



INTRODUCTION

One can begin one's [spiritual] quest by attending to the desires of the heart, both personal and communal. The Spirit is revealed in our genuine hopes for ourselves and for the world. How brightly burns the flame of desire for a love affair with God, other people, the world? Do we know that to desire and seek God is a choice that is always available to us?

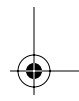
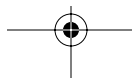
ELIZABETH DREYER

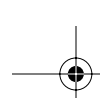


Years ago, I sat in a staff meeting at a church I was serving; the purpose of the meeting was to talk about how we could attract more people to join the church. At one point someone counted the requirements for church membership that were already in place and made the startling discovery that somewhere between five and nine time commitments *per week* were required of those who wanted to become church members!

Outwardly I tried to be supportive of the purpose for the meeting, but on the inside I was screaming, *Who would want to sign up for this?* I was already becoming aware of CFS (Christian fatigue syndrome) in my own life and couldn't imagine willingly inflicting it on someone else.

The clarity that dawned in this moment caused me to start being a little more honest about what my own Christian life had been reduced to. While I was trying harder and doing more, there was a yawning emptiness underneath it all that no amount of activity, Christian or otherwise,



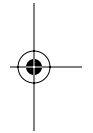


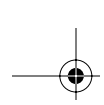
could fill. It made no difference at all that I had been a Christian all of my conscious life, that I had been in vocational Christian ministry since early adulthood or that I was busy responding to what appeared to be God-given opportunities to become involved in many worthy causes. The more I refused to acknowledge the longing for more, the deeper and wider the emptiness became—until it threatened to swallow me up. In the midst of such barrenness, it was hard to even imagine what Jesus might have meant when he said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). My responses to sermons and devotional reflections on this verse were cynical at best. The Christian life just didn’t feel that way to me.

It was hard to know where to go to talk about such uncomfortable realities. Life in and around the Christian community does little to help us attend to our longings, to believe that deep within there is something essential that needs to be listened to, or to offer much hope that our deepest longings could take us somewhere good. At times the deeper longings of our heart are dismissed as mere idealism—beyond the realm of possibility this side of heaven. At other times, subtle fear or outright discomfort arises in the face of such expressions of our humanity. The emphasis on human depravity in many religious circles makes it hard to know if there is anything in us that can be trusted.

Sometimes the language of longing is used to stir the emotions of a crowd, but most often what is offered in response is found wanting in the end. Our longing for love is met with relationships that are fairly utilitarian and prone to fall apart under pressure. Our longing for healing and transformation is met with self-help messages that leave us briefly inspired and yet burdened by the pressure of trying to fix ourselves with some new technique or skill. Our longing for a way of life that works is most often met with an invitation to more activity, which unfortunately plays right into our compulsions and the drivenness of Western culture.

My first response to this awareness of longing was to try tweaking my





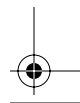
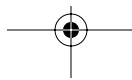
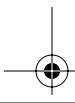
schedule, learning how to say no more decisively, adopting new time management tools. But there comes a time when desire is so deep that mere tweaking is not enough. Finally I just gave in to it all, making the choice to radically reorder my life to listen to the longings of my heart and arrange my life for spiritual seeking. This was a time of utter openness, of questioning almost everything, of letting many of the outward trappings of my life—particularly my spiritual life—fall away until the deepest longings, those that are embedded in the very essence of our humanity, began to be revealed in all of their raw beauty and power. The longing for significance, the longing for love, the longing for deep and fundamental change, the longing for a way of life that *works*, the longing to connect experientially and even viscerally with Someone beyond ourselves—these longings led me to search out spiritual practices and establish life rhythms that promised something more.

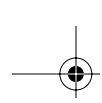


 OPENING TO THE MYSTERY OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Perhaps one of the most basic things we need to understand about spiritual transformation is that it is full of mystery. We can be open to it, but we can't accomplish it for ourselves. Paul alludes to this in his writings by using two metaphors. The first is the process by which an embryo is formed in its mother's womb: "I am in labor until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). The miracle of conception, the formation of the embryo and the birth process itself are natural but also full of mystery. Even though I have conceived and given birth to three children, even though I have marveled at photos of an embryo forming in its mother's womb, even though I think I understand the facts of life, something in the whole process remains a mystery to me, something I cannot control or make happen. The miracle of birth is always a miracle. It is a God thing. Every single time.

It is the same with the process of metamorphosis. Paul refers to this process in Romans 12:2 when he says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed [*metamorphōō*] by the renewing of your mind."





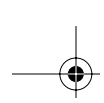
The Greek word *metamorphōō* is “metamorphosis” in English: the process by which a caterpillar enters into the darkness of the cocoon in order to emerge, eventually, changed almost beyond recognition. This change is so profound that the caterpillar transcends its previous existence to take on a completely different form with a completely different set of capacities. I doubt that the caterpillar has much cognitive understanding of the process itself or the end product. Something much more primal is at work. Something in the very essence of this little being says, *It is time*. And so the caterpillar obeys this inexplicable inner urging and enters in.

Both of these metaphors place the process of spiritual transformation squarely in the category that we call mystery: something outside the range of normal human activity and understanding that can be grasped only through divine revelation and brought about by divine activity.

What does this mean for those of us who are seeking to give ourselves more fully and concretely to the process of spiritual transformation? One thing it means is that whatever we think we might know about it, the decision to give ourselves to the *experience* of spiritual transformation brings us to the very edge of what we know and leaves us peering into the unknown. Even though it is normal for each and every redeemed person to experience spiritual transformation, something about it will always remain a mystery to us. It is one thing to be able to tweak and control external behaviors; it is another thing to experience those internal seismic shifts that change the way I exist in this world—from a worm crawling on my belly to a butterfly winging its way to the sky. *That* kind of change is something only God can do.

In the end, this is the most hopeful thing any of us can say about spiritual transformation: *I cannot transform myself*, or anyone else for that matter. What I can do is create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place, by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God.





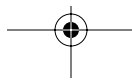
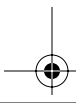
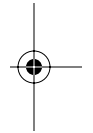
 A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

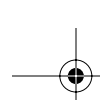
When we are in touch with our deepest longings (instead of being completely distracted by their surface manifestations), a whole different set of choices opens up. Rather than being motivated by guilt and obligation—as in “I really *ought* to have a quiet time” or “I really *should* pray more”—we are compelled to seek out ways of living that are congruent with our deepest desires. Sometimes this feels risky, and it often opens up a whole new set of questions, but this is fundamentally what spiritual transformation is all about: choosing a way of life that opens us to the presence of God in the places of our being where our truest desires and deepest longings stir. These discoveries are available to all of us as we become more honest in naming what isn’t working so that we can craft a way of life that is more congruent with our deepest desires.

The journey begins as we learn to pay attention to our desire in God’s presence, allowing our desire to become the impetus for deepening our spiritual journey. This is the substance of the first chapter, and it is not to be taken lightly or skimmed over as a precursor to the disciplines themselves. If we skip this part of the process, our work with the disciplines will be nothing more than another program entered into on the basis of external prodding or superficial motivators. Stay with this chapter for as long as it takes for you to land on something solid within yourself, to discover what it is that you really want. It is not until after we have settled into our desires and named them in God’s presence that we are ready to be guided into the spiritual practices that will open us to receive what our heart is longing for.

The movement from desire to discipline is important:

What shapes our actions is basically what shapes our desire. Desire makes us act and when we act what we do will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our personalities, minds and bodies—and to the strengthening or deterioration of



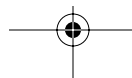


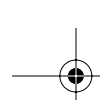
our relationship to God, others and the world. The habits and disciplines we use to shape our desire form the basis for a spirituality.

Each chapter that follows provides practical guidance for entering into the central disciplines of the Christian faith in such a way that they are linked to the most consistent and compelling desires of the human soul. At the end of every chapter is a practice section that offers you concrete guidance for experiencing each discipline so that you can begin to incorporate them into your everyday life. If you are one who can't help reading a book all the way through, go ahead and do that; however, the greatest benefit will come when you read back through it slowly and actually practice each discipline for as long as it takes for you to feel comfortable with it and experience it a natural expression of your intimacy with God.

This book is not, nor could one book ever be, an exhaustive treatment of all the spiritual disciplines spiritual seekers have used throughout human history. The disciplines explored here are simply the ones that are most basic and needful as a way to begin—like learning the basic steps of a dance or the basic melody of a song. After we explore these basic movements in our relationship with God, chapter nine offers the opportunity to begin putting them together in a patterned way so that we move beyond random, haphazard approaches to the spiritual life. In Christian tradition, this structured arrangement of spiritual practices is referred to as “a rule of life.” A rule of life is a way of ordering our life around the values, practices and relationships that keep us open and available to God for the work of spiritual transformation that only God can bring about. Simply put, a rule of life provides structure and space for our growing.

The phrase “spiritual rhythms” is another helpful way of talking about this important concept, because it provides relief from some of the heavy-handed and rigid approaches to the spiritual life that many have





experienced. This language draws on the imagery of the natural rhythms of the created order: The ebb and flow of the ocean waves and tides, which come and go steadily but are full of infinite variety and creativity. The predictability of the changing seasons but also the beauty and variance that captures us anew each and every time. The rhythm of a good beat, which makes music and dancing one of the most delightful and spontaneous experiences that we enjoy, yet mastery of the basic notes and moves is required if we are to enter into it fully.

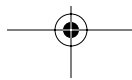
The disciplines themselves are basic components of the rhythm of intimacy with God that feed and nourish the soul, keeping us open and available for God's surprising initiatives in our lives. After we learn the disciplines, there is infinite creativity for putting them together in a rhythm that works for us and great freedom for adding other disciplines and creative elements.

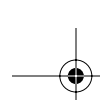
 AN INVITATION TO COMMUNITY

Although this book's emphasis is on personal spiritual disciplines, the spiritual journey was never meant to be taken alone. The whole of Scripture bears this out, but Jesus' life in particular offers us a compelling example. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, after praying and listening to God all night, he chose a small community of twelve disciples—"those whom he wanted," the Scriptures tell us. He chose them first "to be with him" (Mark 3:13-14)

The caterpillar must yield up the life it knows and submit to the mystery of interior transformation. It emerges from the process transfigured, with wings that give it freedom to fly. . . . A rule of life gives us a way to enter into the life-long process of personal transformation. Its disciplines help us to shed the familiar but constricting "old self" and allow our "new self" in Christ to be formed—the true self that is naturally attracted to the light of God.

MARJORIE THOMPSON,
SOULFEAST



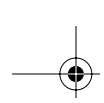


and then to do the work of ministry. Jesus' first invitation was for them to be together with him in community, shaped by his teaching and leadership, and he remained faithful to these relationships until the end of his life.

Our commitment to community and to spiritual friendship within that community is in itself a spiritual discipline that is of great significance to the spiritual life. Spiritual friendship is not primarily a social relationship that exists for the purpose of catching up over lunch or an occasional lunch or a golf outing. It is not primarily a collegial relationship focused on work matters or service projects. It is not a self-help relationship focused primarily on problem solving or accountability. It is not even primarily a Bible study group. Rather it is a relationship that is focused intentionally on our relationship with God as viewed through the lens of desire. With such a friend we share the deepest desires of our heart, so that we can support one another in arranging our lives in ways that are congruent with what our hearts want most. Together we reverence the ways God is meeting us in the context of the spiritual practices that help us to seek him.

Community is such a crucial element of the formation process that it will be addressed as a theme woven throughout the book. Furthermore, you are also invited to *experience* community by choosing a friend or two or even a small group with whom to take the journey, using the guidance provided in the "Journeying Together" appendix. This appendix will guide you in experiencing each discipline together and will also provide questions to help you debrief your experience. Thus the spiritual disciplines form the basis for your interactions with others in community, and your life in community becomes a safe place to practice the patterns and behaviors that bring about substantive change. If you have friends who seem to share a capacity and a desire to enter more deeply into the spiritual journey, invite them to join you so that none of you have to take the journey alone.





Introduction



There are moments in our lives when we cry out inwardly, *I don't care what anyone else says; there has to be more to the Christian life than this!* This book is for those moments in your life and mine. It is about hearing Jesus speak right into such moments with whispers of understanding and hope: "There are desires in you that are so deep and so true and so connected to the essence of who you are; those are the desires I want to meet—and not just partially, but abundantly."

May Jesus Christ himself meet us in the place of our spiritual seeking.

