

## CHAPTER NINE –A SPIRITUAL ACTION PLAN FOR CONSCIOUS LIVING

*“And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, yet pass over the mystery of themselves without a thought.”*

ST. AUGUSTINE in his **Confessions**

As we’ve already discussed, our modern world is filled with distractions and temptations, and we’re surrounded by countless ways to make ourselves feel worse, not better. I wanted to change that, even if only one person at a time. So I designed a Four-Step Spiritual Action Plan to help my patients, and now you, find and follow God.

Scripture tells us that the more we search for God, the more God reveals to us (seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened—Matthew 7:7). But then what? What comes next? What exactly do we do when we acknowledge that there is *more* to our being and to the universe than our simple existence? How do we live when we choose to acknowledge the reality of a spirit or a soul that beckons us to a richer, fuller life? What does spiritual development give us and what does it ask of us?

Developing our spiritual side allows us to be more fully human, to be more whole, more aware, more loving, and more open. It also bestows on us the responsibility to act consciously and with integrity in a way that reflects our essential goodness.

It’s not always easy to live consciously and with integrity because fear can keep us paralyzed with indecision and often does. I observed this kind of paralyzing fear in the stories of many of my patients and I experienced it myself when I was betrayed by a colleague early in my surgical career. Following the betrayal I realized that in order to maintain my personal integrity, and the

integrity of the surgery I was to perform, I needed to leave that position. It was a position that I had been preparing for through all the years of my pediatric cardiac residency and one that had been promised to me years before, which caused me to refuse offers from other hospitals.

As a result of the betrayal and the loss of my work, I was confused and scared. I felt as if the failure was mine, that somehow I was complicit in these terrible events even though everything was set into motion by someone else. I was set adrift emotionally and spiritually. It was a terrible time. In retrospect I understand that the struggle was a necessary part of my spiritual journey (you can read more details about this “dark night” for my soul in the autobiographical section, Part IV). I and my faith were strengthened in the aftermath of that struggle. It helped me understand in a new way how vulnerable fear makes a person feel. And I learned that compassionate, consistent love is necessary to restore one’s sense of clarity.

For some of my patients, life involved struggles not just with heart disease but also with poverty—either financial or spiritual, with power, anger, greed, resentment, betrayal, depression, abuse of one sort or another, or (at times) even suicide attempts. Others had lives that were unfocused and lacked direction. Luckily I wasn’t there to judge any missteps or mistakes on their part. My role was only to bring compassionate and consistent love along with my healing skills. Because of the timing of my interactions with many of these patients, they were open to recognizing the body-mind-spirit connections for them as well as the importance of living with intention and finding a clear purpose. They were ready to acknowledge that having a spiritual action plan would help them live an emotionally and spiritually generous life with the future that surgery afforded them.

## **Why Should I Have a Spiritual Action Plan?**

A spiritual action plan is a way to put into deliberate action the decision to develop and mature as a spiritual being by living a conscious life. It is part of nurturing your soul and therefore as necessary to overall health as is nurturing your body and mind. An added benefit to a spiritual action plan is that it virtually guarantees that you will then learn to love better and in doing so you will live a life of meaning.

There are as many ways to develop a spiritual action plan as there are individual souls within all of creation. Each of us must find our own path and truly, there is no wrong path for someone who sincerely seeks to know God and to plumb the depths of their own spirituality.

However, there are poor spiritual teachers and guides, both in traditional religions and elsewhere whose motives aren’t always pure and whose teachings lead us astray. Jesus warns us about them and tells us that we can recognize them by their *fruit*. Any spiritual path that is not based on love and does not display the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control<sup>1</sup>—is likely a poor path to follow. If your spiritual teacher does not encourage you to walk a path that develops these universal spiritual fruits, then find another teacher.

I am not a priest or spiritual counselor. I am, however, a healer and a man of faith. It is from this perspective that I developed the concepts for a spiritual action plan I share with you now. My concepts evolved out of the lessons and wisdom that hearts—both literal and figurative—taught me over a lifetime of observation. This simple four-step plan offers suggestions which have worked for me and for the many patients, colleagues, acquaintances, and family members I've had the honor to know, serve, and love.

## A Four-Step Spiritual Action Plan

My four-step spiritual action plan is quite straightforward and therefore quite easy to live. It doesn't require a formal religious affiliation, though the support of a faith community is often advantageous. There is no requirement to shave your head, or give away all possessions, or spend forty days in the desert. You can live a healthy spiritual life simply by living with conscious awareness of your spiritual nature and of your connection to God. This conscious awareness enables you to then live in a generous, loving, and reverent manner. It also opens your heart to greater potential than you would experience if you chose to behave in unconsciously selfish and trivial ways.

In nurturing my spiritual life through this four-step action plan, I developed a habit for seeing God in all things. Doing so helped me grow ever closer to God. These days, meeting God face-to-face is not an abstraction relegated to some distant future date. It is an impending reality that deepens my commitment to my spiritual plan and my healing vocation. So I find comfort in continuing my healing work by sharing these concepts with you.

My four-step plan is but one path to spiritual awareness. Yet following it with a loving heart will provide the foundation for living a life of meaning. The plan is simply this:

1. Visit frequently with God.
2. Embrace and live each day to the fullest.
3. Cultivate gratitude and forgiveness.
4. Serve God by serving humanity.

My commitment to this spiritual action plan has graced me with the fruits of the spirit and continues to do so even in this difficult phase of my life when I and my precious wife face the realities and diminishment of advancing age. From this vantage point, I now have conclusive evidence that a spiritual action plan enables us to live a life of meaning throughout our most generative years and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> The fruits of the spirit are recounted in Galatians 5: 22-23, *Catholic Study Bible: New American Bible*, Oxford University Press Incorporated, New York, New York, 1990

St. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth century philosopher, theologian, and doctor of the Catholic Church, wrote in his *Confessions*, “*Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.*” Living mindfully with my simple four-step spiritual action plan has helped me to quell any restlessness in me so that I could discover a path to love and happiness.

By following this plan throughout my adult life I have developed and nurtured a positive mind-body-soul balance within my being. Because of that balance my relationships with other people (family, colleagues, and patients alike) have been positive and nurturing both to me and to them. These many positive and loving relationships have contributed to my healing work which has enabled me to serve both God and humanity. They also have generated a great deal of joy for me and have given my life deep and abiding meaning. I believe that following this plan can do the same for you. So let’s examine each step in a bit more depth.

## Step 1: Visit Frequently with God

Visiting with God, otherwise known as prayer, is a critical part of this four-step action plan. In order for us to achieve our highest potential as human beings we must learn to love well. Since God is the author of all love, visiting frequently with God is one of the best ways to learn how to love. Habitual connections with God provide us with the necessary awareness to understand our basic nature, to see ourselves clearly, and then to become what God had in mind when God’s love overflowed into creation and thus made us.<sup>2</sup>

How do we know what God had in mind when we were created? We visit with God frequently in formal and informal ways. We spend time in one-on-one conversations with God. We follow Jesus’ example learned and discerned through reading scripture. We learn from the examples of saints and spiritual masters. We participate in formal ritualized prayer in community—Mass in the Catholic tradition, Saturday or Sunday religious services in other traditions. We seek and recognize God in all things. We observe the nature of our existence and of everything we experience with our senses. We read other spiritual writings.

Anthony DeMello, SJ, a Jesuit priest and teacher, wrote about the spiritual process of becoming aware of our true nature in his book, aptly titled *Awareness*. In it he tells the following parable of the eagle who believed he was a chicken:

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is taken from a prayer that reads: Lord my God, when your love spilled over into creation, you thought of me. I am from love, of love, for love. Let my heart O God, always recognize, cherish, and enjoy your goodness in all of creation. Direct all that is in me toward your praise. Teach me reverence for every person, all things. Energize me in your service. Lord God may nothing ever distract me from your love: neither health nor sickness; wealth nor poverty; honor nor dishonor; long life nor short life. May I never seek nor choose to be other than you intend or wish. *Take and Receive Series: Love, A Guide for Prayer*, Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and S. Marie Schwann, St. Mary’s Press Christian Brothers Publication, Winona Minnesota, 1985, page 11

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in a nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat on his strong golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked. "That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth - we're chickens." So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was.<sup>3</sup>

Without the kind of spiritual friendship that develops from frequent formal and informal contact with God we remain unaware of our magnificence and oblivious to the fact that we are beings who sprang forth from God's generative love that overflowed into creation. God thought of us and we came into being. That reality is simply magnificent, and thus so are we.

When you're ready to find your own magnificence by seeking the magnificence of God, God is already there. The door to God is always open to us with our Divine Source waiting beyond it eager to embrace us in unconditional love. God's invitation to connect has no expiration and requires no RSVP. God desires to be your best friend and it doesn't even matter if you believe in God or not. You have a standing invitation to connect because God always believes in *you*. However I suggest that you look for God now before you find yourself in NEED of God one day, a day that inevitably comes in some fashion for most of us.

Our conscious minds may debate the existence of God but I am convinced that God resides within all our souls. Since God resides within us, prayer is analogous to a physical reflex especially when faced with our own mortal reality. Prayer serves our needs rather than God's but God is a willing participant.

When surgery or heart disease brought my patients close to physical death many of them sought the comfort of God. Just as a child instinctively reaches for a parent in times of need, most of us reach out to God. Even those who were atheists instinctively prayed to God quietly and some actually cried out to God in prayer when they were placed on an operating table. And like any good parent, God responds to our need (and sometimes God used me in that response).

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<sup>3</sup> *Awareness*, Anthony DeMello, SJ, Doubleday – a division of Bantam, Doubleday, Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, New York. 1992, page 3. ©1990 Copyright held by the Center for Spiritual Exchange, now the DeMello Stroud Spirituality Center. Used with permission. Visit <http://demellospirituality.com/> for more information about, and resources from, Anthony DeMello, SJ.

But we don't have to wait until we're at death's door to make that spiritual connection. Whatever our personal interpretations of divinity are, our souls crave quiet times that connect our inner selves, our spirits, to God. We don't need to be in church, although it sometimes helps. And visits with God don't necessarily have to take long; it could involve a simple inner "Thank you" in appreciation for the gift of a smile or the beauty of a flower. Communing with God is more of an attitude of being. It's noticing God in all things. It's being present to, and aware of, the ways I can connect my essence to God's Divine Essence. For me, such visits are as necessary to my spiritual life as breathing is to my physical one. These brief discussions keep my spiritual life in balance, and also keep me moving in the right direction.

Listening for God isn't as difficult as it first might seem. Persistent practice makes it easier to recognize the specific ways God speaks to uniquely to us. God proclaims Divinity in infinite ways including a newborn's first cry and an elder's last breath. God may speak through the glorious dawn of a new day; the companionship of a beloved pet; the soothing harmonies of a piece of music; the sublime tastes of foods both simple and complex; the gentle hug from a compassionate friend or lover after a difficult day; the tranquility of a walk along a pristine mountain trail; the awesome power of a mighty ocean; the thrilling beauty of the setting sun; or the majesty of a star-filled, moon-lit sky.

God speaks in all these ways, and many more besides. In these communications, God encourages us to enjoy life, to reverence our world and each other, and to seek more visits that awaken us to our magnificence and the magnificence of the world around us.



Adhering to this first step, I communicate with God many times every day. As a younger man I prayed during surgery whenever the going got tough. If, for example, there was serious bleeding from the anastomosis (joining) of a bypass graft to a blocked vital coronary artery in the back of the heart and the situation became critical—as often happens when one precise stitch could make the difference between life and death—I would pray "Not my skill, Lord, but Thine." Somehow at those times the stitch was always right, the bleeding stopped, and the heart kept beating. In such critical situations, I believe God heard my prayers and guided my hands to correct the problem. Some skeptics may say that my prayers were a form of self-hypnosis. I disagree. I believe—more correctly I know—it was God.

During my years of research and surgical work God often spoke to me through the words and actions of my patients and co-workers. At home, when God offered advice to Mary Ann and to me, God's counsel might come as a question, comment, or suggestion from either one of us to the other. Or God might speak through one of our children, our in-laws, or grandchildren. God also offered guidance through friends and even strangers. Since God is in all things, God's

counsel could be communicated through any of us at any time and through any source whatsoever.

These days, I'm unable to help others as much as I once helped those patients. Even so, I make a point of savoring every remaining day I have. Despite my advancing age and the four major illnesses I've suffered in the two decades of my retirement, my life continues to be happy. Although my neurological impairment from Parkinson's disease has become significant, I retain my sense of blessed love. To deal with the suffering I occasionally feel, I reflect on Jesus' compassion as well as his passion, death, and resurrection. As I reflect on Jesus' life, I am able to put into context my own suffering so that what otherwise would be pointless agony becomes redemptive and holy.

As an elderly man who is much closer to death than ever before, I continue to nurture my spiritual growth by visiting frequently with God so that I am able to accept what *is* now and let go of what was before. I do this so I can grow old gracefully and peacefully, and then ultimately die in a way that is a blessing to those whom I love.

## **Step 2: Embrace and Live Each Day to the Fullest**

Once we truly understand that we are magnificent products of God's loving thought and creation, the next step is to embrace that gift and live life to the fullest. Some people might think that the advice to "live life to the fullest" is a recipe for endless self-indulgence. It is not. Willfully self-centered ego-centric behavior courts both disaster and disease.

To spend a precious day engaging in habits, activities, or behaviors that are either dangerous or devoid of self-respect or respect for others is the antithesis of *embracing* the gift of life we've been given. We also fail to embrace life and live to the fullest when we assume a false attitude of pride by comparing ourselves and our gifts/talents to others; or when we assume a false humility in refusing to acknowledge and develop the gifts/talents we've been given.

For me, embracing and living life to the fullest means welcoming both the gifts and the responsibilities of my vocation and my family. When I do this I experience joy through all of my senses in the physicality of my body, through sharing love and hope with those who cross my path (my emotionality and spirituality; my mind and spirit), and through easing suffering whenever I can even now well into my retirement (again using my mind and spirit).

I do all of this not only for the joy it gives me but also because my faith tells me that the Creator made every human being in God's image and likeness. This singular understanding speaks volumes about every life's intrinsic value. Furthermore, since we are created with attributes that are in the likeness of God, that means we were created to love. Therefore we live life to the fullest and experience happiness when we love with abandon. It was in that type of spirit of love that Jesus gave everything He had to us. Jesus' actions and words urge us to do the

same. As a result of becoming more like Jesus, our actions model what he taught. It is then that we can connect much more fully with the Divine essence that is in Jesus, in God, and in us.

As I've said previously, I believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. When we follow Jesus' teachings we too become more fully human. And as we embrace and live by his example we connect to the spark of the Divine that is in our souls. By extension then, we also embrace and connect with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. We recognize that God is in us and we are in God.

### **Step 3: Cultivate Radical Forgiveness and the Power of Gratitude**

As we acknowledged previously, we are imperfect. Yet God accepts and forgives us because God *is* Love and that divine Love makes all other things possible—including radical forgiveness for ourselves and others. According to Christian belief, Jesus Christ freely gave his life for you and me out of love for us. Jesus was showing us that even in the most terrible situations it is better to forgive than to hold onto resentment.

The energy it takes to hold onto injury—whether physical, emotional, or psychological—vibrates through us and through our families and communities. This kind of negative energy has the power to block other life-giving energies resulting in spiritual stagnation and sometimes even physical problems. Acknowledging our need for forgiveness and our power to forgive others opens spiritual channels that feed understanding and compassion.

Sometimes injuries are devastating to the body, mind, or spirit and require acknowledgement, justice, and reconciliation in its truest sense. But holding on to the anger or resentment associated with the injury can be even more damaging than the original injury. And taking anger and resentment to the stage of revenge is absolutely deadly both spiritually and emotionally.

Forgiveness is not an emotion but an act of the will that is rendered before it is necessarily felt. Forgiveness is practiced. It is deliberate. It is difficult. It is work.<sup>4</sup> However, since we are truly One with every other human being, then forgiveness is as life-giving for the wounded as it is for those who wound. Letting go of the anger and resentments we hold frees us to then live abundantly with love and gratitude.



I know that an essential part of a spiritual life is gratitude because physical life itself is a miracle and a gift, yet far too often we take this truth for granted. Many religious teachers affirm this; spiritual practices enable us to become aware of it. Two famous authors of the twentieth

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<sup>4</sup> These lines are from a poem entitled *Forgiveness* by editor and writer, Barbara Mulvey Little. For the full text, see the Prayers and Resources section in the back of the book.



century commented on this essential nature within the human condition. British author Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) said that most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted. And American playwright Thornton Wilder (*Our Town*) said we can only be truly alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures. I agree with both men and know that their assertions are true.

As a physician specializing in deadly illnesses, I understand how painful and fearsome life can sometimes be. Diagnoses like heart disease or cancer, and words like *incurable* or *incompatible with life* cause us to spin out of control. In my practice it was especially difficult to see a child in pain or ill beyond my (or any human's) medical knowledge or capacity to cure. Yet instead of feeling despair, these cases reminded me how good life really *is* for the vast number of people who are not so gravely ill. And even within the crisis illness creates, one can enjoy the blessings and grace that cultivating gratitude provides. By continuously cultivating gratitude we can often regain the sense that life is still essentially good.

Though one person's troubles should never be compared to my own (or yours), recognizing our blessings in the midst of life's difficulties is an important skill. Mother Teresa understood this well. She chose to live among some of the most unfortunate people on earth. She felt compelled by her calling to be God's humble servant who tended to the dispossessed and impoverished in a country far from her own. Though others saw her work as divinely inspired, she often felt alone and sometimes even spiritually bereft. Yet when she suffered her deep depressions she still maintained a grateful, loving spirit with her charges and continued to serve a God that she sometimes could not feel. We may not all have such immense commitment, but if Mother Teresa could still express gratitude in spite the challenges she faced, couldn't we also try to do the same?

Thomas Merton was a modern-day Trappist monk who wisely said, "*Gratitude...takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.*" Merton understood that in recognizing what we are grateful for, we experience the real Presence. There is a wonderful prayer of gratitude written by St. Ignatius of Loyola called the *Sucipe* that expresses this sentiment beautifully:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding,  
and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.

In my life, God blessed me both as a child and as an adult with a family who loved me and with work that challenged and inspired me as it brought healing to others. In my daily prayer, it is good for me to frequently review the blessings God gives me and to express true gratitude for them, especially now as Parkinson's disease so limits me. The eight greatest blessings God has given me are as follows:

1. My faith in Jesus Christ as true God and true man.
2. My life.
3. My precious wife Mary Ann.
4. Our eight children and thirty grandchildren.
5. My parents.
6. My sister.
7. My profession as a cardiovascular surgeon.
8. My cardiovascular research.

I know that I am a very lucky man to have been given all of this in addition to the kind of faith that enables me to see it. I also know that when we live each day with gratitude and with reverence for all that God has given, our lives become prayer.

In Part I's discussion on faith, I shared that having gratitude is the ultimate secret to what I call the magic of love. When we regularly approach our lives with a sense of gratitude for the wonder that we are and the wonder that the world is, it doesn't take long for that gratitude to grow into a desire to share what we've been given. That creates a desire to serve God by being of service to others using the unique gifts we've been given.

This "attitude of gratitude" and the desire to give something back to God bring us to the final step in our spiritual action plan.

#### **Step 4: Serve God by Serving Humanity**

The last step in the spiritual action plan is becoming Divine Love for others. We serve God through service to others. We take all that we've learned from visiting frequently with God and from gratefully and reverently living life to the fullest to make our world, or *the* world, a better place. This can be done through either your vocation or avocation; as part of your work, as part of family life, or through volunteer activities.

I believe that one of Jesus' greatest accomplishments was the way he lived and modeled compassionate service. Perhaps it's the reason his followers spread his message so effectively; they did what he did. Jesus perceived in every person his or her fullest humanity. In being fully known and still loved and accepted, Jesus gave people the greatest gift possible. Jesus taught his followers to do the same; to treat everyone with love, forgiveness, kindness, justice, and generosity.

This kind of inclusive compassion was an entirely new way of being in the world. In ancient times, people believed that many gods ruled the natural world and these gods were often capricious and cruel. Additionally, the human rulers—the kings and chiefs—often lorded their power over their subjects, were also capricious and cruel, and usually achieved their ends through force. Added to this was the reality that tribal affiliation and cohesion absolved individuals from caring for anyone outside their group. In Jesus' time, compassion for all was simply not expected. However Jesus insisted upon having compassion and love for those beyond

one's tribe; this is exemplified so clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus revised the concept of being our brother's (and sister's) keeper as it had been taught in the Hebrew Scriptures in which a "brother" meant only another Jew. For Jesus our brothers and sisters include everyone.

Jesus' more expansive idea of caring for everyone continues to be a difficult message in modern times. It doesn't quite fit into our Western culture's ideals of personal independence. It doesn't conform to our pulling-ourselves-up-by-the-bootstraps achievement philosophy. Being our "brother's keeper" demands that we make an effort to help pull up each other; it demands that we relinquish some of our personal independence in favor of the interdependence that is part-and-parcel of true compassion.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, author, theologian, and follower of Jesus eloquently explains it this way, "*Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It's the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.*" Buechner also said, "*If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors, with our imagination as well as our eyes; that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces.*" As we truly see the life behind and within the faces of our neighbors we will then also see God.

For those of us who desire peace and joy in our lives (and in the world) compassionate service is not a burdensome responsibility. It is a joy-filled path to true peace. It is a vocation; a Divine calling. Vocations are not just for religious people; they are for everyone. Having a vocation is more about *how* and *why* we do what we do rather than the specifics of what we do. When we do everything with love because God first loved us, we are living into our vocation. It doesn't matter whether our vocation is within our work or career, or hobbies, or family situation, or all of it. It matters that in whatever way we choose to be of service, we do so freely as a response to God's love rather than as an obligation based on guilt or another's demands.

I chose medicine and family life with my wife and children as my vocation, my way of serving God by serving humanity. You can choose the path that is the best use of your gifts and talents as discerned through spiritual reflection and by answering basic questions about how you live your life and why. But no matter what choice we make, we must acknowledge also that our true vocation rests within the interdependence of being our brother's keeper.

Buechner spoke often about vocation as being the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deepest need. Reflecting on vocation in his book *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* Buechner said, "*To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake...that little by little we start to come alive.*" I know for me this was true. It can be true for you also.

If together we have the courage and the will to put God's love into full-force action we can make the world a better place for everyone. And given the ego-centered nature of our times and the glorification of humanity's worst aspects of selfishness, I believe this to be a rather urgent task. Too many people pursue greed and glory at the expense of the world around them. They clutch and claw at the illusion of happiness gained through *taking* rather than experiencing the real happiness gained through *giving*. What good is it, after all, if your joy—or your *illusion* of joy—comes at someone else's expense? To counter an increasingly dark and amoral culture, we need more people to discover and then commit to living their vocation. We must open our spiritual hearts ever wider so that God's love can work through each of us to make the world a more compassionate place.

## **Living As One Body; Building the Kingdom**

Can you imagine a world in which everyone considered themselves as members of one singular, peaceful, generous global human family? In that earthly paradise each of us would share the responsibility of helping to maintain this amazing state of grace by taking care of one another. This is not an impossible vision. In the choices of our daily lives, we can change the world for the better by following Jesus' example of love, justice, service, and forgiveness. If the people we help then choose to follow our example and help other folks in a similar manner and so on in an infinite wave of sharing and forgiveness, love could spread like wildfire and the world would be transformed.

The terrible events since the massacre of Americans on September 11, 2001 proves that a small group of people acting with intention can change the way the world works. Unfortunately, that group chose to act out of hatred rather than love. And since those awful days, Western culture has been caught in the grip of fear and used revenge as the outlet for that fear. What has transpired since then is predictable. Communities that use fear and hatred ensure a diminishment of basic freedoms and basic humanity. But all the wars throughout all of history have proven that the use of fear or hatred is a flawed strategy for safety and happiness. If living in this way worked, it would have done so by now. Choosing to live in love with an understanding of our Oneness with each other and the earth has worked in the past and many Native American communities once thrived by living this way. However fear or greed or the belief that living this way is impossible on a wide scale has often prevented greater acceptance.

Yet there's nothing complicated about this plan; there are no leaders and few rules beyond basic codes of decency. By taking small amounts of time throughout each day to reflect upon your spiritual state, you can observe how well you treat others and in what ways you can improve. Then by sharing kindness, forgiveness, respect, and justice with your fellow human beings, you can participate in setting into motion a loving revolution.

To obtain this priceless spiritual treasure, though, we must accept that God resides in the soul of *every* human being. We're all children of the same Creator regardless of skin color, wealth,

nationality, religious preference, or gender. Only by recognizing divine grace as a dynamic reality in our lives and in all life can we carry out Jesus' request to tend His flock and feed His sheep.<sup>5</sup> When we make helping other people the top priority of our existence here on earth, our lives are filled with vibrant happy experiences. By putting other people's needs ahead of our wants, and by examining our deeds and improving ourselves whenever possible, we too become Jesus' Good Shepherd and then, like Jesus, we become instruments of God.

But how can we be effective instruments of God's love and peace in such a conflicted, sick, and needy world? One way is to change how you perceive the world because when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. So I suggest having the commitment to opening our hearts, minds, and souls so that we see our Oneness with each other. Then we can notice and tend to the people who actively seek our help or those whose needs simply cross our paths. Yet this isn't always as easy as it sounds.

Opportunities to do good often come at inconvenient times and ask of us more than we believe we have to give. The person who needs you might appear shameful, disgusting, or unworthy of help. Sometimes the person who needs you most is a member of your own family who has hurt you, disappointed you, angered you, or even betrayed your trust. He or she might be a neighbor who annoys you; or a member of some group you find offensive or immoral; or a person who made poor choices or had awful luck. And sometimes the needy person is a family member, neighbor, or stranger whose vulnerabilities cry out to *you* specifically in a way that requires your personal sacrifice to meet that need. Rarely do we need to look far to find someone in need of what we can uniquely provide.

Offering non-judgmental loving service to people you might normally avoid is a real challenge. It's easy to see God in, or offer kindness to, people you like. However the ultimate spiritual adventure begins when you can see God's presence in "the least brothers or sisters" or in the family member or cultural/religious/national enemies who test your commitment to love and forgive. When you can reach out even to *them*, your spirituality is leading you to become One with them and with God.

If our spiritual vision enabled us to see that it is God when we look into the faces of the suffering, the downtrodden, the angry, the addicted, the hungry, and the homeless it would not be so easy to pass by these unfortunates without offering some (nonjudgmental) assistance. Yet far too often we do precisely that. When we decide we're too busy, too important, or too certain of our preconceived judgments to help someone in need, in essence we're saying to that person (or

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<sup>5</sup> John 21: 15-17 details an encounter between Jesus and Simon Peter following Jesus' resurrection in which Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" After Simon Peter responds 'yes' to each question Jesus instructs him to feed, tend, and again feed his sheep. In other words Peter was to follow Jesus' *way* becoming the Good Shepherd to minister to all people in Jesus' name. This three-fold questioning drawing out Peter's assertion of love is meant to counteract Peter's three denials of Jesus before the crucifixion. Peter then understands Jesus' purpose, accepts the mantle of the Good Shepherd to tend Jesus' "flock."

to God), “I don’t have time for you now” or “I don’t have room in my heart for you” or “I don’t trust God enough not to fear you,” or “I am not responsible for you or your poor choices.”

When we act in this way we are like the self-righteous yet lawfully precise and appropriate priest or Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. They justified themselves when they walked around the wounded man who’d been robbed and beaten for they had no legal or social responsibility. But we can see that they had a moral one. Most of us would probably prefer to identify ourselves with the Samaritan who was able to see and tend to the stranger in shared human dignity. The contrast between doing the *right* or lawful thing rather than the loving or compassionate thing is easy to identify in that parable. It isn’t so easy to see in our own lives. And it’s even harder to live.

Do we truly care about others who need our help or are we just putting on a show? Do we take refuge in our presumed personal importance and decline the opportunities God gives us to help our fellow human beings? Through conscientious development of our spiritual self, however, we can change any tendency toward separation. This enables us to offer others our authentic love rather than false pride or indifference. Authentic spirituality and attentiveness to God will guide us. So let us open our hearts to our best and Highest Selves. Let us reach for priceless spiritual treasures by sharing the unconditional love God bestows on us with those closest to us, and with those who cross our paths with obvious needs we can fill. I believe God will then shower His blessings down upon us, allowing us to better cope with life’s problems and live lives of true joy and peace.

When we understand that joy and peace in this life come only from treating one another well, our flawed human souls will have taken a giant leap forward in our quest for the real spiritual progress that begets happiness. As Mother Teresa said, “*It’s not how much we give but how much love we put into giving.*”



I want every living being to be as happy as they can be. In many ways, that has always been my life’s work. The four-step spiritual action plan can help guide us all to ignite the Divine spark within us so its flame can light the darkness of our world. In this way we can spread peace and joy to everyone.

Having purposefully lived nearly ninety years of life with this plan allows me now to look back upon my life without regret and further provides a peace that defies all understanding. This is of great comfort as Mary Ann and I grow ever closer to the day when we are born into eternal life.

The yearning for eternal life however cannot diminish my continuing wonder and gratitude for this life. When I look into the heavens on a clear night and see the star-filled galaxies billions of light-years away twinkling in a vast, seemingly endless universe I intuitively know that God

exists. When I look into the face of my dear Mary Ann or remember the love she bestowed on me all my life, I experience in a tangible way that God exists. I want this for you too.

Making the conscious choice to develop your own spirituality with a commitment to a spiritual action plan will lead you toward God and it will relieve the restlessness that seems pandemic in our society.



In the final chapter on spirituality, I will share a prayer that inspired me so much that I gave a copy of it to not only the patients I tended but also the residents and fellows who studied under my guidance. The Jesuits of my youth were not my only influence or mentors in prayer. Another spiritual mentor of mine is St. Francis of Assisi who has been inspiring people since he walked the earth nine centuries ago. In Chapter 10 I will share a prayer inspired by him in the hope that it will energize your life as it did mine. With it, you can become an instrument of God and through it you can flourish in your vocation, whatever God calls you to do.

