

## **Introduction: Fully Alive Now**

+

*The glory of God is the human person  
fully alive;*

*and, the life of humanity is  
the vision of God*

St. Irenaeus

+

## **Taking the Plunge**

Stooping and poking one hand into the water under the Mackinac Island Bridge, the swimmer reconsidered. Someone remarked the waters of Lake Superior are so cold she never gives up her dead. And now there was firsthand evidence.

Several wild swans glide just off shore, making wakes that blend as they move briskly along. The air is fresh with the aroma of evergreens that develops when the sun is strong. It must be nearly noon. There will never be a better time than summer at noon; later in the day the air will be as chilling as the water. The swimmer is one of those hardy souls who need to experience things – a visceral type. Sure, the water was great on a Caribbean reef skimming along with schools of brightly colored fish. Even the hotel pools aren't bad when large enough to do a few laps. The swimmer has sometimes filed trips mentally under: "How was the water?" But the prospect of swimming with the sturgeons of the Great Lakes requires more commitment than usual. Wading out into the frigid surf is clearly not the way to test these waters: *I'll always regret not taking the plunge.* So the swimmer does just that.

The rush of shocking cold takes away the breath. It is hard to stop the reflexive urge to inhale before breaking the surface. But with only seconds of gliding, then moving along faster with a sharp frog-kick, a hard pull of the arms takes over by habit. The swimmer begins to think happily of the speedy burn of calories to cope with a hearty, north woods breakfast, and relaxes into the familiar crawl; rhythmic breathing side to side takes over. The whole body tingles. The swimmer senses the edges of muscles never noticed before. It is startling to the whole system, as cold penetrates beyond the top layers of skin, something a seal or penguin would never know. But for a human, this exhilarating sensation is full of aspiration, like what motivates us to explore space or plumb dark caverns in the earth. With deep breathing comes a zone of gliding relaxation- efficient, like the swans up ahead, using only minimal energy. The swimmer relaxes for a bit into an experience both familiar and new; then sprints back to shore, and pushes upright out of the water like a released spring. Arms stretch wide into the warming noonday; nose opens to an intense burst of pine-scented air.

The swimmer's whole being somehow expands into a moment of celebration: *Oh! The freshness of being fully alive!*

+

This little story is a metaphor for something felt by everyone as both a problem and a remote possibility, for something desirable yet challenging, and always resisted as a risk to the status quo.

*To be fully alive*, this is our deep desire, but how to get there? We might pursue adventure or excitement, as in the story; but more often we just try rearranging the surface of life. We vow to take control of our diet and exercise. Perhaps we mull over a job change, or a vacation. Some read and practice the advice of a currently touted self-help plan. Others

might search for the right life partner, or seek a vibrant religious community to stave off loneliness. But most often something spoils the intent to improve things. One feels trapped in a genetically chunky body that never measures up to whatever ideal. It becomes clear that no one could run far enough or fast enough to escape our stressors. When the big trip comes up, it rains all week in paradise. The church we sought out has its own problems, and the music is annoying. The career path we sacrificed much to enter risks becoming a dead end. The new spouse turns out to have variations on the behavior of the former one. Somehow no fresh paint or rearrangement of the furniture ever makes life's dwelling what we hoped for. We slog through long stretches of disillusionment.

Since there are so many choices available, it may take years to realize little that is truly satisfying can develop while moving along the surface of life's trends and temporary satisfactions in pursuit of happiness. Realizing this, we may become even more firmly entrenched in the plodding routines of an ordinary life tinged with hopelessness. But a voice inside still whispers "Is this all there is?"

Of course this ordinary, responsible life with its sprinkle of rewards – a reliable vehicle, and a nice home and well-fed family - is in some ways the *ideal* pursued vigorously by most of the world's struggling people. For a recovering addict, *normal* is the dimly perceived hope for sobriety. It is the never-land of those who can't seem to grow into their responsibilities. It is the wish to be normal that challenges those who see themselves as too short, too tall, or too something else, and also those who are impaired by genes or circumstances. So many of us are struggling with dysfunction or deprivation that the urge to be normal may offer enough motivation to keep us plodding along, at least getting by. Is there any real hope of fully living when so many obstacles seem insurmountable?

And when all the stories are told, is there anything more to expect than survival while treading the turbulent waters of grief, disillusionment or frustration? Or to consider an even more perilous possibility, when the waters are calm and the weather decent, will we waste opportunities while skimming back and forth from one transient pleasure to another? Perhaps, but then a stormy crisis, disease or some other circumstance, forces us to attend to a more challenging situation in a new way. For a while we may even anchor in genuine spirituality. But we inevitably return to the old habitual way- unless we find and persevere in what has come to be called an "effective spiritual practice."

To sustain a spiritually grounded life, various disciplines need to be carefully chosen and practiced. Life's challenges will have better outcomes for those who work with a set of tools such as reflection and imagination, and also exhibit qualities of character such as perseverance and courage. Above all, we will want to have a core relationship of dynamic intimacy with God. To use the imagery of St. Theresa of Avila, the early phases of spiritual growth may raise blisters, as when carrying water in buckets to a parched field; still, with effort, the fields are watered. But, with the development of such disciplines as are proposed in this book, there will be tools that allow the deeper waters to flow more from within, as through an irrigation system. Eventually life will come full circle, though not to childishness which is passive and self-centered, rather to childlikeness, because it includes full involvement of the adult faculty of choice. And as one's spiritual practice matures, the gentle rains of God's love are likely to produce fruit with even less effort on our part.

The writer of Psalm 131 commends a disciplined, calm and trusting inner state of mature childlikeness: **I do not occupy myself with great matters, or things that are too hard for me. But I still my soul and make it quiet, like a weaned child upon its mother's breast; my soul is quieted within me** (Ps. 131: 2-3). And so, let us acknowledge that spiritual growth is always, and with increasing freedom, a matter of choice. More and more the choice must be ours, not that of even the best parents. God gives us the ability to choose fuller life: **For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery** (Galatians 5:1). Always the choice will be at hand. This book will encourage you to make well-informed daily choices to become more fully alive. And it will provide you with insights and tools to help you continue to grow.

Living fully is not just a goal, but an opportunity continuously to make better choices based on expanding awareness. The **Now** of the chapter title does not indicate instant success or short-cuts, but that the joyous person we are becoming is already present, seeking to emerge and act. A fuller, richer life is also within reach whenever we are beset by

challenging circumstances. But desperation or crisis is not required to locate the joy. It is always possible to choose freely what will bring greater vitality now and for the future. The method explored here presents a well tested way to live that only gets better with practice. This is of course an enormously idealistic claim. It is based on the confidence of the early Christians, who were on to something powerful and wonderful which can make all the difference. There is One dwelling among us who has come **that they may have life, and have it abundantly** (John 10:10). For centuries in different cultures and challenging situations, there have been many to bear witness to God's good news: **the same yesterday, today and forever** (Hebrews 13:8). The apostle Paul discovered and proclaimed: **The mystery hidden...now made manifest to his saints: Christ in you, the hope of glory** (Colossians 1:26-27). The good news is we are able to make such a joyful discovery part of our story every day.

There is always hope, a heartfelt longing refusing to be quenched. And many lives clearly attest to its persistence. But, like those saints whose stories are role-models, we must choose to act from engagement with spiritual practice so that what is hoped for touches down to inspire and renew us where we really are day by day. In this way what seems ordinary and everyday can be affirmed, and become an occasion for joy. And so what is lively but declining, by inner transformation becomes **fully alive now**.

### **The Method: Journaling**

To reflect in a journal, whether on a computer or with pen and paper, can be a potent spiritual exercise. Once a reflection is written, it will have a life of its own. What is put down in words seems to be from another self, *me-reflecting*. How wonderful it can be to practice a way to listen to oneself deeply! Within a short period the user's own experience should demonstrate the value of this method. Reading over past reflections can inspire fresh explorations and later insights. Just thinking about the questions and exercises to come will not be the same or as powerful as journaling. And the written method should still be used when there will be sharing with another or with a group.

The following chapters are designed to prepare for written personal reflection, not necessarily to be shared within a group. If a group is formed, or if the book is used with a spiritual friend or mentor, some sections may be shared with discussion afterwards. This must be done with permission and respect for the privacy of all participants. It is always helpful to listen to the experience of others. Certainly to hear one's own experience in a fresh way by sharing it in a group of trusted friends will add another dimension. But it is anticipated that most users of this material would practice journaling privately, over a period of time. Not everything written could or should be shared.

If this work is used with a small group a leader, probably a pastor or counselor should schedule and organize the sessions, and assure confidentiality- one who will complement the author's role as spiritual friend and be a companion on the journey.

In a spiritual journal, the primary audience is the Holy Spirit, who will always be "at your side and on your side" –the Paraclete. The Spirit will listen with great discretion, to the unsaid movements of each heart, to bring energy and encouragement. He will be like the best psychotherapist imaginable, always involved and assisting each person to explore the depths in order to come to fullness of life. Before each session, take a few moments to be quiet and pray, "Come Holy Spirit..." Do this in your own welcoming way. You can expect to be infused with deeper peace and joy.

+

### **Four Initial Journaling Exercises: Attitude Adjustment**

For coming to be "fully alive," an appropriate attitude will be essential - like a good pair of walking shoes, a prepared and equipped character you can rely on for the long haul. It will be necessary from time to time, to check your basic attitude;

and if needed, to stop long enough to recover the conditions for an effective journey. A poor attitude will not make the trip impossible, only more difficult. A spiritual mentor should be able to keep these conditions in place.

Here follows what this writer thinks are the four most important elements of a good attitude for spiritual growth. These elements are within each of us in some form, and can be brought to the surface by noticing what comes to mind and then reflecting in a journal. There will be a blank place for a further reflection, in case you decide something essential is missing from the list. If the journey is to be alone, write a series of reflections to start your journal on the baseline attitudes with which you have begun, and return to it from time to time to clarify, revise, or simply to check the “equipment.” If you are working with a supportive small group, you may find it helpful in the first session or just before to write your reflections and then share parts of them. To get better acquainted, discuss your reactions and thoughts about the four conditions outlined below. Then decide together about any missing essentials.

#### Attitude 1: Availability

*This is all about willingness to proceed. Am I willing to be a pilgrim reaching out to the unknown within and without? (It can be helpful to look at one's usual excuses, and then to decide if the reasons are important or not.) All the stories in the Gospels in which Jesus calls disciples to “Follow me,” seem to involve leaving something specific behind. One potential follower said he must first go and bury his father. Jesus' response was startling: “Let the dead bury the dead.” Who knows how the conversation went from there? Or, what was the outcome? The Gospel of John's last chapter has a question repeated three times: “\_\_\_\_\_ do you love me?” There follows each time “Feed my sheep,” and then the invitation, “Follow me.” Our spiritual availability may be strong, weak or distracted by other priorities. We need to be continually aware of this part of our attitude. The answer to “Am I available?” may shift frequently among options like “yes, no, maybe or later.” Explore what your answer means. This is essential because cooperation requires freedom. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Check the limits of your availability from time to time and sit with this question in prayer. To be “fully alive,” will ultimately have to mean being fully available to one who is “the Lord and giver of life.”*

**Journaling Question:** In what ways am I, and am I not available?

#### Attitude 2: Willingness to Change Behavior

*To be influenced by the Spirit depends on being willing to make changes. The changes required are usually small: “What is necessary to take the next step?” Still, one must be willing, or as one spiritual director puts it, “willing to be willing.” Normally there will be a degree of inner resistance to moving along to spiritual maturity. The issue here is free obedience. This means persons who move efficiently along in the spiritual journey will become flexible to changes in course, malleable to the shaping of circumstances in life, but not all at once. To test this, sit in prayer in silence before God with the question, “In this situation, what can I do to please you?” Some will find the familiar Serenity Prayer helpful in this attitude check. “Lord, grant me the ability to change what I can, to acknowledge what cannot be changed, and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.”*

**Journaling Question:** Am I willing to take the next small step? What is this step?

#### Attitude 3: Hopefulness

*Hope, as St. Paul established, is an abiding condition –a chosen (not necessarily felt) positive orientation toward what is to come. We need to live with it all the time or else often the right behavior will take root but fail to thrive. Since it is impossible to “work up” hope, we should pray for this basic attitude. Though it is always a spiritually positive movement into the unknown future, hope is hard to describe; yet its presence or lack is always recognizable. Perhaps Emily Dickenson's well-known image is a sufficient definition: “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul.” The absence of hope is easy to spot. Look for cynicism, despair, ennui and such behaviors as self-medication and empty pastimes. None of these conditions is to be desired once we recognize them. When these things come up, be aware, let them go, and then ask for the renewing attitude of hope. **Seek, and you will find** (Matthew 7:7)....*

**Journaling Question:** Do I have a hopeful attitude right now? What is this like for me?

Attitude 4: Pursuing a True Vision

“The life of the human person,” Irenaeus wrote, “is the vision of God.”

*This may seem abstract, but it fixes the direction we want to move on the spiritual journey. Since we cannot now see the destination, we must learn to continually follow the signs pointing to the goal. This is why it is critical to learn to seek Jesus’ presence, en-fleshed in the world. Jesus said, **I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me** (John 14:6). If we aren’t sure who we are following, it may be “the blind leading the blind.” There is an account of a large group of cross country runners who followed the pack when a respected runner missed a directional sign. Only four turned onto the right path. One of these paused, waving and pointing the way; but it was to no avail as the pack whizzed by, some laughing. Needless to say, only those four finished the race. The Spirit of God has carefully placed signs along our path. Do we really know where we are headed? Can we spot, and are we following the correct signs? St. Paul reminds us: **You compete for an imperishable crown. So run that you may win** (I Corinthians 9:24). Winning spiritually is not about finishing in first place; it is about staying on course and persevering.*

**Journaling Question:** At this time, and looking back on my experience, what signs do I see pointing toward my ultimate victory?

Attitude 5+: The Open Question

*The four elements above, in the considered opinion of this writer, are the essential components of a right attitude for the spiritual journey. But this analysis may not be correct or sufficient. If something seems missing and calls out to you like a flashing neon sign, consider this seriously. Take time to define what is missing and discuss or write a journal entry about it.*

## Before Taking the Plunge

The flow of chapters to come follows the natural progression of our life cycle. There is a composite of inner imagery, like the phases of the moon, which presents for each of us, the whole range of human experience- something Carl Jung referred to as *archetypal*. But these spiritual realities have a non-temporal character. After an overview of the archetypes an entirely different order of progression may suggest itself. Don’t hesitate to change the order. For example, a period of creativity or some new undertaking may bring the *child* phase of the archetype to the fore-front, bringing with it fresh insights and rejuvenating energy to accomplish something new. This experience could happen to a person chronologically far from childhood...Contact with the eternal also produces moments of recurring meaning through recovered memory...The spiritual journey can be organized thematically as well as sequentially...Note as well that the issues of aging and maturity are not just relevant to persons older in years. Every important event, after all, has its moment of decline. And every seedling contains its full flower of possibility. Once overviewed, the chapters should be used in whatever order seems right for the moment...Or chapters may be used individually and separately as needed.

It may also be helpful to overview the design common to each chapter. First there will be a line drawing suggestive of the archetypal phase to be explored, followed by a brief story. Each narrative outlines dilemmas and possibilities, conflicts and resolutions inherent in the subject matter. The stories, more like vignettes, contain the themes to be explored. Then follows a section focusing on a specific scriptural passage that reveals a phase of the heroic Christ, and then exposition will draw out some emotional and spiritual implications. Finally there are throughout, questions and exercises for journaling, and sometimes for sharing. These responses are interspersed with various meditative presentations to stimulate your own reflection.

The accompanying CD provides some of the text of the book; but it also contains additional resources of music, art and an audio version of most meditations. It is impossible to read and meditate at the same time, so listening to the CD will be very helpful, even for groups. The color prints may be downloaded and projected or copied. All images are in the Public Domain (except for a detail from “The Arnolfini Marriage,” licensed for use with permission). Leaders will also find a full set of lesson plans for a five-week introductory series; this might be ideal for Advent or Lent.