



RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

January 2008, no. 1

IN THIS ISSUE

As the reflective piece for this issue of the newsletter, we are offering a personal experience of living with the diminishment of a loved one. This experience gives rise to reflections on a spirituality of loss. Each of us inevitably must live with and through the experience of diminishment and loss in ourselves and in the lives of all who surround us. Is contingency and loss merely an evil to be endured? Or is it also true, as the opening passage of the reflection from the writing of Rabbi Yehuda states, that “entrapped deep inside the force of evil there is a spark of goodness”? A spirituality of loss is the practice of a “living through” the experiences of life that is characterized by reflection, study, prayer, and an abandonment to Reality that begins to transform our very way of living, our motivations, and finally our sense of caring. As Father Adrian van Kaam repeated so often in his life, “We are always and everywhere in formation.” This includes every moment and experience of life, even those in which the spark of formation and transformation lies deeply hidden.

As mentioned in our first issue, we mourn the loss of Father van Kaam who died on November 17, 2007. In this issue we begin a series of reflections and applications on some of the key concepts of his thought and unique synthesis of a science of human and spiritual formation. It is our hope that this may make accessible to practitioners of formation in any sphere the wisdom and proximate value of his thinking, as well as serve as a tribute to this extraordinary thinker and teacher.

Finally, we continue and deepen our ongoing discussion of charism and offer recommendations and reflections on readings related to our topic.

INDEX

Confronting an Experience of Diminishment and Loss: A Spirituality of Loss (John D. Hamilton, CFX).....	1
In Memoriam: Adrian Van Kaam, C.S.Sp., Ph.D., 1920-2007	8
Book Reflections:	
Illness, Aging, and Diminishment	11
Charism vs. Charisma	
Charism Studies (2) (Reginald D. Cruz, CFX).....	14

CONFRONTING AN EXPERIENCE OF DIMINISHMENT: A SPIRITUALITY OF LOSS

~ John D. Hamilton, CFX

How can evil exist in a world created by God the Beneficent One? It can exist because entrapped deep inside the force of evil there is a spark of goodness. This spark is the force of life of the evil tendency... Now, it is the specific mission of the Jew to free the entrapped holy sparks from the grip of the forces of evil by means of Torah study and prayer. Once the holy sparks are released, evil having lost its life-giving core will cease to exist. ^[1]

Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger

Is it appropriate to speak of diminishment and death as evil? Are they evil in themselves? Or, at least, what about the suffering or the reaction we have or the despondency we feel or the desperation we experience in the face of diminishment and death? Obviously, we do experience as evil the suffering, diminishment, and loss of a loved one and of ourselves. Yet, are there also entrapped holy sparks to be released from the forces of weakness, suffering, death, and loss? I think so. And, perhaps, it is even fair to say that there is a beauty in the dying. In John Bayley’s remarkable *Elegy for Iris*, Bayley’s memoir of the decline from Alzheimer’s Disease of his wife, the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, we can experience the love and life and humor in their suffering. To fully live one’s call to diminishment and suffering is to free the entrapped holy sparks by means of the deepest kind of study and prayer. It is to release the holiness, the glory and the grace that is hidden deep inside the force of apparent evil that threatens to overwhelm us. What is the study, what is the prayer, that allows this to happen? How do we practice faithful and creative living in the face of these things that will inevitably be part of our life? How do we allow the reality to be in a way that holds its complexity, not just the sadness, not just the pain, not just the suffering, but also the glory and the radiance, the love and the beauty?

Study of Traditions

In the ninth chapter of Mark’s Gospel ^[2] we hear the story of the young epileptic demoniac whom the disciples try unsuccessfully to cure. Jesus reprimands the disciples: “You faithless generation” (v.19). The disci-

ples are frustrated because they are unable to see and understand fully the boy's and father's suffering. When the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to cast out the demon, Jesus replies: "This is the kind that is driven out only by prayer." (v. 29) And we might add, in light of the teaching of Rabbi Yehuda, *and in study*. The study of course is the study of the great spiritual traditions, as so much of what they teach is about suffering, diminishment, and loss.

It is their teaching about how to face these experiences of diminishment in life that I would like to consider in this study of the traditions, in particular, their call to study these painful life situations in what Susan Cameron calls a state "innocent of association."^[3] We may release the full meaning of an experience, Cameron says, "if we can see it in a time, in a way prior to the stories that get attached to the pain." To be human is to be a meaning-maker; thus, we experience and understand every experience through the story that we tell about its meaning. This story-telling capacity is necessary if we are to be able to bear with the overwhelming mystery of reality. But it also confines our very experience to the narratives we create. Our gospels are replete with anecdotes recounting the incomprehension of disciples who are unable to see beyond the limits of their current understanding. It is in a pure, narrative-less and caring presence to our experience that unsuspected "sparks" can be released.

"If we could see the pain, if we could see the experience, if we could see the moment in its innocence, without the story, we would see in this moment of lucidity that everything is free."^[4]

In this pristine moment of story-less experience, we can be present to and study the experience we are having in its totality. Though our stories begin as interpretations, the interpretation becomes the lens by which we experience the reality; it (our interpretation) becomes the suffering. If we can be present to the moment in its pristine nature, we may allow its radiance to emerge, from which the holy sparks, as well as the pain, will show themselves. This is not to suggest that we won't experience pain or suffering only that we shall experience these moments much more fully and in all their complexity. Some two decades ago now, just a very few years after the death of my father, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. In the early stages of her disease progression, and of my assuming an added responsibility of caring for her, I was often troubled by the recurring question: "Will I be able to do what is necessary to properly care for her? Will I do this right?" My early stages of her (and our) illness were dominated by this concern, this narrative. The perspective through which I experienced my mother's

diminishment and suffering was fear about my own capacities. Thus my fears sprang not from the reality of the situation but from my ideas about the world and my place in it. So, how can the teachings of our spiritual tradition help us to release the hold which our narratives have on us and to practice presence to our experiences of diminishment in their "innocence"?

Psalm 39

An exploration of Psalm 39 offers us an entry point to this topic. To appreciate this Psalm, it is worth keeping in mind something that Stephen Mitchell says in the introduction to his *A Book of Psalms*. "The mind, in harmony with the way things are, sees that this is a good world, that life is good and death is good."^[5]

The first condition, then, for a sight that recognizes the world's goodness is having a consciousness "in harmony with the way things are." In our tradition we call this consciousness the mind of Christ. "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2,5) This mind of Christ comes about, if it is to come about at all, through the purgation of a life-long formation, through what St. Paul describes in Jesus' case as self-emptying. So, also, our way of taking on the mind of Christ is by our own self-emptying. We take on the mind of Christ over the course of our life's formation that first shatters and then burns away our illusions.

Let us reflect on a passage from Psalm 39 in the translation of the Jewish Publication Society.

Tell me, O Lord, what my term is,
what is the measure of my days;
I would know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my life just handbreadths long;
its span is as nothing in Your sight;
no man endures any longer than a breath.
Man walks about as a mere shadow;
mere futility is his hustle and bustle,
amassing and not knowing who will gather in.
What, then, can I count on, O Lord?
In You my hope lies.
Deliver me from all my transgressions;
make me not the butt of the benighted,
I am dumb, I do not speak up,
for it is Your doing.
Take away Your plague from me;
I perish from your blows.
You chastise a man in punishment for his sin,
consuming like a moth what he treasures.
No man is more than a breath. ^[6]

Here the psalmist gives us a clear description of our reaction to the shattering of our illusions: a reaction typically of anger and fear, but also a condition for transformation, that is to be struck silent or dumb. As we see in this psalm and throughout the Psalter, we

human beings are most affronted by the *insignificance* of our life. "You have made my life just handbreadths long, its span is as nothing in your sight. No one endures any longer than a breath." So, if all this is true, then what can I count on, asks the psalmist? His own answer is "in You my hope lies." Yet, strangely enough, by the very one in whom the psalmist hopes, he is plagued. I hope in you, oh Lord, he declares, and yet I am plagued by you. "Take away your plague from me; I perish from your blows." So then, in whom can we hope, or do we hope at all?

One thinks of the words of T.S. Eliot which he draws from the work of St. John of the Cross: "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing..."^[7] The hope that Eliot calls us to "live without" is not transcendent hope, not ultimate hope, but hope in specific outcomes. The hope that life's situations will come out in a way we would like. This is the hope by which I lived as part of my narrative for much of my life, a hope I learned from my parents' way of life, "if you work hard enough you will get what you want."

So Mitchell in his adaptation of Psalm 39 says, "Help me to give up my desires and to let go of who I am."^[8] I have come to some understanding of the meaning of this spiritual directive through my reflections on my personal life experience of relating to my mother in her condition of Alzheimer's disease, reflections which come out of an experience that began over twenty years ago.

Personal Story

This is a story of who I was in relationship to my parents; and the focus begins for me not with my mother's illness, but some five years before that, when in 1980 my father died at the age of sixty-nine years. My mother then was sixty-four, and I was thirty-three. Right through my father's final illness and up to and including his death, we continued to live out, both he and I, the story we told ourselves and each other about who we were and about what our relationship was. I lived the story of the good and conscientious and dutiful son who used my responsibility and my attempts to do the right thing, and my apparent caring, as a way to also keep my distance. And so did my father, even through the night he died, when he said to me, "You don't have to stay." Until the end he lived the story that he "would handle it" and would not be a bother or a burden to me or to anyone. I took him at his word, not thinking he would die that night, nobody did. (Though I wonder if he might have known it at that time.) Yet we lived the story to his end.

The day after his death, as I drove to the church to arrange the funeral, I had the first panic attack of my life. Driving in the car through familiar streets on the way to the church, the thought emerged: "I just can't do this." As I understand it now, the panic was, "I can't do it, I can't keep up the story, I can't do things in the way I've always done them." It all seemed just too much.

Of course it wasn't. I did manage well; my mother and I did all the things we had to do. We were the epitome of strength and control and all that is expected. We managed strongly, because that's what you did as part of the story. I was enormously grateful through all this that my mother was who she was, at least in the story that I had constructed for her. She was independent and strong, and so I would be able to carry through, we would be able to carry through, in the way that we had always understood and managed life. Even though Dad was now gone, I could continue to relate to my mother as I had always related to my parents, as the dutiful, responsible, but comfortably distant son. She would carry on as she had. After all, she had been on her own since she was sixteen years old and she could adapt to life alone. All would work out fine.

It didn't work fine for very long, however. Within four years my mother began to speak of the fear she had that something was wrong with her memory. "I have problems with my memory too," said her doctor, making light of it. And I made light of it, too, at first, despite the fact that her older sister had been already diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. But as long as it was possible, I refused to heed and recognize her fear. My mother as fearful was not a part of my story of who



she was. Finally, by 1986 it became pretty much impossible to deny the extent of the problem. My mother was evaluated at the Mass General Hospital, and their diagnosis was of a moderate to severe dementia. This moment marked an entrance, for both my mother and myself, into a very different, frightening, and mysterious world.

The world of Alzheimer's is a world that lacks any coherent story. It is in its very essence a world of disconnection. At first for the sufferer, there is an ever-increasingly distant past, but then in time, there is no past at all, and because of that it is a world of incredible anxiety. A kind of anxiety, which to this day, even having lived with my mother in it, I'm sure I can't appropriately understand. What must it be like to not be able to root this present moment in any other? What is it to have no sense of this moment as related to anything else? Without memory, that's what happens.

Loss of Connection

In his *Elegy for Iris*, John Bayley writes this:

A goose that cannot find other geese will attach itself to some object, another animal, even a stone or a post, and never lose sight of it. This terror of being alone, of being cut off for even a few seconds from the familiar object is a feature of Alzheimer's.^[9]

He is speaking about the impossibility of leaving his wife, the author Iris Murdoch, for even a moment. Bayley recognizes that it is not personal attachment to him that leads Murdoch to so desperately cling to him but rather the horrible fear and anxiety that ensues if she finds herself alone, even for a disconnected moment.

As the disease progresses, everything becomes increasingly unfamiliar until the sufferer loses everything, including a sense one's own self. With this comes personality change, violent outbursts, often depression, hallucinations, paranoia, total dependency, and, finally, death. This disease, as I experience it, finds reflection in a poem by David Ferry.

A Night-Time River Road

We were driving down a road.
Where was it we were going?
Where were we driving to?
Nobody knew.

Behind the blur of trees
Along the river road,
Somewhere behind the blur
A dark river ran.

The car bore us along.
We didn't know who we were
Or where we were going to.

Somebody must know.

Somebody in the car
Must know where we were going,
Beside the dark river,
Where we were going to.

All silent in the car
We sat staring ahead.
Where were the lights of a bar,
A gas station, a house?

Out in the dark the river
Was telling itself a story.
There in the car nobody
Could tell where we were going.^[10]

I can't speak of my mother's experience, only of mine, but I think we both had left the daylight of our stories. For different reasons: she because there was no choice; she no longer had a story. I, because my story didn't work at all. But we both had left the daylight of our stories, our hopes, desires, our plans of a lifetime, for how to make a life and have it make sense. Together we had entered on our own "night-time river road."

John Bayley reflects on this loss of a sense of who we are or where we are going that comes with Alzheimer's.

Iris once told me that the question of identity had always puzzled her. She thought she herself hardly possessed such a thing, whatever it was. I said that she must know what it was like to be oneself, even to revel in the consciousness of oneself, as a secret and separate person – a person unknown to any other. She smiled, was amused, looked uncomprehending. It was not something she bothered about.... Nobody less narcissistic than Iris can well be imagined.

Conceivably, it is the persons who hug their identity most closely to themselves for whom the condition of Alzheimer's is most dreadful. Iris's own lack of a sense of identity seemed to float her more gently into its world of preoccupied emptiness.^[11]

Bayley is, of course, interpreting here; he can have no idea of his wife's experience. We can't adequately imagine what it is to have no memory, no sense of connectedness from this moment to a past one, because memory anchors us to the world. Every sense of meaning we have of this moment is related to memory. I wish I had appreciated this better in the early stages of my mother's illness. Often I became frustrated with her, but over time I came to realize that I couldn't understand what it's like to be here in this moment and have no sense of the moment's context in past or future. Bayley refers here, not only to his wife's experience, but also to something that applies to himself and to each of us. The rigidity of our sense of identity and the resultant illusion that is our sense of identity determines the level of dread we experience in the face of

diminishment or in the face of any serious change in life. Not only Iris, but also Bayley, not only my mother, but also myself; all of us will be drawn by life down a night-time river road, as Ferry says.

The Will of God

In a sermon of St. Bernard, founder of the reformed Cistercians, in which he treats of the stages of contemplation, he says that the first stage of contemplation is “constantly to consider what God wants” and, thereby, to recognize our failure to do God’s will.^[12] Through this consideration and recognition we will humble ourselves and recognize ourselves as unworthy of God’s mercy. St. Bernard says this first stage of contemplation “purifies the eye of our soul.” The eye of our soul becomes more purified as we move more deeply into God’s reality. Then we “no longer abide within our spirit in a sense of sorrow, but abide rather in the spirit of God with great delight.” St. Bernard then makes a very profound distinction: “No longer do we consider what is the will of God for us, but rather what it is in itself. For our life is in his will.”

“No longer do we consider what is the will of God *for us*, but rather we consider what it is *in itself*.” (italics added) Ordinarily we consider the will of God through the lens of our sense of our own identity. We limit the possibilities of God’s will by our sense of our own identity. We actually only see from that perspective. Thus, our sense of identity limits our capacity to see Reality and to know God’s will. I recall the exchange between my mother and her doctor: “I think I’m having a problem with my memory.” “Well, you know, everybody at sixty-three or sixty-four has problems with their memory.” We don’t see because what we call the will of God is confined to our sense of self and its comprehension of the world. Using Sharon Cameron’s insight, we might say that we struggle with the will of God within the parameters of the story we tell about ourselves. I have to be good. I have to be responsible. I have to be loving and not afraid. That’s the story of the person driving to the church the day after his father dies. I want to do what God wants; I want to do the right thing. But that’s all from within the story.

We qualify our presence and our obedience to the will of God by the force with which we hug our identity closely to ourselves. One of the graces I’ve been given by my mother’s disease is that relentlessly at every turn I’ve encountered the inadequacy of the story. A very potent moment of my own life occurred the night I got a call from the nursing home my mother had been in for about a year and a half. The staff had moved her to the psychiatric unit of the local hospital because she had tried to smother another patient with a pillow.

Everything that was part of my story, of our story as a family, was blown to smithereens. Who we were, the persons we presented to the world, all our self-understanding was gone. How could this be! How could she do something like this! I walked in to see my mother tied in restraints. Nothing of our familial story any longer fit. Nothing worked. At this moment I didn’t immediately break open and recognize the glory of God. I didn’t become a story-less pristine openness to the will of God. That isn’t at all what happened. But it was the knocking at the door.

By the practice of considering what God wants, we begin to release the identity that we grasp onto, the story that we tell. We begin to consider what the will of God is, *in itself*. The heart of the problem here is our recognition of the sovereignty of God. Our stories are constituted by the sources of our discriminations: our definitions of the desirable and the undesirable, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the fair and the just, and the unfair and the unjust. The stories are necessary: human beings live by stories. But if we are to see the glory, we must transcend the stories.

Impermanence and Contingency

An essential aspect of the way things really are is impermanence. The saddest thing for us as human beings is impermanence. The will of God in itself includes the fact that all is transient. The deepening in contemplation that St. Bernard describes is the passage from sadness about the passing of all to the peace and consolation that adheres in the passing of all. I don’t love life despite the fact it is passing; I love it because it is. This passage from sadness and resentment to peace and gratitude doesn’t happen easily. I have a grandmother who died when I was six, and I was probably fifty before I could be grateful for having had her, rather than resentful at losing her. I created a story of resentment and fear at the age of six, and I held it with all my might for more than four decades. Only gradually have I come to learn that I can touch the core of my being, that is, my spiritual or transcendent ground, precisely through the realization that this current form of my life is passing away. Because everything passes, the self I take myself to be at this moment is also passing, and it’s that very truth, when I enter, appropriate, and contemplate it, that allows me to know the core of my being, my transcendent ground. This is true not only at the moment of death, but it is true from moment to moment throughout life. The more deeply I live in presence to the transience of my passing life, the more I can be present to its ground.

To live in this new, story-less presence to the reality of the passing away of all we know requires a trans-

formation in our consciousness of the experience of contingency.^[13] Even as children we can recall experiences of contingency. Examples abound: losing friends when we would move away from home, changes of school, multiple experiences of disappointment and failure, the breakup of our parents' marriage, the death of relatives or other family friends. The typically youthful response to such experiences is one of conformity; that is, we hide ourselves, we hide from ourselves, and we behave in ways that the society dictates. Be a big girl or be a big boy. We are primarily concerned with reacting to the situation in a way that conforms to expectations. We can carry this same manner of responding into adulthood. I employed this way of dealing with contingency even at my father's death: *I must fulfill the expectations of this moment*. That was focal, primary. The panic I experienced was symptomatic of the dissociation I was living. It was a pointer to the truth. The difference in the contingency experiences of our mid-life and later years (the fact that they become so much more powerful, so much closer to home, or so much more related to us) is that the reality is no longer avoidable.

The jolt of the crisis makes us realize that we have lost touch with our center, that we are more lived by others than living our own life.^[14]

The stories, which we create and by which we live, are largely a familial-cultural construction. They help us to manage a life that would otherwise be far too large and mysterious for us, but they do this by reducing the truth of things. Thus, ordinary consciousness, what we know that we know, is always, in part, an illusion. When diminishment (which is present in every moment) powerfully asserts itself in our lives, it is beckoning to us to remember that the mystery of human life includes its contingency.

According to van Kaam, our first reaction to contingency is always an attempt to deny it, to carry on as if nothing has happened. This can actually be quite successful, for a time, with more subtle experiences of diminishment. This "success" we have in our denial and avoidance of the more ordinary, everyday experiences of diminishment is what makes the unavoidable experiences so shattering for us. The human ego is marvelously resilient. This is a great gift for us. It is always amazing how quickly we "get used to" the most difficult circumstances, and, therefore, how surprising to us the next experience of diminishment inevitably is. But, if we are to be formed by those events of diminishment and contingency in our life, we must develop our capacity to grow in presence to and become a disciple of these events.

Response to Diminishment

What dispositions can we attempt to develop that will help us to grow in this wakefulness and acceptance? Van Kaam highlights three such dispositions: acknowledgment of the finitude of life, reconciliation with the contingency of life (with the truth of diminishment), and transformation of our motivational life.^[15] The most typical way we experience our difficulty in acknowledging the contingency of life is in our capacity to deny that life has changed, that our or our loved one's capacities have diminished. This accounts for the terrible frustration that is experienced in the first stages of caring for a person with Alzheimer's. As my mother grew less able to care for her own needs and order her life and space, I would work longer and harder (and more frantically) to keep life running as it always had. And, of course, the harder I would work; the more frustrated I would get. Finally, someone said to me, "You know. No matter what you do, she is still going to get worse." This simple truth jolted me into acknowledging the reality of this disease and its effects on my mother – and myself.

Secondly, van Kaam says we must grow into a stance of reconciliation with diminishment. Recognizing the truth of things means to recognize the limits of ourselves and of our situation. But this recognition of limit frees us to do what we can. It makes us, says van Kaam, "realistic, resolute, and decisive." As my mother's disease progressed she would often, as most Alzheimer's sufferers, get very anxious after sunset. Over time I became aware that to speak calmly to her about what was happening would actually afford her a moment's respite from the fear. When she would ask me what was wrong with her, I would simply and directly explain her condition. And one evening, as she expressed a strong dread about the future, I discovered myself saying: "Mom, we have no idea about what will happen with this illness. But whatever does, we will do what must be done when the time comes." I was amazed at the relief that this brought her – at least for a moment. Faith is the deep trust that God will give us the grace, the potency, to do what is asked of us at each moment. By recognizing that life is far beyond our capacity to control, we find ourselves able to respond to what is asked of us in each moment. In this sense, the contingency of life frees us from our deformative sense or responsibility and compulsion to control events.

The third disposition to be cultivated is that we allow our motivations to be purified by the experience of diminishment. For the first few years of caring for my mother I would find that my actions were often very self-conscious. I would get very upset when she would say or do embarrassing things in front of others and

quickly try to cover them over. Even more subtly, I would experience myself “observing” myself, to see if, in my eyes and the eyes of others, I was behaving as a dutiful, responsible, caring son would. I realized that I was seeking gratification in the recognition of my own efforts and goodness. Over time, however, (in part because the duration and intensity of the process wears one down) I could sense a slow and partial change. My care began to be less self-conscious and more simple, more a simple and direct response to the needs of my mother in the moment – without worrying about its larger or long-term meaning.

The Call to Care

Within the experience of diminishment is the simple and basic call to care – for the other and for ourselves. In acknowledgment of and reconciliation with the reality of the diminishment of ourselves, all whom we love, and of our entire world, a possibility of “infinite care”^[16] emerges. But “infinite care” means the appropriation of the finite and the limited. In responding with obedient care to the call of the present moment just as it is, we are participating, in our own unique way, in the infinite love of God:

For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.” (Matt. 25, 35-6)

But our share in that love is in accord with our own natures and the nature of human life. So, we must first let go of our grand projects and schemes (including the project of our own sense of identity) and give ourselves over to the simple exercise of non-discriminating caring, that is a caring not dependent on recognition, response, appreciation or even effectiveness. It is out such caring in the face of diminishment in life that the divine sparks emerge and illuminate our lives.

It is wonderfully peaceful to sit in bed with Iris reassuringly asleep and gently snoring. Half-asleep again myself, I have a feeling of floating down the river, and watching all the rubbish from the house and from our lives – the good as well as the bad – sinking slowly down through the dark water until it is lost in the depths. Iris is floating or swimming quietly beside me. Weeds and larger leaves sway and stretch themselves beneath the surface. Blue dragonflies dart and hover to and fro by the riverbank. And suddenly, a kingfisher flashes past.^[17]

Notes

This essay appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of *Spiritual Life: A Journal of Contemporary Spirituality* and in the Autumn 2004 issue of *Epiphany International: A Journal of Formation Science, Anthropology, and Theology*. The Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada gave The Best Essay Award (Press Awards 2005) to Brother John D. Hamilton, CFX for this essay. The content of this essay is based on the first of three lectures from a course on the spirituality of diminishment and loss. Future issues of this Newsletter will present the insights from the remaining lectures of the course.

[1] Quoted in Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage Division of Random House, Inc., 1999), p. 139.

[2] Mark 9, 14-29. All scripture passages are from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968) unless otherwise noted. All further scripture references will be included in the text.

[3] Susan Cameron, *Beautiful Work: A Meditation on Pain* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2000), p. 2.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), p. xiii.

[6] Psalm 39, 5-12 in *The Book of Psalms* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1972), p. 44.

[7] T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets: East Coker III” in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc.), p. 126.

[8] Mitchell, p. 22.

[9] John Bayley, *Elegy for Iris* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 127.

[10] David Ferry, “A Night-Time River Road,” in *of no country I know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 109-110.

[11] Bayley, pp. 64-5.

[12] Saint Bernard, “The Stages of Contemplation”, in *The Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), IV, pp. 235-6.

[13] Adrian van Kaam, *The Transcendent Self* (Pittsburgh: Epiphany Association, 1991), pp. 63-67).

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[16] Cameron, p. 18.

[17] Bayley, p. 81.



**IN MEMORIAM: ADRIAN VAN KAAM, C.S.Sp., Ph.D.
1920-2007**



Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp., Ph.D., was born in 1920, a native of The Hague, Holland. After his ordination as a Catholic priest of the Dutch Province of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, he was assigned to teach philosophical anthropology at the Congregation's Senior Seminary in Holland. At this period, on weekends, he taught

courses in formative spirituality to young adult workers in the Dutch "Life Schools." In 1950, he began graduate studies in pedagogy at the Hoogveld Institute of the University of Nijmegen. His studies were interrupted in 1951 when he was invited by the General Superior of his Congregation to spend a year in Paris researching the writings of Francis Libermann, founder of the Congregation. The results of that research became van Kaam's first book, *A Light to the Gentiles* (1959). Returning to Holland in 1952 to resume his studies, he wrote a thesis on the integrational spiritual formation of young adults and was awarded the M.A. degree. From 1952-1954, he served as a spiritual formation counselor in the Dutch Observation Center for Juvenile Delinquents. After a personal meeting in Holland with the President of Duquesne University, van Kaam was invited to come to the United States to join Duquesne's department of psychology. He arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1954 and while teaching at Duquesne completed his doctoral course work in psychology at Western Reserve University by 1956. He then enrolled at the University of Chicago to be trained in psychotherapy under Carl Rogers, and at the Alfred Adler Institute under Rudolph Dreikurs. The next year, van Kaam undertook advanced course work in personality theory under Abraham Maslow, Kurt Goldstein and Andreas Angyal at Brandeis University. With the completion of his dissertation, *The Experience of Really Feeling Understood by a Person*, he was awarded the Ph.D. in 1958 and began teaching full-time at Duquesne. Van Kaam's vision, inspiration and organizational skills set the direction for the graduate program inaugurated at Duquesne in 1959. He remained within the department of psychology devoting much of his time to the Institute of Religion and Personality. When the Institute was separated from the department in 1965 and became an autonomous unit, The Institute of Man, van Kaam became its first Director. In 1979, the Institute of Man became the Institute of Formative Spirituality. In the new Institute, van Kaam realized his life's dream. In his own words:

I myself was able to continue more vigorously and undividedly my original interest and study. I could finally fully form in this strictly graduate institute my own faculty and students in what became a new science, the science of foundational human formation with a special articulation in the Christian formation tradition, with its own doctoral and master's degree, (June, 1982).

For reasons of health, van Kaam resigned as Director of the Institute in 1980, but continued a busy schedule of teaching, writing and lecturing worldwide. Over the years, he initiated and edited the journal *Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (with Rollo May), *Humanitas*, *Envoy*, and *Studies in Formative Spirituality*. (From *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A History of Duquesne University's Graduate Psychology Programs [1950-1999]* by David L. Smith, C.S.Sp., Ph.D.; pp. 159-60)

Van Kaam published extensively throughout his career, beginning with his biography of the founder of the Spiritans, Francis Libermann, in 1959. Many of his books are available through the Epiphany Association (<http://epiphanyassociation.org>), in Pittsburgh, PA. Dr. Susan Muto, Executive Director of the Epiphany Association, is preparing a detailed bibliography of Fr. van Kaam's books, articles, and tapes.

KEY CONCEPTS OF FORMATIVE SPIRITUALITY

In this and subsequent issues of this Newsletter we will present some of the key concepts of Formative Spirituality, drawing mainly from the writings of Fr. Adrian van Kaam. See below for a listing of some of his main published works.

Appreciative Abandonment to the Mystery

According to van Kaam, the foundational formation option is the choice people make to believe in the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of their life formation. "It is a choice either to abandon themselves to this mystery or to feel abandoned in this cosmos as in a meaningless and careless system closed in upon itself. Our primordial formation decision is thus a faith option for positive or negative abandonment." (*Fundamental Formation*, p. 221)

Van Kaam often speaks of this option as that of appreciative abandonment to the mystery of formation or depreciative abandonment by the mystery. In the appreciative option we recognize the possibilities of each life situation and our connection and relatedness to others. In the depreciative option, we are overcome by worry and anxiety about the threats of our life situation

and primarily apprehend depreciatively the differences and separation between ourselves and others.

This primordial option, notes van Kaam, is not totally free. Our freedom to choose appreciative abandonment can be severely limited, for example, by our genetic preformation, such as certain innate predispositions to depression. In such instances, specific medical treatment or psychotherapy can help to restore adequate freedom for such an act of self-surrender to the beneficent possibilities of life. We can also be limited in our capacity for appreciative abandonment by interformative and outer formative experiences, particularly in childhood. Since in childhood parents and other significant adults are such dominant formation agents, if they are without sufficient love and care or the ability to express adequate love and care, “the freedom of the child to opt for carefree surrender may be impaired.” A person’s capacity for this option can also be limited by “formative life situations one experiences after childhood.” On the other hand, experiences of “love, friendship, counseling and therapy” can similarly serve to overcome these deficiencies and to open one more fully to the formative possibilities inherent in each formation situation. (*Fundamental Formation*, p. 222)

To live in appreciative abandonment requires constant work. It requires that we practice from moment to moment “an appreciative abandonment of our will to anything the mystery allows or designs for us here and now.” (*Transcendent Formation*, p. 259) Van Kaam points out that this practice has the effect of calming the ongoing formation of our nervous systems. Our busy and defensive minds are often scanning our life situation not for the manifestations it contains of our unique mission in life but rather for any possible threat or source of fear, resentment or anxiety. It is only through constant practice that we can begin to still our defensive hyper-vigilance and begin instead to cultivate a habitual mode of faith, hope and love. “The key to coping with coercive dispositions is instant appreciative abandonment to the mystery of formation in the here and now.” (*Transcendent Formation*, p. 260)

Van Kaam applies the practice of appreciative abandonment explicitly to the way in which we relate to other persons. “Transcendent love means loving people, events, things just because the mystery allowed them to emerge in our field as part of our here and now life. . . . We have been taught to place pretranscendent conditions on our love: ‘If you really loved me, you would . . .’ Then we insert one of our coercive dispositions to complete the sentence. . . . Transcendent love means accepting and respecting a person as one whose

deepest identity is hidden in the mystery of all formation.” (*Transcendent Formation*, pp. 259-260)

An example of how the abandonment option is rooted in a community of faith comes to us from a recent event in the Amish community of Pennsylvania. On Monday, October 2, 2006 ten schoolgirls in an Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania were shot by a deranged gunman. Since that time many have pondered what was for most of us the unbelievable spirit of forgiveness that the people of that Amish community extended to the gunman and his family. In *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (2007), Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher demonstrate how the expression of forgiveness was not only possible but inevitable due to the life-long day to day formation in forgiveness and abandonment that is inherent in the Amish way of life. The question of how one can love a person who has done such evil to one’s loved ones is answered by the constant, hard, ongoing work of practicing at each and every moment appreciative abandonment to the mystery. It is not merely through belief or cognition or force of will that one is disposed to forgiveness at such a moment, but rather by the practice of “instant appreciative abandonment to the mystery of formation in the here and now.”

Abandonment to God (to the Mystery of All-That-Is) is not a one-time act. Rather it is a developing of the *disposition* of abandoning ourselves to God and the Mystery of our life, practiced and acquired through the events of daily life.

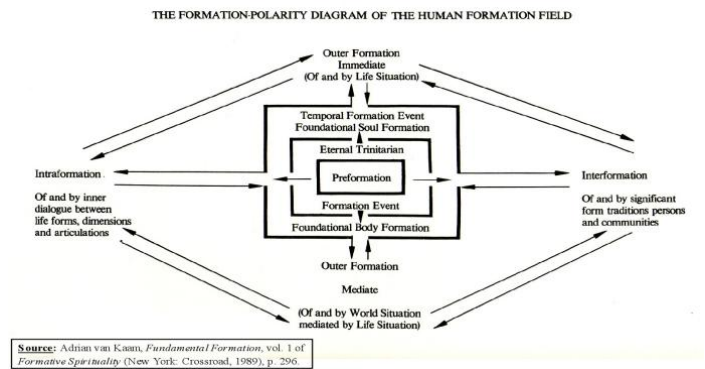
The Formation Field

For van Kaam the core paradigm for the understanding of life and world as rooted in spirit is that of formation. For him, all life is “life in formation.” Creation, in all its forms and manifestations, is a “dynamically formative epiphany of the mystery.” This includes, of course, human life. Each human life is a most deeply a “unique transcosmic direction of the formation mystery.” This unique direction of the mystery manifest in each person’s formation is “our deepest spiritual identity.” This is very different from the ego life we form through “interaction with our cosmic and social world” and from our bodily or vital life that is “a subtle, condensed form of energy that “becomes visible in a body as an individual, temporary shape that disperses when its time has come.”

How, in our day to day life-in-formation does the “unique transcosmic direction of the formation mystery” that is our unique life call become known to us? How does the mystery manifest its direction in our

lives, thus enabling us to both receive the form that we are most deeply and to give form to our life and world in accordance with it?

In the understanding of Formative Spirituality, each human life is a “field of formation.” The direction of the formation mystery is manifest in the “movement, flow, and change,” that is characteristic of all its manifestations. This movement is experienced in “a constant dialogical tension” among the poles of our formation field: preformation, intraformation, interformation, extra or outer formation (situational formation and the world pole of formation). These poles are constantly interacting with one another “by means of formative dynamic relationships.”



- *Preformation* refers to our organic formation, that is our biogenetic formation of bodily cells, tissues, organs, and systems that gives rise to our vital formation, that is our unique vital impulses, needs, and strivings. Our organic formation finds its vital direction by “a process of interformative exchanges with significant persons, events and things in the earliest life situations.” Together our organic and vital formation gives rise to formative temperament. Formative Spirituality posits, at the root of this preformation, a transcendent preformation that is directed by the formation mystery.
- *Intraformation* refers to inner formation dynamics. In many other paradigms this is the single focus of formation. The intraformative process brings the pre-reflective vital form “into forming interaction with the other inner modalities of human life, such as sensing, perceiving, imagining, remembering, anticipating, appraising, deciding.” (*Fundamental Formation*, 250)
- *Interformation* refers to those formative processes that occur in our interactions with other persons and communities of persons.
- *Extra-, or outer, formation* refers to formative processes that are the result of our interaction with our immediate life situation and with the wider world beyond our immediate surroundings.

At any given moment, the current life form which we are is a result of this dynamic field of forces and inter-

relationships. So, our current form of life is never just our preformation, or intraformation, or relationships, or outer formation but rather a formative event, an emergent self, a current manifestation of our unique life direction or spiritual identity arising from the current field of formation that we are.

Thus, as we attend to our own formation, or the formation of others, we must attempt to keep the full-field in view. We have a tendency to confuse our deepest spiritual identity with our ego or vital lives. These are reifications, the reduction of the “unique transcendent direction of the formation mystery” that we most deeply are to our bodily or functional manifestations. We maintain these illusory senses of the self through a reduction of the mystery that is our most typical form of consciousness. As van Kaam would often say, we make our lives “a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived.”

One way we reduce or repress the mystery of our lives is through the reduction of our formation field. For example, we can see ourselves, not as a field, but as a separate, split-off entity constituted by our own interiority. On the other hand, we can lose awareness of and connection with our interiority by seeing our lives as only our relationships to others or in terms of our productivity in work. Frequently, we fail to recognize how the wider world in which we live deeply impacts our life and consciousness. Thus, formative reflection must always be full-field reflection. In counseling or spiritual direction it is well to attend to the field of the counselee and ask the person what poles of the field he or she is currently “leaving out”? Helping a person to restore to consciousness the poles of the field that are “missing” for them can often be a means to restoration of a sense of mystery and possibility in life.

In *Fundamental Formation*, Volume I of his series on *Formative Spirituality*, Fr. van Kaam writes poetically about our life formation as an ongoing event always occurring in a larger “field” of cosmic and divine formation.

... the universe itself is a dynamically formative epiphany of the mystery. Its formation and reformation always move onward. Movement, flow, and change are characteristic of all manifestations of this cosmic epiphany. Yet the mystery itself transcends all the forms in which it fleetingly manifests its creative presence. The cosmic epiphany is like a dance sustaining the manifold formations of the world. It unifies them all by immersing them in its rhythm and making them participate in the dance.

All forms are fluid and ever changing. Our perception of them as static is one result of the inclination of the pride-form to cling to the forms that make up our life and

world as if they were fixed – whether these be people, events, things, ideas, or images. Instead we must accept the world as a continuous flow of ongoing formation. . . . All forms together, and each form in relation to all others, are in not a static but a dynamic equilibrium. The rhythm of the formation mystery pervades them all in its continuous epiphany.

The human life-form itself, insofar as it is also a participant in the micro-and macrocosmic dance, is not an unchangeable constant. Physically, it changes form, that is, it grows from a current life-form to a new current life form. Spiritually . . . it does something similar. . . . the growth through successive spiritual life-forms is guided by a unique transcendent direction. This direction operates in us as a hidden ground-form to be released either within this cosmic period or, according to certain classical form traditions, in a purification period to be experienced beyond this epiphany.

This unique transcendent direction of the formation mystery in each of us is our deepest spiritual identity. (pp. 198-99, 202)

A PARTIAL LISTING OF THE PUBLISHED BOOKS OF ADRIAN VAN KAAM, C.S.Sp., Ph.D.

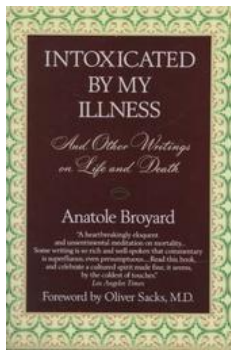
- ❖ *A Light to the Gentiles*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1959 (Revised edition: Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1962 and Denville, N. J.: Dimension Books).
- ❖ *The Third Force in European Psychology*. Greenville, DE: Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, 1960. (Also published in Greek by the Psychosynthesis Foundation, 1962).
- ❖ "A Psychology of the Catholic Intellectual." *The Christian Intellectual*, ed. Samuel Hazo, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1963.
- ❖ *Religion and Personality*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964.
- ❖ *Existential Foundations of Psychology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press and New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1966.
- ❖ *The Art of Existential Counseling*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1966. (Also in Spanish)
- ❖ *Personality Fulfillment in the Spiritual Life*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1966.
- ❖ *Personality Fulfillment in the Religious Life*. Volume 1. *Religious Life in a Time of Transition*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1967. (Also in Vietnamese and Japanese).
- ❖ *The Vowed Life*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1968
- ❖ *The Emergent Self*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc. (First American Edition). (Second and Revised Edition, 1968). Co-author.
- ❖ *The Participant Self*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1969. Co-author.
- ❖ *On Being Involved*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1970. (Also in French)
- ❖ *On Being Yourself*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1972.
- ❖ *Envy and Originality*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972.
- ❖ *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1974.

- ❖ *In Search of Spiritual Identity*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1975.
- ❖ *The Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1976.
- ❖ *The Woman at the Well*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1976.
- ❖ *Looking for Jesus*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1978.
- ❖ *The Transcendent Self: Formative Spirituality of the Middle, Early and Late Years of Life*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1979.
- ❖ *The Mystery of Transforming Love*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1982.
- ❖ *Foundations for Personality Study: An Adrian van Kaam Reader*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1983.
- ❖ *The Science of Formative Spirituality: Fundamental Formation*, Volumes I- VII. New York: Crossroad/Continuum, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1992, 1995.
- ❖ *The Roots of Christian Joy*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, Inc., 1985.
- ❖ *Commitment: Key to Christian Maturity*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989. Co-author.
- ❖ *The Power of Appreciation: A New Approach To Personal and Relational Healing*. New York: Crossroad/Continuum, 1993. Co-author.
- ❖ *Practicing the Prayer of Presence*. Williston Park, New York: Resurrection Press, 1993. Coauthor.

BOOK REFLECTIONS: ILLNESS, AGING AND DIMINISHMENT

Memoirs

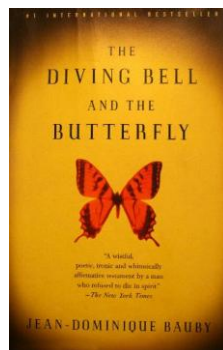
Memoirs of illness, aging, and the experience of dealing with a family member suffering with senile dementia have been sharply on the rise in recent years, as has memoir writing in general. An eminent forerunner of the genre appeared in 1979 when Norman Cousins published *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*. The book is a fuller version of a breakthrough article that had previously been published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, in December 1976, one of a very few essays by a laymen to have appeared in its pages. The article and the book received enormous attention for the approach to healing that was being promoted: namely, that the doctor and patient formed a partnership in the regeneration process. The story of the author's recovery from a crippling and supposedly irreversible disease is viewed within the context of the doctor-patient collaboration and the patient's innate capabilities of overcoming illness. Although a patient's responsibility for his or her well-being was not always recognized at the time, Cousins learned *by being engaged* "never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate."



If Cousins's account can be said to be scientific – in the holistic medicine sense – Anatole Broyard's *Intoxicated by My Illness and Other Writings on Life and Death* (1992) is a more literary dialogue with mortality. Before being struck with prostate cancer in 1989, Broyard had written essays on "The Literature of Death" and "Toward a Literature of Illness." He was well-acquainted with his subject, and fascinated by the power of illness to make storytellers of us: "... people, if they become ill, must become storytellers, must make a story, metaphors, of their illness." His own illness sharpened and focused his curiosity, to the point of creating energy and producing a sense of "intoxication." Determined to face the illness and to write about it with all his strength, he turned to storytelling. "My first instinct," he writes, "was to bring it under control by turning it into a narrative. Always in emergencies we invent narratives. . . . Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness. . . . Stories are antibodies against illness and pain." In his "Forward" to the book the neurologist Oliver Sachs writes that "I have never seen any writing about illness that is more forthright—nothing is glossed over, or evaded, or sentimentalized, or pietized. . . . You feel the man himself—who is also and always a critic and an artist . . . He takes his pen almost to the darkness." The book has recently been reissued and is available in paperback.

In his "Forward" Sachs makes mention of Susan Sontag, who had written *Illness as Metaphor* after her successful battle with breast cancer in the mid-1970's, a deservedly highly-acclaimed essay. Following two subsequent recurrences of cancer Sontag died in 2004 of MDS, *Myelodysplastic Syndrome*, a particularly virulent form of leukemia. Sontag's life and struggles with illness are deftly rendered by David Rieff in *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (January 2008). The memoir will be of interest to those who appreciate Susan Sontag the writer and as well as to those who may be inspired by the quality of the battle she waged against highly invasive illnesses.

No less inspiring is the story of Jean-Dominique Bauby, who until recently we only knew through his personal memoir *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. A 2007 film by the same title is popularizing the story of the one-time editor of France's *Elle* magazine. On Friday, December 8, 1995, on his way with



his son Theophile to see a play, Bauby suffered the symptoms of a massive stroke just as he was taking the wheel of his brand new BMW. Admitted to a nearby clinic, he rapidly sank into a deep coma. Bauby survived, but as he writes in the Prologue of his memoir:

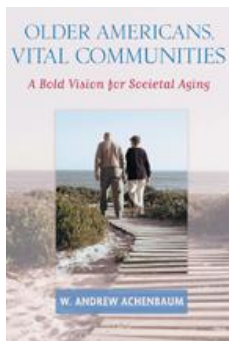
In the past, it was known as "massive stroke," and you simply died. But improved resuscitation techniques have prolonged and refined the agony. You survive, but you survive with what is aptly known as "locked-in syndrome." Paralyzed from head to toe, the patient, his mind intact, is imprisoned inside his own body, unable to speak or move. In my case, blinking my left eyelid is my only means of communication.

With the help of staff Bauby learns to communicate by blinking his left eyelid. Blinking enables him to respond in the affirmative or the negative to questions posed to him by family, friends or medical staff. And by blinking appropriately to the letters of the alphabet as they were read to him by his assistant, this courageous man overcame his self-pity and succeeded in writing a book about the extraordinary experience of his tragic illness.

A fairly vast literature—memoirist and fictional—is growing up around the subject of Alzheimer's disease. An early novel on the subject, *Scar Tissue*, was based on Michael Ignatieff's experience of his mother's final year of life with the disease. Two other well-known writers have also produced accounts of accompanying a parent with the disease: Susan Miller in *The Story of My Father* (2004) and Mary Gordon in *Clinging to My Mother: A Memoir* (2007). The current film "Away from Her" starring Julie Christie is based on a short story by Alice Munro. Christie portrays a woman who realizes she is losing her mind and must leave home and husband for the care she will receive in an assisted living situation. The stand-out performances in the film capture exquisitely the pain of losing someone to Alzheimer's—not only the patient's loss of identity but also the loss felt by the caregiver—husband or wife, son or daughter—when he or she and the intimate relationship they share is no longer recognized by the loved one.

Studies on Illness and Aging

"On Aging" is the focus of the Winter 2006 issue of *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Science*. The eleven essays include consideration of "Longer Life Spans" (boon or burden?), Alzheimer's disease, social security in an aging America, "Human Dignity & the Limits of Life," and "How Society Shapes Lives." An especially fine book on the subject is W. Andrew Achenbaum's *Older Americans, Vital Communities: A Bold Vision for Societal Aging* (The Johns Hopkins Press, 2005). Each of the six chapters deals with a sig-



nificant and substantive issue relating to the topic: Chapter 1 on “The New Faces of Individual Aging” acknowledges the extra years of life expectancy and gives attention to women’s issues as well as to ethnic and racial diversity. Chapter 2 deals with “productive aging” and the work and leisure theme. Chapter 3 on “vital aging” emphasizes the need for wise learning in all stages of life. Chapter 4 is titled “Reforming the U.S. Health System to Care for an Aging Population”. Chapter 5 focuses on the theory and practice of “spiritual aging”. Chapter 6 considers the ties that bind age groups together. Religion and spirituality are given their due in this book:

... there is evidence that those older people who can look deeply within themselves as well as see their place on this vast planet are able to come to terms with death and dying better than those who are less self-reflective. And while primary attention has been placed on the spiritual connections to aging, there is considerable evidence that spiritual awakening is likely to occur earlier, in midlife. Through practice and self-development, those who tap their spiritual strengths are better prepared to face the joys and vicissitudes that come with advancing years (Atchley, 1995: 71). (From Chapter 1)

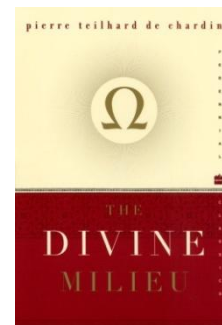
A more philosophical treatment of aging is presented in a new book that has just been published by Oxford University Press: *The Long Life* by Helen Small (a Fellow in English at Pembroke College, Oxford). The author argues that we have to think more fundamentally about what it means to be a person, to have or lead a good life, and to be part of a just society. For those who have access to the magazine, an extended review of this book by literary critic Frank Kermode can be found in the 13 December 2007 issue of “The London Review of Books.”

Three other titles, more dated and general in nature, may be of interest to readers who want to explore specific perspectives on aging, illness and dying. *The Art of Growing Older: Writers on Living and Aging* (1992) is a collection of literary pieces covering everything from the fears and losses associated with aging to the consolations and celebrations of a life well-lived. Wayne Booth, who made the selections, presents a rich variety of literary genres, enhancing the collection throughout with personal reflections and thought-provoking questioning. Recognizing a goodly number of the poems and passages from drama, fiction and literary biography, lovers of literature will be delightfully entertained by the addition of not-so-familiar works that shed new insight and light on the experience of growing older. For a sociological perspective on the subject, Norbert

Elias, in *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Continuum, 2001), reflects in less than a hundred pages on the sociological problems of aging and dying in advanced industrial societies. The renowned German social philosopher sensitizes us to social and psychological issues increasingly faced by people in the economically wealthy yet spiritually alienated cultures of the West. As emotional distances between people become ever greater, it can be said that people lose their direction and life’s meaning before they lose their lives. The philosophical discussion of death presented in Josef Pieper’s *Death and Immortality* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2000) may appeal to those possessing a more philosophical-theological turn of mind. The author considers scriptural passages on death (St. Paul to the Romans: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” The paradox of “losing our life in order to gain it”, etc.) and references a long line of thinkers from Aristotle and Aquinas to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to elucidate a “vocabulary of death” and the central issue of “death and freedom.” Pieper relates human freedom in the face of death to our final disposition, our “last will and testament” as it were, a religious act of loving devotion in which, explicitly accepting death, we offer ourselves and the life now slipping from us, to God. (92)

Spirituality

This final set of books is suited to the practices of reflective “spiritual” reading. *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life* (1976) by Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney is a meditation on the aging process conceived as a journey not only to the darkness but also to the light. The authors consider caring first as “way” to the self and then as a “way” to the other: the more we enter into the unfolding process of our own aging and diminishment, the more present we can be to the issues of the aged among us who require our assistance and guidance. The insights offered here are relevant to those who want to grow in pastoral presence. In *The Virtues of Aging* (1998) Jimmy Carter (yes, *that* Jimmy Carter!) reflects on the blessings that come to us as we grow older and on what aging people have to offer that might be beneficial to others. Policy issues and spiritual values intermingle in these pages, along with keen social and psychological awareness. Sensitive to the prejudice that exists toward the elderly, Carter observes that “What makes it different (from sexism and racism) is that the prejudice also exists among those of us who are either within this group or rapidly approaching it.” One section of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Divine Milieu* (1960) deals



with what he calls “The Divinization of our Passivities.” Included in this section of his book is a prayer that touches on many of the themes discussed above. It also inspires meditation on these themes and is therefore presented here in full (in its original italicized form).

COMMUNION THROUGH DIMINISHMENT

It was a joy to me, O God, in the midst of the struggle, to feel that in developing myself I was increasing the hold that you have upon me; it was a joy to me, too, under the inward thrust of life or amid the favourable play of events, to abandon myself to your providence. Now that I have found the joy of utilising all forms of growth to make you, or to let you, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess you by diminishing in you.

After having perceived you as he who is “a greater myself” grant, when my hour comes, that I may recognize you under the species of each alien or hostile force that seems bent upon destroying or uprooting me. When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself

The more deeply and incurably the evil is encrusted in my flesh, the more it will be you that I am harbouring – you as a loving, active principle of purification and detachment. The more the future opens before me like some dizzy abyss or dark tunnel, the more confident I may be – if I venture forward on the strength of your word – of losing myself and surrendering myself in you, of being assimilated by your body, Jesus.

You are the irresistible and vivifying force, O Lord, and because yours is the energy, because, of the two of us, you are infinitely the stronger, it is on you that falls the part of consuming me in the union that should weld us together. Vouchsafe, therefore, something more precious still than the grace for which all the faithful pray. It is not enough that I should die while communicating. Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.



CHARISM vs. CHARISMA [Charism Studies (2)]

~Reginald D. Cruz, CFX

Confusion exists in the minds of many within and especially outside religious life regarding the word *charism* and the more popular term *charisma*. Both hail from the same Greek word *charis* (χαρις) and they suggest parallel ideas. However, the amount of literature on *charisma* heavily outweighs the far-less discussed phenomenon of *charism*. To muddle the understanding further, religious were wrestling with the meaning of *charism* at the same time that political scientists in the 60s and 70s were elaborating on the qualities of “charismatic leaders” like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Gandhi. A nuanced definition of *charism* reveals a deeper meaning than the usual “grace” or “unique gift”.

Max Weber, one of the prime thinkers of sociology, strongly influenced present thinking on charismatic authority. This power rests on the devotion of a group of followers to a leader whom they perceive as possessing “powers” beyond the ordinary. Weber called this “unique gift of grace” *charisma*, which is “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities.” (*Economy and Society*, 1135, 241) Weber recognized the legitimacy of a community formed around the charismatic leader and its continuation under “the right person” whom the community recognizes as “truly endowed with (the) charisma” of the original leader.” (247)

There is a tendency among religious and their associates to speak about the charismatic character of their founder/s in this Weberian framework. While it is true that their founder/s – like all persons – possess spiritual capacities, the prime charismatic leader for Catholic religious is still Jesus, God-Incarnate. Regardless of the appeal of the life of their founder/s, these women and men were simply reverberating in their lives the counsels of Jesus’ gospel, albeit radically (in both senses of the word) when compared to their contemporaries. The danger that the founder/s can become a cultic figure for the community is a tendency that several observers have noted concerning the relationship between members of some New Religious Movements within Catholicism (Opus Dei, Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Neocatechumenal Way, and Regnum Christi) and their founders. For all their holiness and unique expression of their spiritual capacities, founder/s can never replace Jesus as the central charismatic figure in the Catholic experience.

A good place to understand religious charism properly, then, is to re-position the place of the founder/s within the phenomenological layers that constitute it. One needs to assert that religious charisms originate from the Spirit. To profess belief in the Holy Spirit is to acknowledge that S/He is ever-present and ever-active. This confession resists the notion that God does not – must not – interact with the cosmos. Rather, the Christian Tradition upholds that the Spirit’s (com)passion for the universe is at the root of His/Her uninterrupted interaction with humanity through time – past, present, and future.

This ineffable and inexhaustible goodwill is God’s *charis* manifest in the Spirit’s passion for generating life in an ever-changing and constantly-challenged world. In theology, we have mostly translated *charis* as “unique or extraordinary gift” or “grace.” So much is lost in this translation, to the point that it becomes a thing. *Charis* suggests that which is “beauty,” “goodness,” “kindness,” and “graciousness” embedded deep within us. The charismatic nature of the ministries in Paul’s writings (1 Cor 12:4-11) derives more from the inner goodness or goodwill of the person – inflamed by the Spirit – from which it springs than from the efficacy

of the good work they do. To counter its tendency to be reified in our theologies, *charis* must be re-understood in poetic terms.

When the movement and meaning of charism is located within the pneumatological, we can begin to appropriate correctly and re-appreciate the place of both founder/s and followers in the dynamics. Whatever their degree of holiness and maturity may be, we acknowledge that founders, women and men “full of good will” - *kecharitoméni* in Greek - recognized both a facet of the Spirit’s passionate pulsing for His/Her unsettled world and His/Her call to birth this pulsing within their historical context. The on-going impetus of the Spirit within the community draws other women and men of like passion into the song that is born and, eventually, they enrich its harmony with their own graciousness.

Thus, *charism can be defined as the pulsing of the Spirit’s goodwill toward creation which is powerfully intuited within a crucial historical moment by an individual or group of individuals and embodied in a religious life form and subsequently appropriated and deepened by those who later partake of it and become incorporated into that religious life tradition with their own goodwill.*

NEWSLETTER STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

Resources in Spiritual Formation is co-directed by Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC and John D. Hamilton, CFX. **Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC, PhD**, is a member of the New England Province of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. He holds a masters degree and a doctorate in Formative Spirituality from the Institute of Formative Spirituality of Duquesne University. He has taught in spirituality programs in Rome, at Duquesne and Creighton Universities, and at various sites throughout New England. Along with John D. Hamilton, he develops courses in Formative Spirituality and is available for formative spiritual direction at Xavier Center, where *Resources in Spiritual Formation* is located. **John D. Hamilton, CFX, MA**, is a member of the Xaverian Brothers. He holds graduate degrees in English from Wesleyan University and in Formative Spirituality from Duquesne University. In addition to his work at *Resources in Spiritual Formation*, he is also General Councilor for Formation for the Xaverian Brothers. **Reginald D. Cruz, CFX, PhD (cand.)** is also a member of the Xaverian Brothers. He is currently completing his Doctorate in History at the University of the Philippines. He has served on the faculty of Maryhill School of Theology and the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, both in Manila. He is general coordinator of the *Hagiography Circle*, an online research center on Contemporary Hagiography.

Resources in Spiritual Formation

21 Spring St.
Danvers, Massachusetts 01923
USA

email: webmaster@resourcesf.com

website: www.resourcesf.com