

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Peter Scazzero (Thomas Nelson, 2006)

#### Becoming (my) authentic self

God created human beings to feel a wide range of emotions. Researchers have grouped feelings into eight main families, with hundreds of variations, blends and nuances: anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust, and shame. God “feels” (Gen. 1:25, 31; 6:6; 20:5; Is. 42:14; Jer. 30:24; 31:3; Hos. 11:8; Mt. 26:37-38; Mk. 3:5; Lk. 10:21, for example).

“Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, explored the difference between consolations (those interior movements and feelings that bring life, joy, peace, and the fruit of the Spirit) and desolations (that which brings us “death,” inner turmoil, disquiet, and “spiritual turbulence”)... do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 Jn 4:1). Sometimes they are our fleshly desires or the enemy. Other times God is prodding us to a better choice. God intends that we mature in learning to recognize how he speaks and guides us through our feelings.” (p. 73)

We experience several great temptations toward a false self: I am what I do (performance), I am what I have (possessions), I am what others think (popularity). Differentiation involves the ability to hold on to who I am and who I am not... living faithful to (my) true self. On the lower end of the scale are those who need continual validation from others, and under stress they have little ability to distinguish between their feelings and their thought process (see Bowen’s scale, p. 83-84). We develop our authentic self by paying attention to our interior silence and solitude, finding trusted companions, moving out of our comfort zone, and praying for courage (to change and grow).

#### Breaking the power of the past

We underestimate the deep, unconscious imprint our families of origin leave on us, as blessings and sins, that are often contrary to Christ’s script for us. The Beaver System Model is one helpful, well-known way of looking at and understanding our families. Based primarily on how families understand boundaries, they’re able to classify themselves along five different levels of health: the family in pain, the borderline family, the rule-bound family, the adequate family and the optimal family (see the Beaver System Model, p. 110-111).

Joseph is cited as someone who had a profound sense of the bigness of God, admitted honestly the sadness and losses of his family, rewrote the script according to Scripture, and partnered with God to be a blessing.

“Going back in order to go forward is something we must do in the context of community – with mature friends, a mentor, spiritual director, counselor, or therapist. We need trusted people in our lives of whom we can ask, ‘How do you experience me?’ ‘Tell me the feelings and thoughts you have when you are with me.’ ‘Please be honest with me.’ Prayerfully listening to the answers to these questions will go a long way toward healing and getting a perspective on areas of our lives that need to be addressed.” (p. 114)

#### Letting go of power and control; the Christian life as a journey, through the Wall

Journeys involve movement, action, stops and starts, detours, delays, and trips into the unknown. Many whom we encounter in ministry are stuck or dropped out altogether, failing to see the transforming work that God seeks to do in them at their “wall.” Throughout church history great men and women have written about the phases of our life journey, such as Augustine, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, Evelyn Underhill, and John Wesley. In *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich share a model, including the essential place of the Wall in the seasons of our journey.

Stage 1: Life-Changing Awareness of God – aware of Christ’s reality, recognize our need for mercy

Stage 2: Discipleship – learning about God and what it is to be a follower of Christ, in community

Stage 3: Active Life – getting involved, serving God and His people, using our gifts and talents

Stage 4: The Wall and the Journey Inward – God brings us to the Wall, it compels us inward

Stage 5: The Journey Outward – servant-leadership out of God’s deep, accepting love

Stage 6: Transformed by Love – surrender and obedience to God’s perfect will

For most of us the Wall appears through a crisis that turns our world upside down. On a certain level it is correct to say that Walls come to us in various ways throughout our lifetime. It appears to be something we return to as a part of our ongoing relationship with God. Without understanding of the Walls in our journey, however, countless sincere followers of Christ get stuck there, at what St. John of the Cross called *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Characteristics of a dark night include helplessness, weariness, a sense of failure, defeat, barrenness, emptiness, dryness, and our feelings of God's presence evaporate. St. John of the cross listed seven deadly spiritual imperfections that the dark nights are intended by God to purify us of: pride, avarice, luxury, wrath, spiritual gluttony, spiritual envy, and sloth (see p. 123 for definitions).

How long is a dark night likely to last? "It may be months. More probably, it may be a year or two... or more. Ultimately God chooses the length and level of intensity. He has a unique purpose for each of us, knowing how much there is to cleanse out of our inner being, and how much he wants to infuse of himself into us for his greater, long-term purposes. Our Father knows how much we can handle." Characteristics of live on the other side include a greater level of brokenness, a greater appreciation for holy unknowing mystery, a deeper ability to wait on God, and a greater detachment (to activities, behaviors, habits, things, and people) and greater attachment to God.

#### Surrender to (my) limits

Biblical grieving, such as in the story of Job, is God's path to new beginnings. Jonathon Edwards contended that Job's experience is our experience, over a lifetime. In order to follow Jobs brilliant example, we must pay attention to God and ourselves as we enter into our dark nights of the soul and treat our emotions as an issue of discipleship. We must also wait on God in the confusing, in-between times, resisting the quick solutions and tendencies of our western (and church) culture. We must embrace the gift of limits, evicting selfish demands and expectations from the center of our being. We are encouraged to climb the ladder of humility (see St. Benedict's Ladder of Humility, p. 150).

Stopping to breathe the air of humility - We are admonished to exercise the spiritual disciplines of a Daily Office (stopping, centering, silence, and Scripture) and Sabbath keeping (stop, rest, delight in, and contemplate).

Learning new skills to love well – practicing the presence of people with emotional maturity and true peacemaking

Loving Christ above all else – a "trellis" (rule of life) that helps us abide in Christ and become more spiritually fruitful. This can include multiple spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, Scripture, silence and solitude, Daily Office, study, Sabbath rest, simplicity, play & recreation, service, mission, care for our physical body, emotional health, family, and friends for the journey (in community).

#### Definitions

Emotional health: Expressing and managing our feelings, compassion for others, meaningful relationships, breaking self-destructive patterns, respecting others without having to change them, asking for our needs, wants, and preferences, capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the interests of others, appropriate sexuality and grieving well... live truth and acknowledge brokenness.

Contemplative spirituality: Surrender to God's love, practice His presence, communing with and being indwelt by His Spirit, practicing silence, solitude and unceasing prayer, a journey of transformation toward union with God, aware of the sacred, living in committed community, loving Christ above all else, slowing down, anchoring in God's love, breaking away from illusions, breaking free of false self, smashing idols, and eternal perspectives (in short, practicing spiritual disciplines)