

## Self-study Guide for Unconscious Spiritual Learning

This study guide was developed from Bruce A Stevens' book, *Before Belief: Discovering First Spiritual Awareness*, soon to be published by Rowman and Littlefield (late 2019). Professor Stevens (PhD Boston University, 1987) is an endorsed clinical psychologist, minister-in-association in the Uniting Church and has the Wicking Chair in Ageing and Practical Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra. This and other resources are freely available at [www.earlyspirituality.com](http://www.earlyspirituality.com) He gives permission to photocopy and use in church study groups.

### Week 1 Beginnings

How do we become all that we can be? The idea of unconscious spiritual learning is to return to the earliest influences of our spiritual formation. This is where we began. But it is not where we end. The in-between is where we are now and the challenge is to come to terms with all the hidden influences, discover what we learnt, evaluate and integrate, and then serve with 'a grateful heart'. This self-study guide is designed to help you to begin this process informed by early learning.

When do we first become aware? Some would say with our first breath or even in womb. We know from extensive developmental research that learning begins early – with first awareness. We should not confuse this early learning which is mostly unconscious with what we can remember, because first memories come later.

I will illustrate this with self-esteem and attachment.

#### (a) Self-esteem

How would you rate your self-esteem? Think of a number from low on a 10 point scale "I hate or even loathe myself" 1-2/10 to positive "I feel good about who I am" 8+/10.

Low self-esteem is a *felt sense* of having no value. Initially it is a belief without words. This is an example of unconscious learning – perhaps gained in the first years of life through deficits in nurture. Low self-esteem can be the result of emotional neglect, harsh speech, and rejecting behavior. This 'toxic cocktail' might have included chaotic caring. Then it makes emotional sense to feel worthless. Words follow the feeling, "I hate myself" or "I am bad."

Low self-esteem is clearly a psychological problem but one with spiritual implications. Feeling worthless may result in feelings of shame or guilt – wanting to hide from God. This may be all pervasive with a sense of being rejected by the Almighty, "I am going to hell." It is not hard to see that such early learning might 'color' all subsequent ideas about God. There may be attempts to compensate through overly scrupulous expectations and obsessive practices.

*Reflect:* Think about your self-esteem. How did you rate yourself? Can you identify reasons for why it might be low or high? Think back to the messages you got as a child.

#### (b) Attachment

There has been a lot of research on attachment patterns between very young children and parents or carers. The following patterns have been identified:

*A style is avoidant.* This child is comfortable being alone. He or she uses their resources to meet personal needs. The basic assumption might be: “Better to rely on yourself than to trust anyone.”

*B style is healthy.* There is enough relational stability to either depend on others or be autonomous. The adult is used as a ‘safe base’ to explore the environment.

*C style is ambivalent.* There is a strong need to attach to others, but he or she has little confidence in emotional self-regulation. A core belief could be: “You have to take care that people like you but you can never fully trust them!”

*D style is mixed (disorganized).* This is a confused style of attachment with little internal consistency. It is often present in survivors of childhood trauma and those who have suffered severe neglect. Mood and behavior may shift in unpredictable ways.

The attachment paradigm is a theory of early unconscious learning. The origins are early, before words are spoken. The patterns can be seen by 12 months old.

Equally it is possible to think of a believer’s relationship to God in terms of attachment styles.

*A style is avoidant.* Christians are commonly avoidant in terms of relating to God, “Let me get on with my life.” Of course, some will attend worship but not expect to relate to God.

*B style is healthy.* There is enough relational stability to connect with God and to use personal resources in a flexible way. This healthy attachment can take many forms, but each will be characterized by the confidence that, “I know God will be there for me if things go wrong.”

*C style is ambivalent.* This kind of attachment is spiritually unstable. He or she may have periods of great enthusiasm for the faith, but it does not last. Perhaps commitment to a church is erratic and may lead to disappointment followed by lasting bitterness. This person may say something like, “God is really important but is not really there for me when I most need help.”

*D style is mixed (disorganized).* This confused style of attachment plays out in the spiritual realm as well. There is no consistency in relating to God, attending church or carrying out a ministry. The believer’s inner spiritual world is chaotic.

*Reflect:* on your attachment to God. Do you identify with any of the patterns above? I encourage you to fill out the Attachment to God Questionnaire which was developed by Maureen Miner.<sup>1</sup>

Strongly Disagree

Mixed/Neutral

Strongly Agree

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

1. In times of difficulty I seek out God through prayer or bible reading.
2. I reach out to God in times of distress.
3. My confidence in God's closeness and responsiveness encourages me to call on Him.
4. In times of distress when I turn to God I find a sense of safety.
5. When I felt depressed I would turn to God for comfort and understanding.
6. It is God to whom I turn to for aid when distressed.
7. God encourages me to go on, climbing up the mountains on the journey of life.
8. During challenging times in the past I trusted that God would be with me.
9. Due to feeling God's closeness to me I took courage to confront life challenges.
10. I have cried out to God at times when He seems far away.
11. I persist in crying out to God when God seems distant in my troubles.
12. When it seems that God has left me, I lament with expectancy of His return.

Items 1-3: Proximity Seeking

Items 4-6: Safe Haven

Items 7-9: Secure Base

Items 10-12: Separation Protest.

The scoring is not as important as coming to some understanding of the nature of our attachment to God. This is one of the areas of early learning which has implications for your spiritual life.

**Select Five Photos** of yourself as a child. Do you remember when the photo was taken? Do you look happy? Who else is in the photos? Who is beside you? Do you feel close to anyone in the picture? This might indicate attachment. Can you find a picture of yourself in a spiritual setting such as being baptized?

**Recalling Parents:** What stories did you hear in your family about you as a baby? Were you easy or difficult? How would you describe your relationship with your mother and father? Did you feel comfortable with both of them? Were you free to explore in age appropriate ways? How did the nature of your relationship change as you grew up and reached adolescence?

Do a 'free write' for ten minutes on each parent.<sup>2</sup> Write for this period without stopping, or editing. Do not worry about repeating yourself. Try to include anything that your mother or

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<sup>1</sup> Cited Bruce A. Stevens and Maureen Minor, *Free to Love: Schema Therapy for Christians* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2017), 16-17

<sup>2</sup> This exercise was suggested by Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, 56.

father taught you about God (either positive or negative). After you done this exercise return to what you have written. Underline anything that you find surprising. Think about what it might mean.

### **Conclusion**

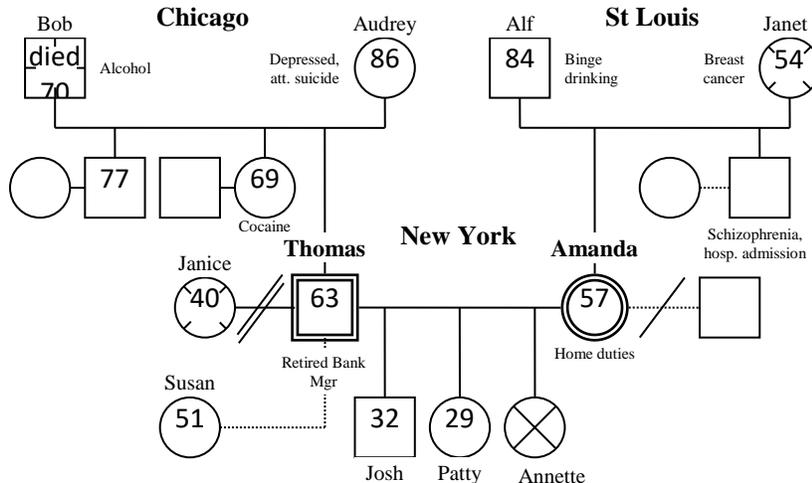
I have introduced the term unconscious spiritual learning. There is no exact term for what I am trying to address but early unconscious learning has been associated with terms such as the cognitive unconscious, tacit knowledge, implicit learning, emotional learning and *habitus*. You can google these terms and explore further. The focus of this study guide is more practical rather than theoretical.

### **To Read Further**

Tim Clinton and Joshua Straub, *God Attachment: Why you Believe, Act and Feel the Way you do about God* (New York: Howard Books, 2010). Easy to read, conservative theological perspective with valuable insights.

## Week 2 Intergenerational Family

The genogram was developed by Murray Bowen to be used in family therapy. The symbols create a kind of ‘family tree’ and the relationship lines indicate who ‘begat who’. This is an example of what a genogram looks like:



The genogram portrays three generations of Thomas’s family. He is married to Amanda with two adult children (the youngest Annette was still-born). There are some family problems which are indicated on the diagram.

The only way to learn the genogram is to do your own. Google genogram. There are lots of helpful sites. Some will offer software such as *GenoPro* to picture your family on a computer. Fill out the diagram and include members of your family on paper or on your computer. Include your parents, wider family and even more distant relatives. Look over the generations; can you identify any patterns? You might also identify cultural issues. Look for patterns of migration. Did people value tertiary education or perhaps learning a trade? You might see positive patterns such as older children looking out for younger siblings.

*Why are patterns important?* A pattern can be the result of common qualities of family members. This can be functional, such as taking responsibility, or negative with problem behavior such as misusing prescription drugs. In what way was culture embodied in the family? Were customs, distinct traditions, religious practices, views of history, or markers of ethnic identity present? How did the family celebrate? What were special days (birthdays, anniversaries, religious events)? How were values expressed? Was there an honored place for the aged? This provides a context for family life and it is formative.

*Reflect:* What expectations were placed on you about how you should live your life? Were you given a life script to follow? Did you feel you were appreciated as a person?

The family is our first context. Think about it as an ‘incubator’ of early learning. Family life includes ‘our first take’ on everything important: people, relationships, how to live responsibly, to love and be loved.

*Reflect:* Can you identify early messages you might have received as a child in your family. What was valued? What did you accept simply by being in your family? What did you later reject?

On a positive note: what strengths do you see? While there may be dysfunctional themes in family life, equally there can be great strengths evident in people. This leads to the many positive qualities that seem natural. For example, most people just cope. This comes from unconscious learning because most people can’t *say* exactly how this happens. Consider the following sentences:

- I am worthwhile.
- I am loved and valued by my family.
- I have something of value to contribute.
- My life has meaning.
- The people in my life are dependable.

These statements all reflect positive early learning. This is derived from positive experiences in the first years, even days, of life. The experience of being welcomed, loved and cared for. Just as it is natural for behavior to be triggered by negative hidden learning, it is equally natural to act in healthy ways when such knowing has been positive. And it feels natural and right.

**Track Spirituality in your Genogram:** Include anything relevant to religious faith. Who was baptized? Who attended church? Did anyone convert to a different religion? Or lose faith? How important was God to people in your family? Who are your models of spiritual maturity? Can you identify anyone with an unhealthy spirituality? What are the effects, both positive and negative, in what you believe or how you have lived? Can you identify religious messages ‘in the air’ of your family when you were young? These can be assumptions relating to your early spiritual formation.

## **Conclusion**

There are some obvious facts of family life, for example whether parents separated or remained together. There are other indicators of family cohesion or fragmentation. There is much to be ‘noticed’. As we think about the family in which we were raised, the obvious things are ‘center stage’ (parents, place, siblings, employment, health issues, etc.). Hopefully we will see some shared strengths along with negative traits among family members. But what is on front stage usually reflects ‘back stage’ dynamics such as expectations, family attitudes, religious beliefs and cultural biases. Look at what has been hidden such as addictions or abuse. All this can be investigated with the genogram, because family is a drama that plays out over the generations.

## **To Read Further**

Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985). Now dated but valuable insights.

Stern, Daniel. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). A psychoanalytic classic on early childhood development.

## Week 3 Childhood Revisited

What was your childhood like? How far back can you remember? Do you see visual images or feel sensations or perhaps recall smells?

Our first memory is usually significant. Mine was finger-painting in preschool or kindergarten. This might predict some creativity but sadly no artistic talent has emerged. A close friend Ann Harvey recalled,

I have such a clear memory of a magical moment in my childhood when in Jakarta, at age possibly 4 years, it started to rain. I was outside and from beyond my understanding water droplets fell from the sky. I ran around the yard like an airplane catching water droplets on my tongue shouting 'Hujan! Hujan!' my face upturned to the sky. It was a moment of pure joy and I am sure 'they [angels] were smiling down at me' from the clouds.

There has been research on first memories. They can predict the course of a life in surprising ways. An early memory of nurture might indicate a caring profession. But we can ask: "Why is such a memory 'chosen' to be so significant as to come out of the fog of early forgetting?" Try to recall your first memory and think about whether it has any special meaning.

It is also important to explore our early spiritual memories, especially in relation to our religious formation. How do we go back? We can simply recall what memories we have.

I don't remember much from my childhood years. My first spiritual memory was hearing the Christmas carol Silent Night. I was in a Christmas pageant in a darkened church sanctuary. It was in the USA so it must have been before I turned 10 years old. I felt a sense of belonging in this sacred context with both light and darkness. A later memory was for receiving a prize for attendance at Sunday School which was later after I came to Australia.

I recommend that you have a journal, perhaps a nicely bound book with blank pages. Record your first childhood memory. Think about it and why it might be significant for you. Why do you think you remembered it? In some way did it predict a trajectory of your life? Use your journal for the exercises in this self-study guide.

*Caution:* Is your earliest memory of a traumatic event? This is also likely to be significant but you may need to talk to someone about it. If you continue to be distressed talk to a spiritual leader, a professional counsellor or your medical practitioner.

**When Early Experience is Mixed:** It is not possible to assume a favorable nurturing environment. Not all children are fortunate, indeed early learning can be largely negative. Think of a child raised by a single drug dependent parent. Neglect is likely in some family settings. In terms of the senses:

- (a) *Sight.* An infant can be exposed to visual images including violence in the home or to inappropriate sexual activity.

- (b) *Touch*. There can be a lack of nurturing touch. Touch can also be abusive with ‘shaken baby’ or being subject to hitting. Neglect might lead bodily sensations including chronic hunger.
- (c) *Hearing*. This might include sudden and unexpected noises leading to a startle response and feeling insecure.
- (d) *Smell*. There might be smells associated with ingrained dirt and rotting food.
- (e) *Taste* can be aversive. Food may be inappropriate for the developmental stage of the child, for example giving soft-drinks instead of milk. Bottled milk might be given too hot and scald the mouth of an infant.

The impact of neglect or abuse is potentially catastrophic on infants and later children. Are any of these senses been the source of traumatic memories for you? Perhaps list some of the experiences. At this point talk to someone you respect, a pastor or pastoral counsellor, and think about ways you might come to terms with such memories. Eventually think about any possible distortions in your view of God that have occurred through such negative experiences.

Some other exercises that may be useful:

**Time Line:** Draw a time line of your life. Divide it up into 7-year segments and put the initials of anyone you trusted in that period.<sup>3</sup>

**Doorway:** Do you remember a room from your childhood? Stand at the door and visualize everything you can that belonged in that room.<sup>4</sup> What experiences did you have there? I remember the living room of the house I grew up in. There was a heater in the wall from which I sought warmth when I got up in the morning. My father had trouble sleeping and we would often chat. This is a nice memory. I recall feeling connected to him.

**Memory Box:** What objects would you place in your memory box from childhood? If you still have access to such objects? Can hold them in your hands? Talk to your children or friends about the significance of each.

**Early Needs Exercise:** Make three columns on a page. In the column on the left side list *age 1*, *age 2* etc. Then in the middle column, alongside each age, make a list of childhood needs (at that age). For example, *age 1* might include food, shelter, protection, affection, touch, stimulation, etc. Continue this until age 12. Notice how your needs both change and remain the same. In the last column think of a spiritual equivalent, for example some kind of spiritual protection. Reflect on this in your journal, considering both human and spiritual needs in a developmental perspective. Where both met for you as a child? One more than the other? How do you think this affected you?

**Recall:** Think back to childhood and recall how God was named in your family? Who talked about God? In what terms? Could this have shaped your early understanding of God?

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<sup>3</sup> Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 134.

<sup>4</sup> Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, 37.

## Conclusion

Early childhood is a time of foundations. This will include the following:

- (a) *Belonging*: This is an emotional response including what Erikson called “basic trust” when people respond to an infant’s needs. Attachment theory conceptualizes this in terms of the four attachment patterns. Ideally this can result in a sense of being at home in the cosmos and feeling at ease in relating to God.
- (b) *Agency*: The infant’s earliest perceptions include people and how they act. The interpersonal network includes the self. Self-agency projects to a macro-level with a sense of a transcendent agency in God who can be talked to and ‘answers prayer’.
- (c) *Difference*: This early awareness distinguishes between this and that, big and small, mother and father, perhaps siblings and eventually develops into areas of spiritual discernment such as sacred and profane.

## To Read Further

Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1963). Classic developmental text which is still influential.

Helen Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP). Practical and useful. Highly recommended for developing your spirituality.

## Week 4 The Senses

The five senses Aristotle identified are: sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste. These senses provide our contact points with reality. Life is experienced.

This is an 'equation' in which experience comes first. Not words, but words are helpful to reflect on direct experience: "That smells like a rose", "It tastes like my mother's apple pie", "I can feel soft fur, like a kitten." Language enables us to think and communicate but its role is secondary.

The Bible records the divine human encounter in terms of the senses. The assumption is that all are involved: "hear the word of the Lord" (Isa 1:10), promising that "the pure in heart ... they will see God" (Matt 5:8); "O, taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps 34:8); the faithful "spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him" (2 Cor 2:14). Indeed, the original witnesses to the resurrection testified that "we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our own hands, concerning the word of life" (I John 1:1). Perhaps we can appreciate how seriously God takes the material world (Col 2: 9).

The Bible and in the Christian tradition portray a faith that is experienced. Over the years people have received visions, revelations, spiritual insight and other communications from the divine realm, but the focus has been more on the content than analyzing the cognitive means of 'getting the message'.

Augustine, for example, in his *Confessions*, "I have learnt to love you late, Beauty [God] at once so ancient and so new! ... You called me, you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odor. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace."

**Senses Exercise:** Imagine that you have arrived at your holiday destination. It is a beach resort. What is your first reaction? (a) To enjoy the feel of the sand under your feet? Or the warmth of the sun? Of the sense of the cool sea breeze on your face? (b) Do you hear the waves breaking? Or notice the sound of sea gulls or the rustling of leaves in the wind? (c) Do you enjoy the view of the beach, the blue sea and the movement of people? (d) Are you drawn to the smell of the sea or the flowers and trees around? (e) Or do you look for exotic dining with new dishes to try out? What is the first thing you notice at the resort?<sup>5</sup>

When you do this exercise it will give you an indication of your preferred sense. Which comes second? This is important information about the potential pathways of your early learning.

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<sup>5</sup> This has been adapted from the following: [excellenceassured.com/nlp-training/nlp-preferred-representational-systems-test](http://excellenceassured.com/nlp-training/nlp-preferred-representational-systems-test)

**First Memory of an Experience of God or a Sacred Place:** What do you notice about this memory? Do you see a God representation or a sacred image such as a stained-glass window? Do you visualize a place? Hear music or another sound such as drums? Smell cooking or incense? Taste the sacrament or food associated with religious people gathering. Do you feel a handshake or a hug? Or do you experience this memory through more than a single sense? What might this suggest about your preferred way to experience God?

**Dialogue Exercise:** We can listen to God in prayer. Many Christians have a sense that God communicates in this way. There are also creative techniques to encourage listening. I like the dialogue method of journaling. For example, Robert thought of himself as a five-year-old sitting by a stream in a forest. Jesus came and sat beside him. The dialogue went like this:

Jesus: How are you doing?

Robert: I like this place but I feel lonely. I don't have a brother or sister to play with.

Jesus: That is sad.

Robert: But I have you at the moment. It is nice to play games with a grown-up because mum and dad are too busy these days.

Jesus: What would you like to play?

Robert: Catching a baseball.

Jesus: That would be fun. Let's do it now.

Robert then thought about what he had learnt as a young child but had since forgotten, "Then I knew it was possible to relate to Jesus or God in a natural child-like way. To play. I have since added so much to make any relationship with God which feels artificial and well, hard. I know what I have to get back to." He understood how his body was overloaded with stress and he had lost that ability to relax and play.

*Also:* You can do this by placing yourself, imaginatively, in a church or sacred setting. Write a dialogue with your child-self, perhaps asking such things as:

- Are you happy?
- Who would you would like to be with you?
- Anything you like doing in church?
- What have you learnt about God?
- What might you have learnt about spiritual reality that I, as an adult, have since forgotten?

Life is learnt by answering questions such as: Do I belong? Am I loved? Is this a safe place? Do I feel secure? What interests me? This is a smorgasbord of early learning laying a foundation for life. Each also provides the building blocks for a sense of God. Think about the messages in early life. What do you still hear in your head? Make a list.

**Conclusion**

Recently I saw the beautiful The Lady and the Unicorn Tapestries from the Musée de Cluny (which was on exhibition in Australia). These glorious works illustrate the five senses and allow for a sixth sense, or an overall focus, labelled Mon Seul Désir (my sole desire). It was for me the exhibition was a wonderful ‘fore taste’ of what I anticipate as a beatific vision – the eschatological hope of the believer in Christ (Rev 1: 12-16).

### **To Read Further**

Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley Eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Academic book and very comprehensive.

R. S. Pine-Coffin, trans., *St Augustine Confessions* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961). One of the greatest books of psychological and spiritual insight.

## Week 5 Individual Senses

There is considerable diversity in how believers relate to God. This is, of course, influenced by early spiritual learning. It will be helpful to explore this more fully through the senses. First visual.

**Candle Meditation:** Light a candle. See the dance of the flame. Notice the light it gives off and the shadows created. What was the source of light in your childhood? Where were the shadows? Where did you hide? You might try the steps of *visio divina*:

- (a) Quieten your inner noise, put yourself in the presence of God.
- (b) Look at the candle with God's eyes and if possible register his delight.
- (c) Notice what stirs within you. What responses, memories and feelings? Does it connect with your life?
- (d) Respond to God from what you are feeling. How would you incorporate it into a prayer?

**Listen:** Listen to a CD of sacred music. Think about the place of music had in your childhood. Was it important? Or just part of background noise? Did you learn an instrument and did this help you to better appreciate music? Do you feel that God speaks to you through music?

Think about what you like best about your favorite style of music. I love the majesty of classical music, say Beethoven's 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony Eroica, when the musical clashes eventually resolve. Or jazz with the freedom of improvisation. Or country and western with unforgettable melodies.

**Body:** Where do you sense God in your body? John Wesley described his conversion as 'I felt my heart strangely warmed'. It might be in your head (hearing his voice), stomach or even all over. Does this say something about your preferred spiritual sense?

*To do in relation to movement:* Walk a labyrinth as a meditative experience. This is like a maze but there is only one path to the center and out. Labyrinths are often found at retreat centers. People find it helpful to walk in a meditative way. Feel the sense of movement, your feet and motion towards God. Think of the journey inward as towards God or Christ, then finding in the center and then walking out as movement towards re-engaging with the world. There is a labyrinth where I work at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. Google for directions to a local one.

**Smell:** You might try burning a stick of incense. Incense was used in the worship of the Old Testament (Psalm 141:2). Perfumed oil was cited in the New Testament (for example with the washing of the feet of Jesus by the sinful woman, his head by Mary of Bethany and he was anointed in his burial). While this is natural in some church circles it is unusual for others. After you light the incense mindfully focus on this smell. What associations do you have? What memories come back? How does it feel? Allow your mind to drift to other smells, perhaps from childhood, such as perfume, a walk in a forest after it has rained, the salt of the sea as you walk along a beach.

**Taste:** A mindfulness exercise. Get a single raisin and take about five minutes for this exercise: look at the raisin, the wrinkles and how the light plays on it. Feel the weight of it in your hand. Lift it to you nose, can you smell it? Then bite into half the raisin and focus on the taste in your mouth. See how it fills your mouth with a distinctive taste. Slowly chew it and notice the grittiness. How you respond with saliva. And when you are finished with the first bite, put the rest of the raisin in your mouth. Try to chew it even more slowly and notice the flavors.

We have explored the five senses. These are important for both psychological and spiritual development. Have you identified your primary sense? This will tend to be what you rely on? Maybe you have a secondary sense? It makes sense that this will apply equally to the spiritual realm. Have you noticed whether this is your preferred sense for communicating with God? Perhaps with this recognition we can relate more naturally to God and not ‘try ill-fitting clothes’ for our spiritual life.

My primary way of experiencing God is visual with an appreciation of beauty. I am fortunate to live near the Australian National Gallery with a great collection of abstract expressionist art. Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* is in the collection with its intricate patterns of drip painting. Pollack echoes the creativity of God.

It is only natural to have a preferred sense for God. The popular author Gary Chapman suggested *Five Love Languages*. These do not directly parallel the five senses but include receiving gifts, spending quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service and physical touch. Chapman’s notes that we feel loved in different ways. This relates to our style of communication which has a potential application to how we feel most comfortable relating to God.

*Reflect:* What do you consider your primary sense with God? Which exercises did you find most useful? Can you build on this in a creative way? For example, Manuel saw that touch was very important to him. He had a weekly massage and decided that he would visualize God touching him at this time, “After all Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.” (John 13: 3-10)

## **Conclusion**

We have explored early learning through the five senses. The task now shifts to trying to discover a message. This is the content of unconscious spiritual learning, which can be expressed in language. This provides new opportunities, “Aha, that is what I have learnt.” Content can be tested and challenged with a different perspective, which may come through understanding the experience and its unformulated message.

Sathianathan Clarke, Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary Washington DC, told of his childhood growing up with his father a bishop in the Church of South India. He was loved as a child, unconditionally and felt an inherent sense of goodness about himself. This was in contrast to the message of his church that everyone is fallen and a sinner before God. He said, “My consistent childhood experience came in conflict with the theological narrative of the church, which was also preached by my father, an Evangelical preacher.” He came to realize that his first understanding was positive and only later was the message of the church a secondary generally negative

overlay giving a different view of who he was. It was important for Sathi to sort out the conflicting messages.

Generally, it is a similar challenge for all of us - to retain the positive or to counterbalance the negative. It is to this we now turn...

### **To Read Further**

Calhoun, Adele A. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. Revised. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2015. This has many useful exercises, some of which have been used in this guide.

Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to your Mate*, (Chicago, Ill.: Northfield Publishing, 1995).

## Week 6 Unconscious Learning

Experience results in language. Usually. This is a familiar process. I see a dramatic sunset. My reaction is “Wow!” Step 1: Experience, Step 2: Language. This happens via the five pathways of the senses, “It smells awful”, “That is a bitter taste”, or “I feel shivers down my back.” None are initially verbal with the exception of hearing words.

I have underlined the importance of the five senses. These provide clues as to what was experienced, processed and potentially learnt. For example, a distinct smell might be a starting point. The original experience is revived and then expressed in language which leads to a variety of options. Once a discovery can be articulated, it can be tested and disputed if necessary. Language matters but in a more intermediate way.

Sandra remembered church potluck dinners. Her family was not well-off, and others would bring ice-cream, “That was the only time I would get to be like other kids and enjoy ice-cream. I felt like I belonged in a big family, the church, and that God welcomed me there. I have always believed and church is an important part of my life.”

Our original learning is on a range of unconscious to conscious. If it was largely unconscious then the discovery of spiritual learning may be surprising. Not always but generally an ‘aha’ or what feels surprising. It can be so strong that it is like being ‘ambushed’. Gradually it dawns on us that this early learning wants to speak. There is a message to be heard. We only have to provide the opportunity. This can be done through the technique of sentence completion. This tool is very helpful.

**Sentence completion** is one of the most effective ways to discover inarticulate learning. Ecker wrote about naming into awareness. Sentence completion is illustrated in the following:

Barbara wondered why she felt so unworthy when she received the eucharist in her Roman Catholic church. She talked to the priest in a counselling session. He suggested, “Try this. Complete the sentence I am bad because... Think about this and we can talk tomorrow.” Barbara was surprised by the answer, “I am bad because I have freckles.” She recalled her experience of being teased and shamed as a child because she had red hair and freckles. She judged herself as not just different but ugly and wanting to hide. At the core of herself she concluded she was bad. This is an example of dysfunctional learning which impacted her sense of worthiness before God – which attending worship brought back to her.

*To do:* You might use the following stem: The most important thing I learnt as a child was ...

I tried this sentence completion and was surprised by my ending, “It is hard to be noticed.” I recalled that my parents were emotionally entangled. While my basic needs were met, there was not a lot of ‘noticing’ of me. This message explained my narcissistic quest [to be noticed]. I can now see that was the basis of my implicit learning which shaped my adult life. It is something I now accept as a ‘mixed blessing’ since it has driven me to some success which I now enjoy.

*Reflect:* You might like to try any of the following sentence completions:

- As a child I learned that I must ...
- I always accepted that I have to ... with people I love.
- If I do something different then the result will be ...
- What I never question about myself is ...

Try writing out 4-5 different endings. Then look over the list. Do any feel emotionally charged? This is a signal that your response is likely to contain hidden learning. Then refine the sentence until every word feels 100% right.

If nothing comes, then shift to another sensory pathway. For example, a visual image or a sound or a sense of touch may come. Stay with that sensation and see where it leads you. Then try to express what you feel in words.

When you have a statement that feels absolutely true, write it on a card and look at it once a day. Do nothing else in relation to the sentence for a week, maybe two weeks. You might find that you are starting to question what you have written. Does another perspective arise? Do you start to question what you initially felt so certain about? You are in a process to challenge the hidden learning.

Also attempt this with early choices you might have made:

- My most important decision as a child was to ...
- One commitment I never question is ...
- I have always known that I must ...

When you first try the sentence completion exercise, you may encounter a wall of resistance. This is a good indication that something is present outside your awareness. It is like you are in a boat and hit something in the water, unseen, that blocks your way. It is time to acknowledge and explore that. Resistance to completing a sentence is *significant* because it will be based on prior learning. Persist. 'Trial and error' is fine, since this allows for a process of discovery.

*Try:* What is blocking me is ... Persist.

## **Conclusion**

We usually express what we know in language. But this is not always a straightforward process. Early learning tends to be preverbal. We can recognize a transition from early experience to language. This week we have looked at the challenge to back-track and use various techniques to regain early learning, such as sentence completion.

## **To Read Further**

Bruce Ecker and Laurel Hulley, *Depth Oriented Brief Therapy: How to be Brief When You Were Trained to be Deep and Vice Versa* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996). Ecker developed Coherence Therapy which has a number of ways to explore what he calls emotional learning.

Bruce Ecker, Robin Ticic and Laurel Hulley, *Unlocking the Emotional Brain: Eliminating Symptoms at their Roots Using Memory Reconsolidation* (New York: Routledge, 2013). An important book which updates Coherence Therapy in line with neuroscience discoveries.

## Week 7 Turning Unconscious Spiritual Learning into Language

Sometimes we lose the childlike quality of being curious. This is a wonderful guide that can lead us deeper into the spiritual realm. It is spacious, not constricting as answers can be. What was natural to you as a child? Do activities such as play now seem artificial? What does it feel like to not know? Perhaps begin with a prayer: “Lord, rekindle my curiosity for the journey ahead. I do not need all the answers just yet.”

*Reflect:* What Questions did you have a Child? Visualize your younger self. What age did you choose? What puzzled you then? What engaged your curiosity? From whom did you seek guidance? What did you do with the answers? Hopefully the answers lead to even more questions.

**Exiles:** Most people have aspects of themselves that are exiled, banished and disavowed. This can include almost anything: a feeling, an emotion, a memory or two, an activity, a place or a person, an insight or a dream. Can you give this a voice? Think on what you recognize.<sup>6</sup>

All that has been said about unconscious learning applies equally to early spiritual experience. We have experiences which are potentially formative, sometimes they remain largely unconscious and not put into words, but shape our behavior.

When Gary was in high school he lost his best friend in a hunting accident. He accidentally discharged a loaded gun while crossing a fence. Gary more or less buried the memory and froze his grief. Then he stopped attending the youth group at church. Decades later he was able to put it into words, “I was mad at God. Why did God fail to protect my friend? He had done nothing wrong!”

You might question Gary’s conclusion. Or you might agree based on experiences you have had. It seems that we often form beliefs which are not put into words. Or are carefully considered. The first step is to revisit the original largely unconscious assumptions.

**Sentence Completion:** Now we will explore unconscious spiritual learning. We can use sentence stems for this as well:

- God is ...
- The most important thing I learnt about God is ...
- If I am in the presence of God, I must ...
- If I change a religious belief the result will be ...
- What I never question spiritually is ...

Be playful with this. I know such learning is ‘serious’ but insights cannot be forced. Once you have an insight about your hidden learning, whether spiritual or not, reflect on how valid it is for you now. This introduces the challenge of testing our early learning which is the focus of the next chapter, but first some other exercises to try.

When I did the sentence stem God is ... my answer was “over there” that is, not “here”. Again, this reflects some distance in my relationship with God (of course, one of my making). I hold this

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<sup>6</sup> Cepero, *Journaling*, 111.

in tension with my certainty that God is somewhere. Hence: What I never question spiritually is the existence of God.

**Vantage Point:** There is an old saying “Nature abhors a vacuum.” Vantage point creates the vacuum through the absence of something, which may make the reason for it being present more obvious!

This technique was designed in Bruce Ecker’s Coherence Therapy as a way of getting behind a psychological symptom. This will help you to step outside your current mental landscape. Were you, for example, distressed as a child about having to do something religious?

Bettina thought about attending what she experienced as long church services. She felt bored. She imagined herself without her childhood boredom and began to sense an awe in the sacred place. She also noticed that she felt a sense of freedom from her parents’ strict expectations that she be still and silent. She could relax in the presence of God. She thought about her early learning and concluded that being in the presence of God she was only welcome as the “well behaved me” which was constricted and not herself.

This can be done with anything that impinged upon you as a child. To imagine its absence opens up a space to appreciate any negative or positive aspects of such experiences.

These exercises explore sight in unconscious spiritual learning. Reflect on those exercises you have done. Consider any insights or consequences for your spiritual understanding.

### **Conclusion**

In this week’s exercises we have explored a number of ways to discover early spiritual learning. This includes sentence completion and vantage point. But develop what works for you.

### **To Read Further**

Bruce R. Parmenter, *Neo-coherence Therapy* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2013). The author applies Coherence Therapy to a conservative version of the Christian faith, interesting but will not appeal to all readers.

Casey Tygrett, *Becoming Curious: A Spiritual Practice of Asking Questions* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books). Nicely exploratory.

## Week 8 Testing and Evaluation

Now we pause. Reassess. I am assuming that you have engaged in many of the exercises, and you have become more aware of your early spiritual learning. You may have welcomed this new understanding. Alternatively, the realization of what you have long accepted as a ‘spiritual truth’ might alarm you. Early learning can be true or false, adaptive or dysfunctional, healthy or destructive in terms of your spiritual wellbeing. There are no guarantees that such foundational messages, no matter how authoritative, are right for you today. Therefore, it is necessary to test spiritual learning once it becomes conscious.

First, a natural question, “Why not simply accept what we ‘know’?” One difficulty is the early origins of hidden learning. The process begins with birth or before, prior to any cognitive capacity for evaluation. Everything is accepted. It is natural to believe parents and authority figures. But this can result in ill-informed assumptions about ‘the way things are’ about life and ultimately God.

In my book *The Storied Self* I wrote about testing the stories that make up our identity. The same criteria can be applied to early beliefs. It is not wise to uncritically accept hidden learning on ‘face value’. This legacy will need to be evaluated. First use reason. Our society values critical thinking and we are taught to evaluate truth claims in philosophy, to understand mathematical principles in engineering and to test hypotheses through empirical experiments. Rightly, we respect rigorous thinking. Truth is too important to be sloppy in our approach to it. This is the most natural place to begin a process of testing.

Unconscious learning is often a statement about reality. Consequently, it should be tested like any other ‘truth claim’. There are relevant skills from philosophy which include recognizing premises and conclusions, premises which are valid, clear and precise line of argument, building on substance not tone, and consistency in terms. These are the elements of a more persuasive line of argument. While unconscious learning rarely has the appearance of ‘water-tight’ logic, it can help to initially ask, “Is this statement reasonable?” While this is a good start it is not always sufficient. Other tests are necessary.

The relational test has a role to play. Once hidden learning has been discovered, we might ask if holding such a belief will impact our relationships? Believing that, what are the relational implications? Also consider including the-relationship-to-self in the relational test, “If I believe this ... is it good for my self-care?” There is a common unconscious learning with people who have achieved a lot: success is worth any cost to myself or my family. The job, or in Christian circles the ministry, is more important than health, well-being, spouse, family, and emotional overload or stress. This has been a strong influence in my life story – for both good and bad. I think it relates to my need to be noticed.

We have no universally accepted way to determine what might be true, especially in relation to intangible realities such as moral and ethical principles, meaning, and claims about God. Theologian Mark McIntosh makes some suggestions. While his approach is sophisticated, it will only appeal to Christian believers. I reluctantly accept that it is impossible to ultimately

determine whether a religious belief is right or wrong. Knowing is elusive. But perhaps we can think about whether a belief is psychologically healthy. I would add this as a potential religious test.

**Messages:** What messages do you think you took from your childhood about God? This might include your earliest understanding of church or religious people. Can you list five ‘truths’ which can be either positive or negative (do not evaluate at the moment, just make a list).

The early messages for me are:

1. There is probably a God. No one in my family was very certain.
2. God, if present, is a benevolent presence, but more on the margins of family life and rarely acknowledged.
3. There is no sense of judgment or accountability in relation to God.
4. We might go as a family to church but only if it is convenient. It was not a habit.
5. We are Presbyterian. That is our religious identity.

**Hidden Learning:** Look over what you discovered in earlier weeks. List some of your assumptions or beliefs that emerged. What are some of the most important things you have ‘just taken for granted’? Make sure you include at least two from hidden spiritual learning as well.

Now identify some statements that you might like to question.

**List five things** you no longer believe. Also list five things you now know to be true.<sup>7</sup> How did you come to these beliefs?

**Your Creed:** Can you write out a personal creed? This might take the form of the Apostle’s Creed, I believe in ... Or it can be in a format with which you feel comfortable. One of the points of my creed would be “I believe in a personal God who enters into a relationship with believers”, and I could go on. Try this exercise.

Now can evaluate every statement in your *credo*? Would you think in terms of how such a belief aligns with the teaching of your church? The Bible? What you see Christians either believing or putting such a belief into practice? You might draw a ‘star’ alongside each belief which indicates a separate source of support.

**Values Clarification:** Google a value list. Tick the ones listed that apply to you. But a more challenging exercise is to choose the ten most important, then rank them in order of importance. It is up to you to determine which values are most important to you. It will take some careful thought. Stephen Hayes has the Personal Values Questionnaire at [www.contextualpsychology.org](http://www.contextualpsychology.org)

## Conclusion

Once discovered it is important to test early learning. This can be done by reason, comparing to life experience, noticing the relation to self and others. These same tests can be applied to spiritual learning. To this we can add the psychological criterion of whether a belief is healthy.

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<sup>7</sup> This exercise was suggested by Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, 58.

**To Read Further:**

Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004). Sophisticated but it is likely to only appeal to Christians.

Stevens, Bruce A. *The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged*. Lanham, Maryland: Fortress Academic, 2018. This has a discussion of the various tests to evaluate unconscious learning.

## Week 9 Integration

Discovery and testing provide the *building blocks* but not the *building*. This must be constructed. Potentially integration not easy. Alister MacIntyre observed current philosophies tend to divide everything into bits, atomizing reality for closer inspection. What counts is abstraction. Raw data is taken from general experience and formatted in universal principles. This leads to a non-temporal coherence which has become foundational to the sciences. The other trend is what might be called contraction of attention to isolated sensations, feelings, the flash of the moment. The search is for the concrete and irreducible. While integration is against the current of our times, it remains important to move in this direction.

Emotional integration may well be even more challenging. Years have been lived. Some of us have had experiences of trauma; most will know the ‘rough edges’ of life. It is all too common to have experiences but not make connections. Who is willing to go deep and to face the challenge of integration?

Sally was devastated after the death of her husband. She said with tears, “He was the center of my life. I can’t imagine going on without him. I think I am in shock.”

Sally faced a great loss. Over forty years were shared with her husband, a companion for almost all of her adult life, but now she is left with a sense of emptiness. Such experiences can remain isolated or connected. Sally was challenged to accept her emotional pain in order to make it a part of her. Consider the progress Sally made:

- (a) *Negative emotional experiences are accepted.* Sally had to accept the death of her husband and acknowledge that the rest of her life would be without him. She needed to talk through some terrible experiences as his health deteriorated, when one medical treatment after another failed.
- (b) *The refusal of the old illusions.* Sally was eventually able to accept that he was not always the best husband. His perfection was an illusion. He gave his first priority to his work, tended to abuse alcohol and had a brief affair with her best friend.
- (c) *A new life script guides a fuller way of life.* Sally came to value her new independence and found deep satisfaction in making some new friendships.

There are two important and necessary steps for integration to occur: something must come to mind, be accepted and find a place in life. Only then is integration possible.

**Acceptance** The challenge of integration brings acceptance to ‘center stage’. We can accept all aspects of life as meaningful and belonging to who we are. This includes our shadow self – containing that about which we feel guilty or ashamed. Traditionally the Christian faith encouraged us to consider ourselves sinners in need of grace. This makes a lot of sense to me. It describes who I see myself to be and, gladly, my experience of God.

Spiritual experiences can become markers on our journey. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich described a response to God in six stages: recognition of God, life of discipleship, productive life, journey inward (including ‘hitting the wall’), journey outward, and life of love. It is not a fixed progression because believers can stall, move to and from, in and out of the stages, but this model is a useful description of progress in faith. I found the expression ‘hitting the wall’ resonated with my experience. This is easy to look back on crises which lead to a different understanding of our relationship with God. It is also helpful that the authors tell of their difficulties incorporating it into a larger story of responding to God.

Choose a few of the following exercises:

**If your Life Played like a Movie,** what would be the genre? A comedy, adventure drama, romance, or a tragedy?

**A Paragraph:** Write a one paragraph account of your life (max 200 words). Now reduce it to one sentence (max 25 words!).

Here is mine: “I have received the gift of life; now is my opportunity to make a difference.” (19 December 2017) But it will probably be a different sentence tomorrow!

**Pictures:** Get a stack of popular magazines (usually stored somewhere at home) and tell your story in cut-out-pictures.

**What’s in your Pocket?** Empty your pockets. Open your wallet or purse or briefcase. Select five objects that represent you. Tell a friend or someone close to you about yourself using these objects.

**Lost parts of the self:** Imagine that you are standing in front of a door. Behind the door is a lost part of yourself, something that which was once consciously part of you but has been lost. Acknowledge that part, name it and begin a journal conversation with it. Invite the part (or parts) into a conversation about who you were, are and can be with assistance.<sup>8</sup> As a suggestion try this with your lost innocence.

**Life Compass:** This is an extended exercise. You might like to take a day off or do a retreat to complete this exercise.<sup>9</sup> Get a large piece of paper and draw a large circle on the page. Now a smaller circle in the center. Divide the larger circle into four quadrants (like an X but leave the center circle blank). (a) The south quadrant represents your creativity, imagination and play. What would you include here? (b) The east quadrant the direction of the dawn. What is coming into your life? What is on the horizon? What needs change or transformation? (c) The west is for sunset, so what is ending in your life? What do you need to let go of? What attitudes need to die? Where is deep healing needed? (d) The north is your sense of direction. Who has guided you and provided the love that has sustained you? (e) What would you place in the center of your life? God? Your values? Or what? Think about how this forms your life compass.

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<sup>8</sup> Cepero, *Journaling*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Suggested by Cepero, *Journaling*, 92-102.

**Regrets:** Make a list of your regrets. Everyone has some. Can you look at what you have listed, with the benefit of time passing and ‘reframe’ them? Can you see what happened in a different light such as “Yes, I failed but I did my best and that was all that possible at the time.” Can you give a new interpretation – one that is self-compassionate and kind to yourself. This will help it to be accepted and integrated into your life story. You might want to google self-compassion. There is a self-compassion scale by Kristin Neff <https://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/>

*Reflect:* Think about your legacy of unconscious spiritual learning. How does what you have found integrate with what you already know about yourself? Such learning may have been gained at a very young age, never evaluated and now might be isolated from what you know as an adult. A process of thoughtful integration may be enormously helpful and unblock the path to a deeper spiritual life.

### **Conclusion**

Integration does not happen naturally. Intellectually integration is not easy in a culture that fragments knowledge and encourages abstract principles. Additionally, there is an emotional challenge to integration. Usually it is hard work. This is a process that brings profound change as we come to terms with unwelcome events and devastating disappointments. Hagberg and Guelich offered a six-stage model of the spiritual journey.

### **To Read Further:**

Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). An influential book in theological circles.

Janet O. Hagberg, and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, Wisconsin: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005). Easy to read with important spiritual implications.

## Week 10 Committed Living

The last of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous reads in part, “Until and unless you give your life away to others, you do not seem to have it yourself at any deep level.” What do we do with breakthroughs in spiritual understanding? Hopefully new insights will lead to greater freedom and a desire to help others. Spiritual maturity is never attained by living for oneself – no matter how aware, integrated or fulfilled we might become. Enlightenment can put the ego back in the ‘driving seat’. The goal is not a ‘self-realized’ narcissism; it is meaningful action.

Of the many possibilities in life, which do we choose to express commitment? Spiritual guidance may help. It is best to think about this in terms of our various religious and spiritual traditions. I gained a lot from spiritual direction. I sought a director with a hope of deepening my spiritual life. This led me to Sister Lorraine, a wonderful Catholic nun, who helped me to realize that I did not have the temperament for sustained contemplation. I am far too active. I remember a session I spent exploring my use of money and what causes I supported. This was helpful for living out my faith commitment. It is best to do what seems natural to the person, honoring their spiritual tradition. Some will read the Bible and pray. Others will ask for direction from a pastor or spiritual leader. And some will simply do what seems sensible.

Erikson saw generativity emerging later in life. Who do we nurture and influence? The spheres of influence might include biological, parental, technical and cultural. For example, a pastor can mentor a younger pastor in the skills of ministry. A carpenter can take on an apprentice. A lawyer can guide a junior associate. After carrying out interviews Dan McAdams concluded that identity becomes more and more concerned with generativity as we mature. McAdams also identified some characteristics of highly generative adults. He found a commitment story which was characterized by the person (a) enjoying an early family blessing or advantage, (b) being sensitized to the sufferings of others at an early age, (c) being guided by a clear and compelling personal ideology that remains stable over time, (d) transforming bad scenes into good outcomes, and (e) setting goals for the future to benefit society.

*Reflect:* How many of McAdams characteristics of generative adults did you identify in yourself?

**90<sup>th</sup> Birthday:** Imagine you are at your 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. What will people say as they celebrate your long life? Will it be about your roles in life? How you raised children? Or about your qualities as a person? Or about the place of God in your life?

**List of Doings:** Make a list of your present activities. Then in a column estimate how much time, on the average, each activity takes each week. And in the last column rate how important that activity is to you (1-10/10). Does anything stand out as time consuming but no longer seems important? Are there others? These might be considered for your ‘garage sale’.

**For Me, for Others, for God:** Take a large sheet of paper. Divide it up into three columns with the headings for me, for others and for God. Then think about the last month. List anything you

have done in the three columns. What does this review tell you about how you invest your time? Is there any room for change?<sup>10</sup>

**Concept Map:** take a word like ministry, vocation or mission. Put it in the middle of a page and map related ideas around that word, draw links between ideas. Free associate and see where it leads you.

**Mustard Seed.** Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed. Often things begin small and grow in our life. This is the way to bring change. Reflect on your life. What are the seeds you are planting today? Make a list and include anything, no matter how small, you are doing. What are your dreams? They too are seeds.<sup>11</sup>

**Resources:** what resources are brought to committed living? Rothschild mentioned five kinds of resources: (a) *Functional* like a safe place to live, reliable transport and finances. (b) *Physical* resources such as physical strength, agility and health (c) *Psychological* include intelligence, sense of humor, curiosity, creativity and effective defense mechanisms. (d) *Interpersonal* with a social network including spouse, family and friends (e). *Spiritual* resources including belief in God and religious practices.<sup>12</sup>

**Promises:** Can you list say five or six significant commitments you have made? How have these promises given you a sense of stability and purpose? Over the years has there been significant changes and how have such choices changed the direction of your life?

**Dialogue with Ministry** Can you think of your ministry as a person to talk to? This will personalize it, but also enable a conversation. I did this exercise this morning, as I write this, and while initially it felt artificial it was very useful.

**Action Plan:** Can you write your own action plan to try to contribute something in a concrete way? Then try it out in a modest way. Sometimes this can be to choose a charity to support financially. Even a modest contribution is a start. Think about this in terms of your skills and abilities. How can you contribute in a meaningful way? There are many emotional benefits to being a volunteer.

**Get Advice:** The hello metaphor is a way to bring a person who has died, such as a grandparent, parent or spouse, into the present “If Bill was here today, what would he say to you about facing your current challenge?”<sup>13</sup>

**Dedicate your Work:** I have done this in my books, so why not with every task, such as speaking at a conference or giving a sermon. Nothing needs to be said. It indicates that an action can be for someone other than myself.

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<sup>10</sup> Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Exercise suggested by Cepero, *Journaling*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Rothschild, *Body Remembers*, 88-92.

<sup>13</sup> See Nancy P. Kropf and Cindy Tandy, “Narrative Therapy with Older Clients: The Use of a ‘Meaning Making’ Approach,” *Clinical Gerontologist* 18, no. 4 (2008): 3-16.

**Personal Mission Statement:** Have you written out a personal mission statement? I have done this a few times and generally found it very useful. It helps me to be more focused in what I commit to do. I have also done mission statements in organizations, usually with less sense of any personal benefit. What works for me is a sense of personal focus.

**Future Story:** Begin with a blank page. Then start: “The story of the rest of my life...” This should express what you most desire to happen in the time you have. It is not a ‘final statement’, more a working draft that can be continually revised and expanded. But you might find it gives you vision and an exciting sense of possibility. This is actually a fulfilment of the goal of this book to author a new story for your life.

### **Conclusion**

A life in Christ is always open. Attention shifts from self to others. Life will flow on. This happens when commitment is fired by spiritual imagination. The new story is one for others, clarified by our values, sense of service and participation in the Christian community. Good things are best shared.

### **To Read Further:**

Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of a Self* (New York: William Morrow, 1993). Highly recommended.