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BEING AVAILABLE TO . . . OURSELVES

INTRODUCTION

To be as available as possible to others requires that we be continually aware of who we are psychologically and where we are spiritually. In other words, we must make an effort to be as “self-aware” as possible.

This point is obviously not a new one. Therapists have long pointed to the need for those wishing to be helpers to be involved in a continuous process of self-examination. In addition, religious figures (e.g., Teresa of Avila) long pre-dated psychologists in emphasizing the same sentiment from a theological vantage point; self-awareness and knowledge of God go hand in hand. Thus, from a psychological perspective we must seek to learn what our unconscious agendas and motivations are, whereas from a religious stance we must always strive to discern where the spirit is leading us.

In light of this need to be appreciative of how the “Christian Self” is developing, four topics are presented in this section: uniqueness, failure and forgiveness, self-awareness, and clarity.

They are all in accordance with the following theme: The more we can remove the blocks to an appreciation of who we are and who we are becoming, the truer we can

be in our response to the Gospel call to serve others and God. We must be available then to ourselves so that our relationships can flow out of a healthy attitude and a clear awareness of our motivations.

Consequently, the theme of this section is based on the belief that we must understand and preserve ourselves *at all costs* . . . not merely so that we might survive, but also that Christ might live on in us and in those whom we touch in his name.

UNIQUENESS

The Rabbi Zusya said a short time before his death, “In the world to come, I shall not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ Instead, I shall be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

—Martin Buber, *Way of Man*

A significant turning point in therapy or counseling arrives when the individual seeking help is able to grasp the following simple, seemingly paradoxical reality: when we truly accept our limits, the opportunity for personal growth and development is almost limitless.

Prior to achieving this insight, energy is wasted on running away from the self or running to another image of self. We fear being ourselves and lack the necessary trust in God for personal evolution to take place. Therefore, running in confusion, we fail to take the special place in community that creation has destined for us.

I guess this is not surprising because we are constantly bombarded with the message that we should be someone or something else. Movies and cartoons impress us

with how wonderful it would be if animals and machines could speak and people could rise above the story of Genesis, successfully eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and be supermen and gods. There is little call for people to fulfill their destiny, and much energy (and money!) is expended on convincing them to avoid it at all costs. In e.e. cummings's words, "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting."

This movement away from the evolution of our true nature flies in the face of our heritage. The courageous people ("saints") who came before us taught us important lessons about "uniqueness." In their struggles they offered us models of the need to strive with all our might to be ourselves. In the words of the famous inventor and global citizen R. Buckminster Fuller, "The only important thing about me is that I am an average, healthy human being. All the things I've been able to do, any human being, or any one, or you, could do equally well or better. I was able to accomplish what I did by refusing to be hooked on a game of life that had nothing to do with the way the universe was going. I was just a throw-away who was willing to commit myself to what needed to be done."

As Christians, the philosophy of Fuller is translated into accepting a very essential point of faith: the same Spirit given to Jesus is available to us, and in living in the Spirit we seek not another world for ourselves but the evolution

of the kingdom of God in ourselves and the world community. This, rather than a life of denial and fantasy, is the very thrill and challenge of life.

Einstein said, “He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead.” This point is valid to no greater degree than in appreciating the loveliness of our uniqueness when we respond to the Spirit that is calling us to *be*.

A woman who had a miscarriage in the final trimester of her pregnancy taught me the importance of the uniqueness of every human being. When I asked her how she felt about losing her baby, she indicated that she was naturally quite sad about it, but there was one specific thing that particularly upset her: “When I think of the son or daughter I lost, the one point which tears me apart the most is that I shall never know who my child was . . . what he or she was like. Would he have been a hyperactive boy? Would she have been a pensive girl? I’ll never know, and that is a special sadness for me.”

We who do live, who have been born, and who have a personality that can be known by us and shared with others have a duty to encourage it to evolve. If we don’t seek to let the Spirit grow within us but instead abort our talents, we mock existence and our singular place in it. In fact, the community (of saints) is significantly lessened by our absence.

To develop fully requires an appreciation of our inherent value. It also requires to a great degree a recognition

of our natural resistance to continue on the path toward truth. In addition, development necessitates an acceptance of the gift of laughter—laughter at the false self which tries to capture our imagination in a way that makes us competitive, driven, and insecure.

Resistance

John Sanford in his book *Healing and Wholeness* echoes a theme, often stressed by Teresa of Avila, that even when we believe in the value of the continuing search for ways to develop, the process can be a discouraging battle. In the words of Sanford, “Deep inside each organism is something that knows what that organism’s true nature and life goal is. It is as though there is within each person an inner center that knows what constitutes health. If our conscious personality becomes related to the inner center, the whole person may begin to emerge, though this may not bring either peace or social adaptation, but conflict and stress. . . . The movement toward health may look more like a crucifixion than adaptation or peace of mind.”¹

The struggle to help the whole person emerge requires a strong belief in the importance of not turning away from the Light. The relief gained in putting up our defenses and avoiding the truth is only a temporary one. The trade-off for ignorance is too great, for in not fighting the good fight, we die a bit each day torn by our anxieties and compulsions, which keep us troubled, bored, and unsatisfied.

So, in bringing all our efforts to remove the blocks to our natural call to grow, we must expect a battle. Realizing the lure of avoiding self-knowledge, we must seek psychological helps to aid us in our conversion (*metanoia*) to the Word, which calls us to take our place at the table. One of the key human helps to this process that should not be overlooked is our ability to *laugh*.

Laughter and Perspective

Norman Cousins, who wrote the book *Anatomy of an Illness* (and was the only layperson to my knowledge ever to have an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*), lauded the value of laughter. He noted that ten minutes of belly laughter from watching comedic episodes on TV would help him achieve two hours of pain-free sleep. This result, he said, proved to him the statement that “laughter is good medicine.” I would like to add to this that *if laughter is in fact good medicine, then laughing at ourselves and our defenses must surely be healing.*

We have a tendency to take ourselves too seriously in a bad way. In light of this, as humans we often become so attuned to our faults that we fear failing and forget forgiveness. This very process results in our failing to have energy available for self-exploration while we are trying to find Christ in our involvement with others. The cost of such a process is loss of touch with a very basic truth: that before we were born, God’s grace was already present to embrace us for a lifetime.

This very point leads us into the subject of the next chapter—namely, the need to inextricably tie failure and forgiveness together in our search for relationship with self, others, and God. Without such an understanding, uniqueness is doomed to be lost in defensive deformity and the possibility for self-awareness is destined to be terribly diminished. Thus, instead of embracing and preserving our uniqueness as a Gift of the Spirit, we let it fall into disuse; whereas, with an appreciation of our special talents, our ministry becomes a source of inspiration for the common good as well as a source of light for determining our own true needs.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

What is the one overriding talent God has given to you to care for, enjoy, and share with the world?

SELECTION FROM SACRED SCRIPTURE: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4–11

There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestations of the Spirit are given for the common good. To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit one receives faith; by the same Spirit another is given the gift of healing, and still

another miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another, power to distinguish one spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongues, another that of interpreting the tongues. But it is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills.

FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS

Most laymen, he supposed, believed psychiatrists fell apart under the weight of other people's problems. Dr. Theodore Levin had another theory. He feared that a psychiatrist's life force gradually leaked out. It was expended on sympathy, understanding, the obsessive need to heal and help create whole lives. Other people's lives. But always from the outside. Always the observer.

Then one day he would wake up and discover that he himself was empty, drained.

—Lawrence Sanders, *The Case of Lucy Bending*

Involved Christians fail a great deal. We probably don't like to talk about it, but it's true. As a group, we fail as much if not *more* than any other community concerned with helping others in need. This should not be surprising since with greater commitment there is a greater "opportunity" to miss at least some of the numerous goals we set for ourselves in life.

Yet, despite the fact that as Christians we court failure as a natural part of our idealism, many of us still look upon

missing the mark with great disdain and embarrassment. We forget the lessons we have been taught about the intimate relationship between commitment and failure. I know I certainly fit into this group.

As a small boy and later as a high school and college youth, I remember not only being asked to reflect on a character such as Winston Churchill in his finest hour but also to look at him and others in their moments of personal and professional defeat. The message was that with any successful commitment comes poignant, frequent failure as well. Unfortunately, that message doesn't always stick with us.

Instead, many of us try to deny and avoid failure at all costs. We look upon certain Christian "gurus" as invincible while, in turn, we allow others to put us up on pedestals. All of this seems to go well until our models tarnish and we—in an effort to be perfect—stumble, fall, and are forced to see a natural fact of life: We have needs. We get tired. We lose fervor. We fail too!

The best and worst of us experience failure. It can occur when we're dealing with persons (friends, relatives, colleagues, anyone who turns to us for help) with overwhelming, long-standing difficulties who have a paucity of resources, or it can come about when we "over-attend" to those with great potential who are only in need of some temporary support and guidance. With the former we may not push hard enough; with the latter we may move too directly and, paternalistically, we may smother their