



# Authenticity: A Spiritual Journey

Excerpt From "The Gift Of Being Yourself"

In all of creation, identity is a challenge only for humans. A tulip knows exactly what it is. It is never tempted by false ways of being. Nor does it face complicated decisions in the process of becoming. So it is with dogs, rocks, trees, stars, amoebas, electrons and all other things. All give glory to God by being exactly what they are. Humans, however, encounter a more challenging existence. We think. We consider options. We decide. We act. We doubt. Simple being is tremendously difficult to achieve and fully authentic being is extremely rare.

We all live searching for that one way of being that carries with it the gift of authenticity. We are most conscious of this during adolescence, when it takes front stage...we try on identities like clothing, looking for a style of being that fits with how we want to be seen. But even long after adolescence has passed, most adults know the occasional feeling of being a fraud—a sense of being not what they pretend to be but rather precisely what they pretend not to be. With a little reflection, most of us can become aware of the masks that we first adopted as strategies to avoid feelings of vulnerability but that have become parts of our social self. Tragically, we settle easily for pretense; and a truly authentic self often seems illusory.

Our true self-in-Christ is the only self that will support authenticity. Finding that unique self is, as noted by Thomas Merton, the problem on which all our existence, peace and happiness depend. Nothing is more important, for if we find our true self we find God, and if we find God, we find our most authentic self.

Truly transformational knowledge is always personal, never merely objective. It involves knowing of, not merely knowing about. And it is always relational.

Objective knowing can occur in relation to anything that we examine at a distance. For example, you may know that the earth orbits around the sun or that Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492 without direct personal experience of either.

Personal knowing, on the other hand, is based on experience. It is therefore subjective. Because personal knowing is based on experience, it requires that we be open to the experience. Knowing God's love demands that we receive God's love—experientially, not simply as a theory. Genuine self-knowledge is available to all who: 1) genuinely desire it, 2) are willing to prayerfully reflect on their experience and 3) have the courage to meet themselves and God in solitude.

If your self-knowledge is limited, prayerfully reflect on which of the three prerequisites is most deficient. Watch for times when you can be alone with yourself and God. Often these times are already in the rhythm of your week but are filled with distractions to protect you from solitude. Some people have music on whenever they are alone. Others turn to their computer, TV or their phone in ways that serve the same soul-numbing purposes. The possibilities for avoiding solitude are endless.

*People who have never developed a deep personal knowing of God will be limited in the depth of their personal knowing of themselves. **Failing to know God, they will be unable to know themselves, as God is the only context in which their being makes sense. Similarly, people who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will of course be equally afraid to look deeply at God.** For such persons, ideas about God provide a substitute for direct experience of God.*

**As a group, discuss your thoughts about this excerpt. Then discuss the following:**

- 1) In what situations are you the most authentic? The least? For what reason(s)?
- 2) How difficult is it for you to think deeply about yourself? Why do you think that is?
- 3) The article speaks of "masks" we wear as strategies to avoid feeling vulnerable. What masks did you create growing up? Which masks are you still tempted to wear?
- 4) What can we do as a group to help you feel free to be authentic and transparent here? Pray for each other.



### **Practicing Solitude: Knowing Yourself & Becoming Fully Authentic**

- 1) After prayerful reflection to identify the things you use to avoid solitude, make a pact with God and yourself to set aside some time to simply be still with God in the depths of yourself. Don't give yourself any agenda for this time except sitting with God in silence.
- 2) Begin by asking God to help you be still; then ask Him to help you see yourself as **He** sees you. Don't feel like you need to fill your time with words or thoughts; just remain still and believe that you are in God's presence whether you sense it or not. Sit there for as long as you can stand it. Then sit there just a tiny bit longer.
- 3) At the end of your time—not during it—write your experience down. Note your thoughts, reactions and feelings and then talk with God about them.

### **Practicing Daily Reflection: Sensing God's Presence in the Midst of Daily Life**

- 1) Ask God to help you reflect on your day & notice His presence in the midst of that day's activities.
- 2) Allow the events of the day to replay before you. When an event or situation pops into your head, ask God what He was up to in that particular experience. You can do this for as many events as you like.
- 3) To end your time, thank God for showing you how present He was throughout your day. Ask Him to help you notice His presence even more throughout the day tomorrow.

### **Practicing Gospel Meditation: Knowing Jesus More Deeply**

Gospel meditation provides an opportunity to enter specific moments in Jesus' life and thereby share his experience. Shared experience is the core of any friendship. And Holy Spirit guided meditation on the life of Jesus provides this possibility. The meditation I am recommending is not the same as Bible study. It is more an exercise of the imagination than of the intellect. It involves allowing the Spirit of God to help you imaginatively enter an event in the life of Christ as presented in the Gospels:

- 1) Grab a journal or some paper and find a quiet place where you can sit undisturbed. Take a moment to quiet yourself in God's presence. Close your eyes and ask God to take the words of Scripture and make them His words to you. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you encounter Jesus through this process.
- 2) Then slowly read the following account (you can do this with any event from Jesus' life in the gospels) several times—preferably out loud.

*Jesus was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, "Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: you must not kill; you must not commit adultery; you must not steal; you must not bring false witness; you must not defraud; honor your father and mother." And he said to him, "Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days. Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and he said, "There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me." But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth (Mark 10:17-22).*

- 3) Ask God to help you picture yourself actually being there and encountering Jesus in this scene. Allow yourself to daydream on the situation presented in the passage. First picture the man approaching Jesus as he is leaving on a journey. Then, as if you were a spectator, observe the events as they unfold. Watch, listen and stay attentive to Christ. Don't be distracted by the rich young ruler. And don't try to analyze the story or learn lessons from it. Just be present to Jesus and open to your own reactions.
- 4) After a few minutes, jot down any thoughts or questions from your time of reflection. Then talk to God about your experience.