

Chapter 1



The Practice of Lifelong Growth in the Spirit

*We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown, something new.
Yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by
passing through some stages of instability—
and it may take a very long time. . . .
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.*

—Teilhard de Chardin

Encountering the Mystery

One of my favorite stories tells of a long-ago meeting between some Christian missionaries and a king. After the missionaries speak of their faith and encourage the king to become a Christian, the king asks for advice. His wise one responds, “Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of humans with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you now sit. . . . Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter

storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, humans appear on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, nor what follows. Therefore if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.”¹

So eloquently yet simply, the story reveals the human condition: we are creatures bounded by birth and death, conscious that there is something “outside” our finite existence, but uncertain about its nature. Our minds wonder about the world beyond the one we know, while mystics and saints of all ages and faiths have testified to the existence of More Than is apparent.

Even in the decades after the “scientific revolution,” Christians affirm the reality of that which is beyond immediate comprehension. Evelyn Underhill, that great student of the mystic life, quite straightforwardly speaks of “the hopelessly irrational character of all great religions: which rest, one and all, on a primary assumption that can never be intellectually demonstrated, much less proved—the assumption that the supra-sensible is somehow important and real, and is intimately connected with human life.”² Underhill adds that there is “a deep instinct of the human mind that there must be a unity, an orderly plan in the universe,” an underlying Vitality, an eternal Becoming.³ Human union with this reality creates a sense of intense aliveness.

Today the experience of unity with the underlying Vitality of the universe is generally referred to as “spiritual formation.” That phrase is a shortcut to experience for which there are really no words. I saw this very clearly some years ago in a conversation with my mother. I was raised as a Christian, attending Sunday school routinely and learning the stories of the Bible. My parents always joined my brother and me in Sunday worship, but later I realized that their primary reason for attending church was a social one—almost everyone in our small town did so and it was a way of establishing social acceptance. There is nothing wrong with such an approach to religion, but it seldom touches the deep Aliveness reaching out to us always. So my mother was puzzled when in later years I became actively involved in spiritual formation work. One day she demanded of me, “So what is this spiritual formation anyway?” I opened my mouth and then closed it, realizing there was no way I could explain to her something she had never experienced (or never acknowledged). She wanted an answer in terms she already understood, and I wanted to invite her into a new way of experiencing the world.

As the two of us authors discussed the possible content of this book, this ambiguity became obvious to us. If pressed, we both might say something like, spiritual formation is a way of life. It is a commitment to find and follow God in every moment of every day. But how can that be put into words, given that God's very self is Mystery? Perhaps the best answer is that spiritual formation is surrendering oneself to wonder.

In our early conversations about components of lifelong spiritual growth, we recalled that any lifelong relationship requires attention, nurture, and mutual love. The practices described here are forms of expression of these components. It is generally the case that God is always going out "ahead" of us, calling us, and creating our desire for deepened relationship. We often discover that some parts of us are actually resisting God's call, perhaps due to fears we have about what might be required of us at this depth. When I confess to my longing for deeper relationship with God, I am also acknowledging that I am not yet complete, but that I myself am at this moment a work in progress, and that is humbling.

How do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength? The fundamental gift of spiritual practice is belonging to a wide and long stream of people before us who have asked our questions, faced doubts, and left records of practices to help us live what we say we believe. Practices offer a bridge between desire and the inhabiting of a new reality, from "ought" to "is," and from "I should" to "I am." In faithful spiritual practice, we find ourselves upheld, not so much chastised for our sins as rather enabled to respond fully to the call we hear.

All spiritual formation begins with the effort to live a moral and ethical life. As we move more deeply into formation, we find that certain practices are more beneficial to us than others. In Eastern religion, persons known to take spiritual life seriously are often greeted with the question, "What is your Practice?" The meaning in that culture has a specific reference to one of four "yogas." (Yoga is a rich term, derived from the root word "yoke" and thus refers to a discipline whose goal is union with the Holy.) Each yoga is a path intended to be congruent with personal strengths and preference. Reflective persons may take the way of *jnana yoga*, or a path to oneness with the Godhead through knowledge. Persons with a more emotional bent may choose *bhakti yoga*, whose path is toward adoration of God. The third path is *karma yoga*, the path to God through work or action, acknowledging that each outward directed act also internally reacts upon the doer. Finally, *raja*

yoga experiments with inner realities to observe the effects of various practices upon one's spiritual condition.⁴

Christian practice does not make this distinction between specialized paths, rather offering a variety of possibilities, all of which are aimed at living a life attuned to the Gospel. Each individual is encouraged to explore many practices, gradually discovering those most conducive to deepened relationship with God.

Standing in Relation: God's "Kingdom"

The core of Christian spiritual life is the conviction that *relationship with Mystery* is not only possible but essential for a full human life. Jesus of Nazareth teaches his disciples to call the Mystery Abba, father. We need not literalize his words to envision an old man in the sky, but clearly Jesus believed that his contact with the Mystery was intimate and personal, and that everyone is invited to such a relationship. He modeled the quality of personal intimacy every time he invited someone to "come and see," gathered a group of friends in ministry, and sat at table with all manner of people.⁵

Pause to reflect: *Take a moment to ponder your personal sense of how you are being invited to live in relationship with God. You might write for a few moments about the longing and hopes you feel as you begin reading this book.*

Jesus announces his ministry with the words, "The Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 4:17, Mk. 1:15, Lk. 10:9). The meaning of these words further unfolds the nature of the invitation to relationship. The phrase "at hand" is one that theologians have pondered deeply, but it clearly means that in some sense the kingdom is already present, that a new era has arrived marked by the constant operation of divine power. It has something to do with Jesus, and it is not fully present as yet, but it is *available*, not just to Jesus but to everyone.

"Kingdom" is a word not used much in contemporary Western secular settings, so it is a little more difficult to understand. Again theologians have studied its meaning, and sometimes it seems to refer to time (the dramatic moment of arrival), and sometimes to space (the "realm" God rules). The Greek term is *basileia*, which can be interpreted as commonweal. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz prefers the contemporary term

"*kingdom*," suggesting an inclusive community of relationships.⁶ Thus Jesus is affirming a present realm or community in which the holy can be experienced every day by every person.

The realm is now at hand, and it calls for "repentance." Fundamentally, repentance means a change of direction, a turning around. Although response to Jesus's announcement is often interpreted as referring to a single moment of radical insight, after which a person repents of "sinfulness" and vows to live a new life, the ideas above suggest a more nuanced response. The overall theme of this book is a human response to Jesus's call to live in God's *baseleia* is not a one-time thing. There may indeed be a moment (or more than one) when we feel suddenly washed through with blessing and hope, and desire to make a commitment to a different kind of life. But like New Year's resolutions, the initial commitment is only the beginning. Response to God's invitation is in fact a lifelong task, involving various practices over time. Perhaps Jesus's disciples initially understood his call to follow him as a big commitment, but one that only asked of them their initial response. Nevertheless, they passed through many stages of confusion and doubt, found themselves sorely distressed and greatly tried, and were often disappointed in themselves (and sometimes even in Jesus). If we believe that the only thing necessary to live a full spiritual life is an initial commitment, we are likely to find ourselves similarly restless or simply bored.

Practicing Relationship with Mystery

Fundamentally, lifelong spiritual practice, or spiritual formation, refers to the means by which we learn to experience our relationship with Mystery over a long period. It may seem curious or puzzling to consider nurturing a relationship with the One who is and will always be much of a mystery to us. It may help to think about our own spiritual formation in the image of a seed unfolding.

First, there exists the seed itself, with its unique potential. We may imagine this seed is the soul of each one of us, personally called forth from God with the words "I love you." Josef Pieper observes that in the act of creation, God says to each and all: "I will you to be; it is good, 'very good' (Gen. 1:31) that you exist."⁷

Gradually the seed unfolds. Planted and sprouting, it must grow. But it grows better if tended. Certainly this involves help outside ourselves, helpless as we are in the beginning, but it also involves our willingness, even our eagerness to become. Thus we know that what

happens in the unfolding is a work of co-creation: God is at work in us, and we are cooperating with God.

Formation is the interaction between potential and nurturance. God is involved in both aspects; we are largely involved in the latter, insuring that nutrients are provided by good soil, water, sun, fertilizer as necessary. In a human life, this includes the classic spiritual practices of prayer and worship, study, work and community. Through worship and study we learn about taking on the mind of Christ and becoming the body of Christ. Through work and community we learn that every moment of the day provides an opportunity to practice our desire and intent. Practices build habits and enlarge our hearts, helping us strengthen our awareness of God as companion in our dailyness, and bringing us a subtle ever-present depth of joy.

It is, of course, much easier to say this than to do it. The constancy of practice can seem a burden. The hiddenness of results can be discouraging. And life provides so many opportunities to “go to seed”—times when it feels our vitality is diminished by involuntary losses of cherished ideas or beloved persons. Yet here too Christ is with us: the cross and resurrection teach us that dying is not the end, but rather the doorway to new life.

All this is vastly different from the cultural notions that surround us. This process of spiritual formation is not primarily managed, analytical-objective, individual, or even what we might call “successful.” Yet for those desiring a strong and flexible spiritual life and an ongoing maturity in relationship with God, practice is invaluable. What we desire and need is already near us, supporting and strengthening our faith, hope, and love.

Lifelong spiritual growth involves several key points:

- Conviction that as human beings, God’s spirit engages us in an ongoing relationship without which life would be less than full and empty of abundance;
- Willingness to undertake a guided discipline for integration of self, pulling pieces and parts into a harmonizing whole in a way that gives meaning and purpose in life;
- Affirmation that we are (still) formable and can take part in our own formation;
- Finally, for Christians, the central dimension of spirituality is knowing and being known by, loving and being strengthened by, Jesus Christ.

The Commandment to Love Ourselves

“The first is, . . . you shall love your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and strength. The second is you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:29-30, modified)

We have heard much about these words of Jesus and we take them to heart, especially when it comes to the God part and the neighbor part. But if we take seriously the other two aspects, why do we forget the third: loving ourselves? More importantly, why might God care that we love ourselves?

Self-love is neither arrogance nor selfishness. It is taking seriously the potential God places in us to become who we most truly are. God loves each of us into being specifically—a uniqueness, an originality that matters. Each of us is meant to become the whole person we carry as seed within us. Each carries a potential meant for full development, not the same as everyone else, but embodying our own specific vocation or call from God to be. God’s call is issued in love, and our lives are sustained by love in continuous unfolding to a particular something which only we are.

When we are truly living to our potential, we feel a quality of personal wholeness inside. Scripture is full of words that describe the abundance Jesus brings. The baskets of food collected *after* feeding the five thousand are *overflowing* (Mark 6:42-3). After Jesus tells a weary crew to down their nets *again*, the fish caught are so heavy that the nets might break (Luke 5:1-6). The presence of God involves not only the absence of anxiety, but also the reality of something generous and full of gladness, as natural as can be.

To love ourselves is to give ourselves permission to live in this state of abundant, full wholeness. It is already here. God has claimed that state, intends it for each one of us, and thus is at work within us helping to bring it about. God loves us unconditionally; who are we to withhold love from ourselves?

Learning to love ourselves and experience wholeness is not easy. It may indeed be one of the most difficult practices of the spiritual life. We have many old memories, habits of protection, learned defenses that hold God away. Experiencing God’s presence as loving-kindness is not so much a matter of periodic saving eruptions in our lives, as rather the ongoing formative blessing that is somewhat harder to notice, because so near to us. It will not happen at once, and it will not prevent “bad things happening.” But it will give us the peace, serenity, and passion to address what we must, and leave the rest to God. When we encounter fear, we can let it become an ally in the certainty that we have encountered *something that can be transformed by God’s grace*.

It requires work and patience to discover the inner desire that is God’s flight encircling us. Yet that is indeed what we are called to do.

In short, lifelong spirituality is openness to relationship, first with God, then with self and other. This openness results in heightened or expanded consciousness and behavior, and is shaped by one's particular tradition. Lifelong spirituality, or formative spirituality, involves awareness that everything we do and/or that is done to us *shapes* or *forms* us in some way. Some habits and influences can be deformative. The focus of spiritual formation is on attending to God's desires for us and in us and allowing our lives to be shaped by those desires. Since God is always somewhat hidden, spiritual formation requires regular habits and practice that help us become more attentive to the divine presence within our daily lives. The practices in this book are intended to help us do so.

Potential Impediments

At best, a lifelong spiritual practice can be difficult as well as rewarding. It may help to understand why practice is so essential in the present time if we turn to a bit of recent religious history in the United States. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow's book *After Heaven*⁸ traces the changes in American spiritual life and the way we have understood the sacred in the last half of the twentieth century. He describes a movement from a spirituality of dwelling (centered in a stable and sacred place) to a spirituality of seeking (where one must constantly renegotiate the meaning of transient glimpses of the sacred). In-depth interviews of some two hundred people suggest that faith is no longer something people inherit but something for which they strive, seeking connections with various organizations and disciplines while yet feeling marginal to any particular group or place.⁹ As the common web of assumptions supporting the older pattern began to fray in the '70s and '80s, religious practice became that of *search*. Search is something of an eclectic matter, perhaps finding community in Sunday services, but also seeking out such things as a yoga class, a Buddhist meditation retreat, and so forth. The movement away from the older practice of dwelling corresponds to a cultural shift involving commuting or frequent moves connected with employment and the consequent disconnection from family and traditional home places—a radical expansion of the world in terms of information flows, and an increasing emphasis on consumption and entertainment. This movement is also linked to the shift from an orderly, systematic understanding of life to a bewildering variety of worldviews and philosophies of life on offer in our

midst. Wuthnow suggests that “the United States is moving into an era of what might be termed a ‘thin consensus’ in which relatively few values are held in common.”¹⁰

Reflecting on these two approaches to spirituality, Wuthnow finds each one incomplete: dwelling because of its relatively rigid emphasis on a distinction between the sacred and the profane, and seeking because of its inevitable focus on individual gratification. He suggests that to retrieve balance in this new century, “the ancient wisdom that emphasizes the idea of *spiritual practices* needs to be rediscovered.”¹¹

We can even think of Jesus himself teaching a practice-oriented spirituality, though he blends it with aspects of what we have called dwelling, involving setting aside a space in which to meditate, pray, and worship. Yet for him, such spaces are changeable, depending on circumstances, and the point of withdrawal is not merely to feel secure in a sacred space but to grow increasingly aware of the mysterious and transcendent aspects of the One who guides him. His practice was sometimes undertaken alone, but was often undertaken in the company of others. Practice apparently involves self-reflection and challenge, includes moral dimensions, and in the experience of connection to the Divine Center, offers cautious hope for each day. Jesus’s practice-oriented spirituality models a rigorous life devoted to deepening his relationship with Abba.

The tradition of spiritual practice was not lost after Jesus’s death. Paul’s letters reveal his commitment to regular spiritual practice as foundational to his ministry, as do other New Testament books. Christian leaders throughout the centuries such as Benedict of Nursia, Calvin, Luther, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola and others also testify to wisdom-guided spiritual practice, not just in the beginning of their lives and ministry, but throughout it. All these leaders left books or records, fortunately translated into English, and they can be our friends and guides even now.

Unfortunately, at some point in Christian history, the notion seemed to rise that such spiritual practices were meant only for would-be saints, or for vowed religious and ordained persons. The practices themselves continued to be kept alive, but for a very small group of people, and often were more focused on identification with the charism of the particular office or community rather than on ongoing relationship with the Mystery.

Also, the contemporary emphasis on the scientifically demonstrable in the West has gradually led our institutions, including our religious

institutions, away from ongoing conversations about values and meaning which rest in experiences of God. On the whole, western Christians are skeptical of mystical affirmations, preferring to “lay ahold” of real and practical things. So we who hope to live a full and vibrant religious life are left with many questions. How do I talk with God? How do I experience God, not only in prayer, but as a vital and living presence in my life? Are such experiences “real”? If so, how do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength? We may, indeed, desire these things, but we hardly know how or where to begin.

A Return to Practice

This book is intended to answer some of these questions by offering a variety of Christian practices, some traditional and some modified in contemporary language to speak to the holiness of daily life when lived in the awareness of God’s presence. The practices offered in these pages help build a bridge between desire and the inhabiting of a new reality of lifelong growth in the Spirit, of intentional and fruitful spiritual formation. How is growth in the Spirit different from regular church attendance and concern for the poor? Our terms *center specifically on the relationship with God*. Of course, spiritual formation does not exclude attending church nor caring for the poor, but those activities are seen as actions growing from relationship with God. The reality of spiritual formation does not depend on how we *think* about God (because God is greater than anything we can think), as long as we have *a desire to be in relationship with God* and believe that God desires to be in relationship with us.

The Mystery that is God chooses to reach out to each one of us and something within the nature of the human being responds. Paschal speaks of a “God-shaped vacuum” within the human, a part of our essence that is incomplete unless in relationship with the Divine Being. The foundations of such a relationship can be thought of as emerging not primarily in a setting governed by sin and repentance, but rather by call and response. God is always reaching out (calling) and our yearning for the More is response to that originating call. God’s loving movement toward creation forms the basis for spiritual formation.

The unexpected joy of this process is that what God calls to us matches the shape of our own deep wholeness. A sense of personal wholeness is not the same thing as personal gratification, of course. The ongoing relationship with God teaches us to reach more deeply

into our best selves, and to discover anew how to be the persons we most hope to be, even in circumstances not of our choice. As we progress in our spiritual growth toward and with God, we discover a personal sense of rightness and completeness that is precisely what we would have chosen, could we have known ahead of time what was possible for us. But usually we must begin the journey without knowing the fullness of what lies ahead, because in the beginning our hearts are not large enough for that knowing. Much of what happens in lifelong spiritual growth happens outside our immediate awareness, because after all, it is God's work within us, not a matter of what our own executive will can accomplish. We have a choice: we can consent to and cooperate with this great work or not. Indeed, our practice is an essential element of the process, but our ego is not the "boss." We may often *feel* that nothing at all is going on, but usually we can look back and see how profoundly we are changing for our own good and the good of others. Underneath all practice is humility, the willingness to proceed *without knowing*.

The unknowingness, the sense of things happening without our control, is put into formal language in the classic definition of spiritual theology as including two parts, one called ascetical and one called mystical. Ascetical refers to efforts on the human side to reach toward God, to eliminate those habits or patterns that move us away from the holy, and to learn to see with God's eyes. Mystical refers, in the words of a twelfth century monk, to the fact that God "does not wait until the longing soul has said all its say, but breaks in upon the middle of its prayer, runs to meet it in all haste, . . . and restores the weary soul, slakes its thirst, feeds its hunger, . . . and gives it new life in a wonderful way."¹² God comes to us even before we know what we long for. Although this book emphasizes practice—the ascetical side—it does so with full awareness that the "effectiveness" of our practice depends utterly on God's doing within us. However hard or wearisome or even glorious our practice seems to us, it is ultimately God's work happening in our unknowing. I have often taken heart from Abbot John Chapman's assurance that however dry, weak, or unsatisfactory our practice seems, if we are doing our best the result is just exactly what God wants us to have here and now.¹³ How we *feel* about our practice is far less important than that the core of our soul is sticking to God.

Practice is seldom easy, but it does offer a way to live what we say we believe. It involves a movement from head knowledge (mainly study and analysis) to heart knowledge (mainly embracing, the organ capable

of reaching into God's being in God's self and in creation). Practice in spirituality is not dissimilar from practice in piano or tennis: we are not capable of instant results, and it is effortful, but sustained over time, it begins to seem more "natural" and more rewarding. The analogy fails if pushed too far, however, because pianos and tennis courts are not persons, and we are seeking a relationship—not just any relationship, but one with a Mysterious Other whose ways are always more than we can comprehend. As anyone who has ever tried to condense a genuine relationship into "quality time" knows, speed inhibits relationality.

It is ironic that we tend both to desire and to resist God's in-breaking in our lives, for fear that we will lose our independence, our freedom. It helps to recognize that resistance in ourselves, so we can push through it when it arises. In the long run, the disciplines of practice offer greater freedom than anything we might imagine will have to be relinquished in faithful practice. In the following chapters, we will discuss not only what each practice is and how to make it workable for yourself, but also some barriers you might encounter as you proceed. It is not a shame to encounter discouraging moments; the only shame is to try to be God rather than to love God.

Using this Book with a Small Group

Community is essential in the spiritual life. We naturally need the encouragement and shared experience of others who are seeking intimacy with God. Jesus himself chose twelve friends with whom to share the journey and face the challenges of following God. While this resource is written for individual use, it can also be adapted for use in a small group.

One of the most important aspects of using this book with others will be the development of intimacy and trust. You might invite others whom you know well to do a book study together, or reach out into the community for other seekers to join you on this adventure. The first meeting should be about getting to know one another and cultivating hopes and expectations for your time together.

Questions for the group to ponder include:

- Who will facilitate each meeting?
- What is the best time frame for your gathering?
- Would you like it to include some social time, or be more contemplative?

It can help the process to begin with the creation of a covenant for the group that helps each person feel safe and honored. A covenant is really just an agreement about what is hoped for from members in the way of things like participation, commenting on what one another shares, and confidentiality. Participants might begin by sharing past successful experiences of small groups and what is most important for each member in the way of creating a sense of security and community. For many people it is important that members of the group commit to being present each time the group gathers and not just popping in when it is convenient. It is often helpful to ask that members refrain from offering advice or commentary on what another shares, but simply listen and affirm what each member offers. It is also important to be aware of differences in temperaments. Extroverts can be encouraged to hold onto their thoughts and insights for just a bit longer than they normally would, while introverts might be encouraged to speak up.

Each chapter includes questions with an invitation to pause and reflect. These can be used to facilitate group sharing and insights. They are just a beginning point for your group to process the ideas offered in the chapters. At the end of each chapter you will find sample exercises. Participants might be encouraged to choose a practice that feels inviting or challenging to them and to practice it in the intervening time between group meetings.

After the initial meeting in which folks get to know one another, share hopes, and create a covenant, a sample group gathering outline might look like this:

- Time in centering silence inviting God to direct and be present with the group.
- Group gathering with brief check in about highlights in each person's life.
- Review the chapter contents and main ideas discussing the pauses to reflect.
- Share questions and comments about the chapter.
- Look over the exercises and each person choose a practice.
- The following meeting, check in time might include reflections on how the practice went. Where did you notice God? How were you challenged or encouraged in this practice? How might you amend this practice going forward?

This is not a "how to" book. We do not offer "six steps to spiritual success!" because we do not believe growth in the spirit lends itself to

formulas. Instead we offer reflections and specifics on practices found both in Christian spiritual tradition and the best of modern psychology as leading toward spiritual maturity and psychological wholeness.

We are both Protestant Christians, Liz an ordained Presbyterian pastor and Norvene a lay Episcopalian and oblate of St. Benedict. Liz has teenage children and Norvene has great-grandchildren by marriage. We both are well-married, challenged often by our spouses, and supported always. We are white, educated, and moderately well-off, and we acknowledge that means we have certain blind spots in our understandings. We ask that you not imagine that either of us are “experts.” It is perhaps presumptuous to write a book such as this, but we write as much from our own inadequacies as from our strengths. Please use this book for reflection in light of your own experiences of God, and follow the Spirit as you find yourself called. We’ll be praying for you, even as we ask you to pray for us.

We offer this book as what might be thought of as a reference book about key tools in lifelong spiritual growth. As we both are Christians, our desire is to present the rich array of tools available from the Christian tradition, some of which seem to have been hidden away in more recent times. However, we also hope that persons who identify with other spiritual traditions may find some of these tools helpful. While as a reader you may wish at first to read straight through the book, we encourage you to return to various sections to work primarily with each one at different times. We think of this as a “reference book,” because our experience is that for persons of varying temperaments, or for a single person throughout a lifetime, differing practices may be of value at different times. *May you be blessed.*

SAMPLE EXERCISES

1. Take some time to check in with yourself and reflect on where you are at present in your relationship with God. You might begin by finishing the following sentence, “God and I are_____.” After you finish your reflections about where you are at present you might take some time to map out where you and God have been. Use the following questions as writing prompts:
 - Was there a time when you felt especially close to God? What was that like? If you have not had a time like that, do you desire a close relationship? What do you imagine it would be like?

- Can you remember your childhood image of God? How has it changed over the years?
 - Has God mostly been an idea, a set of shoulds, oughts, and rules, or a real and loving presence for you?
 - As you reflect on where you and God have been, do you have a glimpse of where you are being invited to go in your relationship with God?
2. Take some time to sit in silence and ponder the possibility and assertion that God is reaching for you and seeking a sincere and affectionate relationship with you. Hold in your heart and mind the truth that God is moving towards you with the intention of nourishing, encouraging, and directing your life. Just let that idea be in you and move in you. Notice the thoughts and feelings that arise as you hold this idea. When you are ready, compose a prayer of consent to God as you begin this journey.

FOR FURTHER READING

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