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Seeking Personal Truth (Chapter 10 from Your Hidden Half: Blending Your Public and Private Self—A Quest for Personal Wholeness)

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Your Hidden Half

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Seeking Personal Truth

To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, 3.

A great imposter throughout his life, Fred Demara took on the identity of a Trappist monk, a Latin teacher, a cancer researcher, a military surgeon, and a psychology professor. Actually he was a high-school dropout. Deciding against becoming an actor, he commented that acting seemed "too artificial." Demara spent much of his life searching for identity, never embracing who he was in reality. His was an identity crisis.

Duality creates identity crises for Christians. Paul put it well when he wrote, "... that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). Apart from God's grace, which Paul considered in Romans 8, he was unsure of his identity. Since duality can never be eliminated, traces of confused identity remain for Christians. But as we fully embrace ourselves, including our impulses and our

rationality, and understand God's character we begin to gain a greater sense of identity.

Trying to eliminate duality keeps us from fully knowing ourselves because duality is part of our identity. But self-awareness is risky. Assume Mr. M. Pulse, a typical growing Christian, has learned to accept himself and recognize his impulses. He confides in a Christian friend, telling of his tendency to act aggressively toward his children. Concerned, Mr. Pulse's friend recommends he get spiritual help. Feeling misunderstood, Mr. Pulse sinks back into duality, convinced that self-acceptance results in rejection from others. His sense of identity is again distorted.

Congruence and Christianity

"Congruent" is how Carl Rogers described a healthy psychological state. A congruent person has a clear sense of identity without denial or distortion.

Critics of psychology have noted the incompatibility of some of Rogers' writings with scriptural teaching, but we don't have to agree with all of Rogers' theory or personal philosophy to profit from his concept of congruence.

Seeing ourselves accurately is biblical. In his book *The Christian Looks at Himself*, Anthony Hoekema provides biblical support for a healthy self-image. Many Christians disagree. In a videotape lecture, a popular Christian counselor insists that Christians should not have a self-image. Instead, he suggests, we should look to God for our identity. How can anyone *not* have a self-image? It's like not seeing our faces when we look in the mirror. Whether we like it or not, our faces are

there, staring back at us. Not perceiving ourselves is impossible. Hoekema constructs his biblical argument for self-esteem by carefully evaluating the apostle Paul.

This chapter will seem self-centered to some. I emphasize self-understanding and personal identity because these are part of seeking truth. Accurate self-understanding is truth-centered rather than self-centered. When Jesus warned to take the log out of one's own eye before attempting to remove the speck from another's, he advocated self-awareness.

Seeking personal truth goes far beyond self-acceptance. A major problem among some Christian groups is a lack of other-acceptance. We split denominations because we can't get along. Countless numbers of churches have ongoing factions on an everyday basis.

Other-acceptance has many implications. I frequently hear of those who desperately need counseling but won't see a Christian therapist because of the answerism they have received from church members. Many long for acceptance but get answers instead. Why? Perhaps we don't accept our brothers and sisters because we don't understand ourselves. James suggested that poor coping with personal impulses causes conflicts in our churches (James 4:1). The faults we identify in others are often the very faults we struggle to bury in ourselves, just as Jimmy Swaggart fought to control his own sexual sin while criticizing Jim Bakker's sexual sin.

Freud called it "reaction formation." Being outspoken and zealous is often a way to cope with our neurotic anxiety, warning us unconsciously of our vulnerability. An irate woman called the police depart-

ment, reporting that young people were driving too fast in her neighborhood. The police promptly followed up and issued their first ticket. Surprisingly, the woman making the report received the citation. Her criticism of the young drivers in her neighborhood reflected her own struggles with impulse control. Our acceptance of others depends a great deal on self-acceptance. A tool in seeking truth is congruence: seeing ourselves accurately without distortions pushing us into palliative coping strategies and battles of impulse.

Incongruence in Palliative Coping

Distortion is used to protect us from negative parts of ourselves. Sampling five distortion strategies, first noted by Sigmund and Anna Freud, will demonstrate how palliative coping strategies result from incongruence.

Denial. This is refusing to perceive negative aspects of ourselves. Alexander C. De Jong wrote, "Denial is the shield used to protect one's inner self from the truth. It is a devastatingly effective means of clinging to feelings of self-worth while effectively committing suicide. . . ." De Jong's insightful statement demonstrates that denial detracts from the search for personal truth.

One student wrote on a course evaluation form that I cared too much about what students think of me. At first I laughed it off as a ridiculous criticism from an insecure student. But as I reflected on the evaluation, I began to recognize my denial. I *did* care a lot about students' opinions. Perhaps this bold student was in-

sightful rather than insecure. As this example illustrates, denial evokes the answer-oriented glossy side. With denial, the glossy side grows in order to repress the faults seen in the dark side.

Projection. This is placing blame on others for one's own impulses or faults. A study of college students showed that those who rate peers as stingy and obstinate are themselves stingy and obstinate. One client insisted she had to discontinue a friendship because her friend was so jealous of her. Later in the interview she stated that her friend had just been promoted at work, had just obtained a wonderful boyfriend, and was very successful financially. Who was jealous of whom? Projection often leads to the palliative coping strategy of meism. If others have these negative qualities (that are really my qualities), then I must protect myself so I am not burned by their jealousy or stinginess or obstinacy. Meism is thereby rationally justified.

Rationalization. This is similarly attempting to prove a behavior is justifiable by producing well-reasoned arguments. This common defense easily leads to meism or answerism, depending on whether the dark side or the glossy side is being rationalized. Impulsive motives can easily be disguised in costumes of rationality.

Undoing. This is compensating for dark-side impulses with some act of atonement. A husband bringing home flowers after meeting his clandestine mistress for lunch is an example. Undoing escalates duality by hid-

ing Hyde. Some "spiritual" activities may be ways to compensate for undesirable impulses.

Acting out. This reduces the anxiety aroused by dark-side desires by permitting their expression. Restraints are abandoned. Acting out is incongruent because it denies our innate sense of morality and rationality. Hiding Jekyll results.

These are just five of many defense strategies. A clear connection between defense patterns and palliative coping strategies can be seen with each.

A congruent person recognizes personality accurately. Rationality controls but impulses are recognized without distortion. All impulses, both from the glossy side and the dark side, are embraced as tools for learning and evaluated through the filter of rationality. Walls between impulse and rationality become unnecessary because both coexist in an environment where impulse is managed effectively.

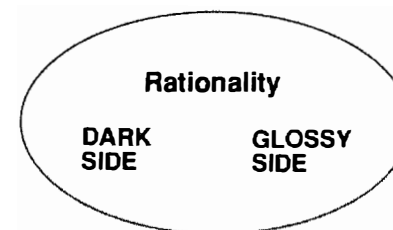
Becoming Congruent

Figure 12 illustrates congruence. Rather than walling off rationality with battles of impulse, both motives coexist. Because rationality is not walled off, it is part of the decision-making process. Dark-side impulses are accepted and rationally evaluated. Glossy-side impulses are also acknowledged. Guilt from the glossy side and urges from the dark side are not overwhelming because they are processed with rationality. Congruence results in self-awareness without need for defense or palliative coping strategies. Of course, some tension remains because the congruent person does not hope to eliminate duality, only to manage it.

How does one become congruent? Here are some ideas that may be useful in seeking personal truth.

Accepting impulses. Some defensiveness results from guilt which, in turn, results from impulse. For example, I might have a fleeting impulse to play golf on Sunday morning instead of going to church. Guilt might result immediately from such an impulse. Guilt might then generate distortions and incongruence. If hiding Hyde was my inclination, I might tell myself that good Christians don't ever struggle with the temptation to play golf on Sundays and that I am surely the biggest hypocrite of all time. To compensate, I get up immediately and have devotions before I go to church (undoing). If meism was my tendency, I might persuade myself that I need the leisure time and wouldn't be able to worship anyway, so I might as well play golf. After all, I'm worth it (rationalization).

Figure 12 Congruent state: Impulses are accepted and evaluated openly. No walls exist.



Feeling guilty for impulses is unproductive. Impulses are not wrong until they give birth to sin (James 1:15). If, instead of feeling guilty, I accept my impulse to play golf and evaluate it rationally, I avoid defensiveness. Rationally, I affirm the value of meeting with

others for Christian fellowship. Or perhaps my five-year-perfect-attendance pin (glossy side) isn't as important as I think, and the golfing impulse reminds me that approval needs are not sufficient motivation for church attendance.

Remember that impulses are not evil just as temptation is not evil. Choosing to behave sinfully in response to an impulse is another matter. Why do I work so hard at making this point in several different chapters? Because impulses can add great vitality to life. Spontaneously doing something "crazy" can greatly benefit one's mental health. Deciding at the last minute to go to the beach for the weekend, choosing the more expensive dress just because it looks better, and selecting the New York steak instead of the diet plate can all be appropriate, even though they result from impulse. Many times these are not issues of sin but issues of choice. To live life denying all impulse is to miss much joy of spontaneity.

Similarly, glossy-side impulses to consider the opinions of others are healthy in mild doses. The opinions of others keep us socially appropriate. In the midst of a hot June commencement service, I would like to take off my faculty robe, roll up my sleeves, and take a nap. But I don't because it would be socially inappropriate. Little rationality is involved; impulse keeps me from doing these things. Impulses, per se, are not evil. They can add joy to life as we accept them as part of ourselves.

Identifying emotions. As I mentioned in chapter 2, selecting the word *rationality* to contrast with impulse

was difficult because rationality has negative connotations. When I think of a rational person I think of a Certified Public Accountant with wire-framed glasses sitting in front of ledger sheets while the family opens Christmas presents. To the extent that rationality implies sterile cognition, it is a misnomer. Rationality, as I intend it, also includes sensitivity to emotional and intuitive experiences. Emotions are as real as thoughts and have the potential to be equally valuable.

Congruence involves accepting emotions. The same speaker who said Christians shouldn't have self-images also said we feel anger because we have self-images—if we give up our self-image, we will no longer feel angry. But that's not biblical. Jesus got angry. Paul told the church at Ephesus to be angry, but not to sin (Eph. 4:26). If anger were a sin, this would be an impossible command.

Deep inside our brains is the limbic system, a neural pathway causing the experience of emotion. Anger, passivity, and sexuality are drastically affected by the activities of these neural tissues. Would God program us to experience anger and then condemn it as sin? Is it reasonable to feel guilt for a biologically caused impulse?

Even emotions can be analyzed rationally. Looking for the origin of the emotions, evaluating how reasonable the emotion is, and investigating the consequences are truth-seeking processes. Even labeling emotion is an important rational function. Many Christians are so guilt-ridden about emotions that they do not know what they are feeling. I sometimes have clients list the different emotions experienced during

the coming week. They often come back with three emotions: *happy*, *sad*, and *mad*. I then send them back to their feelings with a goal of finding seventy-five. It sounds like a lot, but we have many human feelings: *hungry*, *tired*, *bored*, *irritated*, *frustrated*, *nauseous*, *excited*, and so forth.

Rationality involves more than sterile thinking. A congruent person also recognizes feelings accurately. Defensively denying feelings results in distortions of identity.

Being, not doing. Society values doing so much that we begin to identify who we are with what we do. Congruence needs a broader base of identity. For example, if I yell at my child, I will feel guilty. My *doing* was evil, therefore I am evil. I might then hide my dark side because telling others of my failure would reveal my worthlessness. If worth is based on performance, I cannot see myself as unconditionally accepted. But God's love is unconditional. He sees our *being* and not our *doing*. As we shift our emphasis from doing to being, from glossy to rational, we strive less to eliminate duality and we are better able to seek personal truth.

Humor. Lee Trevino once said that if his IQ was any lower he would be a plant. Being able to laugh at ourselves requires congruence. Those who are defensive or uncomfortable about weaknesses aren't able to laugh about them without seeking reassurance from others.

I used to laugh about having a long nose, but it was mostly a strategy for reassurance. People were supposed to say my nose looked fine. I was shattered one

day when someone asked if I knew how to make my nose six inches long. He answered by saying, "fold it in half." I stopped laughing about my nose.

Laughing honestly about our weaknesses or impulses fosters congruence. Impatience with noise is one of my weaknesses. Having three young children at home, I get my share of noise and occasionally resort to some impulsive verbal noise of my own to reduce theirs. Sometimes when the noise level gets ear splitting, Lisa (who knows of my tendency to yell, "Silence!") looks at me and smiles. Laughter in her eyes helps me gain perspective, and we chuckle together for a few moments about the plight of parenting. The noise seems more manageable after those brief periods of laughter, and I recognize that noise isn't as bad as my impulses would have me believe.

Welcoming evaluation. We often fear others evaluating us, perhaps because it is occasionally painful. But evaluation provides greater opportunity for congruence. Seeing ourselves through the eyes of others helps us know ourselves better. "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17).

Teachers hate student evaluations. But they are often quite useful, allowing us to improve teaching methods. After getting over the sting of criticism, I have routinely asked students to evaluate my courses, even though the dean requires evaluations only once a year. Evaluations are useful to me, not only in understanding my teaching methods, but in understanding myself.

The opinions of others provide valuable insights into ourselves. Impulsive persons dismiss them as pointless or irrelevant. Congruent persons carefully consider them, not because of approval needs but to see themselves more accurately.

Self-disclosure. My five-year-old daughter once suggested a way to share a Life Saver. "I suck it for a while, then you suck it for a while, then I suck it some more. . . ." Although a disgusting way to share Life Savers, her model is useful for sharing impulses. Sharing impulses with another makes them seem smaller just as a communal Life Saver becomes smaller and smaller.

Hiding Hyde produces profound aloneness. "No one experiences the impulses I do." "I am the worst of all sinners." Congruence can't be obtained in the midst of such self-condemnation. But disclosing impulses to others disconfirms many self-condemning thoughts. We begin to realize that impulses are normal and do not indicate deviance of character.

For example, most (perhaps all) people feel attractions outside of marriage from time to time. Fewer feel free to share these attractions with their spouses. This privacy can be rationalized out of concern for the spouse. "It would only worry her to know," seems at first a reasonable conclusion. But often the privacy is really a defensive strategy. I suspect sexual temptation rarely turns into an affair when the spouse is informed when the attraction is first noticed.

Self-disclosure is good, but indiscriminate self-disclosure can be dangerous. Jim and Marilyn came for counseling on the verge of divorce. Jim had had many

secret affairs in their three and a half years of marriage, but Marilyn finally found out about Jim's most recent lover. He responded by dumping all the details of his previous affairs onto her fragile psyche. She was shattered by his impulsive way of punishing her with excessive detail. Sometimes self-disclosure can be an obstacle rather than a help in reaching congruence. This will be discussed more later.

Obstacles to Congruence

Even after reaching congruence, it is easy to slip back into defensive patterns and incongruence. Maintaining congruence is a lifelong process with many obstacles.

Cognitive Distortions. Faulty thinking is an obstacle to congruence. Distorting reality with inaccurate thoughts produces poor self-management. Look for some "red flags" indicating cognitive distortion (inaccurate thinking). Many of these distortions are described more fully in Dr. David Burn's excellent book, *Feeling Good*.

Always is usually a cognitive distortion. If I tell myself I am always strong in the face of temptation, I am set up for failure because we all have moments of weakness. Likewise, if I tell myself I always give in to a certain temptation, it is a self-fulfilling distortion that overlooks times of victory.

Mind reading is another red flag. Mind reading is assuming the thoughts of another can be understood accurately. Let's assume I drag myself out of bed on that Sunday morning I wanted to go golfing. With bags under my eyes I eat my Cap'n Crunch and trudge to

church. Sitting in the pew, I realize I forgot to shave. Immediately I begin to mind read. When others glance at me I assume they notice the dark circles and the unshaved chin. Surely they are assuming I have a hangover from a Saturday-night party. Concerned about my public image, I sink further into duality.

Should is a third red flag. Remember that *shoulds* are glossy-side impulses unless they are backed up with *whys*. Should statements often come as self-condemnation for impulse: "I shouldn't think those thoughts"; or "I shouldn't be concerned about my appearance." These things would be nice, but *shoulds* are too strong.

Fortune telling can lead to incongruence by predicting doom. Clients sometimes tell me they are anticipating a temptation and know they are not strong enough to handle it—fortune telling by predicting weakness. By viewing themselves as weak and helpless to temptation, they become weak.

Personalization is assuming fault for the difficulties of someone else. It is the opposite of projection. A Christian song I recently listened to implies the husband of an unfaithful wife is responsible since he is the head of the home. This exemplifies personalization. Is it reasonable to hold a husband responsible for the secret behaviors of his wife?

Labeling is perhaps the most subtle of the cognitive distortions. Attaching a label to ourselves can be misleading. Because you struggle with one temptation, you might label yourself weak. Since you perceive yourself to be weak, you may then begin to struggle with many

other temptations. Labeling can thereby lead to incongruence.

Reactivity in others. The reactions of others is a second obstacle to congruence. If self-disclosure is met with judgment, incongruence often results.

Wanda is becoming congruent. She is recognizing her impulses and attempting to deal with them rationally. She recognizes a sexual attraction to Ned, her next-door neighbor and close friend. Rather than feeling guilty, she attempts to understand herself better by evaluating the impulse. She soon realizes that much of her attraction is a result of Ned's complimentary manner. He always has something nice to say and makes her feel worthwhile. Wanda then identifies her need for approval and looks for other ways of coping with the need. In the process of dealing with her attraction rationally, Wanda tells her husband, Jon, about the situation. Feeling personally threatened, Jon instructs Wanda to keep her distance from Ned and begins looking through the Yellow Pages for a realtor. Jon has reacted to Wanda's self-disclosure by resorting to answerism.

Jon's reactivity will probably push Wanda away from congruence. She might agree with Jon and attempt to stay away from Ned altogether. But her impulses will remain and over time she may pick up the phone to call Ned. Once that happens, she will already feel like a sinner and more intense involvement with Ned may follow. Alternatively, she might disagree strongly with Jon's reactivity and respond by justifying her attraction to Ned, pushing her toward greater involvement with Ned.

Self-disclosure is appropriate, but choosing someone who will not overreact to the disclosure is important. Sometimes a spouse is too involved to keep from reacting, as with Jon and Wanda. Self-disclosure met with judgment in others makes congruence difficult to maintain. It is important to recognize limits in self-disclosure.

Congruent Relationships

Disclosing dark-side impulses to others often evokes glossy-side impulses in them as illustrated with Wanda and Jon. But when self-disclosure doesn't evoke reactivity, congruence is increased. In congruent relationships both persons can disclose impulses without evoking judgment in the other. These rational-to-rational relationships have several distinctives.

Listening. Listening is essential to congruent relationships. Nietzsche wrote, "A matter that becomes clear ceases to concern us." Perhaps Jon would have handled Wanda's revelation better had he listened before reacting.

Ironically, it is often difficult to listen to those closest to us—family members. One female author noted that before marriage a man will lie awake all night thinking about something you said, but after marriage he'll fall asleep before you finish saying it.

In listening, we sometimes assume too much, expecting that our interpretation is the same as the speaker's intent. But there are several layers to any communication.

Layer 1: The speaker's intent

Layer 2: The speaker's words

Layer 3: What the listener hears

Layer 4: Interpretation of speaker's intent

I may ask Lisa how long it will be until dinner is ready, hoping to have fifteen minutes to finish a project. If she assumes I am pressuring her to cook faster, she may feel frustration. What I meant (layer 1) and what she heard (layer 4) are very different. According to Goethe, "No one would talk much in society if he only knew how often he misunderstood others."

Reflection is a useful tool in active listening. The listener, by paraphrasing the message and saying it back, communicates a desire to understand accurately the intent of the message. Lisa might ask, "Are you in a hurry for dinner?" I could then explain my question more fully, preventing any conflict or resentment. In teaching counseling, I have students interview one another in my presence. While they talk, I count the number of reflections used. The more reflections, the higher I grade them. Reflecting does two things. First, it insures accurate listening. Second, it prevents giving too much advice.

Avoiding Advice Giving. Uninvited advice giving is rarely seen in congruent relationships because it introduces power. Power, in turn, evokes impulse in the other. When Jon resorted to advising, he took a power position over Wanda. She was, for those few moments, like his daughter, employee, or pet. Jon's power evoked rebellion in Wanda, strengthening her impulse and destroying her efforts at congruence.

Parents of troubled adolescents struggle with this. The more they introduce power, the more the adolescent rebels. But as the rebellion continues, parents feel greater need for restraint, so they introduce more power, creating a vicious cycle.

Advice is fine when invited, and many answers are useful. Unwanted advice is rarely useful. Congruent relationships avoid advice giving.

Nonjudgmental. Congruent relationships are also nonjudgmental, absent of ridicule or belittlement. I've already stated that judgment is a result of impulse. Persons in congruent relationships seek truth together and avoid impulse.

Nonjudgment is particularly difficult in marriages after one person has been unfaithful. For example, one woman I worked with had continued contact with her former lover at work. Daily her husband asked about the interactions of the day. I tried to keep him from asking for that information, and he did a beautiful job of allowing her to volunteer the information, refraining from making judgmental observations or recommendations. His open-mindedness and willingness to withhold judgment resulted in great healing and growth in the relationship.

Part of avoiding judgment is keeping delicate information confidential within the congruent relationship. The judgment of others is prevented by maintaining confidentiality.

Congruent parenting. Since parents need to help children change inappropriate behaviors, it is more difficult to maintain congruent relationships. Some-

times parents give advice when it would not be appropriate in another relationship. But several principles are useful in raising congruent children.

First, *children need to have their own identities.* Each child is a unique combination of interests, abilities, and emotions. Attempting to mold a child into a lawyer, a neurosurgeon, or a homemaker overlooks the complexities of uniqueness. On the wall of our house hangs the adage,

There are but two bequests we can give our children;
one is roots,
the other wings.

As children gain wings they learn the freedom to choose. Children deprived of choice find subtle ways to exercise choice. They make their choices when parents aren't looking and duality grows as congruence shrinks.

Joan, a sixteen-year-old teenager, was the apple of her mother's eye. Despite the rebellion of her older brother, Joan had always been the perfect girl. At least her mother thought so. It came as a surprise when Joan dropped school and left with her boyfriend for Nevada. When she returned several weeks later, her mother brought her for counseling. Joan was never the perfect girl her mother had thought. Her mother demanded perfection, so Joan developed a sophisticated glossy side. But late at night, she frequently sneaked from her bedroom window to spend the night with her boyfriend or go to a wild party. The Jekyll/Hyde syndrome was full-blown at age sixteen.

Second, *discuss temptations with your children.* Dr. James Dobson suggests parents should discuss the

struggles of adolescence with their children. Dobson recommends preparing for temptation rather than denying it. Another example is teaching small children how to respond if approached by strangers. We drilled our children on this until it became routine. The stranger's piece of candy might be too tempting for the unprepared child.

Overpreparing is the other extreme. Children constantly warned of the big bad world will experience unnecessary anxiety about independence.

Third, *allow children to be sexual*. All humans are sexual, including children. Think for a moment about the paradox of sexuality in our Christian culture. Children are often taught that sexual urges are wrong. Adolescents often learn that sexuality, including all petting and masturbation, is sinful. On the wedding day, a person is magically transformed from asexual to sexual. After a glorious newlywed season, the troubles change. Married adults are informed that *not being sexual* is awful. Couples not having sex on a regular basis are told their marriage is not adequate. Sex is a confusing topic because we seem so hesitant to allow for individual differences.

Children are sometimes denied sexuality because parents fear the consequences. "If I allow my four-year-old to handle his genitals, he might become too sexual later on." "If my teenager is involved in masturbating or petting, premarital intercourse is sure to follow." But these are assumptions. Prohibiting sexuality causes duality to grow because kids are going to be sexual, whether it is allowed or not. The adolescent who is "sinning already" by petting or masturbating is

more inclined to go ahead and "sin big" with premarital intercourse.

Watch for the other extreme also! We don't need to encourage sexual development in our children. My guess is that children are being exposed to more sexual immorality than ever before because of VCRs and video rentals. Time will tell if this is damaging to children's sexual development. I suspect it will be.

Parenting is not easy under the best circumstances. I have no formula for raising congruent children, but I prioritize three ideas as I struggle with the challenge of parenting. *Allowing children to be themselves, preparing them for temptations, and allowing appropriate sexuality* are useful tools to build congruent parent-child relationships.

Let's review briefly. There is no solution to the problem of duality, and trying to eliminate it makes things worse by starting a battle of impulses. Battles of impulse make us self-centered and prevent rational activity. By seeking truth (rational life motive) we avoid battles of impulses, keep duality in control, and move beyond self-centeredness.

Discovering truth begins on a personal level. Honestly recognizing who we are and putting aside defensiveness are essentials in seeking personal truth. As we strive for personal truth, we move beyond answerism and begin to evaluate bigger issues, causing growth and understanding. These bigger issues are considered in the final four chapters. Managing duality depends on understanding love, pain, hope, and grace.