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# Perceiving the Cultural Sea that is Our Home - Spiritual Formation and Western 21st Century Culture

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# PERCEIVING THE CULTURAL SEA THAT IS OUR HOME—SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND WESTERN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CULTURE



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*Abstract: Spiritual formation occurs in the routines of daily living. We are formed by choices made at the grocery store, as we reach for our medicine cabinet, as we consider whether to drive ten minutes or walk thirty. Such seemingly insignificant choices reflect assumptions held about who we are, and how we are supposed to live in the world. Spiritual formation, like notions of civic duty, develops from within a cultural context. Cultural environments give us largely unquestioned taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and how we should live in it. This essay explores three of the many Western 21<sup>st</sup> century assumptions (the autonomous self, eradicating pain, and overvaluing efficiency) that affect spiritual formation. Knowing how we are seeing a thing helps us better interpret what we are seeing and how it influences decisions we make. The hope is that in knowing, we can make choices with more intention, understanding that our decisions shape and form our soul.*

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Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup> might have been the first to observe that fish don't understand water. Because it's all they experience they have no other environment that would clue them into the reality of an alternative, like breathing air is for humans. In 2005 author David Foster Wallace contemporized this concept in a commencement address he gave graduating students at Kenyon College in Ohio. He begins his address with:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Wallace's speech can be found on YouTube, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYGaXzJGVAQ>

McLuhan's point is generally used to illustrate how people live and breathe in a cultural context which is difficult to recognize as anything but an absolute, a given. Our cultural environments give us largely unquestioned taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and how we should live in it. Spiritual formation, like parenting, educational systems, values around sports and beauty, notions of civic duty and civility, develops from within a cultural context. Spiritual formation cannot occur without language, without particular ideas about God, our selves, others, and the earth, all of which are culturally derived and sustained. Our spiritual formation can be enriched and deepened when those assumptions are examined and in some cases, challenged. While we don't often think so as we go about the business of living, cell phones and hot dogs, a love of the *Game of Thrones* or *The Great British Baking Show*, our coupon clipping and the bottles in our medicine cabinet, all say something of our taken-for-granted assumptions. All these pieces of ordinary life surround and shape our souls. Even intentional spiritual formation is understood and practiced in a cultural context that asserts we are autonomous self-actualizing beings with power to shape our own or another's spiritual selves.

My discipline of sociology would largely say that culture is neither evil nor good, though cultural belief systems have supported actions that after the fact came to be generally accepted as evil (Nazi Germany, slavery, and the Crusades come to mind) or good (democracy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). The "after the fact" part is important, as sociologists also point out that assertions of what is good and evil are held in the eye of the beholder, who is inevitably embedded in a particular cultural context and blinded by filters that make self-critique of current cultural trends difficult.

If the context out of which people are spiritually formed is cultural, then challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, our place in it, and how we should live can move us toward a more holistic understanding, and potentially greater spiritual insight and growth. This essay explores how some Western, 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural filters—or taken-for-granted assumptions—affect how we see our spiritual selves. Knowing how we are seeing a thing helps us better interpret what we are seeing, and how it influences choices we make. For instance, how do assumptions about comfort, progress, and efficiency drive technological, pharmaceutical, and agricultural developments that form us spiritually?

Fortunately, unlike fish, we can learn how to perceive a thing we cannot see. (I imagine the old fish in Wallace's story was, at some earlier age, pulled out of the water and experienced air, before being released and given a second chance at life). In the remainder of this essay, I explore three of the many Western 21<sup>st</sup> century filters that shape how we perceive and experience ourselves: the autonomous self, eradicating pain, and overvaluing efficiency. There are various ways we can learn how culture shapes perceptions. First, we can learn to look at the world through a different set of

filters, other non-western cultures for example. Second, we can look to the past, learning the assumptions that organized daily life for our pre-modern ancestors. A third is by exploring social movements at the edges of our own culture, movements asserting that they have rediscovered a lost truth and are forging new or renewed ways of being in the world. I attempt to illustrate these while exploring three Western 21<sup>st</sup> century filters that shape spiritual formation. What we learn by examining outside cultures, past cultures, and liminal places of contemporary change sheds light on how souls are formed and reformed through ordinary living.

While multiple cultural filters affect spiritual formation, I'll discuss three with broad ranging impact on spiritual formation. We'll examine Western assumptions around the autonomous self, our emphasis on eradicating discomfort and pain, and our value of minimizing limits and maximizing efficiency. At times we'll hold up these other lenses, cross-cultural, ancient, and contemporary places of movement within our own, to help us see what is difficult to see otherwise.

## THE AUTONOMOUS SELF

The story of the contemporary “self” begins in the pre-modern era. When people were referred to as souls in medieval times it implied they were eternal beings accountable to and belonging to God, not themselves. Individuals were souls that belonged. In the 1600s that sense was retained in the first English translation of the Bible—the King James Version. Genesis 2:7 reads: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The Revised Standard Version of 1952 changed soul to “being,” and in 1996 the New Living Translation substituted soul for “person”.

The Enlightenment is perhaps most responsible for initiating the shift from a soul-that-belonged to an autonomous self. The shift was an important corrective to social systems that justified gross injustices and inequalities determined by the fate of an individual's birth. With the Enlightenment personal autonomy came to be understood as a right for all, and while Enlightenment ideas expanded who might have autonomy, it did not and has not granted freedom and autonomy for all. Many of our civil rights battles in the last 100 years have kept us mindful that this struggle is not done.

With autonomy came the assumption that individuals should be self-determining and free to apply reason to decisions about how and where they lived, who they married, and what they believed as true. That came to be valued over claims of authority, especially religious authority, which increasingly lost legitimacy. The autonomous self was the only valid entity to determine how one lived, who and what one became, and what one believed to be true.

My discipline doubts the possibility for self-made autonomous personhood. Starting with American sociologist Charles Cooley, who explained the self as constantly being shaped through interaction, sociologists tend to see selves emerging in the context of relationships with parents, siblings, lovers, friends, those in authority over us, and those under our authority. We are relational creatures, responding and remaking ourselves in the context of various alliances and allegiances we make with other individuals and groups.

Being relational creatures, and ones prone to arrogance at that, rejecting guidance in how we might be shaped or formed beyond the most basic parental guidance, made us vulnerable to less overt shaping and forming. Adopting the belief that we are self-determining implied that our happiness and achievement of dreams and desires depends on our ability to make that happen. The gap left by a community that used to shape and form us was replaced by fads and whims of the day offered (at a price) to help us succeed and bring us happiness.

That autonomous self proved a fertile soil for an economic system dependent on growth, especially since growth required spending and consuming. To have discontent and insecure people created a consumer base ready and eager to purchase fashion and upgrades, education and experiences that might bring happiness and success, assuaging the fear of failing to self-actualize as self-determining individuals, and the loneliness of our somewhat alienated state.

Moving away from a soul-that-belongs to an individual-belonging-to-self shifts the forming and shaping of our spiritual selves in significant ways. Contentment was no longer perceived to be an internal state dependent on one's connection to God and community, but became an external state pursued through self-determining choices aimed at satisfying our longings.

One challenge in a consumerist-autonomous-self culture is to remember that through much of our Judeo-Christian history we perceived ourselves as souls that belonged—to God first, and also to each other. People lived in memberships—some of them chosen, most of them assumed at birth. People belonged to their families, to their clan or people, and to the land and the living things they lived among. This was not all good (it justified many abuses of power), but an essential quality of these memberships was identifying with and treating other members with respect, recognizing their well-being depended on the well-being of the various communities (human and natural world) to which they belonged.

I've pushed my students on this point—asking them to consider whether or not living as souls that belong might lead to greater freedom than the autonomous self, rather than less. We become free from the expectation to sift through all the options on our own and craft our own perfect world. Free from the tyranny of chasing market answers to spiritual questions about purpose, contentment, peace and justice. Reclaiming that sense of belonging while holding on to the good awareness of the Enlightenment that we

are agents of change in our own lives, and on behalf of others, allows our souls to be formed in powerful ways.

We use our voice, our agency to invest in the good of others and our souls re-ignite a fire of belonging that draws us toward God and others. We fight on behalf of justice for the marginalized because we belong to them and they belong to us. We might seek to know our neighbor rather than to compete with our neighbor. Maybe we'll mow their lawn when they are gone or pick up trash thrown in their yard as we walk by. Maybe we'll recognize that we have responsibility to the birds and bees, to the rivers and oceans—that we belong to God's created earth—one that needs some better stewarding these days.

While not the goal, the good we do out of these acknowledged memberships results in good that bounces back our direction. We might discover that “belonging” is a code God implanted in our DNA at the beginning; and when we seek to form spiritual selves as souls in relationship, souls that belong, we nurture each other and God's creation in ways that make us all more whole in return.

## ERADICATING PAIN

A second cultural filter that has broad impact on our spiritual formation is our Western 21<sup>st</sup> century relationship to pain. Our contemporary perspective is largely that pain is unnecessary and should be eradicated whenever possible. An outsider might think us a very weak and sickly society based on our television advertisements, over-the-counter medication aisles in our drug and grocery stores, and the medicine cabinets in homes stuffed with bottles of Advil, Tylenol PM, Oxy-Codeine prescriptions we keep around to have “just in case.” According to a 2011 CDC report, we saw a 400 percent increase in anti-depressant medication between the years of 1988 and 2008. During the time of the study (2005–2008) 23 percent of women in the US between the ages of 40–59 were on anti-depressants.<sup>3</sup>

Hear me say that anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs, Oxy-Codeine, and Advil have an important place in our medicine cabinets. I'm married to a psychologist, I used to be a Registered Nurse, I have appreciation for the good relief these drugs have offered and for the healing they make possible. It is our over-reliance on pain-relievers and the associated belief that all pain should be escaped, and that all sadness and anxiety should be treated with a drug, which concerns a growing group of physicians, therapists, and

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Pratt, “Antidepressant Use in Persons Aged 12 and Over: United States, 2005–2008,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics, NCHS Data Brief*. No. 76: Oct. 2011, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db76.htm>

social scientists looking out for the wellbeing of bodies. Our perspective about pain has relevance for those concerned with the forming of souls.

Allow me a story.

In April, a friend and I flew to New Zealand and hiked the Milford Tract. We went with a group, which meant that while we mostly hiked independently, we spent every night in a lodge that had hot water, beds, and prepared feasts served by the guides who kept track of us during the day. Byrle, a 73-year-old woman on the trek, knew if she didn't hike the Milford Track *soon*, it would not happen. We had 10–13 mile days, and the middle one (a 10-miler unless you added the three-mile jaunt to the Sutherland Falls at the end) involved hiking up to McKenzie Pass, crossing the pass (after donning hats, gloves, and a second layer of clothes), and then a descent sharper than our ascent. We were to leave by 7:30 to help ensure we'd all arrive at our destination by dark. The guides said anyone who wanted to go see the falls (spectacular falls in the top ten for cumulative height worldwide) needed to arrive in camp by four in the afternoon to take the optional three-mile trek.

Byrle came in last, not arriving until 4:30 that afternoon. Her knees, hips, feet—her whole body ached, but she was determined to see the falls. Knowing she was late she didn't stop to rest but headed straight to the Sutherland Falls trail, although the guides tried to stop her and advised against it. Several hours later she showed up late for dinner; but underneath the depth of her weariness we sensed jubilation.

What kind of discomfort had Byrle experienced in her 73 years that allowed her to accept significant pain and discomfort to push through and do what she had set out to do? What does pain teach us about fortitude, empathy, leaning on a community of others, taking on the burden of others? What does pain teach us about gratitude? If we learn from pain, what might eradicating pain and discomfort do to what it means to be souls embodied in flesh that bruises and bleeds and breaks and eventually dies?

David Pearce, a British independent philosopher most known for his 1995 book, *The Hedonistic Imperative*, argues for pursuing efforts to eliminate all forms of suffering (for people as well as animals) using genetic engineering, nanotechnology, pharmacology, and neurosurgery. He argues that our need for pain to keep us from hurting our bodies could be re-engineered with a non-pain trigger. He, and other forward thinking people like him, do not see pain as making us more empathetic, giving us fortitude, or otherwise building our character. In a popularized interview with George Dvorsky he quotes W. Somerset Maugham, "It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George Dvorsky, "Should we eliminate the human ability to feel pain?" Interview with David Pearce, *io9*, September 27, 2012, accessed May 2, 2017, [io9.gizmodo.com/5946914/should-we-eliminate-the-human-ability-to-feel-pain](http://io9.gizmodo.com/5946914/should-we-eliminate-the-human-ability-to-feel-pain)

Social scientists are not the only ones to take issue with sentiments like those expressed by David Pearce. Before we had much capacity to eradicate suffering, our spiritual mothers and fathers encouraged us to accept and live into the present moment, whether glorious or full of suffering. *The Sacredness of the Present Moment*, written by 18<sup>th</sup> century French Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, calls us to a practice of fortitude—the ability to see contentment in the present moment, including moments of suffering, because God is there, God is with us, loves us, and will not abandon us.<sup>5</sup>

When I taught Sociology of Sexuality we would eventually talk about menstruation and childbearing. What does a girl learn as she copes with the discomfort and inconvenience of menstruation and menstrual cramps? Might a woman who learns to listen to her body's ache for quiet, and to respond by releasing some expectations of herself, perhaps by seeking some solitude, be honoring the remarkable capacity for her body to grow and birth new life? When I interviewed women about their experiences one woman spoke of how she was more keenly aware of the world's pain and beauty in the days leading up to menstruation, and thought her heightened sensitivity might be when her defenses were down and she was most able to see the world as God might.

Might discomfort incline us toward greater respect for bodies that do amazing and often invisible work that keeps us and, as with childbearing, the whole of humanity moving forward? Can a headache make us grateful for health and remind us of our limitations?

One of Brian Doyle's uncommon prayers calls us toward thanks for small pains. Doyle writes:

But we do need them, of course... the small pains, the sore ankle, the pulled muscle, the common cold, the cut over the eye that needs three stitches, the jammed finger, the stiff knee—those are humbling, those are real, those are honest, they remind us that our vehicles have warranty periods... they reduce arrogance and make us alive and alert again to the fact that people bend over backward for us all day long... thanks for the small pains that remind us sharply of so many companions on the road who suffer savagely right this instant and deserve every scrap and shred of our prayer, thanks; and in closing hold them in the palm of Your hand and breathe hope into them? And also maybe just for fun quash this back spasm thing that started Wednesday? And so: amen.<sup>6</sup>

What would we lose if we lived in a world where we could take a pill for every pain? At what cost to our spiritual formation is the assumption that all pain should be eradicated rather than endured?

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Doyle, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2014), 29–30.



A nursing friend told me she sees a generational tendency that corresponds to the greater availability of pain medications. Though she certainly saw exceptions, the oldest generation tended to need to be encouraged to take pain medication regularly post-surgery, Baby-Boomers wanted their medication on time, but were okay with some pain as part of the process, those younger are watching the clock, wanting to be sure to get enough medication to avoid experiencing any post-op pain. This changing acceptance or rejection of pain is not anyone's fault; it has become a generally accepted assumption that pain is bad and should be avoided.

Pharmaceutical companies make possible a more pain-free life. We can take Advil for a headache and move on with life as usual or we can slow down and evaluate stressors in our life, while drinking water and perhaps taking a nap. We have choices. We can pop a pill or take the opportunity to listen to our body, and lift our body and its troubles to God. We live into our weakness and pain and let God be present in our suffering and teach us that we are able to work through and in our pain.

Again, hear me accurately. I'm not suggesting we shouldn't take medication for a headache, depression, back pain, or anxiety. But it raises the question of whether or not we too quickly move to eradicate pain. How might pain teach us something about making choices based on values rather than our discomfort? How does the assumption that we should escape pain make it more difficult to stay with and push forward on some task—climbing a mountain, finishing a semester of school, staying put to do the hard work required in a marriage that has hit a wall? Perhaps pain understood historically and theologically can help our bodies and spirits find the strength to carry on, put us at the mercy of others to tend to us, put us in the position of tending to others, and send us all into the arms of God.

## OVERVALUING EFFICIENCY

A related cultural assumption concerns how we approach limits and our high value of efficiency. Fatigue is a limit on our natural bodies. We can fight it with Red Bull or No-Doz. When people allow themselves to nap when weary, to stay home when ill, to be less productive than is possible, they are respecting human limitations. Living with limits, at its most fundamental level, puts us in a place of sacred appreciation for what is finite.

Contemporary contented people live with different expectations than most 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners, as did those who lived long before us. Contented souls living now want and choose less, because they are sure at the core there is more. That's difficult to do in a culture that values efficiency and the creative ways humanity has learned to push back the limits of earthy bodies subject to natural laws and physical limits.

Our culture embraces progress, having decided collectively that progress is good. It eliminates menial work, can eliminate pain, gives us more

daylight, mobility, a longer youth, and fewer consequences for enticing but unwise choices. Many of our inventions have freed us from the limits of our frailty.

We take for granted that efficiency is a collective good, so people who have an hour long commute to work elicit sympathy. Those sympathetic people might be less understanding of, and might even be critical of someone who “wasted” time walking one-plus hours to work when they could drive it in 10 minutes. I’m not suggesting those who commute an hour a day make a significant life change. The long car commute is forming their soul one way or another, and they could still push back and be counter-cultural by engaging that commute in intentional ways. Maybe time spent stuck in traffic is time to pray for other travelers stuck on their way to work, time driving past the same neighborhoods, parks, and places of business day after day might become time to pray blessing and care on homes, creatures, and employees passed along the way, places that could pass in a blur or become triggers for a kind of prayer that reminds us we belong to something much bigger than ourselves.

How radical might it be, if then on Sunday, commuters allowed God to shape their hearts for worship by choosing to make an hour-long walking pilgrimage to church (assuming they could), offering the sacrifice of time and comfort to gather with their community? This question is raised by Arthur Paul Boers in *The Way is Made by Walking*, a book about spiritual pilgrimage. Boers (and others) argue that our technological culture, which touts and sells labor-saving devices, does not make life less busy, but more busy. We can multitask, and we do, and become less aware of what is happening around us, inside of us. Walking, for Boers, has become a way to pay attention.

Maybe during the walk to church we become mindful of our church community and pray for them, ask God to show us where our hearts are out of alignment, observe God in the willow trees, the creek, the myriad of life that we pass without noticing when we drive. Such a sacrifice of time would require a reorienting of the day, a reorienting of what it means to arrive at church fresh, clean, and dressed in going-to-church clothes. Boers refers to this slower pace of life that involves walking as moving at the speed of life.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the most content people I’ve known “waste” time watching sunrises and clouds, choose to walk or bike to work instead of drive, and take road trips instead of ones involving airplanes. In some forgotten realm these sound a bit idyllic, and sunrises and cloud watching are not missed overly much because the value of efficiency runs deep in our collective genes.

This value of efficiency spills over into other realms, including economic ones. Consider the “responsible shopper.” Most of us grew up understanding this was a mother and wife (usually) who stretched the family’s

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Paul Boers, *The Way is Made by Walking* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 162.

dollars by shopping smart, rather than frittering money away. She shopped for sales, used coupons, always with an eye for the best values. What most contemporary shoppers don't know (and largely don't see as relevant to spiritual formation) is that rules of efficiency apply to most food, textiles and other goods manufactured today in ways that run counter to many of our Christian values and convictions. Becoming responsible shoppers in that context is attending responsibly to questions of ethics, compassion, and justice as they cast votes for certain companies and practices with every purchase.<sup>8</sup>

Being as we all eat at least three times a day, let's consider food, most of which is now grown and raised in ways our fore-parents wouldn't recognize as good farming or good animal husbandry. Food corporations grow and raise food efficiently in ways that make food cheaper for the consumer than in any prior time in history. But they do so by passing the real cost of that food onto farmers and farm laborers, animals (particularly pigs, milk cows and steers, and chickens—both laying hens and those raised for meat), the soil, creatures that always existed in tandem with farmers—such as bees, birds, and worms, our health, and the well-being of our planet. Perhaps being responsible in our consumer choices comes to mean we lift the veil of ignorance around how food is grown and raised and learn to eat in ethical and compassionate ways congruent with what we understand about being God's stewards of creation.

The Amish are a deeply religious community that largely accepts the limits imposed by daily, yearly, and life-span cycles. Exploring their lifestyles and reasons for their choices illustrates some rather different assumptions and values than those of us who have largely allowed technology to push back those limits. The Amish are not without their troubles, but are a people who better understand what it means to live in relationship with the land they depend upon for their livelihood and sustenance. Work and play are not two separate categories, but flow into and around each other. Communities build barns together, harvest crops together. They recreate and worship alongside each other, strengthening ties between family and community and the land that sustains them. Similarly, and yet differently, American Indians traditionally lived integrated, deeply spiritual, lives, and have looked at industrial progress with skeptical eyes. The choice of their elders not to assimilate to Western ways they saw as damaging to the earth, to other creatures, and to themselves, means they continue to live largely marginalized lives that have been largely stripped of the ability to live in partnership with creation as they did for centuries. They, along with the Amish, have a different cultural assumption—one that recognizes they are part of creation, and that their well-being depends on the well-being of the whole planet. Western culture, and contemporary Christian culture, has tended to emphasize humans as set apart from and placed over creation, with the right to use Earth's resources as we deem best.

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss this and other food ethics questions in greater detail in *To the Table: A Spirituality of Food, Farming, and Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

Movement that began at the margins for evangelicals<sup>9</sup> is working to help us reframe our assumptions, to see how they have been shaped by industrial and post-industrial values of progress and growth. The Amish and Native peoples have much collective wisdom to help us see what we have been unable to see given our cultural context. We are being challenged to again see ourselves in relation to all God's creation and to live in ways that promote a flourishing that goes beyond humans to all of God's creation, not only because our own survival depends on it, but because God allowed us stewardship of it.

If we understand our place in creation as God's stewards of a very good gift, spiritual formation happens as we seek to live in ways that honor that gift, and fosters the flourishing of all life dependent on a healthy planet. The food chain is a miracle of living and then dying so that other life might live. How might a stronger acknowledgement that these earthy bodies require, for our own sake and the sake of all life, an acceptance of limits inform and form our souls?

Similarly one might ask how souls might be formed through extravagant amounts of time offered up to observing, paying attention, blessing, and being grateful for life. Spiritual formation happens in earthy bodies doing what bodies must do to survive and thrive. Being mindful of how values of efficiency influence our choices reminds us that we are embodied souls who make choices everyday that matter.

## CONCLUSION

Spiritual formation occurs on retreats and in the moments spent in prayer before a day begins and on pilgrim journeys, such as the Camino Way. Yet profound formation also occurs in the routines of daily living. We are formed by choices made at the grocery store, as we reach for our medicine cabinet, as we consider whether to drive ten minutes or walk thirty. Such seemingly insignificant decisions reflect assumptions held about who we are, and how we are supposed to live in the world.

Our sense of autonomy can undermine our capacity to rest in dependence on God. Yet what de Caussade spoke in the 18<sup>th</sup> century remains true today:

To discover God in the smallest and most ordinary things, as well as in the greatest, is to possess a rare and sublime faith. To find contentment in the present moment is to relish and adore the divine will in the succession of all the things to be done and suffered which make up the duty to the present moment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network for one.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 64.

As we come to know how our sense of self and place in creation is shaped through our particular cultural context, we can make daily choices with more intention, knowing that every choice shapes and forms our soul. While our spiritual selves are formed by many assumptions, perhaps most significantly are those regarding to whom we belong—and so we come full circle back to belonging. We belong to ourselves, yes, but certainly also to God, and in important ways to those with whom we share this place and time in history. Perhaps we even belong as one part to the whole of God's creation. As people given the ability to pay attention to God's glory displayed throughout creation, charged with spreading the Light of Christ and the love of God broadly, may we be grateful for the remarkable gift of life, and to allow that gratitude to form our souls.

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