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# Cultivating Contemplative Availability

Ronald Charles Coward Jr.

George Fox University, [rcoward05@georgefox.edu](mailto:rcoward05@georgefox.edu)

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

CULTIVATING CONTEMPLATIVE AVAILABILITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

RONALD CHARLES COWARD, JR

PORTLAND, OREGON

OCTOBER 2017

Portland Seminary  
George Fox University  
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Ronald Charles Coward, Jr.

has been approved by  
the Dissertation Committee on October 19, 2017  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies.

Dissertation Committee:

Primary Advisor: Daniel Brunner, DPhil

Secondary Advisor: Diane Zemke, PhD

Expert Advisor: Tricia Gates Brown, PhD

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## DEDICATION

To Anita: my wife, my lover, and my best friend.

Thank you for walking this journey to deeper love and life with me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, LEC4 cohort, for the power of your thoughts and stories upon my life; Len Sweet, for inviting your students into life-transforming conversations; Donna Wallace, for saying no to a book idea, so a better one could emerge; Tricia Gates Brown, for believing strongly in the *Simply Available* vision; Colleen Butcher, for making me look grammatically astute; Father Guerric Heckel, for the journey-space at Mepkin Abbey and for your life-giving friendship; Dan Brunner, for wading through my confusion of heart and mind, allowing me to journey to availability; dad and mom, for your example of loving God deeply and faithfully; Anita, Nathan, Elliot, Elizabeth Joy, and Samuel, for enduring my absences and emotional roller-coaster, and believing in me more than I believed in myself; God—Father, Son, Spirit—for the pleasure of your loving and indwelling presence, and life giving conversation.

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## ABSTRACT

People, in their depths of being, long to escape the noise, pain, confusion, and emptiness that pervade life. Beyond the internal wars of an individual are the wars between neighbors, families, cultures, and nations; even within and between congregations and denominations. There is an extensive need to cultivate the human capacity to bring relational depth to the whole of life, including one's own self. The thesis of this dissertation maintains that to cultivate contemplative availability in loving union with God nurtures loving availability to self and others. Section 1 defines the problem as it is displayed, throughout society and the Church, in issues such as spiritual hunger and frustration, depression, suicide, and life dissatisfaction. Section 2 interacts with a variety of approaches to the Christian journey, including personal Bible study, spiritual disciplines, spirituality, centering prayer, and relational journey. Particular focus is given to the sense of "atmosphere" these approaches create. Section 3 develops the thesis that to cultivate contemplative availability in loving union with God nurtures loving availability to self and others. This section explores biblical, historical, and current expressions of contemplative availability, elevates a "theology of availability," and demonstrates the psychological and sociological effects of cultivating availability. Section 4 shows that the book proposal, *Simply Available*, creates an atmosphere that brings relational depth to life by cultivating the capacity of a person's whole being to say, "Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder." Section 5 provides a detailed proposal for the book, with sample chapters included in the dissertation's back matter. Section 6 tells the story of the writing of the dissertation and the author's personal

journey throughout the writing process, which ultimately led to the creation of *Simply Available*.

SECTION 1:  
THE PROBLEM

“There has to be more!” Jonathan cried out one morning as he jumped out of his chair to pace the floor of his office. The rumblings had been in him for a while, but eruption had finally happened. What he was feeling seemed wrong, but it was undeniable. Despite having been in the church all his life, loving and sharing the gospel of Jesus, praying, studying the scriptures diligently, worshiping with honest fervor, being a servant to his employees and community, growing as a husband and father, and a myriad of other expressions of faithfulness, there was a profound churning in his soul. This was not just an intellectual wrestling match; it was deeper than that. There was a growing sense of discontent and emptiness, and he did not know what to do with it. Based on all that he thought he knew doctrinally and of his life’s story, this should not be happening. “I love God, I believe Jesus rescued me, and I believe the Holy Spirit is present in my life. What is wrong with me?”

As Jonathan began to share with some of his closest and longest standing friends, he found many of them experiencing some level of the same struggle. Jonathan’s honesty seemed to awaken theirs. These friends represented a wide age range, and included an attorney, a doctor, a teacher, a pastor, and a few business owners. Something about their faith life was missing, too. They agreed that these stirrings were, simultaneously and paradoxically, unsettling and welcomed. In their world, this kind of internal turbulence was often labeled as a part of life that has not been surrendered or an issue of unconfessed sin, which would then lead to an unending and unhealthy kind of introspection that simply festered and infected their entire being.

Jonathan was unprepared for what was ahead of him. The lack of preparation was not for want of diligence or an issue of negligence; he and those with whom he had walked for years just did not know any better. They truly believed that their focus on deep commitment and discipline was all that was necessary to express the strongest faith life possible: to “finish well” was interpreted as a moral vision. However, Jonathan’s deepest being could no longer ignore the fact that something was missing in all of the arguments. He felt like his faith life was being lived out in a courtroom, when it seemed it should be more like a walk in a garden. After all, did not life, for humanity, begin in a garden?

Crushing, overwhelming, unrelenting, confusing, dissatisfying, noisy, frustrating, chaotic, unfair, conflicted, painful, struggling; these, among others, are words that even Christians would use to describe their deepest feelings about life, though not necessarily in a public conversation. If the full truth was expressed in their quietest and most vulnerable moments, it would most assuredly not describe an inner wellness. People are struggling immensely and hurting deeply, and they are doing so alone, or at least believe they are alone. The atmospheric conditions are set for a fierce storm.

### **Unsettled Humans**

In 1994, suicide ranked within the top five causes of death in the United States for the age brackets of 10 to 14, 15 to 24, and 25 to 34.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, suicide had

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *10 Leading Causes of Death, United States* (1995).

moved to second for the entire age range of 10 to 34.<sup>2</sup> More starkly, the age-adjusted rate of suicide in the United States jumped 24% in that same twenty-year timeframe.<sup>3</sup> A 2011 study by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that about one in 10 Americans aged 12 and over uses an anti-depressant, with depression as a precursor to suicide.<sup>4</sup> People are clearly hurting, and they are either unsure of options, or believe they have exhausted the alternatives for alleviating or understanding their struggle.

It is somewhat unclear the extent to which faith, including Christian faith, impacts depression. In a review of data from approximately 80 studies on religion and depression, McCullough and Larson ascertained that some studies showed decreased risk for people of faith, while others suggested elevated risk. Because of the low quality of research found in the literature, the authors suggest, “Religion should be measured with higher methodological standards than those that have been accepted in survey research to date.”<sup>5</sup> Although this assessment is nearly two decades old, what the researchers identify is extremely important. The lack of solid data is, in part, due to the complexity of definitions, as well as whether or not survey questions effectively elicit a true self-assessment from those surveyed. McCullough and Larson go on to recommend, “Prior to

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<sup>2</sup> National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and Centers for Disease Control, *10 Leading Causes of Death by Age Group, United States - 2014* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> S. C. Curtin, M. Warner, and H. Hedegaard, *Increase in Suicide in the United States, 1999-2014* (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2016), 2.

<sup>4</sup> L.A. Pratt, D.J. Brody, and Q. Gu, *Antidepressant Use in Persons Aged 12 and Over: United States, 2005-2008* (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2011), 1.

<sup>5</sup> M. E. McCullough and D. B. Larson, “Religion and Depression: A Review of the Literature,” *Twin Research*, no. 2 (1999): 126, accessed May 16, 2017, [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/40DF8B156A139BAF85929E8DCAB1A76E/S1369052300000672a.pdf/religion\\_and\\_depression\\_a\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_literature.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/40DF8B156A139BAF85929E8DCAB1A76E/S1369052300000672a.pdf/religion_and_depression_a_review_of_the_literature.pdf).

conducting statistical analyses on data from epidemiological investigations of religion, we recommend that researchers examine the construct validity of the religious measures beforehand to determine that they are indeed assessing distinct constructs.”<sup>6</sup> How often are faith-based surveys, or any surveys for that matter, designed to accomplish the most positive or most negative results possible, depending on the surveyor’s motives? Could it also be that our deepest hunger and longing cannot be measured, so that no survey will serve a data collection purpose?

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has measured life satisfaction in 38 countries around the globe. When it comes to a general satisfaction with life, on a scale of zero to 10, the average of all 38 countries was 6.5: with a high of 7.6 in Norway and low of 4.9 in South Africa. The United States came in at 6.9, just over the average.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting, yet unhelpful and unhuman, that the OECD aims to avoid emotion in all of its survey approaches. They also have no questions regarding spirituality. Is life satisfaction to be devoid of emotion and spirituality? Though the measures may be better defined as quality of human *existing*, it is still telling; life satisfaction for a globe full of people is anemic at best.

One metric for the Life Satisfaction Survey—social wellbeing—measures relational context. Connections with people are extremely significant for a healthy internal life. The social wellbeing measure moves in a helpful direction for understanding

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>7</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed July 18, 2016, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/>.

the human side of the matter. In their book *Wellbeing*, Rath and Harter of the Gallup organization point out:

When you reflect on the most memorable events, experiences, and moments in your life, you'll notice that they have something in common: the presence of another person. The best moments – and most agonizing ones – occur at the intersection between two people. Yet we often underestimate the impact of our closest relationships and social connections.<sup>8</sup>

They go on to say that, “Because we tend to synchronize our moods with other people around us, our emotions influence one another throughout the day.”<sup>9</sup> These emotions represent and fuel internal shifts, including conflict with self. Internal discord, compounded over time and unchecked, will metastasize and externalize. Paul Redekop notes, “It is widely believed that peaceful relations in the international sphere, in intergroup relations, as well as in interpersonal relationships, must begin with a level of peaceful relationship with self, or intrapersonal peace.”<sup>10</sup> The internal world cannot, and must not, be ignored by anyone, including researchers.

Three separate 10-year studies have shown that emotional stress more accurately predicts death from cancer and cardiovascular issues than does smoking—40% higher!<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, what some would consider “dealing with” the pains, conflicts, stresses, and challenges, would be more aptly described as cover-ups rather than truly resolving the problems. These band-aid solutions often become addictions, operating as anesthesia

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Rath and Jim Harter, *Wellbeing* (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Redekop, “Inner Peace and Conflict Transformation,” *The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Rollin McCraty, *The Science of the Heart*, vol. 2 (Boulder Creek, CO: HeartMath Institute, 2015), 10.

that creates a false internal stillness. In the book, *We Are Driven*, Hemfelt, Minirth, and Meier assess the problem:

Most applauded addictions are efforts to mask deep insecurities, both emotional and spiritual. Addictions are not simply bad habits. They are desperately complex attempts to ease universal human fears about our mortality and vulnerability. Applauded addictions become “gods” of performance and achievement in our lives, false gods that dominate us, and false gods to whom we turn to address the most profound questions about the meaning, purpose, and security of life.<sup>12</sup>

But it is not just the addictions of workaholism and materialism, the primary focus for the above statement, that are attempts to mask the struggle of becoming. Addiction to alcohol and various forms of drugs are a growing human crisis that is difficult to measure statistically. The most collectable data are adverse effects such as car accidents, domestic violence, and death. The fastest growing substance addiction is prescription drug use, particularly opioids. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has noted, “overdose deaths involving prescription opioids have quadrupled since 1999, and so have sales of these prescription drugs. From 1999 to 2014, more than 165,000 people died in the U.S. from overdoses related to prescription opioids.”<sup>13</sup> These opioids activate the pleasure centers of the brain in the same way that sex or eating do. In essence, they are able to provide pleasure upon demand for the person who is overwhelmed with any type of stress or pain.<sup>14</sup> *Psychology Today* assesses addictive behavior:

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier, *We Are Driven* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Prescription Overdose Opioid Data,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/overdose.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Kosten and Tony P. George, “The Neurobiology of Opioid Dependence: Implications for Treatment,” *Science and Practice Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2002), accessed August 8, 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2851054/>.

(M)ost addictive behavior is not related to either physical tolerance or exposure to cues. People compulsively use drugs, gamble, or shop nearly always in reaction to being emotionally stressed, whether or not they have a physical addiction. Since these psychologically based addictions are not based on drug or brain effects, they can account for why people frequently switch addictive actions from one drug to a completely different kind of drug, or even to a non-drug behavior. The focus of the addiction isn't what matters; it's the need to take action under certain kinds of stress.<sup>15</sup>

The inner noise, busyness, and turmoil are real, and people are in search of a way to quiet the impact and presence of its various forms and powers. We seek ways to help us escape a myriad of stressors, including our own thoughts. Richard Rohr describes the human mind as often being “a Mexican jumping bean” or “fly paper,” a mind popping with constant, incessant thoughts, and not being able to shake others; rarely, if ever, is there a place of stillness.<sup>16</sup>

Through an ever-growing number of self-assessment tools such as Strengths-Finder, Spiritual Gifts inventories, Meyers Briggs, DISC, and Enneagram – people can learn about their personality, their gifts and talents, and their own individual ways of seeing and acting in the world. These assessments can be applied across all arenas of life, from family and friends, to work, school, church, and volunteerism. With all of the tools and insights available, it seems that people can know more about themselves now than ever in history. The evidence shows that despite attempts to cover up the internal distress, rates of suicide continue to increase, the use of “numbing” mechanisms has multiplied, and the drive for power, position, and success continues. Deep personal satisfaction and peace continue to be evasive, even for diligent followers of Jesus.

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<sup>15</sup> Psychology Today, “Addiction,” accessed August 5, 2016.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/addiction>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rohr, “Becoming Stillness,” 2015, accessed July 19, 2016,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TGS-JD80nE>.

The life journey, no matter what the external realities, is greatly about one's own personhood, since the one person from whom no one can escape is self. Although many hide the turmoil well, the fact is that people, including Christians, are silently struggling, and even dying on the inside while the noise of the world grows ever intense. Television and radio never go off-air, news from the other side of the world is almost immediate, humans are increasingly electronically tethered, the exposure to expressions of everyone's soul-pain is constant via social media, and even the Church never stops asking for more faithfulness. Life just feels loud. Country music has made note of our prison in a song called *Noise*. At the song's conclusion, the writers express:

Noise  
 Yeah, we scream, yeah we shout 'til we don't have a voice  
 In the streets, in the crowds, it ain't nothing but noise  
 Drowning out all the dreams of this Tennessee boy  
 Just tryna be heard in all this noise

All this noise  
 Can't take the noise  
 Can't take the noise  
 Can't stand the noise  
 Can't take the noise<sup>17</sup>

The noise of external and internal life seems to be inescapable.

### **Conclusion**

People, in their depths of being, long to escape the noise, pain, confusion, and emptiness that pervade life, both externally and internally. Some will not slow down enough or find sufficient quiet to realize something is wrong or missing in their deepest

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<sup>17</sup> Kenny Chesney et al., *Noise, Cosmic Hallelujah* (Nashville, TN: Blue Chair / Columbia, 2016).

being. They are not pretending, they just do not know; we do not always know *that* we need, much less *what* we need. Beyond the internal wars of person are the wars between neighbors, families, cultures, and nations that constantly riddle the earth. We must find our way in, so that we can find our way out. Christians should be an example of the way in, but, if we are truly transparent, it seems we are lost as well.

Is part of the challenge that the Church has not effectively recognized that no one individual's pilgrimage is the same as another? Every story is wrought with unique pains and sufferings filling some days, while distinctive joys and blessings overflow in others. Giving up on the inner life is giving up on completeness of life; for some, it is giving up on life completely. Hearts, souls, and minds are tired and troubled to overwhelming proportions. The need for guidance and support for people along this passage of noise, longing, and confusion is abundantly clear. However, when Christian discipleship focuses on doing the right thing, doctrinal accuracy, and erecting intellectual boundaries for truth's safety, the fire of faith's passion is eventually quenched. Loving and deep relationality are pushed to the wayside, while faith development becomes a training in courtroom argument, playing your part in sustaining the industrialized institution, and, above all, living a life that can actually be blessed by God. The life of faith does not have to be this way; it should not be this way! Instead of transactional and institutional, the Christian faith journey must be nurtured as wholly relational. This paper explores a variety of approaches to the Christian journey and spirituality, ultimately casting a vision for cultivating a simple contemplative availability in loving union with God that, in turn, nurtures loving availability to self and others; it is here where relationships become the sole and soul purpose of life.

## SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

There are a variety of Christian responses to the experiences of Jonathan and his friends. Section 2 explores some of the approaches to the Christian journey that have been prominent in various expressions of Christianity. However, Jonathan believes that these methods have led him to his current situation: an experience of life where cultural noise and Christian busyness are a constant struggle to weather. Despite these prominent approaches, many are struggling. Maybe Jonathan and others are just not taking these disciplines seriously enough. Or perhaps the atmosphere created by these approaches is part of the problem.

Atmosphere is powerful; fostering life, stunting it, prohibiting it, or destroying it. Growing consideration is being given to the quality of the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the fuel we use, and more. However, another kind of atmosphere, one that impacts the human being in ways other than physical existence, should be considered: an internal ambience. Atmosphere, in relationship to God, self, and others, is created by words and ideas; some foster relational life, some stunt it, some enhance it, and some destroy it. What brings life to one person, may actually be harmful to others. Sometimes an atmosphere is fine for a period of time, but eventually becomes toxic with long-term exposure, while others are deadly from the very beginning. This section considers words and ideas that create the atmospheric conditions for living in relationship, primarily with God, but also with self and others.

In his 2007 book, *The Divine Mentor*, Wayne Cordeiro guides the reader to approach the Bible by sitting daily at Jesus' feet, as a way to a dynamic, vital, and

intimate relationship with God. Cordeiro points to the men and women of Scripture as mentors, ones whom God delegated to tutor those who followed them. The way to hear God's voice daily is by investing time in the Scriptures with these mentors, guided by the Holy Spirit as the Divine Mentor. The mentors, notes Cordeiro, provide lessons about life's opportunities and choices: for instance, Abraham on faith, Samson on sexual self-control, Daniel on how to influence your community, and Ruth on love and loyalty.<sup>18</sup>

Each of the book's twelve chapters adds a detail to what is, in essence, a typical daily "quiet-time" where a minimum of forty-minutes per day is encouraged for Bible study and journaling. The heart and vision behind Cordeiro's guide is to develop the likeness and mind of Christ:

It is not a program but the process that changes our hearts as we sit with the Master. This is not an end in itself but a means to the likeness and mind of Christ. Look closely to see *Him*, not to snag information about Him. Listen for His voice, not for a new idea. Catch the heart of God, and be slow to espouse new information until it bleeds out your toes. Let it sink in first. It's food for your soul before it's fodder for your ideas.<sup>19</sup>

There is a refreshing passion and relationality to what Cordeiro writes. However, the pattern he describes – which is similar to the other discipline-based approaches below – conveys the idea that developing the capacity to be like Christ is a result of being with him enough to learn and copy his ways. The goal is to become like Christ through studying biblical mentors. However, there is a significant difference between growing to be more and more like Christ and Christ growing more and more visible *in* us. Our goal is the latter: that the incarnate one continues to incarnate himself through us.

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<sup>18</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *The Divine Mentor* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2007), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

There is certainly usefulness in learning from the lives of those whose journeys with God are provided in Scripture. This is a valuable lesson from Cordeiro's mentoring idea. However, no person can ever *learn* enough to become like Christ. Contrary to Cordeiro's final words, God's presence is much more defining than simply His "hand on" a life.<sup>20</sup> He *is* our life!

A similar proposal, yet with more disciplines, is found in Donald S. Whitney's book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. He clearly and boldly defines his vision: "The Spiritual Disciplines are the God-given means we are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of Godliness."<sup>21</sup> Whitney proposes 10 disciplines: Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. Whitney says these disciplines are "like channels of God's transforming grace. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed. That's why the Disciplines must become priority for us if we will be Godly."<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that Whitney places his list in the realm of *the* spiritual disciplines, as if there are no others to be considered. As will be shown below, he is not alone in this idea. Whitney is passionate about discipline and desires for all followers of Jesus to have the same fire. In fact, a lack of passionate discipline seems to displease him significantly. Christian achievement is a key goal, as Whitney quotes multiple persons supporting the idea that "no one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline." The atmosphere that Whitney's proposal creates is not,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>21</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17.

for many, a very inviting atmosphere for walking in and exploring a living, vital relationship with God. Living in relationship with the creator of all should not be equated with becoming a great soccer player, pianist, or business strategist. It is a relationship, not a skill set. As much as Whitney tries to warm-up the vision of discipline-driven faith, it still seems non-relational.

The disciplines mindset and approach unnecessarily complicates a person's call to live every moment in loving relationship with God. It says, "Do these things diligently in order to become right." It is baffling that those who loudly proclaim grace, also make godliness something to be obtained by working for it with great discipline. Why not learn to nurture relational *being* so that doing what is best in the moment will flow in, from, and as relationship? No doubt Whitney and others who embrace the spiritual disciplines approach—the writer of this paper once one of them—would argue that spiritual disciplines are about cultivating being; however, the various lists of the spiritual disciplines are extensive to-do lists. Cultivating true, deep, and loving relationality becomes lost, even though there are attempts to wrap the idea in relational packaging.

Another classic resource for a spiritual disciplines approach is Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. How Foster uses the term discipline, the nature of the life to which he invites his readers, and the atmosphere with which he does so, give evidence of more grace. He writes, "The needed change within us is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given."<sup>23</sup> Foster provides a more nurturing and relational atmosphere as he lays out his recommended

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<sup>23</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 5.

disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. However, he too speaks of his list as *the* spiritual disciplines, as if there are no others to be considered. The lists provided by these two prominent authors differ significantly. A decision about which disciplines are most important is clearly based on opinion.

Even with the difference in relational atmosphere that Foster cultivates, there is still the idea that one must be faithful to these disciplines in order to open the door, “as a means by which we are placed where [God] can bless us.”<sup>24</sup> How well must these disciplines be followed before a life is worthy of blessing? Did Christ not already open that door? Foster points to Heini Arnold’s idea of avoiding ‘will’ worship, which is the idea that we can “succeed and attain victory over our sin by the strength of our will.”<sup>25</sup> To counteract the willpower idea, the disciplines are raised up as God’s means of grace. However, Foster notes that “by themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done.”<sup>26</sup> This is the pattern among those who urge and even demand adherence to a list of spiritual disciplines as key to becoming Christlike and bless-able. This is a transactional view of walking with God that puts defeating sin in the forefront of the Christian life in order to avoid the “chasms of moral bankruptcy.”<sup>27</sup> Foster has most clearly laid out the argument for the *why* behind

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

spiritual disciplines. But is this truly the context of God’s relational invitation and role as indwelling relational presence?

Dallas Willard has written a trilogy focused on spiritual formation: *Hearing God*, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and *The Divine Conspiracy*. His aim for nurturing relational spirituality is most evident in his earliest writing. Willard’s first book, *Hearing God*, developed the idea of a conversational relationship with God, making God much more present to the person and to everyday life. In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, he reviews a variety of mindsets and principles behind spiritual disciplines, particularly in his chapter, “History and Meaning of the Disciplines.” Here Willard sifts through a litany of “errors” and comes to his final clarification on the true nature of the spiritual disciplines: “Such an activity plants in us, in the embodied personality that is the carrier of our abilities (and disabilities!) a readiness and an ability to interact with God and our surroundings in a way not directly under our control.”<sup>28</sup> In the last book of the trilogy, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard invites his readers to rediscover their hidden life in God, and calls them to experience God in the here and now. Unfortunately, he perpetuates the spiritual disciplines pattern of life that is always striving to obtain Christ-likeness: he includes a chapter entitled “A Curriculum for Christlikeness.” Willard recommends training the student-apprentice in order to overcome consumer Christianity, thus avoiding “a futile and failing existence.”<sup>29</sup> He began shaping this idea in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*: “We

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<sup>28</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1988), 151. Also note his use of discipline in the singular, indicating no particular list, only the idea of any discipline that may be pursued by a person.

<sup>29</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1997), 310.

*can* become like Christ in character and in power and thus realize our highest ideals of well-being and well-doing.”<sup>30</sup>

There seems to have been a shift in Willard’s thinking from *Hearing God* to the last in his trilogy: from a focus that is more on cultivating a conversational relationship, to one cultivating discipline. The spirit, heart, and tone of *The Divine Conspiracy* are different. Maybe Willard realized that shift, for one year before his death in 2013, he added this in “Word from the Author” to the updated and expanded edition of *Hearing God*, his most popular of the trilogy:

It is very important to remember and to always keep before your mind this fact: You are an unceasing spiritual being, created for an intimate and transforming friendship with the creative Community that is the Trinity. Learning to hear God is much more about becoming comfortable in a continuing conversation, and learning to constantly lean on the goodness and love of God. . . . My hope is that this book will help you develop an ongoing relationship with God that will involve conversation, communion and consummation.<sup>31</sup>

The Epilogue of this same book is entitled “The Way of the Burning Heart.”

Compare the difference in tone found in *The Divine Conspiracy*: “We may not soon have bigger crowds around us—and in fact they may for a while even get smaller—but we will soon have bigger Christians for sure.”<sup>32</sup> Losing people, and bigger Christians, are those really the goal?

With a significantly different approach to the disciplines championed by the authors above, Marjorie Thompson, in her book *Soul Feast*, cultivates the idea of “Christian spiritual practices. . . (as) a variety of possibilities for enriching your spiritual

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<sup>30</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, ix. [italics original]

<sup>31</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 373.

life.”<sup>33</sup> Thompson aims to cultivate her readers’ exploration through chapters such as: “Chewing the Bread of the Word,” “Communication and Communion with God,” “Gathered in the Spirit,” “Reclaiming Sabbath Time,” “The Practice of Self-Emptying,” “Of Conscience and Consciousness,” “Companions on the Journey,” and “Entertaining Angels Unawares.”<sup>34</sup> The book provides a group study guide for use in a ten- to twelve-session study.

Although she acknowledges spiritual discipline language, and seeks to nurture understanding of it as a practice, she mostly refrains from its use, preferring the phrase ‘spiritual practices.’ In considering spiritual practices and holding them up as time-honored, Thompson refreshingly points out that “each practice needs to be interpreted and tested for our time if it is to be recovered as a valuable source of spiritual nurture. Staying alert to our current context allows us to discern where the winds of the Spirit are blowing.”<sup>35</sup> Thompson’s nurturing approach is unwavering throughout. For example,

As for the personal anxieties or hesitance we may feel, I suggest we bring them with us into the explorations that follow. Some will evaporate as we come to recognize more about God and ourselves. Others may remain. We need to be gentle with our fears. Testing our experience over time, we can learn to trust the great love of One whose grace transforms us in ways that surpass our wildest dreams!<sup>36</sup>

Thompson’s invitation to the Christian spiritual life cultivates an atmosphere that communicates: ‘it is safe here,’ for the spiritual journey.

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<sup>33</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Newly Revised ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xvii and xxvi.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Ronald Rolheiser, in his book *The Shattered Lantern*, invites us to a Christian spirituality that rediscovers a felt presence of God, “not by learning more or trying harder, but by living a different way.”<sup>37</sup> He was the first author, for the writer of this paper, to push firmly on the door into a new way of seeing the Christian faith journey. He unveils the narcissism, pragmatism, and restlessness that pervade the world, including the faith world, and shows how these realities very often lead to a practical atheism; God may be claimed as a belief, but God is not truly recognized. Rolheiser notes that “each of us aches for significance, meaning, uniqueness, preciousness, immortality, and great love and great beauty in our lives...[and that] we try through our own efforts, to create significance, uniqueness, and immortality for ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> From that exposed place of crisis, he escorts the reader to a simple contemplative vision, describing it as being “when we put our hearts, minds, and lives in the correct posture, when we resist our spontaneous urge to achieve these things for ourselves and, instead, let God give them to us.”<sup>39</sup> It is those last words that make the atmosphere that Rolheiser is cultivating different: let God give them to us. The result is “faith that is a habit of the heart, not an act of the will.”<sup>40</sup> The authors above argue that being faithful to the spiritual disciplines could create that “habit of the heart.” Rolheiser defines the practice of the disciplines as pragmatism, self-achievement, and an act of the will. When life is lived, not from a sense of obligation or discipline, but as a relational “wovenness,” a different kind of internal atmosphere

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<sup>37</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2004), back cover.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 118f.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

develops. “[A]s long as you receive and respect reality as gift it will continue to give you life and goodness. If you attempt to seize it or take it as owed, you will know shame, disharmony, pain, death, and loss of a connection with God.”<sup>41</sup> Approaching life through the spiritual disciplines does not seem to cultivate this kind of availability.<sup>42</sup> We become able to *do* the things God would have us do throughout our day-to-day lives by being simply available to *receive* from God throughout our day-to-day lives. By God’s grace, we live in constant union with Him. Rolheiser unveils the fact that we block our *experience* of this kind of life through our narcissistic, pragmatic, restless way of life. He says we need to become a contemplative people, “waking up...[to] stand before reality and experience it without the limits and distortions created by” these unhealthy ways.<sup>43</sup> Contemplation is doing nothing. Why do nothing? What is the value of nothing? “All thoughts and feelings about God, even scripture itself, are not God. Good as they are, they are not the reality. At a point, they must give way to the reality...we must just sit *in* God.”<sup>44</sup> Most of us do not really understand how life changing an idea that is.

Another prominent voice inviting the Christian world to return to more spiritual roots is Cynthia Bourgeault. Her most recent book, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, specifically aims at nurturing a nondual theory and practice. We focus on this particular Bourgeault book because it is the most recent and she speaks of it as a compilation, yet

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 231-37. Rolheiser does speak to the power of “ritual,” but does so in the context of protecting the necessity of being together in community.

<sup>43</sup> Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 180.

extension, of her earlier work.<sup>45</sup> Mining from Thomas Keating and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Bourgeault guides the reader into an understanding of Centering Prayer that is quite helpful. Her approach is not a legalistic how-to, but a clear, principle-based guidance on why Centering Prayer is important, and what happens in and with the human being over time. Part one, called “A Short Course on Centering Prayer”, is particularly helpful for the newest sojourner into a contemplative way of life. Contrastingly, the thick introduction might best be avoided by novices. It is important to note that “*The Cloud of Unknowing Revisited*” would be extremely helpful as a guide for anyone engaging that mentally and spiritually challenging fourteenth-century spiritual classic.

There are several helpful ideas we want to sift from Bourgeault’s offering. First, she compares Centering Prayer to falling asleep: “You don’t have to ‘do’ it; it happens on its own, programmed right into your original intention to be deeply open to God. You won’t notice the moment you stop thinking; what you’ll notice is the moment you start thinking again.”<sup>46</sup> This is an interesting comparison, since falling asleep can be a significant challenge when practicing Centering Prayer, at least in the early morning hours, but it is still a helpful comparison. Bourgeault exposes a misguided tendency for many within the Christian faith journey, while also affirming the way of the heart:

It is indeed true that ego-driven spiritual ambitiousness can wind up in very bad places. But it is important never to lose sight of the fact that *spiritual ambitiousness and attention of the heart are mutually exclusive categories*. The proud may fall, but it will not be through following the way of the heart, for the

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<sup>45</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016), 1f. [italics original]

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 26.

heart has its inbuilt safeguard: it perceives only in the modality of surrender (which means, literally, to “hand oneself over,” to entrust oneself entirely).<sup>47</sup>

It is from this attention of the heart that, over time, we are able “to be fully present to God, but at the same time fully present to the situation at hand, giving and taking from the spontaneity of [our] own authentic, surrendered presence.”<sup>48</sup> This is an example of the nondual life to which we are invited. Bourgeault wants to make sure it is understood, however, that what she and others are giving invitation to is “not just a spiritual attitude,” but “*a strong, sensation-based physical practice.*”<sup>49</sup>

In her aim for non-duality, there are a number of contradictions. First, her use of “operating system” to describe this mode of perception in a non-dual consciousness actually leads to a hardware/software duality that is further exacerbated by coming across as impersonal.<sup>50</sup> Another significant concern arises with her lack of distinction between self and God under an idea of being “re-collected:”

In the nanosecond between the cessation of one thought and the arising of the next, there is a moment of pure consciousness where subject and object poles drop out and you’re simply *there*. For a nanosecond, there’s no “you” and no God. No experience and no experiencer. There’s simply a direct, undivided, sensate awareness of a single, unified field of being perceived from a far deeper place of aliveness. And what is first tasted in a nanosecond can indeed become a stable and integrated state.<sup>51</sup>

While we agree with the aim for oneness, the journey away from individualism, and that we have a self that we are seeking to realize, there is a distinct difference between a

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76. [italics original]

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 130.

woven reality of individual person's living in community and an idea of one single thread; the Triune God should be the first consideration here for the Christian.

Ultimately, only the Infinite One can understand the fullness of relational expression between God and all that is, since all came from God. We should, therefore, seek to understand how to simply be available to all that God will share with us as we learn to live *in* God. Centering Prayer is a way of cultivating this fullness and completeness of availability.

Although there are a few reasons to hesitate on some of her ideas, Bourgeault's invitation to cultivate our relationship with God where the "'inner wellspring' is no longer a place you go to... [but] a place you *come from*," or better yet, in which you live, is an invitation we receive with joy.<sup>52</sup> Her guidance in the way of the heart through Centering Prayer remains extremely helpful.

In his spiritual journey trilogy—*Surrender to Love*, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, and *Desiring God's Will*—David Benner leads the reader on a relational journey from beginning to end. As a depth psychologist, transformational coach, and author, Benner's life passion is to help people "walk the human path in a deeply spiritual way and the spiritual path in a deeply human way." Each of the expanded editions of his books includes the choice between a one- or five-session discussion guide to aid in personal and small group application. Benner writes that his trilogy "describes the foundational Christian practice of surrender, how this practice emerges as a response to Perfect Love,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27.

and the changes this produces in our identity, will and deepest desires.”<sup>53</sup> He goes on to say that the three books together guide in “walking the spiritual path as God’s heart and mind slowly but truly become our own.”<sup>54</sup> *Surrender to Love* focuses on discovering the heart of Christian spirituality, *The Gift of Being Yourself* is a sacred call to self-discovery, and *Desiring God’s Will* aims to align the reader’s heart with the heart of God.

Throughout the three books, Benner keeps the whole person and real life in view: he clearly writes from his own journey. His approach is highly conversational, shepherding, personal, honest, and very much from a journey of the heart perspective.

What distinguishes Thompson, Rolheiser, Bourgeault, and Benner from the spiritual disciplines approaches is that their invitation is not to do the right things to become holy, godly, or worthy of blessing, but more simply to live a relational journey with, and in, God. All of the above authors offer a basic vision and approach to the Christian spiritual journey. One group is complex and puts forward disciplines as a means for “living right” for God, while the other is simple and nurtures the privilege of loving relationship from, with, and in God. The depth and beauty of loving relationship is lived from simple availability.

This thesis arises from a heart that has journeyed through the way of complex, relationally disconnecting disciplines to now cultivating the simple way of availability. There is no call to leave Bible reading, prayer, service, worship, or expressions of faith behind. However, there is a shift away from developing effectiveness in disciplines in order to please God and fight moral bankruptcy. Instead, there is a vision to simply be

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<sup>53</sup> David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

available to cultivate relational depth with the reality of God's literal, loving, and empowering union with us in every moment. It is the idea of, and basis for, this life of abundant possibility that we now explore in the next Section.

### SECTION 3:

#### THESIS

Contemplation is typically understood as a period of inactivity accompanied by deep thought. When added to the idea of prayer, contemplation becomes a heart-centered approach where the person's posture is that of "looking or gazing at," and less a brain-focused activity.<sup>55</sup> Mark A. McIntosh notes that "in Orthodox theology, contemplation is inherently transformative, leading those who pray towards a habitual recollection of God, holiness of life, and a capacity for wisdom and discerning judgement."<sup>56</sup> Of the transformations that contemplative prayer can bring, this paper looks specifically at the idea of contemplative availability in loving union with God. Kevin Hart points out that "Theologians from St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great to St. Bernard of Clairvaux have used the word 'contemplation' [*contemplatio*] when speaking of the love of God."<sup>57</sup> As will be shown, cultivating contemplative availability in loving union with God develops a self that embraces the reality of one's very being as from the being of God: the infinite in and with the finite. Contemplation, therefore, develops a deep sensitivity to this literal union with the personal, relational presence of an infinite, transcendent God.

However, discussing those who are considered "contemplatives" can easily make the idea of becoming more contemplative seem impossible, particularly in such an intensely busy and noisy world. How are silence, quiet, and stillness to be found, both

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<sup>55</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second ed. "Contemplation."

<sup>56</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, "Contemplation."

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Hart, "Contemplation: Beyond and Behind," *SOPHIA* 48 (2009): 436.

externally and internally? What difference does it make, anyway? Cultivating contemplative availability is vital to navigating, managing, and even alleviating the busyness and noisiness of a person's life and self. This paper and the artifact that it supports are written to address this vital need. How can a person become truly available *to* God in such a way that it also leads to an availability to self and the surrounding world that is deeply and abundantly guided *by* God?

Contemplative availability in loving union with God is birthed from being quiet in the literal loving presence of God. It is in this quiet, and from this quiet, that a person becomes increasingly available to God with no agenda of his or her own. Here we find submission not to an enemy, but to the one who loves the human being more broadly and deeply than can be intellectually understood. What is being encouraged here is a fully relational approach to the story of God's availability and interaction with humanity, and humanity's availability and interaction with God. This thesis proposes that it is in simple and loving union with God that a person is truly and completely available to God in His fullness for whatever *God* chooses: all that a person is and has is fully open to all that God is and has for him or her. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century monk Jean-Pierre de Caussade describes it as a "state in which one discovers how to belong wholly to God through the complete and total assignment of all rights over oneself—over one's speech, actions, thoughts and bearing; the employment of one's time and everything relating to it."<sup>58</sup> Through the cultivation of contemplative availability as loving union with God in *select* moments, it is then cultivated for *every* moment. Brunner, Butler, and Swoboda aptly capture the heart

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<sup>58</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1989), 9.

of this idea: “The practice of awareness is a way of embodying spirituality, of ‘seeing,’ of nurturing a deeper mindfulness of God’s presence in the world and in our everyday, mundane lives.”<sup>59</sup>

Cultivation can take place in a variety of ways, including centering prayer, meditating on Scripture, listening to music that moves the depths of being, watching the flames and coals of a fire, walking quietly in nature with no agenda other than being with God. The point is not what is being done, but being fully available to loving communion with God in an internal stillness and quiet. Granted, this is the cultivation of a way of living that is deeply spiritual and vastly different from the busy, driven, noise-consumed life in which much of humanity is unknowingly, and maybe bitterly, enslaved. To address this enslavement we propose cultivating contemplative availability in loving union with God to create the nurturing atmosphere for cultivating availability to self and others.

### **Biblical and Historical Considerations**

Through stories from the Scriptures, Christian history, and current practice, we discover principles and examples of contemplative availability.

#### *Elijah*

The impact of Elijah’s desert and mountain journey is significant to the contemplative world, including monasticism, and particularly the Carmelites. Elias Friedman indicates that by the fourth century Elijah was considered the founder of *all*

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<sup>59</sup> Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 182.

Christian monastic life.<sup>60</sup> Jane Ackerman notes that though “Elijah’s lifetime predated...the founding of the Carmelite order by more than two thousand years... [his story led to] full-hearted, all-out Elijan abandonment to God on the mountain.”<sup>61</sup> Elijah is a foundational biblical personality for monasticism, and is thereby an important influence on contemplative history.

It is often the difficulties of life that drive a person to cry out to God, seeking him for resources such as understanding, strength, favor, or protection; one such person is Elijah. What makes Elijah unique is that his desert and cave experiences take place just after a dramatic expression of God’s powerful presence (I Kings 18:16-19:18). On Mount Carmel, in a battle between the god Baal and the one true God, Elijah prayed for God to show that he was turning the hearts of the people back to him. After the prayer, fire fell and burned the sacrificial bull, the altar, and soil, along with drying up the water that filled a surrounding trench. As a final declaration, Elijah decides to demonstrate God’s decisive defeat of the god Baal, by slaughtering four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal in the Kishon Valley. Elijah then returned to the top of Mount Carmel, seeking much needed rain. Once he knows rain is on the way, Elijah runs approximately seventeen miles to Jezreel *ahead* of Ahab on his chariot.

Following this incredible experience, Elijah receives a message from Jezebel that she will see to it that he is killed within twenty-four hours. What makes the message worse for him is that she is naming as her support the “gods” he had just proven to be

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<sup>60</sup> E. Friedman, *The Latin Hermits of Mount Carmel: A Study in Carmelite Origins* (Rome: Teresianum, 1979), 97-99.

<sup>61</sup> Jane Ackerman, “Stories of Elijah and Medieval Carmelite Identity,” *History of Religions* 35, no. 2 (November 1995: 139 and 47, accessed August 9, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062693>).

false. A fight-or-flight decision now faces the man who has nothing left to give. Afraid of one person, after having just defeated hundreds, an exhausted Elijah runs for his life far into the desert. Barlow notes, “Baal’s prophets were slain—Jehovah acknowledged with one voice—false worship put down. Elijah’s life aim—the transformation of Israel into a kingdom of God—was all but accomplished. In a single day, all this bright picture was annihilated.”<sup>62</sup> Elijah crashed, retreated, and eventually headed “to another mountain, to confront, not Baal, but the LORD himself—whom Elijah serves, but whose ways he only partly understands and accepts.”<sup>63</sup>

The contemplative availability of Elijah over the time of his ministry, as recorded in the Scriptures, is displayed both in publicly demonstrative ways and in privately personal encounters. His brief ministry story found in First and Second Kings, when read from a conversational and relational perspective, provides significant insight into the intimacy between God and Elijah. God shows himself as a friend to Elijah and was good to him, graciously meeting Elijah at the core of his being; and Elijah was very honest about where he was, at his core. As a friend, God encourages, responds to, and rescues Elijah, even when Elijah questions his own calling: bread, water, a touch. Eventually, “God speaks in a quiet voice here to a prophet drained of strength.”<sup>64</sup> God’s treatment of

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<sup>62</sup> George Barlow, *First and Second Kings*, vol. 8, 37 vols., *The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 305.

<sup>63</sup> Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 143.

<sup>64</sup> Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, vol. 8, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003; repr., 4th), 224.

Elijah, Iain Provan points out, is “noticeably gentler than his treatment of Jonah (Jonah 1:4ff., though contrast 4:6ff.)! So softly does he creep back into Elijah’s life....”<sup>65</sup>

Elijah’s story is that of honest, human struggle. He was a human being; therefore, he was an imperfect man with limits. Howell and Howell note:

Jezebel’s threat provides the trigger and Elijah responds with several symptoms of depression. Elijah flees from others, even leaving his servant behind, as he seeks solitude. In addition to being a symptom of depression, isolation can also perpetuate depression as the individual ruminates over a faulty interpretation of events and separates themselves from those who could provide a challenge to such maladaptive thought patterns.<sup>66</sup>

It is true that Elijah was exhausted and in deep emotional and spiritual pain. But is it a proper conclusion that Elijah’s getting away was a mistaken response? This is not to say that isolative behavior among the depressed is to be nurtured; however, God met Elijah there in the desert, fed him, then sent him on another journey of forty days and nights to a mountain cave where God met him again. Lockwood goes so far as to say that Elijah was abdicating his responsibilities as a prophet because of “egocentricity.”<sup>67</sup> He goes on to say:

Reluctantly and belatedly, the Lord dismisses him, and in doing so gives him a handful of final instructions. Angry at being dismissed, Elijah stubbornly holds on to the reins of office, employing Elisha as his servant rather than anointing him as his successor. He carries out the other instructions he has received incorrectly, if at all, doing things his way rather than in conformity with the Lord’s parting wishes—with disastrous consequences.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Provan, 144. [parenthesis original]

<sup>66</sup> J. Dwayne Howell and Susan H. Howell, “Journey to Mount Horeb: Cognitive Theory and I Kings 19:1-18,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 7 (2008): 658.

<sup>67</sup> Peter F. Lockwood, “The Elijah Syndrome: What Is Elijah up to at Mt. Horeb?” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (2004): 52.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

The reader may accept Lockwood's appraisal of Elijah, or they might think that Lockwood did not approve of God's ways, as if he was not fast enough or strong enough in his correction of Elijah's attitude. However, God was not asking for Elijah's perfection. Although he did not respond in full obedience to God's instructions, Elijah was never unavailable to God: he was simply honest about his emptiness and struggle. In the desert where Elijah showed his greatest point of darkness in wanting God to take his life, God lovingly sent an angel twice to wake him up with bread and water. On Mount Horeb, when it was clear that God was speaking, Elijah went to God's voice, he did not run from it. In the end, God did not end Elijah's life: he ushered him even more into His ineffable presence via a whirlwind.

Lastly, perhaps Elijah is an example of someone who was separated from the surrounding world in order to gain insight for and influence upon the surrounding world. There are persons who are more introverted, deeply contemplative, and isolated who emerge from time to time with a message for the people through books, speaking, coaching, and other expressions. For Elijah, his story was more dramatic: calling down fire. Susan Cain's book *Quiet* argues, via stories and research, that the power of the introvert is in significant quiet, stillness, and time alone.<sup>69</sup> From this place, they become who they are and emerge at their best. This idea will be considered further below with a look at Thomas Merton. Elijah shook his world, and the story is still being told.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Cain, *Quiet* (New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 2013).

*Jesus and Mary of Bethany*

Another defining story for contemplative availability is that of Jesus and his friends Mary and Martha. One of the well-known portions of their story is when Jesus declares to Martha, “Mary has chosen the better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). These are words spoken by Jesus to a friend who was bothered by her sister Mary’s stillness and attentiveness to Jesus while she was busy serving everyone. It is interesting how often Martha is defended by commentators on this text. Ephrem the Syrian goes so far as to say, “Martha’s love was more fervent than Mary’s, for before he had arrived there, she was ready to serve him. . . . When he came to raise Lazarus to life, she ran and came out first.”<sup>70</sup> Even Augustine made it a point not only to protect Martha, but to elevate her: “Martha was busy satisfying the needs of those who were hungry and thirsty. With deep concern, she prepared what the Holy of Holies and his saints would eat and drink in her house. It was an important and transitory work.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, Martha’s reproach of Jesus is quite strong. A.T. Robertson describes the intensity in the phrase, “She came up to him” (Luke 10:40): “*Epistasa* is the ingressive aorist here and really means, stepping up to or bursting in or upon Jesus. It is an explosive act as is the speech of Martha.”<sup>72</sup> Martha seems to have been volatile in her approach, but had she said nothing and continued in her service, Jesus quite possibly would have had nothing to say

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<sup>70</sup> Arthur A. Just, ed. *Luke*, ed. Thomas Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, vol. III* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 183.

<sup>71</sup> *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 38 (New York, NY: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 350.

<sup>72</sup> A. T. Robertson, *The Gospel According to Luke*, vol. II, 6 vols., *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), 155-56.

to her. However, because she sought not only to elevate her physical busyness over Mary's spiritual investment, but also to call Jesus to account for it, Jesus spoke to Martha's need. Robertson indicates that the verbs Jesus used to describe Martha carried the ideas of being divided, distracted, and in tumult.<sup>73</sup> Martha, as John Noland portrays her, is:

Over-stretched in her busyness, [and] makes a very natural request for her sister's help. But at the end of the day her request quite fails to recognize the uniqueness of the situation and reflects the outlook of a person who, despite the best of intentions, has become ensnared by "the worries and riches and pleasures of life" (8:14), and has lost sight of what must predominate in one's true life as a disciple (4:4). The sharpness of Martha's language suggests that we should see a deliberate contrast between Martha as she *tells* Jesus what he *must* say and Mary who *listens* to what Jesus *wishes* to say.<sup>74</sup>

Jesus was inviting Martha to a different kind of life; he was not seeking to chastise her frustration in the way that she did to him. He wanted her to learn to be present in the moment in the way that Mary was. It did not mean she had to stop serving, but that she would serve in a different way, no longer "pulled or dragged away."<sup>75</sup>

It is important to note that Jesus' response to Martha's chastisement of him "not caring" and of Mary "not helping" is representative of the life pattern he displayed for those who followed him in his ministry. Luke, in his gospel, indicates that even as news

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>74</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, vol. 35B, 53 vols., *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 606. [italics original]

<sup>75</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, vol. 3, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986; repr., 2nd), 452.

was spreading of Jesus teaching and healing ministry, crowds of people sought him out, but Jesus still “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:15-16).<sup>76</sup>

It is interesting to note, in another story, the differences in relationship and response between Jesus and these sisters upon the death of their brother Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, but Jesus waited to go to them for the purposes of “God’s glory” (John 11:4). When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany where they lived, he learned that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Martha was the first to approach Jesus by going out to meet him while Mary stayed home. Here is where the relational and response patterns differ significantly. Both of the sisters’ initial words to Jesus were exactly the same; “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21, 32). Martha went on to elucidate her beliefs and almost instructing Jesus by way of them, and Jesus went on to instruct her. Mary, on the other hand, spoke the words with weeping and had others with her who were weeping, and Jesus was moved to weeping. John makes a point in telling the story to speak of Jesus’ love for both Mary and Martha, but there is clearly a difference between the two in the relational context. The reader is also told, “many of the Jews who had come to visit *Mary*, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him” (John 11:45). Leon Morris notes “throughout this narrative the emphasis has been on Martha and it is curious that the Jews are said to have come to the less prominent sister.... It may be that they were more concerned for Mary than for the bustling Martha.”<sup>77</sup> Mary seems to be

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<sup>76</sup> Other Luke texts related to Jesus and prayer: Luke 3:21; 4:1-13; 5:15-16; 6:12-13; 9:18, 28; 11:1-13; 21:37; 22:39-46.

<sup>77</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 500.

loved deeply and demonstratively not only by Jesus, but also by many others around her. It seems that there is a more heart-centered way to Mary and a more action-centered way to Martha. Noted here is the nature of response of Jesus and others to these two ways: Mary toward being, Martha toward doing. It is in the context of being where loving communion is most present. According to Jesus, Mary chose the better way.

### *Thomas Merton*

Thomas Merton was a significant influence in understanding and applying the contemplative life. Because a comprehensive look at the life and writings of Thomas Merton is not the purpose of this paper, we will focus specifically on Merton's significant role in awakening the broader Christian world, beyond the monastery, to the ancient idea of contemplative prayer.<sup>78</sup> Frenette suggests that in looking back over the past fifty years of challenges faced by the Church, Merton's books "can be seen as the beginning, the 'first wave' of renewal in contemplative Christianity."<sup>79</sup>

Merton's impact comes from the way he put his life-struggle on paper for the world to see: real, honest, imperfect. Merton understood the necessity of connecting the contemplative message to people's everyday life. In a letter to Pope Paul VI written on 21 August 1967, at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton addressed the question of the monastic voice speaking to the larger world:

We must, before all else, whatever else we do, speak to modern man as his brothers, as people who are in very much the same difficulties as he is, as people

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<sup>78</sup> This role has clearly not ended, though Merton's life on this earth has, and that impact will likely be particularly pronounced in the year 2018, the 50th anniversary of his death on 10 December.

<sup>79</sup> David Frenette, "Three Contemplative Waves," *Sewanee Theological Review* 48, no. 2 (2005): 152.

who suffer much of what he suffers, though we are immensely privileged to be exempt from so many, so very many, of his responsibilities and suffering. . . . People look at us, recognize we are sincere, recognize that we have indeed found a certain peace, and see that there may after all be some worth to it: but can we convince them that this means anything to them? <sup>80</sup>

The letter was an initial response to the Pope's request for a letter by contemplatives to guide people across the globe in their spiritual journey.<sup>81</sup> The initial request by the Pope was sent to two monks from the Cistercian abbey of Frattocchie, who in turn asked Merton for help in writing such a letter. Merton's response to the Pope was a request that he *not* be asked to help with this effort to guide the people of the world, for he felt no confidence in it. He went on to say, "I will attempt to say in my own words what I personally, as an individual have to say and usually do say to my brother who is in the world and who more and more often comes to me with his wounds which turn out to be also my own."<sup>82</sup> Forthrightness was one of Merton's hallmarks as he looked deeply at the realities surrounding the whole of humanity and considered a proper response. In that way, he was prophetic, and was much like the archetypical Elijah; hiding away for a time, then emerging to influence. However, the contemplative life did not completely detach Merton from the world around him. It made him more available to speak with clarity and boldness, which is the antithesis of what many believe about contemplatives.

In his article, "Contemplation in a World of Action," Merton addresses a 1968 world, but with exhortations that aptly apply to any age. Pursuing an answer to the

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<sup>80</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 423. Letter reprinted from Brother Patrick Hart, ed. *The Monastic Journey* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews, 1978). Patrick Hart, OSCO, served as secretary to Thomas Merton during the last year of his life.

<sup>81</sup> The final letter was written collaboratively by Thomas Merton, Carthusian Dom Porion, and French Cistercian Dom Andre Louf to fulfill the request of Pope Paul VI.

<sup>82</sup> Cunningham, 423.

question, “What does the contemplative life or the life of prayer, solitude, silence, meditation, mean to man in the atomic age?” Merton relates contemplation to action:

He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action to which men are driven by their own Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions.<sup>83</sup>

Merton is passionately expressing the change resulting from the deep interaction of human personhood with Divine personhood. Regarding the monastic prayer life, Merton issues an invitation to all Christians:

This is the creative and healing work of the monk, accomplished in silence, in nakedness of spirit, in emptiness, in humility. It is a participation in the saving death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, every Christian may, if he so desires, enter into communion with this silence of the praying and meditating Church, which is the Church of the Desert.<sup>84</sup>

There are no tricks or shortcuts to the spiritual life, he says. “Those who think they ‘know’ from the beginning will never in fact come to know anything.”<sup>85</sup> Merton makes the point that all must be “convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!”<sup>86</sup> These were words meant not only for the reader “out there,” but for his own internal person. Inchausti points out:

Merton tried to erase any external ecclesiastical authority from his writing in order to reinscribe himself as co-reader of his own texts in a space shared by his

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York, NY: Image Books Doubleday, 1969), 25-26.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

readers with the Holy Spirit. Writing was enacting the search for meaning—a search that was, by force of grace, never entirely under his control. It wasn't the consistency of his voice or the meaning of his message that mattered to him, nor was it the authority he possessed as a priest, but the meaning coming into existence in and through his shared discovery of his own true self.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps this constant personalization is the greatest reason for Merton's impact on the growing wave of contemplatives from all walks of life: he showed himself to be one of us in the struggle.

### Some Current Contemplative Movements

We now consider three contemporary contemplative movements: New Monasticism, Urban Contemplatives, and Contemplative Eldering.<sup>88</sup> Though there are variant terminology and season-of-life foci for these expressions, they are, in essence very much the same. All of these movements are committed to contemplative approaches long found in monasticism, and in applying them to the larger world, because they represent “a complete commitment to the transformative journey.”<sup>89</sup> Though what is meant by “transformative” includes the individual, it does not end with the individual.

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 35-36.

<sup>88</sup> “Contemplative Eldering” is nomenclature coined by Father Gueric Heckel, a Cistercian monk at Mepkin Abbey for over 23 years. It is also known, by others, as Conscious Eldering and Conscious Aging. Father Gueric, in an email 30 September 2016, shared about his facilitating people in this journey:

“When I turned 70, it was nothing short of a seismic shift for me as I realized I was in transition from a more doing mode to a more being mode. I started asking some folks about my age if they would like to join me in talking about how we could make our aging more contemplative. The response was more than I ever expected and out of it came our first Contemplative Aging Retreat. We since have changed to Contemplative Eldering because “Aging” sounds too passive as if it is something that just happens to you. For us “Contemplative Eldering” conveys more of a choice in how we age. Our idea of contemplative eldering is that it is aging in such a way that enables us to be present to what is rather than what was or what we might wish the future would be.”

<sup>89</sup> R. McEntee and A. Bucko, *The New Monasticism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), xxi.

Within these movements is the desire to live connected and engaged, both with the Divine and with the broader surrounding community. In some instances, the living situation may be communal, but life's fullest expression for these movements is in the larger world. This can include varieties of social action, a more deeply purposeful and attuned work-life, the ability to finish life well, making the world a better place, etc. Although the author of this paper does not align with the total vision of "interspiritual" approaches found in some of these movements, there are principles and methods that can be beneficially applied to the Christian faith community and journey.<sup>90</sup>

McEntee and Bucko describe new monasticism as "the phenomenon of living out this spiritual vocation in the world... [as] one's spiritual journey is inextricably linked to the day-to-day reality of most people's lives."<sup>91</sup> One potentially life-transforming idea fostered by Urban Contemplatives is a contemplative retreat on the street of a city, moving into the noise instead of removing oneself from the noise.<sup>92</sup> The purpose is that a person position him- or herself on the street to hear or see what God would have heard or seen.<sup>93</sup> This approach to the realities of the city is whole-person immersive and one means of protecting the contemplative life from becoming self-absorbed. For a person

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<sup>90</sup> One such principle is having the ability to "sit at the table" for dialogue and learning with people from a variety of faith journeys and traditions. Many within the evangelical community consider this to be unwise and even dangerous. Others would only come to the table to be argumentative, not dialogical. Both of these types of persons are unavailable at the core of being and should probably avoid taking a seat, until availability is cultivated.

<sup>91</sup> McEntee and Bucko, xxi.

<sup>92</sup> Trinity Grace Church, "Urban Contemplative Retreat," accessed October 3, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3cTyoDInqI>.

<sup>93</sup> This paper's author has facilitated many prayer walks through city streets with walkers going with the prayer, "God, help me to see what you would have me see, to hear what you would have me hear, and to even smell what you would have me smell. Break my heart over those things that break your heart, and help me to know how to respond."

stuck in an office all day, the same approach could be taken in that work space. McEntee and Bucko note:

We are all called not just to dream about a better world but to act for a better world. That gives us a mandate to experience every person in need, every cry, including the cry of the earth, as a call to be answered. Selfless service and compassionate action are both a spiritual practice and a fruit of our spiritual practice...letting go of our individual preferences, ideas, and comforts. It allows us to feel the call of each situation, and then respond in a way that utilizes the best of us for others.<sup>94</sup>

Action in service of others, which emerges from contemplation, is very much at the heart of current contemplative movements; doing that emerges from being is a very different kind of action.

Another example of new monasticism is a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania intentional community known as “The Simple Way.” Founded in 1998 by a group of students deeply affected by the stance of homeless families when they were being forced from an abandoned church building, this community of sharing has grown for over two decades. What started as one house purchased by pooling college student funds, is now a village. This Christian community is committed to 12 Marks of a New Monasticism:

1. Relocation to the abandoned place of empire.
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3. Hospitality to the stranger.
4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities, combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
5. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.

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<sup>94</sup> McEntee and Bucko, 182.

6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
7. Nurturing common life among members of an intentional community.
8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
10. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us, along with support of our local economies.
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence, and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18:15-20.
12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.<sup>95</sup>

In his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, Shane Claiborne tells of his personal transformation and some of The Simple Way's stories, which "emerged from a movement of communities of faith and struggle, inspired by local revolutions and ordinary radicals, anchored in life among the poor and marginalized."<sup>96</sup> In simple terms, The Simple Way is about being the church, not doing church; they live in deep and full relationality as a reality, not merely as a hopeful vision. Claiborne notes, "We are about spreading a way of life that exists organically and relationally and is marked by such a brilliant love and grace that no one could resist it."<sup>97</sup> Is that not the simple invitation of the Gospel? The call of *The Irresistible Revolution* and The Simple Way is to connect

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<sup>95</sup> Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 363.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

integrity of life to the gospel we say we believe. What led Claiborne and his friends to this place was a contemplative journey that continues: a journey of availability to and in the world they see, using every sense and living out abundant possibilities that others have said cannot happen. To this end, Claiborne casts a multigenerational vision:

It seems to me that God could surround us with elders as we bring new energy into an aging body, but it will take tremendous courage from old folks to dream new dreams and allow a new generation to make their own mistakes. And it will take great humility from the new generation of the church to listen to the wisdom of our elders and know that we can learn from other's mistakes.<sup>98</sup>

So, what would happen if an older generation stepped into contemplative space in order to discern how to elder new generations?

When you add years of life lived and contemplation together, there is a deep wisdom and availability that emerge. Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller described the heart behind Contemplative Eldering in their 1995 book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. There is a broad array of approaches to life after fifty or sixty. Contemplative Eldering starts with the need for an ongoing internal journey that guides external activity. There is a desire to nurture the world with the good wisdom surmised from the first half of life. However, to do so necessitates an availability to aging where persons are “spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible ‘elders of the tribe.’”<sup>99</sup> Those engaged in the Contemplative Eldering movement see this need and are available to becoming such a blessing to the world.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 353-54.

<sup>99</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-Ing to Sage-Ing* (New York, CA: Grand Central, 1995), 5.

To consider the availability of the God of all that is, to the people of the world, is an overwhelming thought! What does the availability of God mean? To what extent is God present and accessible?

### **A Theology of Availability**

The human person, especially the one who studies God, has wrestled for millennia with the task of answering the who, what, and how of God. Wars, both physical and verbal, are fought over stances, and to what avail? In his interpretation of St. Augustine's "process of examining any topic," Michael Polanyi assesses it to be "both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it."<sup>100</sup> He goes on to say, "Our fundamental beliefs are continuously reconsidered in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premises."<sup>101</sup> Around the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor profoundly described knowledge of God as knowing "in supreme ignorance the supremely unknowable."<sup>102</sup> George Berthold has pointed out that to Maximus, knowledge means mystical experience of God.<sup>103</sup> One of the great challenges of theological conversation over millennia, is in words and meaning.

The ultimate concern for those in the search of proper terminology to apply to God is the use of words that appropriately define, yet not limit, God. One of the inherent

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<sup>100</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 267.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> St. Maximus Confessor, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 75. Originally from Maximus Confessor's *The 400 Chapters On Love* 3:99.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, note 5.

challenges with applying terminology to the Infinite is that the word terminology itself is from *terminus* which by definition brings boundary and limit. Therefore, from the start, it is a somewhat faulty venture.<sup>104</sup> Even when based on the biblical text, human interpretation of that text is enculturated, and holds the possibility of being flawed. What is important for the purposes of this paper is not an investigation of epistemological approaches, challenges, and flaws, but the why behind these philosophical and theological pursuits. Rowan Williams points out:

We shall only have a glimmer of what ‘God is the maker of the world’ means if we hear alongside it, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts’. If we don’t hear this, ‘God is maker of the world’ will appear as a bit of information which carries no claim and I want to argue that the meaning of ‘God’ is quite unintelligible if we fail to see that talk about God is talk about what lays claim upon us, moves or draws or changes us.<sup>105</sup>

Relational theology should not be approached as an exercise in the establishment of intellectual supports for a belief system, but as whole-person availability to God who is loving communion.

Finite knowers should be wholly and humbly available when approaching the vastness of all that is. Rohr rightly says that “we must—absolutely must—maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery. If we do not, religion always worships itself and its formulations and never God.”<sup>106</sup> This availability particularly holds true when such knowledge is within the context of loving relationship, and even more so

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<sup>104</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second ed. “Terminology.”

<sup>105</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Christian Experience and the Christian God,” *The Furrow* 35, no. 11 (1984): 675. [italics original]

<sup>106</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), 27.

when in loving relationship with the infinite, yet personal One. Such a study is a drawing into the very being of God: “the more deeply we reflect on the Trinity, the more we are led to mystery.”<sup>107</sup> This mystery, however, does not have to lead to perplexity and confusion, but to relational enchantment that escorts a person to being simply available, having total openness and offering all that a person is and has to the full mystery of God.

The Apostle John indicated that it was impossible to put the entire life and ministry of Jesus to pen because of its vastness (John 21:25). Is it not possible that the Scriptures are, above all, an invitation by God to a world of relationship seekers? In fact, Jesus himself, the Son of God, condenses everything down to: loving God, loving self, and loving neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31). In that simple statement, the human-developed complexities tied to God and religion are brought down to God’s longing, displayed to humanity from the very beginning. God is loving communion, dwelling with and in humanity. Of all that is true of God in regard to humanity, to not be in loving union with the God who is would be the greatest loss, no matter what else can or cannot be defined. As nonacademic and nonintellectual as it sounds, love has a way of showing what is real and what is important. Why is love so powerful? Because it is the very being of God.

### *God as Loving Union*

“God is love.” (I John 4:8, 16) What does that mean? That God is love is vastly more than action or function: it is the core of being. Love is who God is, not merely what God does. The kind of love that God is may even seem, to some, as unbecoming of God.

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<sup>107</sup> Brunner, Butler, and Swoboda, 101.

It is love that is ineffable and passionate, as theologians, contemplatives, and mystics often describe the indescribable. The aim here is to elevate theological approach that is more readily inclusive of the beauty found in theological artistry and poetry. The result is a balancing of the typical theological proving and substantiating, as if God must be handled in a science, math, and engineering way. Speaking of God as loving relationality calls for an all-encompassing engagement of the human person, not just the brain, and theological dialogue should do the same.

*Perichoresis* is a term often applied to the idea that God is loving communion and woven relationality. The term perichoresis is originally stoic and carries the meaning of “interpenetration” and “rotation.”<sup>108</sup> Stramara, synthesizing Gregory of Nyssa’s view of the Trinity, describes the relationship this way, “...each participates in the utter fullness of mutual inclusivity and co-extensive existence.”<sup>109</sup> Rohr elevates an idea, birthed by the early desert church Fathers, of “radical relatedness... [as] perfect communion between Three—a circle dance of love.”<sup>110</sup> Though perichoresis has been utilized to describe the relationship of the persons, Gregory of Nyssa seems to have refused to apply it to God because God is spirit:

Surely no one is such a child in understanding so as mentally to superimpose concepts of special differentiation upon intellectual and incorporeal nature, for position in space is proper to bodies, whereas that is intellectual and immaterial by nature is recognized to be far outside the domain of spatial concepts.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Daniel F. Stramara, “Gregory of Nyssa's Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 52, no. 3 (1998), accessed September 25, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1584502>.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>110</sup> Rohr, 27.

<sup>111</sup> Stramara, 258.

Just as boldly, Adiprasetya argues the other direction, “The difference between nature-perichoresis and person-perichoresis is obvious,” the point being that this interwoven idea can be applied to concepts of relationality as well as physicality.<sup>112</sup> In that vein, Jürgen Moltmann describes this perichoretic relationship as “that Trinitarian unity which goes out beyond the doctrine of persons and their relations: by virtue of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with one another, for one another and in one another that they constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete unity.”<sup>113</sup>

John Zizioulas, also anchored in the Cappadocian Fathers, seeks to explain the nature of the idea that God is love:

The expression “God is love” (I John 4:16) signifies that God “subsists” as Trinity, that is, as person and not as substance. Love is not an emanation or “property” of the substance of God...but is *constitutive* of His substance.... Thus love ceases to be a qualifying—i.e. secondary—property of being and becomes *the supreme ontological predicate*. Love as God’s mode of existence “hypostasizes” God, *constitutes* His being.<sup>114</sup>

That the very being of God is love means that when God gives love, He is giving His very self, not just acting in a loving way! God’s availability as love to humanity takes on a new dimension and challenge to description.

As much as Zizioulas’ argument for love as the very being of God is foundational to a relational understanding of God, there is something about the nature of his

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<sup>112</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, *An Imaginative Glimpse: The Trinity and Multiple Religious Participations*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2013), 110.

<sup>113</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992), 86.

<sup>114</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 46. [italics original]

descriptions that seems just a bit too scientific and even physical. His tightly held language of “constitution” and “substance” – though he contradicts himself by also saying this understanding should be “as person and not as substance” – raises the same apprehensions held by Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>115</sup> Certainly, trying to find language to describe being has no shortage of challenges, particularly when it is an effort to substantiate. Admittedly, Zizioulas is aiming for an avoidance of a vacuous love. However, his scientific, non-emotive pattern shows up twenty-one years after introducing *Being as Communion*. Zizioulas continues to describe God as communion, but in a quite starchy way, stating, “Love is not a feeling, a sentiment springing from nature like a flower from a tree. Love is a *relationship*; it is the free coming out of one’s self, the breaking of one’s will, a *free* submission to the will of another.”<sup>116</sup> It is absolutely relational being, and all of the other descriptions he provides. But why must loving relational commitment be seemingly vacant of feeling and beauty? Why not both free submission *and* indescribable beauty? Smart and Konstantine see the origin of this challenge stemming from “the ‘impersonal and static’ flavor of classical theistic formulations, especially in the substantial understanding of God (as is evident in the widespread use of the terms *ousia* and *substance* to denote the Godhead).”<sup>117</sup> The point here, beyond Zizioulas, is that to argue loving relationality mostly, if not completely, from a logical, intellectual, and philosophical platform will invariably be flawed. It is a bit like stating that rust loves

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 56. [italics added]

<sup>116</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2006), 166. [italics original]

<sup>117</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 248.

metal. Part of the awe and wonder of God as love in Trinity, and the expression of that being as gracious love of and in humanity, is that it is almost completely illogical and ultimately inexpressible.

As difficult as love is to describe, love is beautiful, as is a flower on a tree, and God as love and as Creator is that kind of beautiful love. It is the beauty of God as loving union that calls for the inclusion of the work of artists, poets, musicians, and storytellers.

Consider the example of Scripture as God speaks of the people of Israel:

Therefore I am now going to allure her;  
I will lead her into the desert  
and speak softly to her.  
There I will give her back her vineyards,  
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,  
as in the day she came up out of Egypt. (Hosea 2:14-15)

As a creative writer, Madeleine L'Engle puts it well in her preface to Dorothy Sayer's *The Mind of the Maker*, "It is as always over-literalism, over-definition, which causes confusion."<sup>118</sup> Jesus answered the Scribe by pointing to the simplicity of loving relationship (Mark 12:30f).

God is love; not a word of it can be proven, only evidences purveyed through life and experience. For such experience of the Infinite by the finite to be possible, this God who is loving union became intimately available to other persons. The availability of God is much more than a person present in the room to provide help or company; God's availability, that even Jesus points out repeatedly, is in mystical union.

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<sup>118</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1987), xvii.

*Availability in Mystical Union*

A search of systematic theology for the “availability of God” as an attribute provides a dearth of results. Yet, if God is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, but not available, then God’s presence is of no relational importance to the human person. Martin Marty says that if he could add a word to a new theological dictionary, he would add “available.”<sup>119</sup> He notes French philosopher Gabriel Marcel’s meaning of availability as making “a fundamental engagement which bears not only on what I have, but on what I am.”<sup>120</sup> Availability is an openness to the possibilities of the moment, even if such a reality never has been: the created universe once was not. “Jesus was not known and talked about for his principles,” points out Leonard Sweet. He “was known and talked about for his relationships. Perhaps Jesus got this from both his fathers, not just his heavenly one. Joseph is described as ‘a man of principle’ who was determined to put Mary ‘away’ but ultimately chose to marry a girl bearing another man’s child because he was told by an angel to choose a person over a principle.”<sup>121</sup> Not only was Mary available to God in a very life-altering way, but Joseph cast aside the human expectations of his day to embrace the history-altering manifestation of God in a way that had never happened before.

When considering the idea of being available to the presence and work of God, Oliver Davies describes this mysticism “not as an idea or the basis of a theological

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<sup>119</sup> Martin E. Marty, “A Is for Availability,” *Christian Century* 125, no. 26 (2008): 11.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 103.

system nor as a mere image self-created or received by tradition, but a sense within the human person that a transcendent and divine being or power is *immediately present* to him or her.”<sup>122</sup> Oliver goes on to describe what he calls three schools of mysticism:

1. Communing with God in a very real and meaningful, but mediated way, primarily through a church service, including sacraments and liturgy,
2. Christocentric spirituality which is based upon dialogue “with” Christ that is sometimes biblical, and sometimes revelation,
3. Direct experience of and union with God in His fullness.<sup>123</sup>

The first two schools are externally focused, while the third is internal and is a literal person-to-person union. For this paper, the third is considered, particularly the stream focused upon the journey to and in loving union with God.

The Bible is replete with stories of God’s personal availability to humanity, with the incarnation being the most manifest, and His presence in the human person as the most immanent. Jesus, the Incarnate One, spoke even to the Pharisees that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). The “in” language related to the presence of God is the most intimate idea of communion, thus the radical language of perichoresis, which includes the idea of interpenetration. Jesus proclaimed this union repeatedly: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:17). “I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you” (John 14:21). These are all promises given by Jesus

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<sup>122</sup> Oliver Davies, *God Within* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1988), 1. [italics original]

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-6.

the Christ, the second person of the Trinity, as he neared no longer being on the planet physically. It is the promised spiritual presence of the post-ascension Christ that led Calvin to celebrate, “Indeed we see how much abundantly he then poured out his Spirit, how much more wonderfully he advanced his Kingdom, how much greater power he displayed both in helping his people and in scattering his enemies.”<sup>124</sup> Calvin goes so far as to say that Christ’s “power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.”<sup>125</sup>

There is a huge distinction to be made here. We are speaking of the availability of God to humanity, and not one human to another human. The often-quoted J.I. Packer idea remains important, “[C]hurchmen who look at God, so to speak through the wrong end of the telescope, so reducing him to pigmy proportions, cannot hope to end up as more than pigmy Christians, and clear-sighted people naturally want something better than this.”<sup>126</sup> That there is even the possibility of loving communion with the God of all that is, must never cease to overwhelm and amaze. Again, we are not speaking of two people in the same room, but person-to-person interpenetration. To take God’s communion with the human to the level of actual union with and presence in the believer is unfathomable.

What seems to be most challenging is stepping from belief in God loving from somewhere out there, to the idea of a vast and infinite God living in mystical union with such limited human creatures. How do we make the jump? Do we really want the infinite God to be fully conceivable and hemmed-in by the finite? Humanity certainly does not

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<sup>124</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 523.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 6.

have the right to define God on their own terms, which is the point of Francis Schaeffer's warning regarding what he calls "modern" or "semantic" mysticism.<sup>127</sup> His argument is that wrapping language around ideas does not make those ideas true if they are void of rational meaning and purpose.<sup>128</sup> This call to meaning and purpose is true, but how that meaning and purpose is defined is also significant. Nothing about the story of the infinite, Creator God with and in finite, created humanity is rational. Mystical, loving, relational union is the meaning and purpose. St. Augustine embraces the mystery as he proclaims that "He withdrew from our eyes, that we might return to our own heart and find Him. For He went away and behold He is still here. He would not be with us long, yet He did not leave us."<sup>129</sup>

The difficulty of this mystical theology is real, yet not new. Louth, in his study of Patristic mystical theology, shines a light on the fact that the,

...formative period for mystical theology was, of course, the formative period for dogmatic theology, and that the same period was determinative for both mystical and dogmatic theology is no accident since these two aspects of theology are fundamentally bound up with one another. The basic doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, worked out in these centuries, are mystical doctrines formulated dogmatically.<sup>130</sup>

There is a both/and reality to theology that at times must uncomfortably, paradoxically, and unsystematically straddle the fence between what is intellectually defined and the experientially undefinable. The mystery of loving union with the infinite provides infinite

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<sup>127</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1968), 55-62.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>129</sup> H. A. Reinhold, ed. *The Soul Afire: Revelations of the Mystics* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1944), 233.

<sup>130</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1981), xi.

possibilities in relationship and life. Undoubtedly, this does not sit well with those who demand certitude, boundaries, and systems in all things.

Scripture provides cause for believing in a mysterious weaving of love, life, being, personhood, etc., that is truly perichoretic: an interpenetrating union of God with the whole human personhood. Moltmann points out that it is “not a mysticism of identity and does not mean a dissolution of the human soul, as if it were a ‘drop in the ocean of divinity’... [It] is a way of describing the reciprocal space for living and moving; the beloved human being lives and moves in God, and God lives and moves in the loving human being. They become the living space for love.”<sup>131</sup> Moltmann contends that this unity is made clear through Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21 and is made possible through the incarnation of the Son which “binds together the divinity and the humanity; and which unites divine and human life in the indwelling and the power of the Spirit.”<sup>132</sup> To be indwelt by God far exceeds the idea of simply being contractually identified with him as an adopted child and helped by him along the way from somewhere out there. Contemplatives believe deeply in the opportunity to experience this union with God in consistent and transforming ways.

The Apostle Paul utilized “temple of God” language several times in his first letter to the church in Corinth (I Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19). From God mysteriously and visibly dwelling in pillars of fire and cloud, and eventually in Solomon’s temple, Paul now declares God’s new place of dwelling: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” The English Puritan, Isaac

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<sup>131</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 148-49.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

Ambrose, proclaimed, “Hence it is that God doth set his sanctuary and tabernacle among us, and that he dwells with us; and, which is more, that he makes *us* houses and habitations, wherein he himself is pleased to dwell by his holy Spirit.”<sup>133</sup> Zizioulas notes that this true union means the church becomes Christ in human existence as well as every member of the church becomes Christ and the church.<sup>134</sup> “The mutual co-inherence of the mystical and the ecclesiological,” notes Louth, “is, indeed, a striking feature of the mystical theology of many of the Fathers.”<sup>135</sup>

Something terribly wrong happens when the awe, wonder, and spirituality of our mysterious union with God is overlooked, forgotten, or at worst, rejected. In his day, Symeon the New Theologian saw the impact of this type of unavailability to God in His fullness. Of Symeon, Maloney writes, “He felt that the Christian religion of his day had degraded into a static formalism that had stifled, for the masses of Christians, including monks, the real message of Jesus Christ and His Gospel.”<sup>136</sup> He later notes that Symeon “wishes to move Christians away from any superficial, externally motivated relationship with God into a deeper person-to-person relationship.”<sup>137</sup> Upon the celebration of Easter one year, Symeon proclaimed that the resurrection “happens daily and eternally *in* those

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<sup>133</sup> Isaac Ambrose, *Looking Unto Jesus: A View of the Everlasting Gospel, or, the Soul's Eyeing of Jesus, as Carrying on the Great Work of Man's Salvation, from First to Last* (Pittsburgh, PA: Luke Loomis & Co., 1832), 190. [italics added]

<sup>134</sup> Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, 58.

<sup>135</sup> Louth, 196.

<sup>136</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanaro, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

who know its mystery.”<sup>138</sup> Symeon longed for more than a superficial understanding: “But, if you will, let us look and carefully examine what is the mystery of that resurrection of Christ our God which takes place mystically in us at all times, if we are willing, and how Christ is buried in us as in a tomb and how He unites Himself to our souls and rises again, and raises us with Himself.”<sup>139</sup> “Mystically in” is the key idea here; this is not simply an identification principle, but true presence, which should not be quickly moved past, nor easily discarded. Wrought in scripture, Symeon’s passionate *Catechesis* is unyielding regarding this mystical union of the triune God within human persons who believe. The Trinitarian spiritual presence, to Symeon, is experienced as literal light and passionate love, both with resulting feeling and emotion, often leading to tears of communion, compassion, and contrition. Teresa of Avila distinguished the difference between beginning union and the purest union with God as Spiritual Betrothal and Spiritual Marriage.<sup>140</sup> She too echoed the brightness of light and depth of union in transforming love.

Symeon’s greatest expressions of this life-moving union with God are found in his hymns, some of which are quite startling in their verbiage, which he uses to express the all-consuming and overwhelming nature of loving union with the Trinity as spiritual ecstasy:

God heard my cries  
And from unimaginable heights he stooped down  
And looked upon me.  
Once more he had pity on me and allowed me to see

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 181. [italics added]

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>140</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1946), 151.

The One who was invisible to all,  
 As much as human kind can bear.  
 Seeing him I was astounded,  
 Me who was locked up in my tiny house of bone,  
 All surrounded by darkness...  
 I saw him in the midst of my tiny house,  
 So quickly had he entered in, complete,  
 Uniting himself to me inexpressibly  
 Joining himself to me inexpressibly  
 Suffusing himself in me unconfusedly,  
 Just as fire can permeate iron,  
 Or light shine through crystal.  
 So it was he made me become like fire itself;  
 Revealing himself to me as Light.<sup>141</sup>

It has been noted that reading Symeon's hymns is not like reading a treatise. The experience "is a launching of the reader into an orbit of mystical prayer, into an inner world filled with beauty and mystery."<sup>142</sup> In the 1650's Isaac Ambrose echoes these emotions, crying out:

O let me bathe my soul in the delicious intimacies of a spiritual communion with thee my God, that I may forever adhere unto thee with a sincere constancy, and rest in thee with a love of complacency: for I feel, I find my soul cast into a longing sweat for thee, and nothing can satisfie the importunate longing of my perplexed soul, but thy own self; for thou are my Lord, my love, my life; and thou are altogether lovely, O my dear Jesus!<sup>143</sup>

For many, the words of Ambrose are far outside what is typically expected of a Puritan. Yet, notes Schwanda, Puritans "were as interested in stirring their hearts as stretching their minds."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> John McGuckin, "Symeon the New Theologian's *Hymns of Divine Eros*: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition," *Spiritus* 5 (2005): 195. Portion of Hymn 34 translated by McGuckin from J. Koder, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien: Hymnes, Sources Chrétiennes*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969, 1971, 1973), 174: 366-370.

<sup>142</sup> Theologian, 25.

<sup>143</sup> Isaac Ambrose, *Prima, Media, Et Ultima; or, the First, Middle, and Last Things*, Seventh ed. (Glasgow: by James Knox, 1657), 223.

<sup>144</sup> Tom Schwanda, *Soul Recreation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 163.

Returning to Symeon, one of his translators notes that his deepest longing is not to tout his own story, but to call “*all* his readers to experience the mystical presence, not merely to the elite. The experience of the divine is initiated by a wholehearted response to God. It does not require great intelligence, or years of asceticism. It requires only readiness.”<sup>145</sup> In this paper, readiness is referred to as availability, which is a heart-state that God alone can know. This heart-state is one where we are simply available to the One who is available to union with us. Teresa of Avila echoes the same longing as she writes to her fellow nuns, “Oh my sisters, how little one should think about resting, and how little one should care about honours, and how far one ought to be from wishing to be esteemed in the very least if the Lord makes His special abode in the soul.”<sup>146</sup> If God has chosen to make the human body a dwelling place for himself, no other attitude makes sense but to avail one’s total being to that person-to-person presence. Thus, one nurtures awareness of and full availability to God in every word, and every ebb and flow of love, mercy, and strength.

Cultivating availability to God in loving union has significant implications for the way humankind views and acts toward self and others. Consider Teresa, again: “we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service.”<sup>147</sup> Perhaps both enjoyment and fitness are in order, but the point is made. “The mystical graces,” notes Louth, “have an apostolic purpose...

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<sup>145</sup> McGuckin, 192.

<sup>146</sup> Avila, 163.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 165.

[wherein] the soul becomes a source of grace to others.”<sup>148</sup> Grenz notes that Moltmann is “convinced that societies reflect their fundamental theological outlook, their basic understanding of God or the gods, in the way they organize themselves.”<sup>149</sup> How a person understands and interacts with God impacts how he or she understands and interacts with self and a world of humanity. It is with this consideration that we now turn to psychological and sociological implications of contemplative availability in loving union with God.

### **Psychological and Sociological Implications**

#### *Availability to Self*

From the safety and revelation of God’s mystical, loving, and available union, a person can nurture the atmosphere for self to emerge as a deer from the safety of a forest’s cover. Benner speaks of it as replacing the “egoic self with the heart-shaped self.”<sup>150</sup> Others make the distinction between false self and true self.<sup>151</sup> Beyond nomenclature, the issue is one of being available to that journey of self which will necessarily be invasive. In this stance, a person is no longer evasive toward his or her

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<sup>148</sup> Louth, 201-02.

<sup>149</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>150</sup> David G. Benner, *Human Being and Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 92.

<sup>151</sup> For more examples on false self/true self see David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, Expanded ed. (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015); M. Basil Pennington, *True Self/False Self* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2000); Richard Rohr, *The Immortal Diamond* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013); M. Robert Mullholland Jr., *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

own self, nor resistant to true union and intimacy with God. Fear of vulnerability is finally being excavated. Brené Brown notes, from her research, a pattern of language emerging that describes “worldview” with opposites: “winner or loser, survive or die, kill or be killed, strong or weak, leaders or followers, success or failure, crush or be crushed.”<sup>152</sup> Could it be because of the propagation of Darwinian “survival of the fittest” that vulnerability is seen as weak and undesirable? Fear of vulnerability leads to an unwillingness to be truly available to God, self, and others, which cultivates living in falsehood; not venturing into the dark corners of self to find what is there. Benner notes that ignoring these “unwanted parts of self” does not make them go away; in fact, they only grow stronger while in hiding.<sup>153</sup> But, through Christian spirituality, our response as available persons will acknowledge “all our part-selves, exposing them to God’s love and letting him weave them into the new person he is making.”<sup>154</sup>

The nature of Christian spirituality is central to what this thesis is espousing. Contemplative availability in loving union with the God who dwells *within* the believer nurtures availability to the heart-shaped self. This is availability for the very being of God to literally infiltrate and flow through the fullness of a person.<sup>155</sup> Embracing the knowledge that the transcendent, yet relational God is not just somewhere “up there” or “out there,” but is somehow mysteriously present *within* the human person and fully available to her, can significantly change her psyche. Intently exploring the heart’s role in

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<sup>152</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York, NY: Avery, 2012), 152.

<sup>153</sup> Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 50.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>155</sup> Benner, *Human Being and Becoming*, 95-96.

this journey is vital, including the physical heart, which is also made by God; we are truly and fully woven.

Since at least the 1970s science has been exploring the heart's influence on the brain. Though it does not speak of God, this research in neurocardiology paints a highly supportive picture of why the heart is spoken of so much in the Bible, including loving God with heart first (Deuteronomy 6:3, 11:13, 13:3, 30:6; Joshua 22:3; Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). What makes this research even more interesting is that the physical heart is shown to do much more than deliver blood. The heart actually has its own "heart-brain," an intrinsic neural circuitry that "enables it to act independently of the cranial brain to learn, remember, make decisions and even feel and sense."<sup>156</sup> Within the vagus nerve bundle, the majority of the fibers ascend to the brain and are cardiovascular-related. "This means the heart sends more information to the brain than the brain sends to the heart."<sup>157</sup> Additionally, because of the woven nature by which the heart and brain work together in emotional intelligence, the phrase, "It's all in your head," is incorrect. Even within the brain, "the neural connections that transmit information from the emotional centers to the cognitive centers [are] stronger and more numerous than those that convey information from the cognitive to the emotional centers."<sup>158</sup> This helps to "explain why it is generally difficult to willfully modulate emotions through thought

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<sup>156</sup> Rollin McCraty, *The Science of the Heart*, vol. 2 (Boulder Creek, CO: HeartMath Institute, 2015), 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

alone.”<sup>159</sup> What is important about this science, for our purposes, is what HeartMath Institute research indicates: “the key to the successful integration of the mind and emotions lies in increasing one’s emotional self-awareness and the coherence of, or harmonious function and interaction among, the neural systems that underlie cognitive and emotional experience.”<sup>160</sup> This integrative, coherent end is why van der Kolk says people must “open up to and explore their internal world of sensations and emotions,” not just tuck them away, minimize, or ignore them.<sup>161</sup>

Through the use of fMRI, the activity level of the self-sensing area of the brain is able to be viewed. What these brain maps show is that a person literally has the capacity not to use this area of the brain that actually helps us know that we are alive.<sup>162</sup> However, the power that humanity holds over self can be detrimental. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk argues for embracing sensations and emotions at a very deep and physical level:

In my practice, I begin the process by helping my patients to first notice and then describe the feelings in their bodies—not emotions such as anger or anxiety or fear but the physical sensations *beneath* the emotions: pressure, heat, muscular tension, tingling, caving in, feeling hollow, and so on. I also work on identifying the sensations associated with relaxation and pleasure. I help them become aware of their breath, their gestures and movements. I ask them to pay attention to subtle shifts in their bodies, such as tightness in their chests or gnawing in their bellies, when they talk about negative events *that they claim did not bother them*.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York, NY: Viking, 2014), 101.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 101. [italics added]

What he is speaking of here is full availability to the total person, ignoring, pushing aside, and numbing nothing. Research in neuroplasticity is showing that from this state of access, mental grooves, the trance of unworthiness, PTSD, repressed memories, and a plethora of other psychological realities, begin to be recognized, are better regulated, and can even be eliminated.<sup>164</sup>

Psychotherapist Chris Saade points to the heart journey as “something much deeper in us that we recognize intuitively. It is about our deep feelings, longings, and desires. As individuals, we know when we touch a place that belongs to the infinite, and yet resides in us as finite beings.”<sup>165</sup> This is a place of depth all people need to explore. Brown, in her research, found that the very foundation for people who experienced resilience was their spirituality. What she noted is that from this spirituality emerged “cultivating of hope, practicing critical awareness, and letting go of numbing and taking the edge off vulnerability, discomfort, and pain.”<sup>166</sup> After his one-year sabbatical with a “desert and harvest” theme in Montana, Eugene Peterson described the reason behind his extended time away as a “two-pronged stimulus: fatigue and frustration.”<sup>167</sup> He says, “it was a tiredness that vacations weren’t fixing—a tiredness of spirit, an inner boredom. I sensed a spiritual core to my fatigue and was looking for a spiritual remedy.”<sup>168</sup> The

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<sup>164</sup> Joshua J. Knabb, “Centering Prayer as an Alternative to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression Relapse Prevention,” *Springer*, no. 51 (6 October 2010): 908. Kirk A. Bingaman, “The Art of Contemplative and Mindfulness Practice: Incorporating the Findings of Neuroscience into Pastoral Care and Counseling,” *Springer*, no. 60 (22 January 2011): 487.

<sup>165</sup> Andrew Harvey and Chris Saade, *Evolutionary Love Relationships* (Toronto, ON: Enrealment Press, 2017), 109-10.

<sup>166</sup> Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 65.

<sup>167</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

results of his highly contemplative time were new atmosphere, life rhythms, and relationships. Peterson shares, “the parts of pastoral work I had done out of duty before, just because somebody had to do them, I now embraced with delight. I felt deep reservoirs within me, capacious and free flowing. I felt great margins of leisure around everything I did—conversations, meetings, letter writing, telephone calls. I felt I would never again be in a hurry.”<sup>169</sup> It seems that contemplative availability led to Peterson finding his true self and a life lived more from the heart.

The human being is extremely complex—an interwoven reality made by God for God. When a person is contemplatively available to the personal, loving union of God, he or she journeys to a place of wholehearted availability to life’s offerings, including an elevated capacity to be more significantly and fully available to others.

### *Availability to Others*

A call to times of contemplative silence and solitude in loving union with God and an availability to self is not a call to lifelong isolation, nor an unhealthy form of self-love. Humanity is made for relationship and communion. Rolheiser points out that narcissism’s effect on contemplation is significant. “When we stand before reality preoccupied with ourselves we will see precious little of what is actually there to be seen. Moreover, what little we do see will be distorted and shaped by self-interest.”<sup>170</sup> Preoccupation with self is a complete engrossment with self, which can even be an issue in pursuit of personal holiness. The journey of life, all of which is spiritual, is not meant

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>170</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2004), 35.

to be made alone. If the very being of all humanity was ushered out of the thrice-communing being of God, how can there be an alternative? As Benner puts it, “the myth of the solitary Christian making his or her way alone to paradise flies in the face of everything the Bible teaches about the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).”<sup>171</sup> What such companionship brings to the journey, says Benner, is love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality, and accompaniment.<sup>172</sup>

Regarding availability to others, Moltmann notes “we can no longer limit ourselves merely to discussions with our own tradition without being quite simply ‘limited’.”<sup>173</sup> This does not mean that there is an embracing of all that is believed by all, which is ultimately not truly *believing* anything. Even those who claim to be inclusive in their approach to life and beliefs exclude those who do not agree with their version of inclusivity. Clearly, as human beings, we do not live in a vacuum hidden away from conflict-causing issues. But, what would happen if people became truly available to one another? No matter how distant belief systems and ideals may be, it is possible for people to be with, listen to, and learn from one another. The gulfs we tend to see may not be as insurmountable as we believe. Availability at this level does not happen accidentally; it is a maturity into which a person grows intentionally. Balswick, King, and Reimer propose some high-level attributes to what they call the “reciprocating self:”

1. Characterized by a *covenant* (unconditional love) commitment rather than a conditional commitment,

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<sup>171</sup> David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2002), 40.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-78.

<sup>173</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), xiv.

2. Response to failure in relationship is characterized by *gracing* rather than shaming,
3. Persons in relationship use their power, giftedness and resources to *empower* rather than to control the other, and
4. Relationships are characterized by an openness that can lead to *intimacy* rather than isolation.<sup>174</sup>

They go on to note that “since relationships are dynamic and ever-changing, if a relationship does not spiral into deeper levels of commitment, grace, empowering, and intimacy, then it will stagnate and fixate on *contract* rather than covenant, *law* rather than grace, *possessive power* rather than empowering and *distance* rather than intimacy.”<sup>175</sup>

What we maintain is that the doorway for attributes such as these is through self-availability. Moltmann says that “those who watch have a world in common.”<sup>176</sup> Benner speaks of it as “heartfulness,” whereby compassion flows through the person.<sup>177</sup> “It isn’t so much about doing the loving thing as allowing love to flow through us. We all suffer from hardened arteries of the heart. We all experience blockage that restricts the freedom of the heart to be a conduit of love and compassion.”<sup>178</sup> There is something about living a life ever open to the people around us, including recognizing Christ in the “unnoticeable

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<sup>174</sup> Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, Second ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 57. [italics original]

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 59. [italics original]

<sup>176</sup> Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, 175.

<sup>177</sup> Benner, *Human Being and Becoming*, 95-97.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

people in presence of mind to do the right thing at the right time.”<sup>179</sup> This level of wovenness of life may be the deepest level of humanness that we can display and experience. It only takes one of the persons to set this tone of availability to the other.

A significant key to healthy togetherness is the ability to communicate, to have conversations. Communication actually begins to take place when people are simply available to one another. If a person believes he has won the argument, but loses the person with whom he argued, what has truly been won? Chances are, the conversation is over and any hope of future success is thwarted. Sweet’s helpful guidance for protecting dialogue is that we have no right to argue with another person until we can state her case in a way that is satisfying to her.<sup>180</sup> This becomes a powerful opportunity for *all* involved, because true dialogue changes us. Zolli and Healy utilize research and history to suggest that walks can be a means of cultivating conversation. “Face-to-face interactions often bring conflict to the forefront of the conversation, whereas walking side by side allows space for a more considered dialogue.”<sup>181</sup> Taking these walks in nature can foster a contemplative environment which further nurtures availability of one person to another. Patricia Snow notes “all of the qualities that human conversation requires—patience and commitment, and ability to listen and a tolerance for aridity—prayer requires in greater measure.”<sup>182</sup> What a person nurtures in personal experience with God has significant implications for public expression in the rest of life’s relationships.

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<sup>179</sup> Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, 174.

<sup>180</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Nudge* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 122.

<sup>181</sup> Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), 167-68.

<sup>182</sup> Patricia Snow, “Look at Me,” *First Things*, no. 263 (May 2016): 28.

Outcome studies of HeartMath Institute's approaches to *self*-coherence are also showing their impact on *social*-coherence. Kaiser Permanente, which has made caring science theory and practices a high priority, partnered with HeartMath Institute in a study of over 400 nurses, leaders, and support staff. After one year of training and application of self-coherence approaches, significant improvements included increase in patient satisfaction, and healthier relationships between nursing staff and leaders.<sup>183</sup> This training focuses on obtaining heart coherence as an optimal physiological state associated with increased cognitive function, self-regulatory capacity, emotional stability, and resilience, from a more intuitive and balanced inner reference.<sup>184</sup> In another study with police officers, post-training results compiled from psychological and performance assessments showed reduced competition, improved communication, greater cooperation within work teams, and improved listening and relationships with family.<sup>185</sup>

Collaboration has become a pet idea throughout most, if not all, spheres of human interaction. Ideas behind collaboration are abundant, with some being more relationally focused than others. For instance, Morten Hansen indicates that the goal of collaboration has nothing to do with the relationality of collaboration, but is all about "better results."<sup>186</sup> Unifying people around a common goal necessitates unifying people. Kouzes and Posner point out that it is essential that leaders be skillful in creating a climate of trust,

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<sup>183</sup> McCraty, 81-85.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>186</sup> Morten T. Hansen, *Collaboration* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 15.

facilitating positive interdependence, and supporting face-to-face interactions.<sup>187</sup> Even Hansen, in his very task-intensive approach, identifies the need for unifying people, yet still concludes that his unifying principle is results only. Collaboration is a deeply relational idea, which means that there is a human-related goal in the mix of desired results. Siloing the idea of people being available to one another only when collaboration is desired does not work; the ideas are interwoven. Daniel Pink's study of decades of research shows that results which focus on dollars and self-promotion are not motivating to the majority of human beings. "We know that human beings are not merely smaller, slower, better-smelling donkeys trudging after that day's carrot," assesses Pink, but that people care about "doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause greater than [them]selves."<sup>188</sup> Along this same line of thought, Kouzes and Posner point out, "If one partner always gives and the other takes, the one who gives will feel taken advantage of and the one who takes will feel superior. In that climate, cooperation is virtually impossible."<sup>189</sup> So, it seems that clarifying and examining the "Whys?" behind efforts at collaboration is a powerful exploration, for the answer can greatly impact whether or not the work is successful.

In *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek provides insights about how to inspire people to action, particularly with respect to the need for trust. However, he misdiagnoses the difference between two types of why. Sinek tells the stories of Samuel Pierpont Langley

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<sup>187</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, third ed. (New York, NY: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 243.

<sup>188</sup> Daniel H. Pink, *Drive* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2009), 145.

<sup>189</sup> Kouzes and Posner, 254.

and the Wright brothers, and their pursuits to be first-in-flight.<sup>190</sup> He indicates that although the Wright brothers had far fewer resources than Langley, they were successful because they started with “Why?” However, that is not the whole story. In a TED talk unpacking the premise of his book, Sinek tells the same story and adds that the Wright brothers were successful because they wanted to change the world. Langley, however, just wanted to get richer, which was an end result.<sup>191</sup> Actually, both are an end result. The difference between the two drives to succeed at flying was that one was only driven by a desire for a stronger and richer self, while the other was about the whole world becoming stronger and better. The heart trajectory of Orville and Wilbur Wright was vastly different than that of Langley. Chances are, the Wright brothers’ team trusted them more, thus, their passion, vision, and determination were contagious. “When people trust us,” notes Dickson, “they tend to believe what we say, and few are considered more trustworthy than those who choose to use their power for the good of others above themselves.”<sup>192</sup>

## Conclusion

Stories from scripture, history, and current contemplative movements, along with our Christian gospel, are all an invitation to a theology of availability that has seemed illusive amidst the noise and chaos of the typical US American life. This thesis maintains

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<sup>190</sup> Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York, NY: Portfolio / Penguin, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>191</sup> Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” TED.com, accessed January 19, 2017. [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action).

<sup>192</sup> John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 147.

that contemplative availability in loving union with God is a key means for creating an atmosphere whereby the relational breadth and depth, for which we were all made, can flourish. Exploring the fullness of relationality with God, self, and others in the whole of life—the connectedness of everyday, everywhere, and everyone—is a life of being simply available to abundant possibilities. There is no longer a rationing of what could be when one is simply available to the fullness of God. The ir-ration-al is no longer complete anathema because of a newfound awareness of, and availability to, the abundant possibilities that once were unseen and inconceivable.

No matter what a person's situation or place in life, Gregory of Nyssa, notes Harrison, “challenged them to remake themselves from *within*, with God's help.”<sup>193</sup> She goes on to say, “He looked deeper than all the stereotyped categories and recognized that all people are made in the image of God, and all have been created with the goal of becoming like God and sharing in the divine life.”<sup>194</sup> It is from this vision and reality of divine life that the church must learn to better cultivate contemplative availability in loving union with God in the midst of life's noisy and often hollowing realities.

Every human story is wrought with unique pains and sufferings filling some days, and distinctive joys and blessings overflowing in others. Learning to live in loving union with God's true, inescapable, and mystically indwelling, presence every day, everywhere, with everyone, will nurture a people who are simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, no matter what a moment seems to offer on the surface.

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<sup>193</sup> Arthur Holder, ed. *Christian Spirituality: The Classics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 26. [italics added]

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

SECTION 4:  
ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

This dissertation's artifact is a book for popular press. *Simply Available* is written with the premise "Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder." Having been made *from* relationship *for* relationship, we are faithful to God's design of us and dwelling in us when we are simply available. When we cultivate the capacity for availability in our whole self, we allow relational depth to come to life.

Based on the theology of availability explored in the written statement, *Simply Available* takes the voice of a shepherd or coach, nurturing the reader's journey into the abundant possibilities that exist for a life lived in and from availability. The book is written as to be available to a very broad audience, not just Christians. The author believes that apologetic, courtroom-like arguments for the existence of and love of God are far from relational magnets. Cultivating simple availability allows for a much more conversational dialogue that acknowledges God's full capacity to accomplish what God desires in a life that is simply available. God, whose being is relationship, is available to and through the whole of creation, living in relationship with what he made. Because humanity is made from the relational being of God, we are at our best and highest in life, when we live simply available to that relational being every day, everywhere, with everyone, and in all situations.

*Simply Available* explores a contemplative way of living that goes far beyond isolated prayerful minutes in the day. It shepherds the reader on a journey into the relational warp-and-weft of life, nurturing an understanding of, and capacity for,

relational depth with God, self, and others. Each chapter paints a picture of what it looks like to become simply available at the woven intersection of being completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.

SECTION 5:  
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

**THE CONTENT**

*Premise*

We live in a time providing the greatest access to human interaction in history, yet, quite possibly, are experiencing the most extreme relational shallowness and divisiveness. These and other relational realities are not so much intentional, they are just where we find ourselves in today's atmosphere. The purpose of this book is to cultivate an atmosphere that brings relational depth to life by cultivating the capacity of a person's whole being to say, "Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder." *Simply Available* is a coaching voice that cultivates an atmosphere for relational depth to flourish. Each chapter provides examples of what it looks like to live the simply available life.

*Unique Selling Proposition*

If consumers in the target market purchase and read *Simply Available*, the results will include:

- ▶ Deeper understanding and acceptance of the life journey necessary for self and others.
- ▶ Greater ease in conflict resolution and solution creation.
- ▶ Deeper, more fulfilling relationships with self, others, and God.

- ▶ Greater ability to see and cultivate ideas.
- ▶ Easier decision making.
- ▶ Healthier relational atmosphere for teams and families.

Because the book will:

- ▶ Nurture a personal journey that fosters the depth and health of relationships, including with self.
- ▶ Cultivate an introductory understanding and application of a more contemplative life.
- ▶ Reveal the human capacity to live a more aware and attuned life.
- ▶ Shepherd passage into a whole-person availability to what is and what can be.
- ▶ Cultivate joy in approaching the unknown.
- ▶ Display the woven reality of life.
- ▶ Nurture an availability to and possibility with the God who is.

## OVERVIEW

The manuscript will be divided into five distinct parts, with eight short chapters each, and will close with an epilogue:

### *Part I: Abundant Possibilities*

What if you could go back to the whimsical time of childhood when, for many, nothing seemed impossible? A time when you didn't always pay attention to the voices of "you can't do that." You didn't so much ignore those voices out of disrespect, but mostly from a pure and innocent belief. The eight chapters of this Abundant Possibilities section will nurture one idea each: Atmosphere Creation; The Unknown; Unexpected Breakthroughs; Youthful Exploration; Relation-Ally; Life-Bearing; Insanely Genius; De-frame. Each chapter will feature stories and metaphors as illustrative elements.

### *Part II: Completely Here*

"Here" often seems to play a game of unending hide-and-seek with us. We tend to dwell in the past or the future, finding it difficult to live in the here and now. The eight chapters of this Completely Here section will nurture one idea each: Everywhere...There...Here; Plod No More; Stillness Bubble; Forgiveness Clearing; Mirror, Mirror; Pain's Invitation; Unforced Learning; All of You. Each chapter will feature stories and metaphors as illustrative elements.

*Part III: Keenly Aware*

Although we live surrounded by access to insurmountable information, we are not necessarily more aware. In fact, we may well be lulled to sleep by the endless flow. The eight chapters of this Keenly Aware section will nurture one idea each: Awake Walking; Gaining Perspective; Sensory Power; Their Perspective; Garden Conversations; Soap-Box Step-Down; Context and Culture; Learning to Discern. Each chapter will feature stories and metaphors as illustrative elements.

*Part IV: Deeply Attuned*

It is one thing to have a plethora of information, but it is quite another to know what to do with it. There needs to be a contemplative approach to life that allows for cultivating our capacity to discern. The eight chapters of this Deeply Attuned section will nurture one idea each: Heart and Gut; Deep Longing; Getting Away; In-Seeing; Understand, Understood; Relational Resonance; Infinite Guidance; Woven Reality. Each chapter will feature stories and metaphors as illustrative elements.

*Part V: Full of Wonder*

Wondering about life is often viewed as a negative, when it is actually showing an openness to what is, what could be, and the whys of it all. Wonder is casting aside fear and anxiety to embrace faith and awe. The eight chapters of this Full of Wonder section will nurture one idea each: Magnificent; Minuscule; Mystery; Captivated; Respecting;

Delight-full; en-Lighten-ing; Passion. Each chapter will feature stories and metaphors as illustrative elements.

A complete chapter-by-chapter synopsis is attached in Section 6, providing a more detailed overview of the manuscript.

### *The Manuscript*

- ▶ Manuscript Status: Brief content for five section introductions and all 40 chapters, along with major portions of nine chapters and an epilogue are attached as writing samples.
- ▶ Anticipated Length: 65,000-70,000 words.
- ▶ Anticipated Manuscript Completion Time: Approximately 4 months after receiving commitment from a publisher.

## **THE MARKET**

### *Characteristics*

The audience for the book is men and women with at least a high school education.

### *Motivation*

The audience for the book is made up of persons with interests that include, but are not limited to:

- ▶ Personal growth and development, spiritual formation, and discipleship.
- ▶ Help in decision making.
- ▶ Nurturing the relational atmosphere of their work, church, team, family, or friendships.

- ▶ Conflict resolution.
- ▶ Creating a collaborative environment.

Although there will be some Christian ideas in the book, the content will be written so as to make it accessible to anyone, no matter where a person is on his or her faith journey.

### *Affinity Group Examples*

1. Counselors
2. Personal Coaches
3. Consultants in a variety of spaces including business, non-profit, education, and government.
4. Pastors / Clergy
5. Conflict Resolution Facilitators
6. Collaboration Facilitators
7. Team Leaders and Developers
8. Church Small Groups
9. Book Clubs interested in personal development

### *Competition:*

Interest in the areas of mindfulness, neuroplasticity, neurocardiology, and contemplative prayer is growing rapidly. The pace and noise of each day is driving men and women in all walks of life to look for ways to move beyond survival. A few of the popular books being turned to for insight and guidance include the following.

*Mindfulness*, written by Ellen Langer, Ph.D., invites the reader to be the controller of how he or she sees, feels and acts, and to no longer be controlled by his or her

surroundings. Instead of mindlessly accepting what is and what comes to us, we can live with the understanding that almost everything can be changed. Mindfulness creates possibilities. Langer is a professor of Psychology at Harvard University and the author of multiple books from her decades of research on mindfulness.

Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist, senior fellow of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, and has written three books that unpack and apply the power of the brain. In his *New York Times* bestseller *Hardwiring Happiness*, Hanson invites his readers to a simple daily method for capturing the brain's capacity to be hardwired for contentment, calm, and confidence.

The popular book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, by Brené Brown, Ph.D., leads the reader to shed expectations. Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and *New York Times* bestselling author, writes authentically from her own personal journey. She creates an atmosphere for her readers to delve into their deeper self so as to embrace who they really are in order to live a wholehearted life.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, offers a number of books that nurture the human person into a more contemplative life. A key thread that runs through nearly all of his works is that God is a lover and not a dictator. *Everything Belongs* is written as an introduction to contemplative prayer for those who seek a deeper spiritual life.

Although these books bring great value to people's journey, *Simply Available* meets some specific needs. The first need is for a book that provides an introduction into the ideas of mindfulness, contemplation, and related areas. These ideas can be very

‘thick’ and feel inaccessible, overwhelming, and unobtainable. *Simply Available* offers a variety of doorways for taking initial steps into these and other important concepts.

There is also the need for more Christian writers to explore these topics, learn from them, and provide practical application. *Simply Available* offers a look from a Christian point of view, while at the same time remaining available to those who are not Christian or theologically trained. Because my faith heritage is protestant, evangelical, and specifically Southern Baptist, I also seek to build a bridge into these ideas for people within those faith communities. For instance, mindfulness has long been a Buddhist idea. What neuroscience and neurocardiology are now showing us is that meditation and contemplation do good things for the brain and the heart. I am not seeking to create Buddhist Christians. I do believe the broader Christian world can be awakened to the power of a more meditative, contemplative approach to living in relationship.

Finally, there is the need for clear application of these ideas to life. Through stories, metaphors and a very accessible, conversational style, *Simply Available* provides day-to-day application: readily applied approaches that fit every arena of life. Because of my study and degrees in the sciences and theology, I have the desire and capacity to show the woven nature of these worlds in applicable ways. The aim of *Simply Available* is to cultivate a way of being and living in relationship with the whole of life.

## THE AUTHOR

### *Background*

I have a BS in Biology from University of South Carolina (1988), an MDIV from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (1999), and a DMIN from Portland Seminary (Graduation, Spring 2018). My nearly 30 years of experience has included team work internationally, work in multiple medical arenas, non-profit leadership and facilitation, pastor, chair and member of various boards, teaching at the university level, business ownership, consulting, and personal coaching.

### *Previous Writings*

Coward Jr., Ronald Charles, "Cultivating Contemplative Availability," DMIN diss., Portland Seminary, 2017.

Coward, Chuck, *Redemptive Journey*. [www.redemptivejourney.blogspot.com](http://www.redemptivejourney.blogspot.com).

Coward, Chuck, "One King's Money, Another King's Men." *Leadership Journal*, (Summer 2008): 41-43.

Coward, Chuck, *Redemptive Journey with Jesus* –30-day devotion guide. Self-published, 2007.

### *Personal Marketing*

I develop seminars and consulting sessions with the same title as the proposed book and based on the context of the audience: non-profit, business, church, regional collaborations, etc. I will continue to grow these opportunities for promotion of the book.

Traveling and speaking for global promotion of the *Simply Available* book and message is something I look forward to.

My long-standing relationships and partnerships within United Way, Charity Tracker, and the Southern Baptist Convention provide access to North American and global networks.

A business network that I am part of provides global connections and opportunities. I have provided a regular two to three-minute, *Simply Available* message to key leaders in this global network via Voxer.

I will diligently promote the book through my Facebook, Twitter, Alignable, and LinkedIn accounts.

## SECTION 6:

### POSTSCRIPT

In the spring of 2005, Dr. Leonard Sweet was guest lecturer at Charleston Southern University in Charleston, South Carolina at a small, invitation-only event. My wife, Anita, and I had been invited by a friend. What we did not know was how profoundly those few hours would change our upcoming years. Dr. Sweet, known as “Len” by his friends, sat in a chair and conversationally exegeted a Starbucks cup, unpacking the need for an EPIC approach to ministry. He also shared about his “Leadership in the Emerging Culture” Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary.

At the end of the conversation, Anita and I stood in line to speak with Len. I shared with him that I had been looking for a DMin program where I could incorporate my current work, developing a non-profit as my project. Len told me that I could do that in the George Fox program. Within the hour, I had arrived home and started the application process. I was accepted that summer and began my doctoral work in the fall of 2005. That was 12 years ago. It was the start of a journey that would change me deeply.

The reading, writing, cross-cultural conversations, and “Advances” that made up the next six semesters of course work engaged my heart and mind in ways that were transforming. I did not really enter the program for the degree; it was always about learning and growing, which continue to give me a sense of life. What I did not know was that the most difficult and significant learning would be *after* the coursework was complete.

The original plan for the DMin thesis and project was for my reading, research, and writing over the semesters ultimately to feed into the dissertation, but that did not happen. My initial dissertation advisor moved on to another teaching opportunity. What followed was nine years of searching and false starts with my writing. I would begin to write, but in my deepest being something was not connecting. Within that nine-year timeframe, a seismic shift hit our family and my perceived anchor point for dissertation writing. In the fall of 2012, I learned that I would no longer have a position with the umbrella non-profit that funded my work while I was developing another non-profit. With four-months' notice, my world hit a brick wall. The newer non-profit would not have the time to develop the funding necessary to go on. Not only was the struggle of dissertation writing continuing, but I was now faced with the project focus, my income, and my family's insurance coming to an end. Twenty-five years of life investment in a three-county region was seemingly lying in a ditch. Now, the struggle was even more personal.

The financial and insurance pieces to the puzzle were figured out for our family fairly quickly, but not the puzzle of my life. For the next four years, the personal struggle of "Who am I and why am I here?" was real, deep, angry, revealing, dark, and painful. These are just a few descriptors for the unending storm that was churning my being. Then, in late spring of 2016, it was as if I stepped into a clearing.

I turned 50 that spring. Maybe that was somehow my exit from the larger storm. Whatever the cause, the possibilities for my dissertation work began to flow again with some new clarity. Track 02 would still be the approach, and the book, as I believed then, would be *Ending Pretending*. My expert advisor for the artifact said, "I don't think that's

it. Is it okay if I push you on this a bit?” After a phone conversation, I made myself even more available to what was emerging in me and what was showing up in personal coaching that I was providing for a few people. What surfaced in those areas, along with my ongoing dissertation development, was the thread of “availability.” The more I read, thought, conversed, and wrote, the clearer it became: simply available. Because of the 2005-2017 journey, I am now simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, and I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.

Now, in the tenth anniversary year of having started my dissertation journey, the work is complete. My aim is that the book, *Simply Available*, will be published in 2018 and that my shepherd’s heart and vision would have the opportunity to cultivate the simply available life in the lives of people around the globe. I will keep writing, and have a continuing journal of several book ideas. I also have the opportunity to teach for a university with an extension program in the Charleston, South Carolina area. My personal coaching/shepherding will also continue to be developed.

One issue that may be a consideration by administrators of the program is the need for someone to have the role of “checking in” with students who are in an elongated dissertation journey. It is true that no one could force anything out of me in that timeframe, but I felt pretty alone in that dissertation desert. Maybe that is what needed to be for my content to emerge. However, as a person with shepherding tendencies, it seems to me that someone from George Fox Evangelical Seminary (eventually Portland Seminary) should have been asking “How’s it going?,” “How are *you*?,” “How can we help?” as a check-in and support. With that said, I am grateful for Dr. Daniel Brunner staying the course with me as dissertation advisor, helping to see it through. He sought to

understand me as a person, and allowed my approach and style to emerge. Also, it is a very wise element for the program design to have spouses attend the final advance with Len on Orcas Island. My wife was much more available to my dissertation journey because of that time with Len, the cohort, and other spouses. That adventure was also a tremendous “thank you” to my wife for supporting the two-years of course work.

Through it all, I now live, simply available.

## APPENDIX A:

### ARTIFACT

#### **INTRODUCTION (PARTIAL): LET’S GO FOR A WALK**

After decades of study, work, conversations, and wrestling with ideas in areas of theology, sociology, psychology, biology, neurology, epistemology, business, education, politics, and more, a simplicity for life emerged within me. I saw something that fit all of those worlds, and I began embracing my own life as a husband, father, son, brother, and neighbor. There was nothing simple about the journey to this place. In fact, there were times when I threw it all in the air with the hope that something would land and make sense.

When I stopped working and thinking so hard, and began cultivating my capacity to simply be, there it was: all I had to be, every day, everywhere, with every one and in every situation, was *simply available*. Being available doesn’t answer every question or solve every problem. However, availability does open up space to explore abundant possibilities in the search for answers and solutions.

The word available is made up of two words:  
avail – from the Latin *valere* – to be of worth  
able – from the Latin *habilis* – handy, fit

These two words that combine to create available, are value words. To be available to self, someone, or something is a value statement: “You and I are worthy of this potential connection.” When you and I are available, we believe there is the potential for value to be given and gained. Being simply available is a way of being that is cultivated over time, fostering an ability to say:

*Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life, I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.*

In this way of availability, the doors and windows of our whole being become open to abundant possibilities; soft and refreshing breezes begin to blow through, causing toxic realities to be chased away and new life to emerge. We learn there is more available to us when we become available to more!

What you have through this book is the voice of a friend walking with you along the path of becoming. You decide when my voice speaks and when it doesn't. Nothing you read is written by an expert, but by a fellow sojourner, one who has learned that being simply available brings relational depth to the whole of life, including to your own self. You won't find courtroom, laboratory, or pulpit arguments here. Although you will be challenged with a variety of questions, they are from the heart of a shepherd and coach.

Each section and chapter provides descriptions, examples, and stories of what the simply available life can look like. Don't be overwhelmed by the need to *do* availability. I am inviting you to *be* simply available. So, as you read, picture yourself in your favorite place of conversation, such as a beautiful garden, an expansive beach, a quaint tea room, or a winding mountain trail. Create that place in your own imagination, then...let's go for a walk or sit for a spell, simply available.

## **PART I: ABUNDANT POSSIBILITIES**

What if you could go back to the whimsical time of childhood when nothing seemed impossible? A time when you didn't hear, or at least didn't pay attention to, the voices saying, "you can't do that." It wasn't out of disrespect, but from a pure and innocent belief in abundant possibility.

### *Chapter 1: Atmosphere Creation*

Whether vicious storms or the brightest of blue skies, atmospheric conditions determine the weather. The same holds true for our homes, work places, communities, and even our inner world; atmosphere is powerful. We have the capacity to influence and create the atmospheric conditions of our life spaces. If you consider an idea as impossible, there is nowhere else to go. However, if you choose to consider a possibility you don't yet know, pathways and scenarios have the possibility of becoming visible. Either way, impossible or possible, an atmosphere is created, but only one option creates an availability that provides the conditions for opportunities to emerge.

### *Chapter 2: The Unknown*

Humans like having all of the answers. To *not* know can be anxiety-creating for many. However, consider what was once unknown to you. Consider what was once unknown to all of humanity. That would be...everything! Being available to the unknown opens up an abundance of possibility for the challenges we face. Challenges that are yet to be solved. We have access to new ideas for these solutions, ideas that are new because they are presently unknown. What would happen if you lived available to the unknown?

### *Chapter 3: Unexpected Breakthroughs*

People tend to be problem solvers. Often, when you are in a problem-solving mode, the harder you push and press for solutions, the more elusive they seem to be. Yet when you are just going about your business, from out of nowhere, unexpected possibilities arise as breakthroughs. Living a simply available life cultivates access to these serendipitous discoveries. When you are open to the idea that unexpected breakthroughs exist, you can more readily see them when they surface.

### *Chapter 4: Youthful Exploration*

As crazy as it may sound, when I walk into a store and smell freshly popped corn, I am taken back, every time, to my days as a youthful explorer. During the sweltering summers in the south, my sisters, friends, and I would make our way to a store that had an amazing popcorn aroma. Along with having shopping cart races, we spent hours exploring the store's offerings. But it wasn't just in that store. Whether in a forest, an attic, the marshes, or a cavernous old building, exploring was the way of my youth. There is a youthful explorer somewhere in all of us, longing to emerge again. When we avail ourselves to it, there are always potential treasures of life to be found.

### *Chapter 5: Relation-Ally*

What if we nurtured all of our relationships as if we were meant to be allies? As difficult as it may sound, what if you and I were willing to enter every conversation, including conflicts, with an attitude that said, "I am not your enemy," and then acted like it was true? The other person in the relationship may not have the same attitude, but what

if you were always a persistent model of being available to approaching conflict relationally?

*Chapter 6: Life-Fostering*

The womb. We all came from one. All of life has some type of womb within which it is nourished and nurtured. Every new life holds abundant possibility. Even the tiniest and seemingly insignificant flower could become the loving beauty delivered by a child to a mother bearing the weight of life. What if you saw your moments as a life-fostering womb from which abundant blessing could be birthed?

*Chapter 7: Insanely Genius*

Many of the greatest geniuses of the world were believed to be insane at some level. But think about it. Where would we be without them? These are the people with eyes to see things that no one else sees, because they are insanely genius, and simply available to abundant possibilities. There are other labels, such as quirky, dysfunctional, learning disabled, mad, and unstable. Human beings like these seem to not acknowledge the boundaries that inhibit most of the world's minds. Abundance of thoughts, ideas, and possibilities are their launching pad. We can all learn from them. It may very well be that *you* are one of them.

*Chapter 8: De-frame*

Frames hold the edges of a moment, a picture in time. The frames add beauty, sometimes more stunning than the picture or painting itself. We also frame our arguments, reframing them when necessary. Let's admit it, we want to win. We hate

losing. But, what if instead of framing and reframing, we chose to *de*-frame, realizing new possibilities that our frames prohibit or inhibit? “Why” is a powerful de-framing word: not just to ask of others, but to ask of yourself. When you ask this question, you may find that what you have framed is a forgery. On the other hand, de-framing may show that what you have in your possession is of greater worth than you ever dreamed!

## **PART II: COMPLETELY HERE**

“Jim, where are you? Jim. JIM!,” yelled Ellen as she grabbed Jim’s hand with a frustrated force.

“Why are you yelling, Ellen?”

“I was telling you about my long conversation with our son Jeffrey and it seemed like you weren’t listening. It was like you were in a completely different world. I called your name two times, finally yelling and grabbing your hand before you even acknowledged me. What’s going on? Why do you seem so distant?”

### *Chapter 9: Everywhere...There...Here*

Have you ever almost been in a major car accident, or had the blue lights flashing in your review mirror, whether they were for you or not? In that moment, nothing else matters. Nothing else is on your mind. You are incredibly present to that moment. Being truly present can be one of the most difficult practices, as our attention tends to be there and everywhere, but rarely completely here. Becoming simply available helps us to cultivate our capacity to resist being everywhere else and to truly be here when we are with others, or our own self.

*Chapter 10: Plod No More*

The word “plod,” is a great example of onomatopoeia. I think it sounds dreadful. To plod is to trudge or walk heavily, which we usually do when bearing the weight of something that is overwhelming. We all have bad days, but when an individual bad day turns into a string of bad days, a pattern has been established. A series of plodding days may be evidence of a self-state that is in need of change. Becoming simply available to this need for a change allows for weight to be identified and unloaded.

*Chapter 11: Stillness Bubble*

We live in an incredibly noisy and busy world, with electronics being the largest noise-making culprit. The most pervasive factor preventing our escape is the mobile phone, which has replaced the once immobile phone. In the old days, we used to have to walk to a phone, now we never have to walk away from it. That mobile phone doesn't simply connect us to a single person on the other end, but to the whole world. A busy signal once lead to hanging up the phone. What if you had a way to enter into a personal stillness bubble where though the noise and busy are all around, it does not “touch” you, even though you are aware of its presence? It may sound impossible, weird, or crazy, but it can be accomplished over time, if you are simply available.

*Chapter 12: Forgiveness Clearing*

Unforgiveness. Could you be holding unforgiveness including a lack of forgiveness for yourself? Unforgiveness held over time eventually holds us in a thorny existence. Very few of us are without some portion of our soul-garden encased in thorny,

twisted, vines of unforgiveness. Ignoring this thorny presence will only lead to an increase of its invasiveness. Being available to the presence of unforgiveness creates the atmosphere for a forgiveness clearing that will help unbind you from the past and open up more of you to your present and future.

### *Chapter 13: Mirror, Mirror*

Earlier, I introduced the idea of availability as a term of “value.” One of the most difficult people to consider worthy of our availability is our own self. Let me show you. Find a mirror. Really, find a mirror. Now, look into your eyes; not at them, but *into* them. If you fit the pattern, you will not be able to look for very long; in fact, some will not be able to look at all. Some people, when asked to do this exercise, go months before being available to look into themselves through the window of their eyes. Why is it that we can look at ourselves in the mirror multiple times each day, but when asked to look more deeply, it is difficult and some refuse?

### *Chapter 14: Pain’s Invitation*

Steel being forged and tempered by fire in order to make it stronger is a metaphor often used to describe the value of pain in shaping the character of a human being. Have you ever watched the steel-forging process? The temperature can reach well over 1500° F. No one has ever mistaken me for Superman, aka “the Man of Steel.” We are people of flesh and blood, so the fiery difficulties of life hurt, no matter what form they take. However, pain, in its myriad forms, is a reality of life that we cannot escape. What if we became available to pain as an invitation to relational depth?

*Chapter 15: Unforced Learning*

When learning is forced, how much learning is really taking place? There is no doubt that sometimes we need a boot to the rear. But, what if we worked to lessen the number of boot-prints we have to bear? I believe the two greatest causes of boot-prints to the rear, are arrogance and fear: arrogance that thinks we know it all, and fear of stepping into what we don't know. Both of these states-of-being are not very open to learning. Being completely here means there is no room for arrogance, fear, and other learning impediments; becoming available opens one to the life of a learner.

*Chapter 16: All of You*

To be a simply available person requires all of you; mind, body, soul, spirit, and any other label you may add. It's okay if you have a few deadbolts to unlock first. The journey to becoming simply available will help you find those locks. Once found, we won't be blasting those locks loose, that only creates more damage and doesn't really help in the long run. We will look for the keys. To successfully find the locks and keys necessitates an all-of-you search, which requires you to be completely here and fully available. When you have the keys, you don't put the locks back on because they are no longer needed.

**PART III: KEENLY AWARE**

As my son and I drove past the newly cleared acreage at dusk, I slowed to look for deer that would sometimes emerge in the darkening day. As my eyes carefully

surveyed the landscape I spotted a large doe nibbling at some greens just on the edge of the forest. She was keenly aware of our presence too, for as we spotted her she slowly lifted her head and stood as a statue looking our direction. I briefly stopped so that we could watch her. She didn't move, until we had moved to a distance she considered safe. The extent of her awareness was quite amazing. The doe had a way of going about her business, yet being keenly aware to the world around her so that she could respond appropriately.

### *Chapter 17: Awake Walking*

Sleep-walking can be quite dangerous. What should be frightening to us is the extent to which humanity sleep-walks throughout their day. If you want to live a life that is keenly aware, you must wake up. You overcome sleep-walking by nurturing awake-walking. Repetition and routine can lull a once-alert person to sleep. A break in routine, changing your schedule, taking a new route, going to new places, seeing new things, meeting new people, experiencing new cultures, are all powerful. You become a more keenly aware person when you are available to the fullness of your own world as well as to worlds and ideas beyond your own.

### *Chapter 18: Gaining Perspective*

Perspective is defined as the faculty of seeing all relevant data in a meaningful relationship. When a phrase like "it is what it is" is spoken, it is a clear indicator of someone feeling stuck. But there is always more than you are aware of right now because you have limited awareness. What questions are you asking? With whom are you having those conversations? What are you reading to gain more information? How available are

you to gaining new perspective, especially in some of the more challenging aspects and relationships of your life?

*Chapter 19: Sensory Power*

What happens when all of our senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling—are engaged throughout the day? Being keenly aware of what is taking place around us at any given moment comes naturally for some, yet for others it is a capacity that needs to be nurtured. “Stop and smell the roses” is a phrase spoken to those who are moving so fast, and are in such a state of unawareness, that they don’t even recognize the sweet fragrances of life right under their noses. Simply available senses cultivate an awareness that is invigorating and deeply engaging of and in the whole person.

*Chapter 20: Their Eyes*

It is one thing for us to see situations through our own eyes and ideas, but what happens when we become available to see through the eyes and ideas of others? Typically, the information we use to interpret a story is coming from one angle, our own. That angle isn’t just about facts, but interpretation of the facts. We forget that what we see is based on many factors—beliefs, experiences, questions, agendas, etc.—all of which are lenses that shape our conclusions. Keen awareness comes by being simply available to see through the eyes of others.

*Chapter 21: Garden Conversations*

Picture yourself in a courtroom as the prosecutor, and you are questioning someone, whom you consider to be a significant enemy. Take note of the details of that

scene as it develops in your heart, mind, and gut. Now, picture yourself walking with the same enemy through a quiet, beautiful garden talking first about ideas you share, then about issues that divide you. How do your feelings from this garden scene compare to the courtroom scene? Garden conversations are more productive because they make us more keenly aware of relationship.

*Chapter 22: Soapbox Step-Down*

First used as a platform for street speaking, the term “soapbox” evolved into a metaphor for a person known for having much to say about a topic, with much passion, and on a regular basis. What about you? Are you aware of the issues on which you tend to have a soapbox? Is it possible that you need to step down, in order to be available for hearing the voices of others a little better? Maybe those same people would be more available to hear what you have to say as well.

*Chapter 23: Context and Culture*

Have you ever been to another country, or to parts of your own town that you have heard about, but have never visited? Being simply available to the world around you will cultivate your awareness of the variety of context and culture that is beyond your own. If you explore unknown areas, simply available, an awareness of context and culture can develop, and you will probably never be the same. In fact, you might even adopt as your own, some of the new ideas and ways to which you are exposed.

*Chapter 24: Learning to Discern*

To be keenly aware and receptive is not a call to become a bottomless receptacle. We all have limits to what we can take in, and sometimes the garbage needs to be taken out. There are also times when the level of activity around us is at fire hydrant levels. Over time, we can develop a capacity to select the content and flow-levels for what we are absorbing. This discernment and awareness can develop over time as you are available to yourself.

**PART IV: DEEPLY ATTUNED**

“I just can’t take anymore!” yelled John as he jumped up from his office chair to pace the room. He had arrived early, as was his pattern, to get some uninterrupted work done before the constant flow of feet and voices into his office space began. For the past few weeks, that extra two-hours every day had not been fruitful, and there was no one else to blame. Something wasn’t right, and John could feel it welling up. What he didn’t know was how to get at the gnawing in his gut and the chaos of his thoughts; there was a disharmony in his very being. He knew he needed help, but wasn’t sure where to turn.

*Chapter 25: Heart and Gut*

Like John, you have probably had moments when your gut or your heart were telling you to tune in. Many of us don’t know what to do in such a moment, for from our earliest years, we are pushed to develop and live from the brain and, in contrast, to control, or even subdue the “feelings” that our heart and gut provide us. Little by little we

lose contact with our deeper, intuitive self, leaving our decisions and actions to what the surface data may say is correct. The pattern is dangerous, but how do we change it?

*Chapter 26: Deep Longing*

Longing. In the deepest part of your being, what do you really, really, really hope for? Do you even know? I'm not asking for a description that someone else has forced on you, but what *you* truly long for. If you were to wake up tomorrow to find that one thing about the world had changed, what would you long for that to be? Many people are unable to provide a quick answer to that question because they don't live attuned to their own deep longings.

*Chapter 27: Getting Away*

Some of us enjoy alone time more than others. What I have found is that all people need more alone time than they realize. Finding a place that is out of your normal path of noise and busyness may save your life, whether you realize it or not. Sometimes we don't know what we need until we have it. Personal tuning time is fundamental to being deeply attuned. Getting away is a helpful way to be simply available to our own selves.

*Chapter 28: In-Seeing*

How much conflict could be avoided if we invested the time necessary to look *into* people, information, situations, etc. for fullness of meaning and purpose? How often do we accept our initial conclusions? As mentioned earlier, our initial ideas are often assumptions based on our own interpretation of minimal information. What is the rest of

the story: the story behind the story? As a globe of humanity, we must learn to find our way in, so that we can find our way out. To have true insight, you must learn to look into.

*Chapter 29: Understand, Understood*

Misunderstanding someone and being misunderstood are both very frustrating. Often, in those moments we press in harder with the hope that understanding will emerge. Pressing may be the worst action we can take. If I press, you probably will press, and *vice versa*. What then tends to emerge is more *mis*understanding. How can we win if we keep missing each other? To understand is to stand-under: an attitude of humility. Instead of pushing harder for someone to understand me, what if I simply became available, sitting down and tuning in with the aim of fully understanding the other?

*Chapter 30: Relational Resonance*

When I hear dissonance in music, my whole being responds with a shudder! Resonance sounds right and feels right. Dissonance is necessary, since it may be movement into something new, but sustained dissonance needs attention. Relational resonance should be our aim. That doesn't mean there is complete agreement about all things, as if we are all playing the same note or rhythm. It means we are available to the symphony that emerges from a commitment to the relational journey.

*Chapter 31: Infinite Guidance*

We don't know what we don't know and given the expansive universe in which we live, not one of us has a platform for arrogance. There is a tremendous amount of knowledge that all of humanity has yet to know. Just thinking about how to understand

what you *do* know is overwhelming! We will explore being available to the idea of a designer and sustainer of the universe who has fullness of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. This Designer, God, is available to us and awaits our availability to the infinite guidance God is willing to provide.

*Chapter 32: Woven Reality*

Life is not as separated as we tend to believe. Instead, it is a woven reality: separate, but not separate. There are different types of weave, but if you pick up a blanket or piece of clothing, looking closely as you pull on it, you will see the various fibers with which it is made. Another way to see it is like the body's systems, made up of separate organs and serving different purposes, yet all are tied to the same purpose: life. Living deeply attuned to the woven reality of life can help us take note of how our being and doing impacts a world of people around us. You have more of an impact than you might believe.

## **PART V: FULL OF WONDER**

Maude stood near the edge of the rocky cliff as the sun's color danced with the ocean's waves. The cool evening breeze was blowing across her face as she absorbed the calm beauty. "Why can't I record this moment and play it in a loop," she thought to herself. It was utterly breathtaking and life giving at the same time. There are the other kinds of wonder in life: wonder why, wonder if, wonder what, wonder when, wonder how, wonder who, wonder where. Wonder is both inspiring and inquiring. Being

completely here, keenly aware, and deeply attuned positions you to live a life of wonder, because you are simply available. It is fun to wonder.

*Chapter 33: Magnificent*

Fiery sunsets, snow covered mountains, a total eclipse, a baby's development from one cell to trillions, color rich nebulae, a flower-filled Alpine meadow; the whole universe is magnificent! Do you see it? Have you ever been moved to tears of awe, moved by the sheer splendor of it all? If you have ceased being moved by the magnificent, perhaps you need to make yourself available to some magnificent opportunities, and stir your heart once again.

*Chapter 34: Minuscule*

History has shown that when we think that what makes up the world around us can't get any smaller, it does. It may be that the world of particle physics has yet to find the smallest particle and energy of the universe. To be minuscule is to be less than small. Minuscule is exciting, because it keeps me wondering, and I love to wonder! Do you realize how much the world of the minuscule impacts your enormous life?

*Chapter 35: Mystery*

In a world consumed with knowing and defining, we don't necessarily care much for mystery, particularly when it touches our own lives and doesn't seem solvable. But why must mystery be viewed as a problem to solve? Why can't mystery stand on its own, where we are simply in awe and wonder of the mystery itself? Are you available to mystery just being mystery?

*Chapter 36: Captivated*

Have you ever stumbled upon something new, beautiful, or intriguing, and found the thought of that person, thing, or idea hard to shake? You have been captivated. Being held captive is not necessarily negative. It is possible that you have not been held captive enough in your lifetime, leading to a loss of wonderment.

*Chapter 37: Respecting*

True wonder births respect. Since not one of us knows all things, we should esteem the knowledge of the other. Respect is another value term. We are only truly available to what or to whom we consider worthy of respect. To dis-respect what we don't know is arrogance. To respect what we don't know is an act of humility. I am available to the possibility of worth when I respect the place of wonder.

*Chapter 38: Delight-full*

Isn't delight a delightful word? Just speak the word out-loud a few times, enunciating as you do; it makes you smile! Delight-full people make us smile. I'm not always a delightful person, but I want to be. I am becoming available to delight by not trying to work so hard at the life that is meant to be delight-full. Become simply available to delight.

*Chapter 39: en-Lighten-ing*

Just as helium is lighter than the surrounding air of earth and can cause things to rise against gravity, wonder is also able to lift the depressed because it is en-lighten-ing.

Wonder also has the power to disperse shackling darkness. Being available to wonder can help remove weight from the heart and mind and shine light in the dark corners of the soul. Wonder helps us to be available to see things that we would not otherwise see.

*Chapter 40: Passion*

What matters to you? For what, and whom, are you willing to die, and why? Do you know at this point? Stop here and thumb back through this book and your journal, if you have kept one in this journey. Look for some hints. It is quite possible that your beginning desires have now been clarified. Your journey has helped to bring you to a place of being simply available to clear and abundant possibilities for living passionately from your deepest and fullest being.

**EPILOGUE: SIMPLY AVAILABLE WORLD**

*Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life,*

*I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.*

What if everyone lived the simply available life every day, everywhere, with everyone? Innumerable problems would be solved, conflicts would end, relationships would be restored, and marvelous ideas would emerge in every nook and cranny of life and the world.

## CHAPTER SAMPLES

### CHAPTER 1: ATMOSPHERE CREATION

As my young family and I stepped off of the plane into the beginning of our southern California summer, a smile emerged on my face. It was early summer, 75 degrees, no humidity, a light breeze, and beautiful blue skies. “This is going to be great!” I said to my wife. From LAX we eventually made our way up the winding roads to Arrowhead Springs, an exquisitely manicured property partway up the mountain, where the Hollywood stars of years past had once come for rest and leisure. We were there for a summer of special training for work with a non-profit.

A few months later, we realized an unwelcomed shift had crept in on us. Summer smog had arrived. The brown ugly air was unnerving. Where we came from, in coastal South Carolina, the air was thick in the summer and we had fog at times, but never brown and visible. I couldn’t get our young son’s lungs out of there fast enough! Some years later I experienced an even more visible and disconcerting “air” in several cities of China, where many wore masks as an element of their daily attire. This was a requirement, if they were to survive the atmospheric conditions. It seemed there was no thought of changing those conditions.

Whether vicious storms, visible air, or the clearest and brightest blue skies, each creates a specific atmospheric condition. While it is clear that we are personally able to influence or control some of these scenarios, it is debatable what level of power we have over others. In most instances, there is no singular cause; it is a complex combination of factors. The same holds true in our homes, work places, communities, and even our inner

world: atmosphere is powerful. As individuals, we have the capacity to influence and even create the atmospheric conditions of our life's spaces.

Finding a way to rise above the atmospheric pollutions found throughout the days and moments of our lives can be life-saving. When the smog of southern California descended, we eventually learned there was a way to rise above it. One day we traveled further up the mountain to Big Bear Lake, where we saw the very defined line between the blue sky and the dark brown, polluted air. Even though Arrowhead Springs, where we were staying, was not the worst air, what we had seen rising even higher above the pollution made going back down the mountain a little more difficult. We saw just how bad the atmosphere really was. However, there was also a new option that we hadn't known. There was now the possibility of escaping the toxic atmosphere into the freshness we longed for.

Options are powerful. If you start with the narrow view of an idea being impossible, there is nowhere else to go. However, when you consider that there may be possibilities you don't yet know, pathways and scenarios often become visible. Either way – impossible or possible – an atmosphere is created, but only one option provides the conditions for opportunities that are truly free to emerge. For instance, I have heard it said that “No one ever enjoys writing, they only enjoy having written.” If a potential writer chooses to believe that statement, the idea of writing becomes anathema! Why would you be motivated to get started with something you will not enjoy? For me, writing is freeing, explorative, stimulating, and a myriad of other affirmative descriptors. Getting started is difficult, but once I begin, ideas flow, stories emerge, concepts connect, insights motivate, and the moments become powerful! If I never step into the possibility

of possibility, the atmosphere has been created by my lack of availability. Writing may never happen from that place. However, when I step into possibility by making myself available with pen and journal in hand, or laptop open and ready, the atmosphere for writing has been created. Then, once I start writing, the more I write, the more the content flows. Barriers that prevent the release of the jumbled-up mess in my heart and mind are somehow removed and streams of thoughtfulness and creativity flow. No doubt, writing is work, but I enjoy having written AND writing!

What about you? Is there something you long for, yet a voice has convinced you it is joyless, impossible, or not worth the effort? Have you given up on the idea because of that voice? That voice is smog; find a way to rise above it. In order to find what you need to change your internal atmosphere, you will probably need to change your external atmosphere. Get out of your normal patterns and places for a few hours, or a few days and make *yourself* available to what might emerge. If you're not really sure how to approach this, stay with me; I promise to help. Let my voice, through this book, shepherd you to a place above life's smog where you are simply available.

Not everyone has the belief capacity necessary to step in the direction of other options. Imagine yourself buried alive in a box that is just the size of you. You are clearly in a dark and confined place where survival is your only thought. Eventually, you give up and accept your present, inescapable negative reality. "Abundant possibility is not allowable for me, available to me, or accessible by me. My life will never see the sunlight." From this negative space, a person is unable to engage in possibility, much less dream of abundance. The first time I identified this pattern, I was working among the poor, particularly with families for whom poverty was multigenerational. After having

mentored a middle school boy for a number of weeks, the teacher of the “self-contained” class, of which he was part, invited me to invest an hour each week with her entire class. I committed to do so with the idea of conversations focused on developing the young people’s character traits. The day we were to talk about self-control, there was a lunchtime fight, in which several of that class’ boys took part. They had created their own self-control illustration! After some minutes of conversation about what had happened, I asked “Why, knowing the consequences, would you choose to step into that fight?” It was as if one of the boys knew the question was coming, as he immediately responded “Cause my momma told me, ‘You was born in da hood, you ain’t neva gettin’ outta da hood, so you might as well learn to survive in da hood.’” Although I was stunned for a moment and thought “How could a mom say that to her son?” the light came on. That boy’s momma was simply teaching her son what she had seen time and time again, and survival tactics were the only option. She believed what she said, because her life atmosphere had created that belief.

This shortage of belief capacity is not just about people in financial and material poverty. This can be the belief atmosphere for anyone, including you: an underground space of negative belief where some of us dwell and can escape only with the help of another. If you believe you have never been there, beware. Consider that a toxic belief atmosphere can show up in isolated pockets. Perhaps you have tried for years to change some work dynamics with no success. Or, you may see a myriad of possibilities for work advancement, but your marriage “just is what it is.” Think outside the realm of personal finances, position at work, and accumulation of nice and fun “things.” Stop here, close your eyes, and become simply available to your whole life: the people who are or are not

there, how you feel about yourself, your growth or stagnation, the spending or investing of your days, etc. Can you stop the grind long enough to look beyond the grind?

Contemplate the possibility that there may be a part of you that was buried at some point along the way, by you, someone else, or life circumstances. You may not even believe it is possible that you have buried possibilities. Read that sentence again: you may not even believe it is possible that you have buried possibilities. See how sly unbelief is? All I am asking is that you be simply available for creating a new atmosphere for your life.

Sometimes the atmosphere creation we are willing to invest in others is more significant than what we invest for our own selves. Don't let that happen. Self-deprecation is actually a false humility creating internal undercurrents that, over time, will drag you out to sea. Treading water is exhausting. If you don't find a way out of that destructive current, you will eventually find *yourself* drowning. Stay with me; we will find that way out together.

On September 9, 1989, hurricane Hugo bombarded South Carolina. I had just been hired as a phlebotomist in a downtown Charleston hospital. Because I was the newbie, and also because I had emergency medical training, I was chosen to stay. As the nearly 300-mile wide Hugo approached the coast with his 140+ mile-per-hour winds, transformers were exploding, windows were shattering, water levels were creeping into the city, and fear was rising all around. Patients were moved into hallways away from windows, which literally bowed inward as the storm winds grew in intensity. Among the strange happenings that I observed were ceiling tiles floating and wax coming off of the floor, both phenomena caused by the storm's barometric pressure. There were also a number of babies born that night! Pressure, barometric or otherwise, is powerful. The

human and situational atmospheric pressures outside of you can impact what goes on inside of you.

Yet your internal pressure can also impact the atmosphere around you. For instance, let's say there is an external pressure that bothers you, and you allow that external pressure to build pressure within you in a way that eventually erupts, creating further external pressure around you. How have you helped the situation? You have now aggravated and worsened the situation. What if you slowed down to consider other possible atmosphere creating responses?

You see, atmosphere is everywhere: inside of you and outside of you. Just as there are certain conditions necessary for humanity to physically survive, there are atmospheric conditions that foster the whole person. We are not just physical creatures meant to wake up each day simply to produce something, then go back to sleep. Everything alive was made to live in relationship, including you. The vision that Jesus cast for humanity was one of abundance, but it was abundance of life. Jesus made it clear that life was all about living in relationship. He often pointed to the children and said, "be like them": loving life, loving each other, abounding in energy, frolicking in the possibilities of that moment! To a child, life is a treasure-chest, which is an atmosphere of belief wherein abundant possibilities can emerge, be seen, be embraced, and be celebrated. We just need to become simply available.

In the chapters that follow, we will create an atmosphere that nurtures your availability to what is and what could be, including bringing buried treasure to the surface. That treasure might be you.

## CHAPTER 8: DE-FRAME

A frame holds the edges of a moment, a picture in time. They often add beauty, sometimes more than the picture or painting has to offer to the viewer. We also frame our arguments, and if those frames don't work, we reframe them. The earliest known frame surrounds a portrait from an Egyptian tomb and dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Early frames were also frequently used to divide wall-painting scenes in Greece and Egypt.

A framed picture, painting, video, or argument is always missing a part of the story, which is the absence of context. Have you ever picked up an old photo of people about whom you know nothing? If you happened to be sitting with family or friends who were there when the picture was taken, you might ask, "Who is this? Where are they today? or, Why do they seem to be laughing so hard?" You want to know more. Often, the first step is to take the picture out of the frame to get to the back, with hopes that there may be a clue. Video can provide a little more detail of the context since the audio may offer clues of happenings that are outside of the visual frame. Video shares more of the story, but still isn't the whole story. There may still be a very important person or situation in the hidden 180° that the video in no way captures.

Beyond visual frames, what if we did a little more *de*-framing of our arguments. Arguments are usually about winning. However, if you win the argument, but lose the person, have you really won? What would happen if the aim was not to win, but to be available to the person and realize new possibilities? I'm not saying that you should give up presenting your point, opinion, passion, or conviction. However, just because a particular reality is all you have ever known doesn't mean that it is all that there is to know. There may be nuances that you have never considered. "Why" is a powerful word

to ask and to be asked. “Why” helps to take the well-framed, well-displayed argument down and to take off the frame. The world will not come to an end, nor will you defame the idea that you de-frame to check that idea’s worth. For instance, you may have a theological argument that you have held for decades, but you have never challenged it. The only books you read related to that theological stance are those that support what you believe. Read some books that challenge your beliefs by removing the frame from your arguments. You may find that the argument you have so proudly framed and confidently displayed is actually a forgery. On the other hand, de-framing your belief may substantiate the idea’s worth, possibly showing that what you have in your possession is of greater value than you ever dreamed! You may be significantly transformed because you had enough trust in your idea or belief to take the frame off and test it.

Some of our frames are perceived as a web of safety, when in reality, they prohibit or inhibit seeing clearly. How many of our arguments rely on the argument, “it has always been this way,” because what “has been” is the only framework we know? You may be the kind of person who feels most safe with what you know, and that safety is your number one priority. But is the unknown really that unsafe? Think back to chapter 2, “The Unknown.” You haven’t always known what you know. At some point, it was all new and fresh to you. At what point did your availability to new and fresh begin to wane? It might feel like I am asking you to jump off of a cliff. Well, to do that you would probably have to be close to the edge, which I doubt is the case if you are a person of intense safety. I’m not asking you to leap, just to look a little farther. Start with simply lifting your eyes from the worn path you are on and realize there is beauty all around you, just beyond the framed pathway you daily trod with great care. If you are ready to do

more than just look around, then take a step. What recent book or blog have you read, what talk-show have you listened to, or conversation have you had that brought some level of challenge to at least one of your ideas and life patterns? Perhaps you might invest time with someone from another culture to learn about their food, family, and faith. You might find you have presumed a framework that was inaccurate: a stereotype that needed to be de-framed. Don't enter into these new relationships to debate or change anyone. Go as a learner. We will go into more detail about this way of learning in the chapters ahead. At this point, at least consider the need to transverse the framework of fear that has you cut off from abundant possibilities.

When facing conflict, availability to the full truth of a story displays relational worthiness. A story is typically told from one point of view. That point of view is able to provide a significant amount of information; however, it is still just one perspective, which provides details framed from one angle. The possibility for moving beyond a conflict comes by considering all points of view, removing the individual frames so that a four-dimensional puzzle can be pieced together. Each piece has a boundary. The more pieces of the story that can be found, the better the chance of finding peace.

Another frame that impacts our lives is a frame-of-mind, which can be negative or positive at any given moment. One example is when someone says to you, "You woke up on the wrong side of the bed!" The challenge, if you accept it, is to de-frame that frame-of-mind before it pervades the rest of your day. "Wrong side of the bed days" are not days of abundant possibilities. The only person who can de-frame that framing of your mind is you. Often, we approach negative attitude and mindset by actively trying to re-frame our perspective and attitude. We try to *force* ourselves onto the right side of the

bed, often to find there is no other side of the bed that day. What if we de-frame the proverbial bed and simply become available to having awakened? “I am awake; therefore, I am available.” Maybe you are supposed to see things the way you are seeing them that day? It could be a forced de-framing by God or your own deepest being that wants you to see something or someone differently. The wrong side of the bed metaphor indicates an unhappy or grumpy mood, right? So, are we never to be unhappy or grumpy? Are those emotions unacceptable? Who declared them so? Are there no possibilities in the space of unhappy and grumpy? If you are the eternally effervescent personality, rejecting people who are unhappy and grumpy, please stop attempting to force them into your frame. De-frame for a little while and try to meet them where they are at and sit by them on their side of the bed. You don’t have to become unhappy or grumpy, just be more available to the fact that the other person is grumpy and it is okay. Don’t make them fake happiness just to keep you happy.

A series of bad days is another reality, however. Ruts and dark holes are confined spaces, framed by walls of various heights. Staying in the dark for extended periods of time is not a good idea. But again, contrary to popular belief, I am not so sure that grunting to climb out or being dragged out of a hole of depression is the right way. My personal experience has shown that making one’s way out of ruts and dark holes is a journey of availability, over time, and in a highly contemplative environment. Several chapters cultivate this way of living. At this point, understand that my invitation to you is a simple availability. Just *be*. Don’t even engage the darkness: don’t debate it, don’t run from it, don’t run to it, don’t acknowledge it. This approach – being simply available – is not a fight or flight response. Find your favorite place. The beach, mountain trail, coffee

shop, lake, garden, recliner, craft room, or wood-working shop, and breathe deeply. Just *be*. That's all I am asking. This is the starting point for a different kind of journey than you may be used to. De-framing can be de-compressing. Just breathe.

Becoming simply available to some level of de-framing of arguments, beliefs, ideas, approaches, attitudes, mindsets, and other aspects of life is transforming. This kind of availability may show you the value of what you possess in your deepest soul. It may free you from unfounded and confounding ideas, and reveal to you a myriad of new relationships with people and ideas. Sometimes this de-framing lasts only for a conversation. At other times, once de-framing has happened, you can never go back, because you find new possibilities that lead to better and deeper relationships with God, self, and others.

## CHAPTER 11: STILLNESS BUBBLE

We live in an incredibly noisy and busy world, electronics being the largest noise-making culprit. Probably the most pervasive cause of being stuck in the noise of life is the mobile phone. We once had phones that were only as mobile as the cord was long. We had to walk to those phones. Now, we never have to walk away from our phones, which, sadly, some never do. That mobile phone doesn't connect us to just one person on the other end, but to the whole world, along with their social network expressions of their life issues.

What if you had a way to enter into a personal "stillness bubble" where although there is noise and busy all around you, it is not "touching" you? I'm not necessarily talking about turning off your awareness of the activity, just how it impacts you. However, if you want to tune it all out, you can cultivate that capacity as well. It may sound impossible, weird, or crazy, but as someone who has lived life as a "ring-of-fire" absorber of everything around him, I promise you, it can be accomplished over time.

The stillness bubble is not daydreaming, which takes your thoughts elsewhere. It is being in the here-and-now with your whole being, yet not controlled by the here-and-now. You are not shut down or necessarily inactive, but there is a sense of "here-ness" about you in the present. Finding and knowing where you are and who you are in the midst of your sometimes-chaotic surroundings is quite powerful. While you are completely here in a stillness bubble kind of way you can also take on varying levels of interaction with the activity around you.

Picture yourself in a clear bubble that only you can see. This imaginary bubble can be adjusted in size and permeability; it can include as much of what is around you as

you desire. Sometimes you really do need to tune out what is taking place around you for the purpose of focus, or maybe even sanity! However, at other times you need to be right in the thick of it all, yet in a way that prevents the chaos from creating chaos *in* you. In fact, you, in your stillness bubble, can be more completely here to what is taking place than those who are caught up in the white-rapid frenzy. Don't hear me saying that you are necessarily unengaged or are leaving all of the work to everyone else while you sit and watch. You can be engaged, but doing so with an availability to your surroundings that is actually deeper, richer, more meaningful, and with more understanding.

How often have you heard it said, or have you said firmly to a child, "Be still." Maybe you were a child who heard those words frequently. When we use the words "be still," it is usually referring to physical stillness, but the words themselves actually speak to a way of being. However, notice that the words are *be* still, not do still. I think it leads to an important question: Can you be here without the "here" controlling and consuming your being? Interestingly, the person shrieking "Can you just be still, already!" may actually be the person who needs to work on his or her own stillness.

This capacity for stillness doesn't just show up in a day, it is cultivated over time as you are simply available to the possibility. You may have to prove to yourself, little by little, that creating this space within a space is possible. There is no doubt that high-energy, high brain-active, intensive people have more of a challenge with stillness. As one of these people, I believe we need to cultivate this stillness bubble capacity more than anyone. Although I am still on the journey, cultivating stillness has changed my life, and, as a result, the lives of those around me.

Years ago, my wife and I used the idea of “sit time” with our children, an idea shared with us by some friends. At least one time each day, our children would sit in a chair for a designated period of time. There was nothing else to do but sit: no talking and no doing. We started small and grew the length of time as they showed their capacity to sit still. The idea was to develop self-control and the ability to sit still for periods of teaching or just to be quiet for a while. The same idea can work for you here, but call it stillness time. Start with one to two times each day for three to five minutes each. If that amount of time is easy for you, adjust as you see fit. The aim is to cultivate your capacity for whole-person stillness. As you nurture this stillness ability when alone, you will find the capacity for it when you are in the midst of a busy noisy world. You might even find that you begin to crave your stillness bubble.

Developing the capacity for stillness should not be practiced in isolation. To be able to enter the stillness bubble at any time, any place, or in any situation, is important. Move your stillness-bubble-cultivating to different types of places and levels of activity such as at home, at work, in a park, in a coffee shop, sitting in traffic, standing in line at a store, or strolling around a mall. You might have to explain the idea to the people closest to you, so that they have some level of understanding of what you are up to. Invite others to join you in this journey. Some will love the idea and be immediately available, others will watch from afar, and a few will totally reject the concept. No matter how others respond, you remain available to stillness. You, and those with whom you live out life, will be better for it.

One consideration that may help you is to reduce your caffeine intake. Neuro and cardio stimulants aren't helpful when you are trying to achieve personal stillness. How

far you want to go with this reduction is up to you. Because you are developing sustainable behavior, I recommend caffeine reduction over time. For example, if you drink three cups of coffee, or energy drinks each day, go to two. The point here is to empower your ability to enter a stillness bubble.

The stillness bubble can also be enhanced by reducing your engagement with “news” sources like social media, non-stop news channels, or any other relentless media. Pay attention over the next 24 hours to how much you are tapped into these. Note what takes place in your gut and your thoughts. You may need to extend your observation over a few days just to see how invasive and stimulating this content is for you. Note how you feel before you read or listen, then note how you feel afterward. Now, pay attention to how long you can actually go without this intake. Notice the frequency with which you start to reach for your phone. What would happen to your inner being if you were to maintain a pattern of leaving this content alone? The corresponding impact is that the content will begin to leave *you* alone. You might eventually choose to fast from it for a weekend or more.

Let’s take this to one more level, nurturing even more significant stillness of mind. As you nurture stillness in the ways already presented, take note of your thoughts. Often, one “spider thought” creates a web of thoughts in the mind that then captures many others flying by: a sticky mind. Go back to stillness. In stillness, practice letting thoughts just “flow through.” When you don’t engage them, you don’t allow sticky thoughts to land in the web that captures many more thoughts. Let there be a gentle stream that just keeps them flowing through. I close my eyes and imagine something in the distance, on which I then focus. Eventually, even that image melts away. This

approach helps prevent engaging other thoughts that will surface. As you set aside time to practice letting your thoughts simply flow through, you will find that they reduce in number. The goal is not to turn you into a thoughtless, empty minded person. The purpose of this practice is to cultivate your ability to step into stillness of mind when you need to. For instance, there may be times when you are working to find a solution to a problem, but you can't settle your mind from the flurry of disconnected ideas flying around in your head. When you have the ability to find stillness of mind, solutions seem to find you; they emerge because you are more available to them. Again, I understand that this stillness of mind may be outside of anything you have ever heard. Begin with making yourself simply available to the possibility of benefit. However, don't get hung up on over-thinking or you will be totally defeating the idea of mind-stillness.

The stillness bubble nurtures our availability to self and others at a different relational depth than we tend to operate otherwise. In the upcoming sections, as we explore being more aware and attuned, a picture will be painted of a very different way of sensing and interacting with life. Learning to be completely here through stillness is a different kind of availability to life than is typical for our busy and noisy lives. I am convinced that you will find it to be a refreshing and even transforming addition to your days. Don't push yourself. Just step into what you are available to at this time.

## CHAPTER 14: PAIN'S INVITATION

Steel being forged and tempered by fire in order to make it stronger is a metaphor often used to describe the value of pain in shaping the character of a human being. Have you ever watched the steel-forging process? The temperature can reach well over 1500° F? No one has ever mistaken me for Superman, aka “the Man of Steel.” We are people of flesh and blood, so the fiery difficulties of life hurt, no matter what form they take. However, pain, in its myriad forms, is a reality of life that we cannot escape. What if we became available to pain as an invitation to relational depth?

Being available to the transforming power of pain isn't something we just stumble upon. Remember, availability is a value term. If we don't see the value of pain, we will not be available to the relational depth that can come from it. Pain, at its highest, can be that moment's only reality to you; overwhelmingly intense and seemingly inescapable. Sometimes pain is a warning. Putting your hand on a hot stove shouts, “Don't leave that here!” The warning of pain may be indicating there is something that needs to be investigated.

The human journey is full of painful pits and pendulums, some of which are created by our own choices. Pits are dark holes of discouragement and depression that are difficult to escape, especially alone. Pendulums are the swings we experience at different times of life. Sometimes they appear in response to issues taking place around us. At other times, these swings emerge from internal wrestling over questions, including beliefs, life purpose, and relationships. Being completely here in these pit and pendulum times can be deeply personal and painful, but in order to understand what is going on and not settle down to live in the pain, one needs to develop this level of availability.

None of us are without some level of pain. Whether something was done to us, done by us, or both, the pain can feel as fresh as if it happened today. Pain may also arise from a clear sense of something or someone being absent from your past because of death, workaholism, emotional disconnect, divorce, or some other cause of relational separation. You cannot do anything to erase the past. However, what you can do is determine what it produces in you and from you. Make yourself available to pain from the past and allow life-principles to emerge, then move on. Learning and growing from pain rooted in your past begins to cut the roots, which helps prevent new growth into the present and future. The roots of bitterness begin to dry up and die, losing their influence upon you.

There are times when you are hurt by misinterpreting, misunderstanding, or mishandling of the truth. Even though what is believed is not reality, the pain is no less real. Until the truth is given the chance to be unveiled and received, falsehood can color everything. Left alone, other words and actions are often falsified, as they are heard through the falsehood filter. Sometimes it is on purpose, other times it isn't. Groups of people, such as families, political parties, and employees, deal with painful truth issues all of the time. The pain of misinterpretation tends to keep on giving until someone is available to say, "Enough is enough! Something isn't right, and we need to sit down, or take a walk, and figure it out." This is an "I am simply available to be completely here" kind of conversation. All parties have to be available. Being completely here is being available to know the truth. Pain is evidence to which we must pay attention. Unwillingness to seek and know the truth about pain brought upon me, or caused by me is inhumane to all involved. Choosing to always know the truth, no matter how painful, is

availability to relational depth. Several of the chapters provide more insights for these kinds of conversations.

Probably the deepest pain that we can experience comes from our deepest loves. For many of those loves, we should absolutely be willing to make ourselves available to the pain they may create. Love for any human being will bring pain along with it. We all cause pain; imperfection has a way of doing that. Personal growth happens as we learn, and learners always make mistakes. Those mistakes tend to be painful in some way. Learning how to live in relationship is the most challenging school we attend, and it never provides a break of any kind. Even if you isolate yourself from every external source of human presence and activity, you always have *you* to deal with, and you are the most difficult person you will ever grow to know. You may very well cause yourself more pain than anyone else in your lifetime. Just be sure you love yourself enough to learn and grow from self-inflicted pain and those personally-created learning opportunities.

Not all pain from our good loves is bad, although it seems bad at the moment of delivery. When convinced that a pain's source is good, you tend to be willing to endure it. When a dentist injects you with lidocaine to numb your mouth, in order to work on a bad tooth, she always starts with, "This is going to sting a little bit." You endure the sting because you know the tooth needs work, and this sting is better than the alternative pain. Physical trainers love to cause pain, not to injure, but to strengthen. Muscles are not meant to experience a major tear, but the fiber does go through micro-tears which are just enough to cause a healing that results in stronger muscle. The best trainers know those pain-to-benefit boundaries and train their students to identify them as well.

Other deep loves that we have can cause pain that should be understood as the hot stove warning; it is a pain shouting “Don’t leave that here!” Dropping these loves and leaving them behind, however, can be extremely difficult. Freedom from a destructive love begins with acknowledging it is not good for you. In order to embrace this conclusion, your mind and heart need a reason why this love you have held so dearly needs to be released. This level of convincing may take time, and may include reoccurring pain inflicted upon you and those closest to you. You probably will not accomplish this difficult journey alone. There is pain in the separation process from any love, which means that you will want to give up rather easily on the idea of leaving that destructive love behind. Your mind and heart are saying, “If this love is so bad for me, then why does giving it up hurt so badly?” The pain of leaving a destructive love may feel even worse than staying in it! This is why support is necessary, to help you sift through all of the whole-person turmoil to find reality.

An ongoing difficult and uncomfortable conversation that we have in the United States of America is regarding the history of slavery and its variety of evidences in society. My whole life has been lived in the deep south, with middle and high school years in predominately black schools. I have engaged in conversations while standing in the streets and sitting on sofas with black elders of downtown Charleston, SC, as they have told me their personal stories of embarrassment, suffering, and pain. These streets are in a part of the city of Charleston, in the shadows of Emmanuel AME church. You might remember this as the place where black Christians were in a Wednesday prayer meeting and Bible study, and nine of them were shot dead by a white young man. It was a race-based killing, on June 17, 2015. You see, it is still fresh pain.

You don't just "get over it" when you bear real and deep pain through life experiences. These are friends and neighbors who still have video footage running in their minds of verbal and physical abuse because of their skin color. Black or white, I am sorry for how difficult and painful these conversations are, but they need to happen for true healing. If you are white, please acknowledge that you can never fully understand this personally, but please make an effort to be completely here in those conversations. The changing of laws doesn't change the hearts of hateful people and doesn't take away the pain. Watch, with openness, some movies that will expose you to history that will probably stun you. Be open to the honest pain and raw emotions from real stories. Sit and listen intently. Put yourself into the stories you are hearing. If you do, you will be changed. If you are black, please be available to questions that are meant to gain understanding. The toughest, and perhaps the most painful question being, "When can we move on?" It can be a question with good intentions, for many, wanting to move beyond the frustration of struggle in order to finally find healing. Many of us long to "fix" our racial impasses. I know this is more than a black and white issue, skin-color or otherwise. We can be better if we would all be simply available to one another.

Entrepreneurs see the pain of need as evidence of abundant possibility. The more significant the pain, the more evident the need, the greater the opportunity to create a solution. For some, finding these opportunities is very much about the money to be made. However, for many others, their entrepreneurial heart is driven by solving problems for people in order to make life better. These entrepreneurs live available to the pains of others

Pain is an invitation to bring relational depth to life. This inescapable reality takes on a myriad of forms, but you have the power to determine pain's impact. It starts with being completely here to your pain: acknowledging its presence and source. You win by refusing its dominance over your deepest self and being simply available to the abundant possibilities in relationship with life.

## CHAPTER 21: GARDEN CONVERSATIONS

Picture yourself as a prosecutor in a courtroom, questioning someone whom you consider to be a significant enemy. Your case is strong and arguments are bold. Take note of the details of that scene as it develops in your heart, mind, and gut. Now, picture yourself walking with the same enemy through a quiet, beautiful garden. You talk first, about the issues that unite you, before you engage those that divide you. As insane as it may sound, shared issues with that most significant enemy really do exist, so humor me for a minute or two. How does the state of your heart, mind, and gut in the garden scene compare to the courtroom scene? Chances are, the garden walk is a bit calmer. Garden conversations have more possibilities than courtroom arguments. The intent of the courtroom is to conquer, where the person in charge is focused on thinking ahead about the stance to be taken, the questions to be asked, or the arguments to be won. To talk while walking a garden path or sitting on a garden bench cultivates the capacity for conversation instead of a debate. Winning is not the intent of garden conversations, instead the focus is on relationships, and opening the door to solutions. Although we can't have every conversation in a real garden, it is a helpful picture of the kind of atmosphere that can lead to productive and even wonderfully refreshing conversations.

To be keenly aware, in true conversation, means you are less focused on an agenda and more intentional about the relationship; I truly desire to hear you and you truly desire to hear me. We also want to learn about each other: who we are, what we love, what stirs our souls, why we believe what we believe. To be in conversation is to be open to and inclusive of the actual person, not just concerned about the subject to be hammered out or the task to be accomplished.

Conversations are not interrogations. It is important to understand that a barrage of questions can feel like an interrogation, even if they are not meant to be. Keenly aware askers will notice when they have crossed the line. The person answering a constant flow of questions needs to be aware of when they have reached their limit and communicate that awareness: “I understand your desire to know more, but I am feeling a little overwhelmed with the questions at this point.” Then, shift the conversation to something lighter, or have the inquisitive question asker do some sharing, where he or she ends sentences with anything but a question mark!

Great conversationalists are great listeners. They are not thinking about what comes next. They are paying attention to the person speaking with the aim of truly hearing what is said. Listening is not just a function of your ears, but of your whole person. A keenly aware listener is a completely here listener who is enjoying getting to know a person’s heart, mind, and soul. If, as a listener, you find your surroundings distracting, try more eye contact to help you focus and listen better. Sometimes you may even let the person know that activity around your conversation is a little distracting, but that you are working hard to focus. If the conversation can’t be moved to a quieter location, it helps him or her to know you are committed to truly listening, even with the surrounding noise and activity. To listen well is to be keenly aware that there is much to learn about and from anyone. Learn to enjoy listening and nurture that capacity.

As a listener, there are two ways conversation can be impacted negatively, of which you need to be keenly aware: assumption and misinterpretation. Both of these can be poison to conversation. The difference between the two is information. You assume upon someone, as a listener, when you have come to a conclusion that is pre-information.

Misinterpretation is post-information. Both of these are due to complex filters through which you interpret life. These have developed over time. I'm not so much looking for you to label these two negatives, but to be aware of how they both create mistrust.

Mistrust tends to lead to more of a courtroom conversation than a garden conversation.

Always aim for a walk in the garden. When in conflict with someone, you are more prone to be in error about what that person is thinking or believing. Awareness of this possible error can help you avoid assumptions and misinterpretation, which would most likely exacerbate the conflict. Assumptions and misinterpretation can also bring about unfounded worry, anxiety, or anger. Sometimes assumptions develop because someone you desire to hear from isn't communicating and you don't know why. This lack of availability leaves people to "guess" what might be going on and is not helpful to a relationship. However, it is also not helpful for a person to assume the why behind a person's lack of response. If you don't know the story, don't assume one and cause your own worry, anxiety, anger, or other negative emotion.

Another way you make assumptions about people is by imputing your strengths and skillset onto the other. This leads to your own frustration, because chances are, that person will not live up to your expectations. This doesn't mean the developing and strengthening of capacities should never be considered. Invest more conversation in what that means. Make the conversation about the person and not just the task to be performed at a higher level. Being assumed upon can be very frustrating, particularly when it is a negative assumption. Negative assumptions put a person at a deficit, creating a fighting stance. Don't assume upon others, since you don't want them assuming upon you. An

awareness of your own filters will position you to understand their impact and how those filters may need to be changed or eliminated.

In situations where brainstorming and developing ideas and projects is the purpose, remember that it is never “just business.” Often, the boardroom is no different than the courtroom with its focus on winning. You should not lose awareness that you are working with people. Arrive at the meeting space a little early in order to prepare yourself by picturing the space as a garden. It may sound strange, but consistently preparing yourself in this way will pay off over time. Your business might consider creating a boardroom that actually is more conversational, by removing the big table and adding sofas, chairs, and greenery. Invite the more relational and conversational people in your business to help.

Sometimes the most difficult conversation we need to have is with our own self. One of the reasons why it is so important to cultivate a capacity for stillness and a more contemplative element to life is that it helps you to be more available to *you* on a consistent basis. Do you ever talk with yourself when on a walk? If not, you should give it a try – but, make sure you also listen to what you are saying. When you are discouraged, depressed, angry, or in some other negative space of attitude and emotion, see if you can be more aware in those moments through self-talk. Ask yourself some questions and then be available to what the answers may be: who, what, where, when, how, and lots of times, why. We have made talking to self a sign of mental dis-health, when it could actually be a way of pursuing mental and whole-person health. But, in a Bluetooth world, who would know the difference anyway? Just be keenly aware of who might be around, unless you want them joining the conversation.

From these honest and deeper level conversations with yourself, you are better prepared for your conversations with others. When you slow down and become available to the people with whom you have conversations, you often find that they are struggling with some of the same challenges with which you have wrestled or are wrestling. Have you ever had someone with whom you were sharing about an issue you were facing or a relationship with which you needed help and that person clearly felt the pain of your struggle? How did that sense of connection impact the extent of your opening up with more detail and more of you? Something happens in our deepest being when we realize our human struggle is a shared one. The empathy that is created fosters a different kind of conversation because trust has moved to a higher level. Garden conversations graced with empathy foster a special kind of trust that leads to an extraordinary relational depth.

Our desire should always be simple availability in every conversation, bringing relational depth to life. Garden conversationalists are keenly aware of their own heart intent when talking with others and their own self. Be the atmosphere-creator that we discussed in the first chapter. Envision and treat every one of your conversations as a simple garden conversation, not a courtroom. Be keenly aware of trust so that the person with you feels deeply safe, knowing you are not their enemy. Be the one who remains keenly aware of cultivating this deeply relational atmosphere, whether anyone else does or not. If you do so, garden conversations will begin to pop up all around you.

## CHAPTER 23: CONTEXT AND CULTURE

It happened around midnight in New Delhi, India as I stepped out of the airport building and into the insane streets. People were everywhere and it was utter chaos! My thought was that it was just airport activity, but that was not the case. The streets of India, no matter what city we visited, seemed to never sleep. There were auto rickshaws, trains, and busses. I had seen pictures of the packing jobs that maximized the number of human beings who could fit into the severely limited transport boxes, but to experience it first-hand was unforgettable. Crowded New York subways provide no match for Indian transport systems. India is now one of my favorite places—the food, the people, the conversations, the culture—I love them all.

You don't have to go far to experience and learn about other cultures. The opportunities are right in your world already—work, neighbors, school, the gym, restaurants, faith community—all around you. When you are simply available to your surrounding world, there is a keen awareness of context and culture that emerges. Visit stores, restaurants, and coffee shops in different areas of your city or town. Watch and listen while you walk around or sit, whichever is appropriate for the location. The inner city or “the other side of the tracks” are both places that people hear a lot about and maybe drive through quickly, but they don't necessarily invest time. We all have stereotypes about these communities, the people we have never met, and streets we have never walked. Remember the story in chapter one about the character conversation after some of the boys had been in a fight? That was context and culture. That mom was telling her son the story she had experienced throughout her life. We all have our own responses to life's issues that emerge because of where we came from. The cultural differences in

the United States alone are stark, from Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest. You can even drive to various regions of your own state and find radical differences. The distinctions of context and culture are all around you. Be careful not to judge as right or wrong what is simply different. Don't hear me saying there is no right or wrong, only that our idea of what is right or wrong can be greatly impacted by our own context and culture. I love learning why people see things as they do.

I visited four cities in China and had a variety of experiences that changed me. One of them, as mentioned earlier, was the bad air experienced in several of those cities. Our visit was focused upon the Uyghurs, one of over 50 minority groups found in China. After three days of travel within China, my friend finally had his soda and pizza longing met. I was truly afraid that he would starve during our ten-day visit, because he was finding it difficult to eat the food available to us. One of the cultural realities in the Uyghur villages and cities was the meat hanging on hooks in the open air, out on the streets, in front of the restaurants. It may have been the flies gracing the hanging slabs, that was particularly unsettling for him. As a germophobe, it was for me too. From these legs of mutton, chunks were sliced throughout the day as needed, for two menu options: in a bowl with vegetables, or ground with spices and on a stick, breakfast, lunch, and supper. A significant portion of the Uyghurs of China had been isolated to a city of 80,000 called Yarkand. This city sits on the edge of the Taklamakan desert, found in the Tarim Basin of the northwest China region known as Xinjiang. After arriving in Beijing China, it took us three flights and three overnight stays, followed by a two-hour taxi ride to arrive in Yarkand. In this area, Uyghurs were reclaiming desert territory by digging large irrigation ditches, growing trees along the edges to shade them, and diverting water

from the Yarkand river. Within the city was a mix of modern construction and large homes built from dried mud. We made a trip to the desert one day where we climbed a sand dune to look out over the desert. As I trudged through the thick, reddish-brown sand, my feet were buried with every step and the searing sun was baking me. I questioned why we were there. On the drive back to the city, with windows down and dust flying everywhere, I sucked down the only three bottles of water that I had with me, and longed for more. I thought I would die. After settling down from what I perceived to be a near death experience, I absorbed that fact that this was *their home*. I was changed by my time with the Uyghur people in their city, eating their food, experiencing their culture.

Have you ever been to another country? If you haven't, the stories above may make you want to stay home, but I hope not. As hard as that trip was, I would return at the first opportunity. Yarkand is now part of my story. Remembering these stories moves me deeply. If you go to these new places keenly aware, you will never be the same. Immersion has a way of making us different people. If you are truly available to the sights, the sounds, the smells, and the people, they will leave indelible marks upon your personhood for which you will be grateful.

My first international experience was in East Germany for a month in the summer of 1988. There was still an east and west for Germany at that time, and those worlds were quite different. When traveling from west to east, it was almost like driving from a full-color world into one that was black and white. While in East Germany, the team I was with camped. We returned late one afternoon to fellow campers from all over Europe watching us in an unusual way as we drove toward our campsite. Some of them were throwing their hands in the air saying, "Kaputt, Kaputt!," which is German for lost, or

dead. Once we arrived at our site we knew why we were the center of attention. Earlier that day, a very bad storm had come through with strong winds. Our largest tent had been destroyed. The campground's maintenance guy, along with others had already started working on a solution for us: a very large canvas tent that had been stored away in a shed. For hours, they worked on finding the poles necessary to erect that tent. Something happened that day as the stories of people from various nations were woven together: we had all met more people and our relationships were more trusting and deeper. We had shared the reality of life together. A few years later I visited Romania, another former eastern bloc country, where I stayed in the home of a widow and her two daughters. This family provided beds and prepared three meals every day. Breakfast was outside and our evening meal was usually a bit later in the evening. We would sit around the table for hours enjoying great food and conversation, often with lots of laughter. My experience in both of these cultures was one of amazing hospitality.

Culture shock is the description of what sometimes happens to a person when exposed to elements of a culture new to him and that stretch him significantly. For some, the shock is upon return to their own world, when they are confronted by negative realities about their own context that they were not attuned to before. What I have found over the years of much cross-cultural experience, is that the more available you make yourself to the culture, the less shock you experience; its severity and longevity is at least reduced. Being deeply attuned to the reality of differences and having a pre-determined "I want to learn and enjoy" kind of availability, serves as a culture shock reducer, possibly even a preventative. Over time, you might even move from just being a little flexible in different contexts and cultures, to having a capacity to be fluid. You see, the more

inflexible you are, the more shockable you are. Availability increases flexibility, cultivating a more deeply attuned capacity to learn from and enjoy new contexts and cultures.

One more thought. Beware of jumping to conclusions about someone's words, beliefs, or actions, before having the context. Sometimes we hear stories second hand or third hand, which means significant details were probably changed or lost. I am often asked to give a general response to a "what would you do" question. The majority of time I ask for more of the story so that I can provide a contextual answer. Think about politics and conflicts, which are basically the same. How often are statements and actions taken out of context, changing the meaning? If we don't like others taking our words and actions out of context, why do we feel the freedom to do so to them? Cultivate asking for, and being attuned to, the interpretive support of context: the story behind the words and actions.

Context and culture are both story. Culture is developed over tens, hundreds, and thousands of years of context. Culture is like strands of context-beads. Being available to the stories of others unlike you and becoming a part of those stories will often show you how much you actually share in common. I love that my story has intersected with the stories of so many others, even in the desert where I thought for a few minutes that my life was over. These human beings eat, drink, sleep, work, play, laugh, cry, and get angry just like you; they are just not *exactly* like you. Don't let different be a wall. Let differences in context and culture be an invitation to a more deeply attuned life because you are simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life. Greater meaning and deeper relationships will be the fruit born from a life cultivated in this way.

## CHAPTER 25: HEART AND GUT

It was October 15, 1994 when Susan Smith's story catapulted into the news. The emotion and detail with which she told the story of her car having been carjacked with her two-young sons fueled a massive manhunt. As I stood in front of the television watching this young mother emotionally express to her sons her love and longing for them to be back home, my gut said "She is lying." I actually said it out loud so that my wife heard it. She asked quite passionately, "How can you say such a thing?!" "I just know," I said. My gut was right. Since that time, my wife has come to trust the intuitive capacity of my heart and gut, and hers as well.

You have probably had moments when your gut, heart, or both were telling you to tune in a bit more. Whether it was sensing a need for more understanding, something seemed to be amiss, or you had no idea what it was about, the physical stirring in your core was very evident. Many of us don't know what to do in such a moment. From our earliest years, many of us are pushed to develop and live from the brain, and to control or even subdue the "feelings" that our heart and gut provide us. Little by little we lose contact with our deeper, intuitive self, leaving our decisions and actions to the impersonal data. If you have focused upon the power of the mind, chances are, you have left the heart and gut behind. Ignoring the inner stirrings is a significant loss and may even be dangerous at times. How can we be simply available to our heart and gut so that we are deeply attuned to what is to be learned from them? Some of what you find below may be a bit outside of your comfort. All I ask is that you be available to the possibilities.

First, slow down. Actually, let's go a little stronger with that. Stop. Your active mind and body can prevent you from noticing the subtler heart and gut. Practice your

stillness bubble as described earlier. Both your heart and gut thrive on stillness, so provide them an atmosphere in which they can flourish. Sometimes I sit quietly and hold my open-palm hands, one on top of the other over the lower portion of my left rib cage. It's like I am holding the lower part of my heart and the upper part of my gut. Then, with eyes closed, I focus on the warmth I feel. There is no magic here, just becoming attuned to another part of you that has a voice. I want the whole you to be reminded that the brain is not the only place where wisdom, discernment, and understanding are found.

Now, as you make your way through your days, pay attention to your heart and gut. When they are stirred, stop and be attuned to the possible why. Become okay with hesitating. Activators tend to be focused on the task and have a hard time with not acting immediately. Living in relationship with the whole of life fosters a relational depth that intuition thrives on. Your heart and gut have the capacity to go far beyond facts and task. That is why I am asking you to pay more attention, so that you don't blow past these powerful opportunities.

All people have some level of intuitional capacity. Variance from one person to another is based on personality, availability to the idea of intuition, level of use, and other factors. The differences in intuitive capacity means that we need each other. Knowing someone that you believe to be more attuned to heart and gut is a blessing. Walk with him. Learn from her. Seek his or her counsel.

Learn to trust your own heart and gut, especially if they have a pattern of being right. I wish that I had someone tell me this, years ago. It was only after years of my heart and gut clearly being attuned to realities beyond the five senses, that I began to trust those stirrings. By no means do I view my own, or anyone else's intuition, as inerrant.

However, I also do not allow the chance of being wrong to shut down what I believe to be God given. Sometimes intuition's purpose is to slow things down. The more your heart and gut are right, the stronger your belief in this capacity will become. This means you have to be attuned. Maybe start by telling no one so that you don't have that added pressure of expectation. Keep a journal where you unpack the feelings and senses that you have, and then tell the story as it emerges. Don't make this overly complex. Just breathe and be available.

God designed a whole you and can empower your being to be much more intuitively attuned. Since we will unpack these two ideas in chapters that follow, I will simply make some connections here. You are not isolated, disintegrated parts, but a woven human being. This matters to intuition because even your body speaks, which is why you should learn to listen to your heart and gut. Not only does your body speak, but God speaks. Not usually in an audible way, but in our deepest being. That God speaks, means that our intuition can be led by God who knows all, if we are simply available. I'm not indicating that God always has something to say, but I do believe God speaks more often than we listen.

Strong intuition doesn't give the right to bulldoze into just any situation or conversation. Having something to say doesn't provide the right to say it. It is important to be humble and respectful if you are deeply moved to share insights you may have. Asking for permission shows respect: "Do you mind if I share a possible insight?" If the answer is one of refusal, don't push, just move on. If there is an openness to what you have to share, do so with humility.

Empathy can create a challenge for intuition. People who are deeply empathetic feel the pain of others in a very real way. Empathy, like intuition, shouldn't be pushed aside. However, they are different. Empathy is about entering into what someone else is feeling, and not necessarily about intuitive insight, which is more interpretive. Strong empathy can overshadow or misdirect intuition out of fear of hurting the person more, or just creating confusion in your heart and gut. Intuition should never be uncaring and impersonal, but it does need to be attuned to the emotional confusion that empathy can bring. If you have strong empathy and intuition capacities, nurture them working together. Having and showing empathy can open an otherwise closed door of trust, allowing for you to share intuitive insights you may have.

Over the course of time, as people experience your heart and gut being correct, they will ask for you to speak into their world. Sometimes you will know enough of the story and already have some thoughts that have emerged, welcoming the opportunity to speak into the situation. At other times, you will need to hear the story, listening not only to the words, details, and logic, but being deeply attuned to your heart and gut. In the end, you might have nothing to offer, and that's okay. Don't pretend to give what you don't really have, which could eventually lead to loss of trust. Why risk throwing away a trusting relationship? An honest "I don't know" can build trust, too.

Although your heart and gut serve distinct purposes for your physical existence, you can be attuned to the intuitive connection they both can bring to your life as well. Intuition isn't something you so much work at or discipline yourself to do; but, it is part of your human weave, for which you can cultivate your capacity to be simply available. Describing the physical roles of your heart and gut is much easier than determining their

roles in intuition. Those attuned to their intuitive capacity will often point to their solar plexus and say something along the lines of, “Something just doesn’t feel right,” or “I think we should hold off.” Being available to that stirring over time will cultivate a more deeply attuned life and allow for critical wisdom and insight to emerge for your good and the good of others.

## CHAPTER 31: INFINITE GUIDANCE

Remember earlier when I asked you to consider all that you do not know and all that no one yet knows? Let's do that again, but with another aim in mind. We don't know what we don't know, and given the expansive universe in which we live, not one of us has a platform for arrogance. There is a tremendous amount of knowledge that all of humanity has yet to know. Just thinking about how to understand what you do know is overwhelming! What I want for us to explore here is being available to the idea of a designer and sustainer of the universe who has fullness of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. This Designer, God, is available to us and awaits our availability to the infinite guidance God is willing to provide.

If the idea of God doesn't work for you right now, please don't let a dissonance in this moment keep you from what is potentially here for you in another moment. Don't forget, this journey is about bringing relational depth to life by being simply available to abundant possibilities, most of which are still unknown to everyone, including you. If talk of God and faith of any kind is utterly infuriating to you, skip this chapter for now. I do ask, however, that you cultivate becoming available to this conversation at some point. For those who will continue here, how do we cultivate our simple availability to this infinite guidance that is available to us?

Acknowledge that, because you do not have all knowledge, you live every moment of everyday in need of guidance. Admittedly, this is a place of humility, which has been pointed out several times in our conversation. I can't say that I have run into anyone who refuses to say "I do not have all knowledge." However, what I have experienced over decades of conversations around the globe, is that many people act and

argue as if they do know all; people from all kinds of faiths, cultures, and beliefs. One of the greatest challenges we face as human beings is our pride. If you don't know all, there is always the need for help from someone who at least knows some things which you don't. It is life transforming to be available to the abundant possibilities afforded to you if this Someone has all knowledge and is available to you. Don't let pride sell you short.

To become deeply attuned to infinite guidance is to be attuned to a person, not an impersonal reality. For the Christian faith, the story told through the Bible is a story of a personal God being available to live in loving relationship with creation. Before and beyond creation, God is a loving relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. Relationship is not just something that God lives in; relationship is the very being of God. God's ultimate availability to us is displayed by a willingness to come as a human named Jesus: to be born, to live, to die, and to defeat death through his resurrection back to life. There is so much conversational content here, but what I want you to be captured by is the Designer and Sustainer of life being available to live in relationship with you.

For some, this story is outlandish. However, think about your own existence. The whole idea of you and each person who makes up humanity starting as two separate cells to eventually become trillions with the ability to think, communicate, create, and so much more...isn't it outlandish? The reality of anything is nothing but miraculous. Are you willing to be simply available to the possibility of a conversational relationship with a personal God who is available to you? I'm not asking you to embrace all of my theology. I'm not even trying to argue to prove God. All I am asking is for your availability, which could open a door to relationship with a person who can provide infinite guidance. I think you will agree, humanity is in desperate need of guidance beyond ourselves.

There is an interesting side note to the resurrection story. The morning of Jesus' resurrection, he was mistakenly thought to be a gardener by one of his friends, named Mary. Jesus had many garden conversations with his followers, making Mary's mistake in Jesus' identity not so strange. To take the identification as gardener further, history, according to the Jewish and Christian traditions, tells us that the beginning conversations between God and the first human beings were garden conversations. God clearly loves being in conversational relationship with us.

Unfortunately, availability to God and all God has to offer can be made extremely complex. Beware of getting bogged down in the mire of expectations about all that you must do to get to God, to keep God, and to be blessed by God. Often, activities to regularly perform are spoken of as important to a developing relationship with God. Sometimes these practices are equated with an athlete preparing for the Olympics or a musician learning scales. The problem with this kind of metaphor is that it is not relational. God and human beings are not instruments or sports to be mastered. One of the common barriers to our availability to God is our busy faith: an oxymoron. I'm not saying that all regular practices are bad. Just be attuned to whether or not your practices are actually cultivating relational availability and depth. You might need to say "no" to a few activities and involvements so that you can actually become available to God again. Here are some ideas to help with being simply available to God.

As I have mentioned several times, music takes me to a place of whole-person availability that is wide open to God. God gave us music. For those who have tinnitus, or ringing of the ears, which I do, music is very helpful for overcoming the irritating distraction of constant ringing. A fan helps as well. When nurturing availability to God,

sometimes instrumental music is best, because words might distract. This is where you need to be attuned to your deepest self. Do you feel distracted by the words or drawn out by them? Don't be anxious about getting it right. I often go with the flow of what emerges. One morning I was home alone and ended up dancing around the living room, weeping in freedom while listening to an amazing arrangement of *It is Well with My Soul*. Now, every time I hear that song, I remember that doorway moment into a new relational depth with God and myself.

Consider getting out into nature, particularly at times of the year and day when nature is talking through its glorious array of color and creature conversations. God made it all and can speak to you there. If you cease to be deeply moved in one nature setting, find another. Breathe deeply in this space while you simply enjoy the beauty. Right now, as I write, I am sitting in an office, looking out the window at the sunrise and a hummingbird enjoying a large Rose of Sharon bush full of flowers. Slow down so that you can see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and be.

Walking the streets of a city or town in conversation with God can bring a relational depth to life that you wouldn't necessarily expect. As you go, do so with this prayer: "God, help me to see what you would have me see, hear what you would have me hear, and even smell what you would have me smell. Break my heart over those things that break your heart and fill me with joy over those things that bring you joy." Just you and God, talking about the world around you.

As described earlier in the Stillness Bubble chapter, try some silence. Silence unnerves us initially, because we are so used to constant noise. Don't be afraid of silence, God is there, too. Maybe start with five to ten minutes, one or two times each day, then

grow from there as you nurture your capacity to simply be available. You will probably find yourself enjoying these quiet moments and longing for them in the noise of life. The point for this chapter, however, is not just the silence, but the infinite guidance to which you become more available in the silence. As you catch and release a myriad of thoughts, sometimes there is one thought that is clearly meant to be held onto. With that thought may come a sense in your heart and gut that God is speaking to you. Don't worry, don't be anxious, just listen.

Beyond the guidance, is the Guide. Don't just make yourself available to what God can give you, but to the Giver. Be simply available to living deeply attuned to God's being. Your life can be an uninhibited being-to-Being relationship. We are seeking to nurture a life that never ceases to be deeply attuned to the infinite relationality that God offers us. Instead of scattered, scheduled, and brief moments of being attuned to God, you can live continuously attuned to the infinite, unending, reality of God's deeply relational presence and guidance. You see, even God's guidance is relationally based. I see it as a never-ending garden conversation that stimulates, refreshes, and leads to deeper loving relationship. That doesn't mean that God and I are talking all of the time. We find pleasure in simply being together. Think about it. Haven't you found joy in just sitting with someone on a park bench, or strolling down a beach with no words being uttered at all? Sometimes simply being present with one another says more than words could ever express.

You and I can't, don't, and won't have all of the answers, but we can live available to the One who does. Be simply available to the infinite guidance that God is willing to provide you in life's journey. Learn to be okay with what God will not share

with you. What God will not share may be out of loving protection. Also, don't feel the need to explain and defend what you can't. When you no longer live your faith as if you have to defend it in a court of law, you are able to live your faith as relationship. See it as an ever-refreshing walk through the garden called life with the One who can provide infinite guidance as needed, but who mostly loves just being with you.

## CHAPTER 34: MINUSCULE

History has shown that when we think that the world around us can't get any smaller, it suddenly does. It may well be that the world of particle physics has yet to find the smallest particle and energy of the universe. To be minuscule is to be less than small. Minuscule excites me, because it keeps me wondering, and I love to wonder! How about you? Don't be afraid to wonder. We will talk about this fear a little more below when we seek to embrace the wonder of mystery.

Consider the book you hold in your hand. You see it and hold it as the solid that it is, but it is not as non-moving as you might think. The paper and ink are all made up of minuscule particles: molecules made of atoms made of electrons, protons and neutrons. Protons and neutrons are hadrons, which are made up of quarks. All of these naked to the human eye particles are actually vibrating! It has been quite some time since new subatomic discoveries have been made. The neutron was the last to be found, which was in 1932. The quark was postulated in the 1960's, but has yet to be officially observed. It has been shown experimentally to exist by its effects, but not visibly confirmed. So, the minuscule teaches us that we can know that something exists by the effects that we see, even though we do not see that which is causing the effects. I wonder what else to which we could apply that level of availability to the unobservable?

The minuscule invites you to be available to a completely here, keenly aware, and deeply attuned kind of seeing. The smallest things call us to a deeper relationship with life. Babies, bees, blessings, hummingbirds, caterpillars, and quarks are not as readily seen by the constant hair-on-fire activist, nor from the throne of self-centeredness. Learning to be available to the small things helps you to see the opportunities to serve in

the smallest of ways: a simple “Thank you,” “You look nice today,” “Can I get those for you?” or “You seem upset. Can I help?” The wonder of the minuscule brings relationship to life.

The power of minuscule time is found in moments: cutting the umbilical cord, the drive away to college, the walk across the graduation stage, a marriage proposal, all of the firsts and lasts that we experience in life. Each of these moments in time are but a speck in our overall story, but they can be unforgettable and life changing. Many of these minuscule particles of time are seeds for new growth. They are opportunities that avail themselves to you, but will the level of wonder in you allow you to avail yourself to them? A moment of opportunity that seems so small and insignificant could be the beginning of something quite expansive: a mustard seed moment.

A minuscule molecule can be the difference between fostering life or advancing death. Adding one molecule of oxygen to  $H_2O$  turns the life necessity known as water, into a poison. You know  $H_2O_2$  as hydrogen peroxide, which you would never consider treating like water if you want to go on living. Just like that tiny molecule, one tiny word has the capacity to empower or destroy, to encourage or shut down, and to enlighten or confuse.

There is a chip measuring five nanometers, which is just a few atoms thick, or around two helices of DNA. The ability to produce chips this size will lead to a chip the size of a fingernail that can hold 30 billion transistors. However, even the idea of those transistors is being challenged for a future chip that can both process faster and hold memory. The minuscule world of chips, processing, and memory is getting smaller by the moment. We don't know how small we can go. The speed at which the world of

minuscule within electronics is developing is almost impossible to keep up with. Yet, we have come to expect these kinds of developments. It is possible that expectations can endanger wonderment. The wonder of creating miniscule may no longer be a large enough advance to catch our attention.

Ant colonies tend to pervade my yard every spring and through the summer. In my yard, it is fire ants and they are an unending battle every year. It might be quite terrifying if I could get a full look at their subterranean domain. Most of the time I am able to avoid the extremely painful bites, but I never go through the summer without a few red welts on my feet and ankles. It is amazing that something so small can create pain that is so intense. Although I battle these painful little devils, I am also intrigued by how their colonies function. It is utterly amazing the speed with which they can respond to a food source from out of nowhere. How they work together and the way they work to save fellow ant lives is no doubt key to their ability to survive any onslaught that I bring upon their mounds. Sometimes they seem so much smarter than the large-brained human beings that fight them. We really can learn some things from these miniscule creatures.

Then, there is you. Your body went from the fusing of two cells to the trillions that now make up the you who is reading this. When the sperm and ovum cells come together, they create the ability for the miniscule to become a human being. These two cells, on their own, do not have the capacity to create. I remember the moment in my college embryology class when I learned about the variety of cells that develop after the fusing of these two germ cells. These cells recognize and communicate with one another in order to make up the tissues of the body. And then, there are the genes that make us all different. Even identical twins are not completely identical. If you haven't heard of

epigenetics yet, things just got smaller for you. Science now tells us that genetic predisposition isn't true about every gene, because some of your genes have on and off switches that can be controlled by your environment. The wonder of the miniscule! Does your knowledge feel small yet?

Beyond the physical world are the miniscule differences in ideas. It is amazing how we seem to have a way of becoming monstrously divisive with the smallest of disparities. These small differences shouldn't make us want to fight, they should lead us to wonder why, which opens the door to seeking out understanding, as described earlier. This kind of wonder is an available one, with an internal atmosphere that cultivates learning from, not just arguing against. Notice the distinction between, "I wonder why he believes that?" and "Why does he believe *that*?" If you are on the receiving end of a monstrous response, minimize the impact by wondering why there has been a monstrous response to something so small: "I wonder why she just responded that way?" If we were to take more of these small steps we might find ourselves closing some of the larger gaps as well. Granted, sometimes what we see as miniscule is a bit more significant, like the molecule difference between water and peroxide. However, it is the availability of wonder that opens the door to even understanding this critical difference.

The smallest details can be so significant. Details of a story may answer questions or create more. For instance, if you were a witness to a murder, your memory of the tiniest details can make or break a case, which is a heavy load to bear. Having DNA evidence now available has led to hundreds of exonerations for people on death row; people wrongly convicted to death because of a missing, microscopic detail. Pictures are painted in your mind and movement takes place in your deepest being, based on the detail

that is added. The simple addition of music to a movie scene completely changes it by stimulating emotions within us according to what the author and director intend. Pay attention to this small, but powerful feature next time you are watching a movie or TV show. Music added to a room of people can be the difference between a party and what feels like a funeral. I write with whimsical and run with rock. Simple detail, significant impact.

What seems so small is often so much more powerful than we can imagine. At other times, we make things that should be seen as miniscule larger than what they are. Living the distinction is cultivated by being simply available to the wonder of miniscule as it dwells in and impacts the world all around you, whether you see it, or not. Don't miss out on the wonder of the miniscule. Live simply available.

## EPILOGUE: CULTIVATING A SIMPLY AVAILABLE WORLD

*Because I am simply available to abundant possibilities in relationship with life,  
I am completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.*

What if everyone lived the simply available life described above, and did so every day, everywhere, with everyone, and in every situation? Innumerable problems would be solved, conflicts would end, relationships would be restored, and marvelous ideas would emerge, not because we were doing more, but because we were simply available people. This kind of availability brings relational depth to life because you see life's woven reality. The relational intersections and connections are there, we bring them to life by being simply available to them.

Now, with whom have you had conversations along the way, sharing about your simply available journey? Those closest to you—at home, work, school, faith community—may have even indicated to you some differences they have noticed. Consider one or two people that you could invite to join you in an ongoing simply available conversation. What chapters were wellsprings to you? Return to those from time to time in the days ahead as a well from which you can draw refreshing waters along the journey. You might even find yourself reclaiming desert territory, as you become a simply available wellspring to a dry and dying world around you.

The simply available life will slow and settle us. Our actions will be more relational. We will be more “here” in our conversations. We will listen better and love more. We will pay more attention to what we say and how we say it. We will be more

open to learn from everyone and all things, even the darkest and most difficult. We will make decisions from a deeper well of possibility and insight. We will be filled awe and wonder. Living in deep relationship with God, self, and others will be everything to us. All of this and abundantly more will become true, not because we worked so hard to make it true, but because we became simply available people, bringing relational depth to life.

Cultivate the simply available life every day, everywhere, with everyone, and in every situation. Hear the voice of your coach/shepherd one more time:

*Because you are simply available to abundant possibilities  
in relationship with life, you are  
completely here, keenly aware, deeply attuned, and full of wonder.*

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