



HOLISTIC FORMATION

INWARD JOURNEY, OUTWARD JOURNEY

BY JAN JOHNSON

“While my generation focuses on outreach,” a Gen Xer wrote in a recent article, “older generations focus on spiritual formation.” I was disturbed by this sentence, because it suggests a split between social justice and spiritual formation. This split is based on an either-or assumption: Either you pay attention to your inner life with God or you help others. Most frequently it is worded this way: I’m a Martha (do-gooder) not a Mary (pray-er); I’m a Paul (a thinker) not a Barnabas (a server). Never the twain shall meet. I want to holler back: “Except in Jesus.”

The arbitrary separation of spiritual formation and social justice creates two groups of Christians, each of whom reflect only half of the Great Commandment¹: loving God or loving our neighbors. In this unhealthy paradigm, so-called lovers of God can become self-absorbed spiritual elites, sometimes hiding out in prayer and devotion. So-called lovers of others can become grouchy, worn-out do-gooders whose service is mechanical, insincere, and forced.

Responding to this dilemma, many people stress the need for balance. But is balance what is truly needed? Should I let a few people starve so I can pray more? Should I read the Bible less so I can spend more time loving my neighbor? Jesus was not split between the two. The reality of who Jesus was and how he lived is that he developed a regular rhythm of going off for solitude with God² and intentionally engaging those in need. When we live in this rhythm, devotion and service gradually overlap so that our service is infused with prayer (intercession and confession) and our prayers are infused with questions and insights about serving others.

The source of our confusion lies in our limited understanding of spiritual formation, which we tend to restrict to an inward experience of prayer, silence, and focusing on

Scripture. But Dallas Willard warns that we must “guard against the view of spirituality as something ‘wholly inward.’” The inward journey and outward journey “are not two separate things, but one unified process.” When Richard Foster formed Renovaré (Renovare.org) in 1988, he made social justice one of the six (then five) streams of spiritual formation. Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, delighted in having the daily Eucharist celebrated every day at the New York House of Hospitality. Transformation of life involves an inward journey of devotion and an outward journey of loving others concretely. They flow concurrently in an interlocking spiral.

THE COMBO IS A POWERFUL FORCE

Nehemiah is a good example of this rhythm and infusion of the inward and outward journeys. This deeply compassionate politician had a remarkable connection with God that overflowed into practical help for the poor and oppressed. He illustrates well the life of a contemplative activist.

After hearing stories about the Jewish survivors who escaped captivity but lived in shame and harassment from neighbors back in their homeland, Nehemiah sat down and

wept, belting out a deeply devotional prayer seven verses long. Then, as he stood before his boss, King Artaxerxes, and asked for the materials needed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to protect the settlers there, he also prayed “to the God of heaven” (Neh 1: 5-11; 2:3-4).

During Nehemiah’s “exposure trip” to Jerusalem, he made a hidden prayerful inspection of the ruined walls by night, telling no one “what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem” (2:12). This prayer walk caused him to boldly invite the survivors to rebuild the walls so they would no longer be trampled upon.

As the Jews’ enemies taunted Nehemiah, he didn’t wear down but prayed continually (4: 4-5, 9; 6:9, 14). This book of nonstop activism is full of prayers (Neh 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:1-37). The result was that the gracious hand of God moved through Nehemiah because it was moving within him as well.

This dynamic combination made Nehemiah selfless yet passionate, an unusual combination. Selfless people often seem wimpy; passionate people are often self-absorbed. But when compassion is God-infused and comes from the depth of a character that is spiritually formed, a remarkable combination of selflessness and passion emerge.

MOVING TOWARD INFUSION

If we tend to focus on the inward or outward journey only, we may have to work on our weaker tendency. Two things help us here: (1) understanding how these journeys fuel each other as well as our transformation; and (2) trying out practices of the journey we have less experience with.

The inward journey fuels the outward journey in the following ways:

It provides energy. One of the main reasons people burn out while helping the voiceless is that they’re doing it out of obligation. Doing what good Christians are supposed to do will never be an adequate motive. In the 15 years that I’ve volunteered at the Samaritan Center, a drop-in center for the homeless, many volunteers have burned out and jumped ship. I’m still there because I don’t see myself as doing good or seeking success in my efforts. I’m there because I’ve meditated for years on Matthew 25:31-46, and as a result I experience Jesus next to me while I do laundry and share jokes with clients. I go because my friend Jesus invites me there, promises to meet me there, and says I’ll learn things in that setting that I won’t learn anywhere else.

It cultivates a right heart. Most people begin serving with selfless motives, but self-importance and self-congratulation

gradually seep in. Or they become resentful when those they serve don’t appreciate them. I’ve learned that each time I drive to the Samaritan Center—each time without fail—I must ask God to fill me and help me love both clients and fellow workers. Without that pause and prayer, I become the efficient but obnoxious helper who ignores people but gets a lot of laundry done. If I don’t ask God to help me bless the other volunteers, I find myself judging them. But when I’m centered in God as I serve, I end up loving clients even when they get mad at me. Serving the needy is hard work—boot camp! I have no choice but to depend on God to be even mediocre at this.

It makes life holy. For those of us who live comfortably in our inner world, the outward tangible nature of service is shocking at first—but then refreshing. Hands-on helping takes us out of our heads and builds a gritty compassion in us through doing. Over the years, mopping up blood off a bathroom floor, fixing the insides of toilets, dealing with washers that leak, and hoisting weary, dehydrated people into chairs have moved me away from sentimental spiritual talk. I see now that scrubbing floors can be holy work.

The outward journey benefits the inward journey in the following ways:

It brings the Scriptures to life. Once we work with an adult who cannot read or become friends with a person who is physically disabled, Scripture verses we never saw before about God being the guardian of the poor and oppressed pop out at us with new vividness. Jesus’ miracles come alive. We feel as if we’ve lived the story of Jesus helping the man filled with a legion of demons.⁴ When we serve without expecting anything in return, the passage about inviting people to our table who can never invite us back becomes as real as the magazine page you’re holding in your hand right now. We cherish the lament psalms because we need them to process our grief about the plight of the elderly in America or the sex slaves in Asia or the nearly extinct California condor.

It gives you a sense of partnering with God. Helping the poor and the lonely helps us see the world as the world God “so loves.” We get an inward sense of God inviting us to partner in the divine mission of subverting evil with good and making God’s kingdom available to all.

It helps you meet Jesus. I’m not a mystic, but at times I have experienced people who come out of nowhere to the Samaritan Center and say exactly what I need to hear that morning.

Their name isn't in the files, and we never see them again. I go home and tell my husband, "I think Jesus spoke to me today." So I don't quit. If I'm unable to go a few times in a row, I miss it — and the experience of meeting Jesus there — terribly.

It provides fuel for reflection for needed transformation. Self-examination and confession are vital in spiritual formation and often occur in quietness with God. But this inner work teaches us to confess our sin the very moment we commit it. I find myself hiding out in the Samaritan Center bathroom confessing after I've misjudged a client, complained and felt sorry for myself, or thought about slashing the tires of a city councilwoman. In the midst of this repentance, God teaches me to be as polite to a client as I am to my best friend or to calm an unruly client without raising my voice.

BECOMING INTEGRATED

Here are some ideas to experiment with to create the back and forth rhythm and finally an infusion of the inward and outward journeys.

For those who love the outward journey and need to journey inward:

- Think of someone you serve (perhaps someone difficult). What pithy breath prayer (nine syllables or less) could you use when dealing with that person? Maybe "Bless X through me" or "Into Thy hands."⁵
- Read a few sentences of *The Practice of the Presence of God* and think about how Brother Lawrence—the awkward, overweight kitchen monk—found he was as close to God stirring the soup in the kitchen as lying on the floor of the cathedral. Experiment with what it looks like to live with God in simple actions.
- Go on a morning walk out in nature, taking with you pictures of those you serve or little things they've given you. Pray for them as you hold their mementos in your hands and while you also enjoy God's creation and the blessings of a body that can move. If your mind wanders, that's okay. Whenever someone pops into your mind, ask God, "What would it look like to love this person?"
- Pray a "weeping prayer" such as Psalm 56, imagining yourself as someone who is oppressed, and then putting the psalm into his or her words. I did this once by putting myself in the place of a 12-year-old Southeast Asian girl trapped as a sex slave. The psalm came alive to me and it awakened within me more passion for this issue (a passion that was then reflected in my checkbook).

- Hum/whistle while you work. Pick a song that helps you be aware of God's presence and hum it while you serve. (Suggestions: versions of the St. Francis prayer "Lord, Make Me an Instrument of thy Peace," the hymn "Be Still, My Soul," or the Taizé song "Bless the Lord, O My Soul").

For those who love the inward journey and need to venture outward:

- *Investigate the possibilities.* Take some quiet moments to consider what breaks the heart of God that also breaks your heart? What disability or need tugs at you? Talk to someone with that need and ask her what she needs most. Or investigate organizations that serve that group of people. Start a computer file on this and add internet news about it to the file as you find it. Finally, ask God for a nudge about what to do next.
- *Identify a friend or a group at your church who is reaching out.* Before joining them, ask about the needs of this group. Pray about those needs and ask God to show you how you can be a blessing to those people.
- *Welcome strangers.* Ask God to show you people who are overlooked and left out (Matthew 25:35-40). Look around at a church activity to see who is sitting alone. Take note of one or two people whose personality drives others away. Ask God to show you how you can be helpful and ask God for the courage to approach that person. People who are used to being alone and/or repelling others will be completely taken off guard when you move toward them.
- *Pray what you read.* Look prayerfully through this issue of *PRISM* or some back issues and pray for the needs that writers have brought to light.

God wants to build a home on this earth within a family of people. God wants to dwell in us (inward journey) and move out to do all kinds of exciting things (outward journey). All of this journey is about letting God live in us more deeply. ■

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(Editor's note: due to space limitations, the endnotes for this article have been posted at esa-online.org/Endnotes.)