like an ancient trying to conceive that the world was not flat and that the sun did not circle the earth. (Cynthia Bourgeault, Inner Awakening, 102)

Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God." This teaching is where we're heading, it is our goal, but first we have to say, "We're blind." Jesus says in John 10, "If you knew you were blind then you could see, but since you think you see, you're blind."

In a sacred nutshell, this is the first step. We must see our limitations of seeing in order to begin to see. Our hope is in this confession, "I'm blind."

In time, we'll need to look at ways we learn to see, how is it we sharpen our vision? How is it that we stop lying to ourselves? For now, it is enough to admit that this is our instinct. Blame it on the culture, blame it on "The Fall," our brokenness or sinfulness or all the above... in a way, that does not matter. All that matters is that we admit it is so.

Until we do, then we will identify with (an important idea) with the understanding of ourselves that is limited and limited by all that would control us. When we identify with our limited notions of ourselves and of the world we create what some call "the false self." (TS/FS 27)

This concept of the "false self" is important to understand as we make our journey towards the "authentic self" or the "true self" or the essential self. Spiritual teachers all describe the phenomena of the false self, although many other names are used to describe it such as: the ego, the egoic self, the small self, the persona, The Imposter, the small mind, the small I. (I'm personally partial to "Mini-me.) The pervasiveness of this teaching throughout all traditions is referred to as The Perennial Philosophy, "there is a you that is not really You. The small self is not THE ESSENTIAL SELF."

While each teacher certainly will nuance the notion, they seem to agree that this phenomena develops, this self develops, as we identify with our limited understanding of who we are.

Who are you? How do you answer that question? "I'm single... I'm married?" "I'm a homemaker... a banker... a carpenter?" "I'm a daughter... a dad?" These are the roles you play, the relationships you have, and they are a part of the small self... your persona.

Who are you? "I'm a Baptist... an activist... a passivist?" "A liberal... a conservative?" "I'm from West Texas... from Boston?" "I'm a Smith... a Jones?" Again, all these are a part of what makes up the small self. They help you define you in the world. They are labels.

Who are you? “I’m a doubter... a failure?” “I’m really out-going... friendly?” “I’m shy. I’m an INFJ?” “I’m sick with cancer? Hi, I’m Heather and I’m an alcoholic.” The limited understanding of self is centered in these things.

All of the above is what we might think of as “the small self stew.” They are ingredients of the small self and really are important to know early on in life. It’s good to name them. They are sources of identity with a small “i” and tend to answer questions about competency, belonging, and belief.

Parents, good parents, instinctively know how important it is to help a child know these things.

“You’re such a good artist.”

“We’re Baptist and here’s what we believe.”

“We’re Joneses and that’s not the way Joneses act.”

At one level these parts to our persona, are very important to be aware of and find confidence in. Paradoxically, they are also important to forget. Healthy spiritual teaching and healthy faith communities will help us both to affirm these parts of ourselves and to move beyond them. (What some would call a balance between self-fulfillment and self-transcendence.)

This “self” introduced above, is what some might refer to as a social construct. By and large it is something that is created externally and has a great deal to do with what others expect of you and what’s fashionable and what is valued in the community.

This “self” is the small self and it tends to be fashioned by and to be controlled by (when we’re unaware of it) the world. And by “the world” we mean, expectations of others, demands of the culture, inner conflicts, insecurities, and deep wounds, habits... Sin and sins. All that is in the physical realm (the world of sense). As a rule, when the ESSENTIAL SELF is unknown... the small self will be controlled. It is a marionette.

And there are certain things the small self tends to require. Thomas Keating, a Benedictine Monk and Abbot says that we will find the needs of the small self (he uses false self) in one of three areas:

Needs for security and survival. (some would add pleasure here)

Needs for esteem and affection.

Needs for power and control.

Father Keating says that every need of the small self can be found here in one of these areas. Each of us, being unique with unique stories have different felt “needs.” But we all have a small self and this small self, this “identity” will have needs... or hungers. It will want, to be affirmed... or to be in control... or to be secure... and when that need goes unmet... certain feelings will for sure come. They are what Thomas Keating calls, “the afflictive emotions,” (anger, grief, apathy, lust, pride, envy). (Invitation to Love, p20) These feelings betray, point to, the needs of the small self that have gone unmet. Once we have identified with our small self “thinking,” and are blind to this... we will have no choice but to be swept up into these feelings.

For example, the preacher whose small self needs to be admired (esteemed, what the desert fathers called “vainglory”) will feel perhaps sad or

angry if no one compliments his sermon. He doesn't want to feel that way, he just does. When a peer is invited to speak at a local event, instead of him, he feels envy. He doesn't want too... mean too... choose too... it's just there.

The man who grew up with little resources might feel anxiety... deep fear... when the fridge isn't full. Or when his wife buys a new toaster instead of putting that \$50 dollars in savings, he finds himself angry.

The woman whose small self has been conditioned to be in control might feel profound anger at someone she is working with who seems to be unpredictable or "irresponsible." And when she gets home and her husband hasn't picked up the dry-cleaning, she's depressed.

We can easily see how this escalates. If I get angry when I'm out of control, I'm liable to avoid situations where I'm not in control and I may develop habits or even addictions like obsessive planning and list making, that provide more assurance of being in control.

We instinctively cope with our "stuff." If my small self always needs affection, I'll look for those who will "touch a lot." Unconsciously, I will find them, and, of course, they will have a great deal of power over me. Or I may just withdraw and stop relating to people because "you can't trust them." This of course, reinforces at a deep and unconscious level that my small self must receive a certain amount of affection or something awful will happen.

Much of what is taking place here is under the radar of consciousness. We don't see it. It's in charge. We're just being swept along. We are marionettes. As the Fifth Dimension once sang, "If you wanna see me do my thing, Baby, pull my string."

The culture says, "Buy this" and we need to be esteemed, so we buy it.

The small self enjoys power and so we unconsciously manipulate those we work with. Or it hates boredom so it finds stimulation. Or it fears scarcity so it consumes. Or it can't stand the thought of someone thinking less of it so it signs up to be on the committee even though you're already over-extended.

The bottom line? The small self wants what it wants and works to ensure that it will get it.

We're in a small self mess, but there is good news. Christ has come to set us free. And already, even as you read of the small self and nod to its "tyranny" in your life... you know something else. At some level, you know... you've tasted it occasionally. Real Life broke in on you. You were given a glimpse or perhaps have been given many glimpses of something more true and eternal.

It may have happened in worship. Or in some moment of sacrificial love... or deep friendship. Perhaps it was a crisis, where everything was stripped away. Maybe you knew someone who seemed to be a Saint and was so full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control and this gave you hope. Maybe you've already been in contact with this wisdom through some teacher. All of the above may be true for you.

The point is, we have reason to hope. We are not left captive to what is not true.

Resources:

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening: Cynthia Bourgeault

Invitation to Love and The Human Condition: Thomas Keating

True Self, False Self: M. Basil Pennington

Living Presence: Kabir Edmund Helminski

Session Two

What, Where, Who is the Authentic Self

Let's go back and remember the primary emphasis of Session One. We are complex beings and we have different parts to who we are. One part, the external part of who we are, can be called "the small self." It is comprised of many things: likes and dislikes, opinion and comparison, ambitions and passions, reactions and expectations, personalities and tendencies are all apart of the "small self stew."

This part of you is not, in its essence, bad. However, it is limited and can be limiting if we are unaware of it and therefore controlled by it. Thomas Merton says that the false self mistakes itself for the whole thing. (Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, Cynthia Bourgeault, 102) So, the first thing we must do, is to see. That's why Jesus is always inviting people to wake up... to awaken. As we do, we can stop identifying with the small self and we can know there is something more.

"What if we were to experience something more real than what we can see and touch, something more ourselves than our body, or our role in society, or our personal history – more real in fact than even our thoughts and emotions." (Kabir Helminski, Living Presence, p.58) The witness of all the saints and of every tradition, is that there is something more. Chances are, you already know this.

You have had times of awareness. This awareness may dawn on you over time or it may flood you suddenly.

Ekhart Toole describes the moment when it happened to him as he was in the midst of a very dark time in his life.

“I cannot live with myself any longer.” This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” “Maybe,” I thought, “only one of them is real.”

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I as fully conscious, but there were not more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing,” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void.

(The Power of Now, I)

He goes on to describe passing out and awakening to a world that he’d never known or seen or appreciated. Birds chirping... light through the window... simple things in his room... he was awake to the beauty of it all. “That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world.” (T.P.o.N. p.2)

Surely, that’s what Jesus spoke of in John three when he used the image, “born again.” It is a move from one place to a larger place, from the familiarity and restriction of a womb we’ve always known, to a larger realm.

This is exactly what discovering the Authentic Self involves. It quite literally is a birth into a new world... or at least an awakening to a world and in the process, another self... an ESSENTIAL SELF. Like the children of Narnia passing through the wardrobe, we finally see a reality that was there all along.

“A beggar had been sitting by the side of a road for over thirty years. One day a stranger walked by. ‘Spare some change?’ mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap. ‘I have nothing to give you,’ said the stranger. Then he asked: ‘What’s that you are sitting on?’ ‘Nothing,’ replied the beggar. ‘Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember.’ ‘Ever looked inside?’ asked the stranger. ‘No,’ said the beggar. ‘What’s the point? There’s nothing in there.’ ‘Have a look inside,’ insisted the stranger. The beggar managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold. (TPoN, p9)

What you need, has all been provided. The Apostle Paul says this well, “All things are mine since I am His.” When you meet the True Self... your Authentic Self, you will meet someone you have always known in one part of you

but have been largely unaware of. You will see the face, as the Buddhists say it, “that was yours before you were born.”

Basil Pennington, who just recently died, says that “When we come into being in the womb and come forth from the womb we are not just some little bundle of absolute need. At the center and heart of our being is the Divine Creative Energy, an Energy that is Love, each moment bringing us forth in love.” (True Self, False Self, p 42)

Becoming aware of the Authentic Self, knowing the Authentic Self, involves a different kind of knowing. A frustration common to everyone who has experienced the Authentic Self, is the reality that the language of the small self (our ordinary awareness, words, rational communication, and thinking) cannot describe what it is. (This is generally true anytime you have a genuine transcendent experience. Word’s won’t work.)

Saint Bernard says, “Those who have experienced this know what I am talking about. And those who have not had the experience, have the experience and then you will know.” (TS,FS p 44)

This is true. The True Self abides in the spiritual realm and although we can try to talk about it and describe it (and we should) our rational descriptions will not only fall short but over time will dilute the experience. In time we’ll only be talking about the experience and not from it. (Lost Christianity, Jacob Needleman, 194-95)

While we’ve acknowledged that our language fails to describe this spiritual reality, we make attempts in order to help one another recognize and name it. Most spiritual teachers will describe The Authentic Self in similar ways.

The Authentic Self is unitive. As opposed to seeing separation, the Authentic Self, the True Self, sees unity. Everything’s connected. Everything belongs. So we’re no longer in a posture of comparison and critique with others. We just aren’t there. It’s not that we have to try and not be judgmental, we just aren’t. There is no “us and them” when we’re in this state of consciousness. “When we find the True Self, we find everyone in God.” (Basil Pennington, TS, FS, 47) The Authentic Self understands that it is connected.

The Authentic Self is visionary. When we have awakened to this level of being, we have a different capacity for seeing and knowing. There is a sense of having been “lifted up.” There is a different view, a different perception. Things are seen for what they are. We don’t have to try and be broad-minded or holistic, we just are. “We can see with the eyes of the ESSENTIAL SELF, hear with its ears...” (L.P., 59). The Authentic Self automatically perceives what matters.

The Authentic Self is present. Awakening to this part of who we are enables us to be where we are. We are no longer stuck in worry about the future, nor or we preoccupied with passive fantasies about the present, nor or we living with resentment about the past. We do not try to control things and we are not trapped in our expectations about how things ought to be. We do not have to work at being present, we simply are. The Authentic Self understands the difference between “being” and doing.

The Authentic Self is a treasury. In this state of awareness, we seem to possess the Divine qualities, what Paul calls the “Fruits of the Spirit.” Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control, is the list given to us in Galatians. Although there is “work” to be done, we do not work to produce these qualities, they are fruits from being a certain being. They are qualities of Being. We are in the Spirit and they (all of them) are just there. “Our higher faculties reflect the divine qualities and ... bear fruit in virtues... participations... in the modes of divine presence.” (Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism, 80) The Authentic self bears the fruit of the Spirit.

The Authentic Self is a channel. The Authentic Self is a conduit for life. It is “a channel for the creative power of the universe.” (L.P. p.59) It is in this sense that we understand Paul’s words when he says, “I can do all things through Christ” and Jesus’ bold claims about “moving mountains” can be heard as he surely intended them. When we are aware of and open to our connection to God, our lives become channels of blessing. The Authentic Self is powerful.

These are some of the more common things offered as descriptions of The Authentic Self. But remember, our ordinary awareness and rational thinking cannot communicate accurately. We just know.

And most would agree, that everyone has experiences with the True Self. Certainly, deep in our bones we knew this reality at our conception. Surely, in the embrace of our parents, we were aware at another level of our original purity. We’ve known it in moments of great beauty or joy or pleasure. Even as our small self developed and in many ways, took over, God has continued to reach through to us and tap us on the shoulder with experiences of complete Love.

Initially, the experience of the Authentic Self is sheer grace. The Christian journey is in large part, training in how to access the Authentic Self, however, our first contact is often simply a gift. We may have not even been looking but there it was and it moved us. We just know.

When this happens, it’s complete. All of what was described above (unity, vision, presence, and divine qualities) floods us. In this moment we are “no longer identified with the concocted false self made up of what I do, what I have, and what others think of me. I know that I am existing within and even flowing forth from Divine Energy of the I Am. Here is freedom, here is empowerment, here is life, and here is love beyond all telling.” (TS, FS, p 44)

Hugh Prather, another modern wisdom teacher, says of the experience of knowing our True Self that “our worldly identity melts before the dawn of our spiritual identity.” (Spiritual Notes to Myself, 106). Now, this moment, this melted moment, is often fleeting, in part, because Mini me elbows his way back in. But it is also fleeting because the spiritual faculties necessary to sustain it are not developed and because God seems to draw us into the search by withdrawing the experience of it. (See the Song of Solomon)

However, we should take joy in and find encouragement from the glimpses that God has given us. The work, as we’ve already said, is all about growing so that we can live from The Authentic Self and as the hymn writer said, we’ve been given “a foretaste of glory divine.” We know there is a magnificent reason to make this journey.

And we are not alone. Listen to Saint Augustine describe the calling he felt. “I was admonished to return to my own self, and with you to guide me, I entered into the innermost part of myself, and was able to do this because you were my helper.” (Richard Rohr, Everything Belongs, 136) We have one another and, even more importantly, we have The Spirit. So, with the Sustainer to guide us, we say yes. With great hope, encouragement and anticipation for what lies ahead, we say yes to this journey.

Let all thoughts be still with me.

Let the ego dissolve gently from my mind.

And let me forever be, only as You created me.

(S.N.T.M., p. 107)

Spiritual Notes to Myself, Hugh Prather

Everything Belongs, Richard Rohr

The Roots of Christian Mysticism, Olivier Clement

The Power of Now, Eckart Toole

Session Three

The Small Self and Authentic Self in You

Here's what we've learned so far, that there is an objective part of us that the spiritual tradition has given many names: the thinking self, the small mind, the small I, the false self, the external self, the small self, Pete or Prisilla the Persona, Edgar or Edwina the Ego, the Imposter, the flesh, and Mini Me. To begin to make progress, we must admit to and understand two things. First, that this is true. If you can't see this and say it, you will remain identified with the small self and will remain under its control.

Remember, this means your habits, the expectations of others, your agendas hidden and otherwise, will call the shots. You will be a puppet and you'll sing forever, "If you wanna see me do my thing, Baby, pull my string." You have to know this and then you can begin to see this... the small self.

Secondly, you need to admit to and to understand that the small self is what it is and will be what it will be. We must admit and understand that "our ego is basically set. No matter how much spiritual progress we make, whenever we fall back into our ego, it's still all there. We never succeed in perfecting it and never will. (Hugh Prather, Spiritual Notes to Myself, p. 106)

In other words, Mini Me doesn't grow up... not much. You can dress her up in a new outfit... teach her to behave a little better when company comes over... you can make her more comfortable and assured... but at the end of the day, this is who she is. Mini me is limited.

Admitting this and understanding this is important, because if you don't, you're liable to be pretty tough on her. You'll ground her incessantly. You'll shame her. ("Grow up, why don't you.") You'll obsess about her behavior. You'll undoubtedly drag her to therapy for years and she probably ought to make a trip or two there, but again you aren't going to transform her. You can develop her... some.

Cynthia Bourgeault says that the small self is under the domain of what is provisional. It can be "tweaked" and enlightened some. But it simply cannot get to or know certain things. (Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 104) Remember Session One; the small self is not bad, only limited. We do need a small self and need a small self that is developed. We just shouldn't mistake that for our Spiritual Self, nor should we expect it to change dramatically. It has its limits. It is of this world.

This is what Jesus means in John 3 when he says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh." There are just limitations to the temporal side of who we are. This is true even before we introduce the reality of sin into the conversation. (more later) Flesh gives birth to flesh, material to the material.

But... Jesus goes on and finishes the sentence. (the tock to his tick.) We know there is more. "Flesh gives birth to flesh and Spirit... gives birth to Spirit." Spirit gives birth to our Spiritual Self, what we've been calling THE ESSENTIAL SELF, The Authentic Self.

The Authentic Self is the "more" that you know and sense that you are "made for." And by God's grace, we've been introduced from time to time to this part of ourselves. But, The True Self seems to be an illusive booger. One minute we seem

flooded by something and we're at peace and the next minute Edgar the Ego takes over and tells us that we deserve to be treated better than we're being treated at work.

We think, "wasn't there just someone else here telling me to be at peace?"

Edgar responds... "someone shmumone... They're taking you for granted at the office." And you try to grasp that other, Truer Self, but he seems a faint memory and then not even that. And so you just give into Edgar and you're angry...

But thanks be to God... you're waking up. And you say to Edgar, "Wait a just a minute there bucko... I don't have to let you be in charge." You are awakening, and even if you can't feel it, you trust a deeper wisdom... you believe what Jesus taught you. "Spirit gives birth to Sprit." And now you seem able to see both parts of who you are, at least occasionally and at least "in theory."

And what you want is to learn how to help these two parts get along better because you can tell that Edgar is about to take off the gloves. You're tempted to do the same but don't... slow down... and remember... you can't deal with the small self by beating it up. That way only leads to a fight and Edgar will win. Slow down... look for the better way.

The spiritual teaching of the Christian Tradition is that these parts of you both exist and that, this side of glory, they will continue to exist. How so? Where so? How can the small self and the authentic self both be real? Well... hold onto your mystical horses.

This can be because you are an amphibious creature... designed and equipped to exist in more than one environment (Lynn Bauman, Foundations of Christian Spirituality, p 11). In more exalted terms, Gregory of Nazianzen (4th century) wrote, "The great architect of the universe conceived and produced a being endowed with both natures, the visible and the invisible... Thus in some way, a new universe was born, small and great are one at the same time. (The Roots of Christian Mysticism, Olivier Clement, p.77)

The Early Church Fathers worked diligently to understand what it meant to be human. They had an anthropology... a sacred anthropology. The anthropology that we received by default was limited. It came to us via a hodgepodge of history. The Roman Empire... and the Western Church thinking so rationally... The Middle Ages and the prejudice that deeper, spiritual things were only for those who lived in monasteries. Last but not least, "The Enlightenment," which was anything but enlightening. Modernity gave us a notion of ourselves limited to the material world and though as Christians we still "believed" in something Beyond, "what was "Beyond" never really intersected with what was "real." Try as you might not to... you have adopted a limited view of human beings.

The Fathers saw something else and taught that we were a hybrid. Listen to Gregory of Nazianzen.

"The Word of God took a lump of newly created earth, formed it with his immortal hands into our shape, and imparted life to it: for the Sprit that he breathed into it is a flash of the invisible godhead. Thus from clay and breath was created humanity, the image of the Immortal." (Olivier Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism, p 79)

This is the understanding of human nature that we lost. We are clay and breath... material and immaterial... flesh and Spirit. This is what it means to be human and what has been revealed to us in Christ. Listen carefully to Paul's words to Timothy. Listen with and through this anthropology.

“This grace was given before the beginning of time; but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (II Timothy 1: 9b-11)

So, Jesus comes to accomplish something... the destruction of death... but he also comes to reveal something, the “grace given before the beginning of time.” He has “brought life and immortality to light.” We can see it in him.

Jesus is the template. We see in him, what it means to be completely human and no longer cut off from our true and authentic selves... unaware of this “grace given before time.”

He is the “Theanthropos” the God-man... two natures completely united. Jesus shows us what human beings are and initiates a new mode of being that the Father's called the “Theandric mode.” (Philip Sherrard, The Eclipse of Man and Nature, p. 26) The Thandric mode is, God acting in a human manner and man acting in a divine manner. “In Christ the divine is human, the human, divine.” (Herakleites)

Heavy stuff but think of it this way, what Christ is in his essence, we are in potential. (Sherrard p 27) “He became what we are that he might make us what he is.” (A common saying and assumption of the Fathers)

This is what Paul is getting at when he says that we have been “adopted.” We are all “Sons of God.” “To be a Son of God is to have the divine as the determining element of our being.” God is... “The source, the inmost centre of our reality.” (Sherrard p. 19) We must participate in the divine in order to be truly human. To be cut off... unaware... makes us “only human” and less than Human.

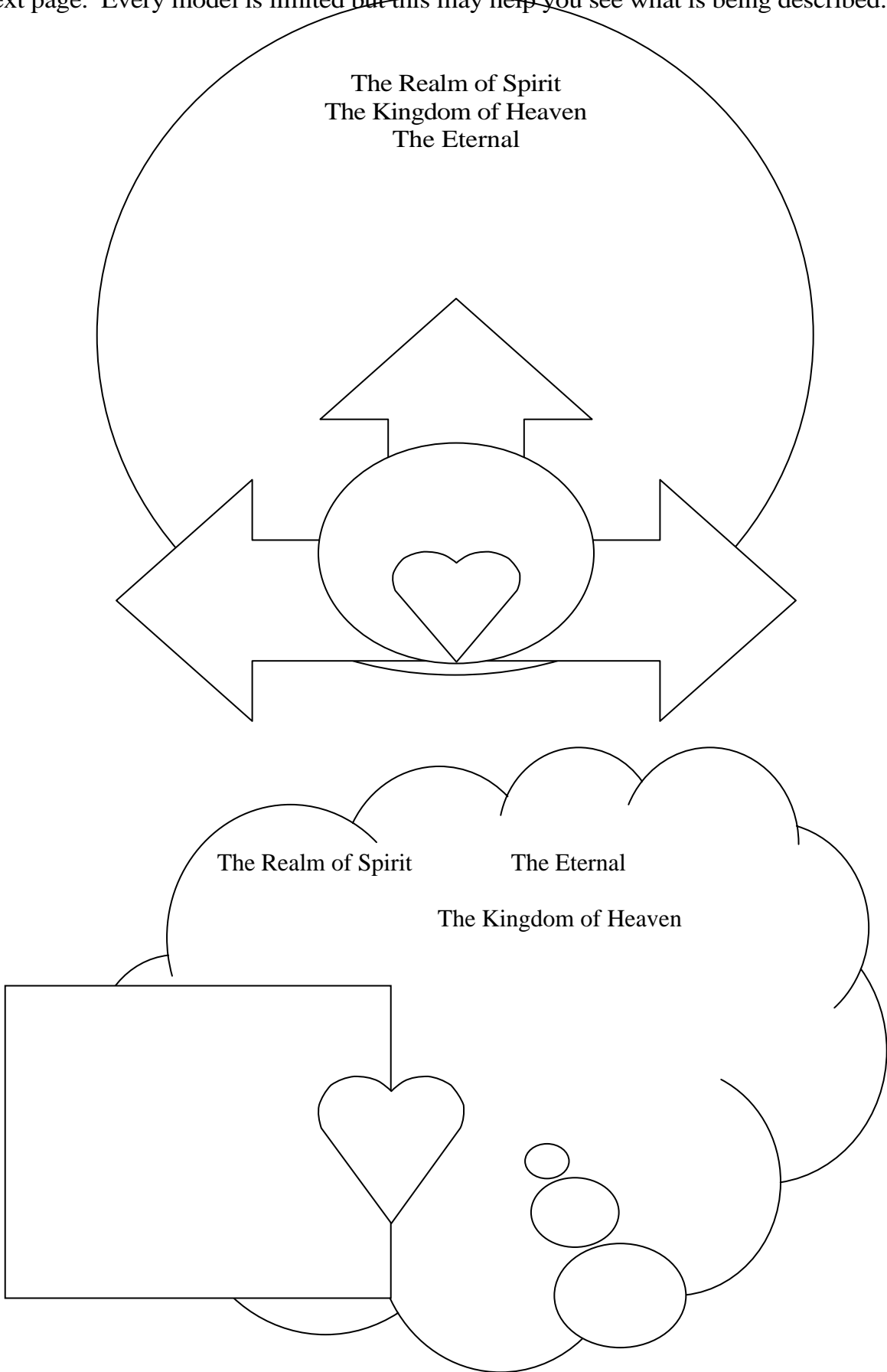
We are made and equipped for participation in the divine. There is a part of us that is capable of apprehending and penetrating the things of God. Sherrard says that there must be an “organ on the borders... of the created and the uncreated.” (p 32) The Wisdom from the early centuries of Christianity taught exactly this. That within you there is an “organ of perception.” Some called it “the heart,” some “the soul”, others “the nous.”

It is this part of us that is capable of being aware... aware of both worlds in which we live and both identities which we are. You might think of it as Narnia's Wardrobe; the place that connects these two realities.

It is the place of, the vehicle for, awareness. The Heart can perceive what is real. The heart (nous, soul) has the capacity to know that “grace given before time,” that is inherent in us. It understands, discerns, and mediates.

This is a faculty that exists within us. It is objective and real... this is not a metaphor. Just as you have physical eyes to take in the physical world you have been created with this faculty. This faculty, the “heart” enables you to be aware in a way you cannot be aware in the material realm... Call it “cardial awareness.” (L. Bauman)

The two realms meet here and meet here within you. Therefore, Mini Me and THE ESSENTIAL SELF also meet here. Take a moment and study the diagrams on the next page. Every model is limited but this may help you see what is being described.



The Heart... the nous... is the faculty with which we can be amphibious and live in two environments. We can be “in the world but not of it.” When the qualities of Spirit, that Paul writes about, flood through us and into our lives, they are flooding through the nous. When we have moments where grace overwhelms us and we know that we are beloved of God... it is the nous that knows this. When we perceive spiritual wisdom, this is the part of us that perceives it.

Congratulations... you are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” That’s the good news. The bad news and what we all know to be true, doctrinally and experientially, is that Sin and our sins are a part of this picture. The nous is “darkened” as the Fathers would say. For some, it’s broken... for some, shut tight, closed off. For others, it has atrophied for lack of use. For others, it is dead.

But... there is hope. Jesus shows us what we can be and how we can be it and what’s more... Jesus gives us the grace and the capacity to be it.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.... We are hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Spiritual Notes to Myself, Hugh Prather

The Roots of Christian Mysticism, Olivier Clement

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening: Cynthia Bourgeault

The Eclipse of Man and Nature, Philip Sherrard

Foundations of Christian Spirituality, Lynn Bauman

Session Four

The Work

All those who have journeyed far on the spiritual path have come to know and describe what we’ve been talking about in the first three sessions. To be sure, different teachers have taken the pieces of the puzzle and put them together in different ways but always, these ideas are present.

There is a self that must be let go of, surrendered, in order that we might awaken to a deeper dimension and a Truer understanding of who we are. It is not that this small self is bad; it’s just inadequate for a more complete life, the life for which you were made. It is a womb that serves you well for a time but that in time must be left. We must be born again.

And this second birth must be understood as a paradox. It is pure grace... you can do nothing to get it. It is work... and will not come to you apart from practice. Both are true.

God knows each of us and wants us to intimately know Him in a way that is transforming and which draws us into Him. And so God, in love and passion, initiates, draws us, convicts us, enlightens us, and transforms us. This is the gospel.

But, it is also and equally true that, although God initiates and accomplishes the transformation in us, the nature of this journey is one that requires our participation. Not only will God never remove our freedom and ability to choose or not choose what is right and good and light but spiritual development simply calls for our participation and effort. Like training to any athlete... work is a necessity to develop the potential with which we have been created. The knowledge is process dependent.

This is also uniformly agreed upon by saints and teachers of spiritual wisdom. The disciplines and practices and rules of life that they lived out and taught might vary but what does not vary is the obvious truth that we must cooperate with the Divine in our transformation.

But before we go further, we need to remember again the passage for II Timothy.

“This grace was given before the beginning of time; but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (II Timothy 1: 9b-11)

It is essential as we begin to talk about “the work” that we keep this verse and the Truth it reveals to us as our constant backdrop because it seems to be an ever-present human instinct to slide towards legalism. This has been especially true as Christians called one another to the disciplines. There seems to be inertia towards legalism. There is a gravitational pull from rules-based religion from which it is difficult to break free. So, if we’re not very diligent and mindful, the gospel will not be good news.

The efforts we make as Christians must be our response to grace. There is no such thing as earning grace. Around the tree at Christmas, no one hands a loved one a gift and says, “that’ll be \$29.95.”

Remember, grace has been given to you “before the beginning of time.” It’s yours and it’s your great joy on this earthly journey to live deeper into it. It is a reality flowing from God’s heart. The aim of Christian practice is to remove what is in the way of it making its way into our lives. The reason you work is because you want more of what God is trying to give you. You want to awaken to and live from the Authentic Self.

It’s not news there are assumptions about what a Christian must do to develop. We know this. There are things assumed just like there are things assumed regarding what it takes to be Olympic athlete. This is obvious.

All Olympic athletes need coaching, they all need theoretical knowledge of their sport, and they have to develop muscle memory. Every one of them must be willing to make certain sacrifices. Every single one of them must give themselves to small and particular activities that enhance particular aspects of their performance. They must be

willing to put themselves in proximity to certain things and certain people and influences and avoid others. They have to develop a competitive and positive attitude.

Christians who want to grow must do certain things. It's news to no one serious about the faith. A developing Christian must be in a community and in community with other Christians. There must be an ongoing experience of cooperate worship and an immersion in sacred scripture. A life of prayer must be cultivated as well as acts of service engaged in. These are the bread and butter of the Christian faith.

However, Christians who desire to move beyond the bounds of the small self will and live more fully from the Authentic Self, will, in most cases, need more than this "basic training." This has also been the witness of the Saints. Transformation does not happen by osmosis. We don't catch it by hanging around good people, as right and helpful as that is to do. Most of us reading this can testify to needing something more.

Typically, it is the hunger within for something more that prompts the willingness to make new and different efforts. We find ourselves wanting to interact more intentionally with grace. And it's here at this point that it is so important to submit ourselves to a deeper wisdom and deeper awareness.

Our instinct will be to "think" that we can "think" our way there. Einstein said that the consciousness (the thinking) that caused a problem, cannot be the consciousness that solves it. The small self exists as a result of our thinking. Remember, "Who am I?" Now fill in the blank and what is it we use to fill in the blank? Our minds.

So, while learning will be a component... the effort that we make will not be centered in what is rational. Study groups aren't likely to help. Bible study...while a good thing, is not typically among the list of practices offered by the spiritual fathers and mothers. The movement we're trying to make must take place at a different level... at the level of the heart.

In session three, we introduced the heart or the nous. This place and capacity within us is the "intermediate principle." (Needleman). It is the "wardrobe." It is the place where we "know" things that cannot be known in the mind, the things of the Spirit. This would include our essence in God, which is the authentic self. The efforts we make to move deeper into the spiritual life are aimed at the heart and are a work of the heart.

Different spiritual teachers from different traditions will emphasize different disciplines and patterns and rules of life, but the one common thing seems to be that the efforts we are called to make are not centered in "the thinking mind."

An Olympic coach may teach the athlete some about the theory of the sport but sitting and thinking are not even close to being at the top of the training agenda. The same is true for the coaching we receive as we progress deeper spiritually.

Fasting, solitude, chanting, body prayer, disciplining the tongue, seeking out people who are difficult, cultivating watchfulness... all of these by-pass the thinking self. They are efforts aimed at the heart. They seek to step around Edgar the Ego. And, by the way, Edgar will not like them. "Chanting... mantras... what a waste of time. I can't see any benefit to that." The small self will seek to sabotage your efforts.

Most all of the spiritual practices can be seen one of two ways, as either work or rest. Most of them can be and will be experienced as battle or surrender. These are both “efforts” we make and both proper to this work.

Fasting, for instance is a kind of work that we do. The discipline of our tongue... limiting our words and being careful with them, will feel like battle. The prominent tone of the desert fathers, seems to be one of doing battle. We do battle with the thoughts (gluttony, greed, lust, anger, etc). Evagrius saw these as forces beyond us that we are fighting... demons who specialize in a certain kind of warfare. It does not matter whether or not we understand ourselves as fighting against principalities and powers or our own psychological brokenness, we all know that it is in fact a battle, a battle that we must train for.

As we conclude this study, however, will we think on the reality of surrender and it’s importance as an effort we make to escape the limitations of the small self. What we are trying to do is develop the attitude of and the capacity for “nonattachment.” “It is the attitude that comes from the acceptance of the fact that everything about my life and in my life comes and goes in its own time regardless of my preferences or aversions. It is an attitude that allows us to cooperate with the natural rhythm of life.” (Gregory Meyers, Listen to the Desert, p 35)

Theologically, the way of surrender is expressed in the incarnation and through the life of Jesus. Remember how the Apostle Paul recorded it. His words from Philippians were likely an early Christian hymn.

Have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death of a cross! (Philippians 2: 8-8)

This is called the Kenosis passage... a word that means “surrender” or “self emptying.” Spirituality based on this theology understands that the only way up is down. The way of surrender is what we see of Jesus the night before he dies. He doesn’t pick up a sword. It is Mary saying, “Let it be to me as you have said.” It is what the hymn writer was after in that old altar call standard, “I surrender all.”

It is an attitude, and paradoxically an effort. We must learn to let go. We must train the heart to surrender. We must “work to surrender.” As the Buddhists say, “try but don’t try.”

The practices, and there are many which fall under the surrender approach, are ways of trying, but not trying. They are... in many ways... simple efforts, but still serious work in which we by-pass the small self and move through the heart to the center of our being.

As we bring this study to a close, let’s look at three of them.

The first comes from an ancient anonymous work called, The Cloud of Unknowing. “Take just a little word, of one syllable rather than two; for the shorter it is the better it is in agreement with this exercise of the spirit. Such a one is the word

“God” or the word “love.” Chose which one you prefer... Fasten this word to your heart, so that whatever happens it will never go away.”

The teacher’s idea is to use this small word as a prayer to by-pass the thinking mind, which is incessantly running. “I want this... I need that.” “So and so is too _____.” “I can’t wait ‘till lunch.” “I’m so angry at her for saying that.”

The small self just does it’s small thing... it just will. It will have passive fantasies while your driving to work. It will drift here and there. It will obsess about this or that. It just will.

This surrender method is quite simple. When you catch yourself thinking... when the small self is doing its thing... employ your one word prayer. “Peace” or “Lord” or “Still.” Do this over and over and over and over and over. Be where you are... stay with what is.

The second exercise is also simple but requires that we set aside a time each day. Ideally, 20 minutes. It’s based on idea that our breathing controls our thinking (LtD p 26). Hold your breath... do it now..... Your thinking stopped didn’t it.

This practice is from the Tradition and it’s called “breath counting.” We’ll use seven breaths... the biblical number for perfection. Find a quiet place and time but don’t obsess about some noise. In fact, this can be done in a busy environment if need be. Sit up straight with your feet on the floor. Be comfortable.

As you breath in, count and say silently, “one.” Breath out... “one.” Breath in... “two.” Breath out... “two.” Do this all the way to seven. Then start over at one. Set a timer and do this for 20 minutes.

Now, your thoughts will continue to flood you. Just let them pass - don’t grab hold of them. “Resist no thought, react to no thought, retain no thought.” (C. Bourgeault) Just keep counting your breaths. Pay attention, as best you can, to the air coming in and out. This practice will take time to establish... months maybe (LtD. 28) You’ll be shocked that something so simple is so difficult. You will be amazed at how easily you drift. When you do, don’t beat yourself up. Just return to your breathing. Remember, you are training the heart in the way of surrender.

The last practice is called Welcoming Prayer and it is described in detail by Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening. It’s a practice that involves some degree of awareness. There are three steps to Welcoming Prayer.

First, when the small self agenda (a need for esteem for instance) has been frustrated and you feel some emotion because of it, feel it. Notice it and notice in your body where you are feeling it. The jaw maybe? The stomach. It’s likely that you are use to these specific locations in your body for certain emotions. Notice it and be present.

Second, welcome it. It sounds odd... backwards... but remember this is a surrender approach. Say, “Welcome anxiety.” “Welcome sadness.” “Welcome embarrassment.” Its there, right? So notice it and welcome it and be present.

Then last, in a little while, if you can, release it. “God, I give you my need to be in control.” “Lord, have mercy... I give you my need to receive affection.” Let it go.

See it. Be with it. Surrender it.

These are three examples of spiritual praxis that attempt to by-pass the thinking self. As you detach from the small self, you are awakening and using the heart. There are many, many disciplines to employ. However, as you become intentional about the spiritual life, do not behave like a kid in a candy store. Many of us have made the mistake of using a cafeteria approach to our work. “I’ll have a little of this and a little of that.”

Begin something and stick with it for at least a year. The three exercises above work well together and are a reasonable place to begin.

One last thought, as we conclude this study. You cannot do this alone. If you’re serious about growing... you must have a community and you must have a guide. Pray that God will send you one. Ask... inquire... “when the student is ready, the teacher shows up.” And take Augustine’s prayer with you as you go. “Lord, may I know myself in order that I might know you.”

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening: Cynthia Bourgeault

Listen to the Desert: Gregory Meyers

Lost Christianity: Jacob Needleman