

Waking Up to God's Presence

The Spiritual Formation of Your Life in Christ

Capable Flesh

The tender flesh itself
will be found one day
— quite surprisingly —
to be capable of receiving,
and yes, full
capable of embracing
the searing energies of God.
Go figure. Fear not.
For even at its beginning
the humble clay received
God's art, whereby
one part became the eye,
another the ear, and yet
another this impetuous hand.
Therefore, the flesh
is not to be excluded
from the wisdom and the power
that now and ever animates
all things. His life-giving
agency is made perfect,
we are told, in weakness —
made perfect in the flesh.

Irenaus (c. 125–c. 210)¹

*Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—
separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world.*

*But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize
the distinctions we make between the two.*

*Earth is so thick with divine possibility
that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.*

Barbara Brown Taylor²

¹ Adapted and translated by Scott Cairns, *Love's Immensity; Mystics on the Endless Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007, pp. 5–6.)

² *An Altar in The World*; Barbara Brown Taylor p. 15.

Spiritual Formation

Henri Nouwen relates this story to illustrate what spiritual formation is all about³

A little boy was watching a sculptor at work. For weeks this sculptor kept chipping away at a big block of marble. After a few weeks he had created a beautiful marble lion. The little boy was amazed and said: "Mister, how did you know there was a lion in the rock?"

The sculptor had to know the lion by heart to see the figure in the marble. He saw it before he began.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, heart, refers to the essence of who we are—all physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and volitional aspects of the human person. God is the sculptor who sees beauty in us and can sculpt us in a way that brings out all the beauty he sees in us and “knows by heart.” God sees us in ways that are not seen by others. God sees us as not only what we are, but what we can be and what we will be. The experience of salvation is a process of being formed in Christ [see Colossians 1: 21-28; 3:1-17]—of having our heart or essence reformed or sculpted in the likeness of Christ.

Since we live in a society that overvalues personal achievement and development it is easy to conceive of this process of formation from the viewpoint of accomplishing something in our spiritual lives rather than responding to God with us, God seeking us. Questions of personal achievement when it comes to knowing God, faith, and spiritual growth look like:

- How do I find God?
- How do I get to know God?
- How am I to love God?
- Who is God to me?

Better questions, questions of response and discover are:

- How do I to let myself be found by God?
- How do I to let myself be known by God?
- How do I to let myself be loved by God?
- Who am I to God?

This means that the spiritual journey of formation in Christ is one in which we cooperate with the Spirit by making room in our lives for God and responding to God’s gentle initiatives to form us. Our primary job is to pay attention to God. God’s job is to sculpt us.

³ Quoted by Henri Nouwen in *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation* from Thomas Hora, *Existential Meta-Psychiatry* [Seabury press, 1977].

Spiritual formation or **Waking Up To God Presence** is very much based on two realities

- The human condition
- The fact that God is “with us” and God works in our “capable flesh” [cf. Irenaus’ poem].

Nouwen:

Truly the good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pains and participates in the fullness of the human struggle...our joys and pains...God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom,...our helper, our shepherd, our love.⁴

In another place Nouwen writes:

The key work here [in cooperating with God in spiritual formation] is articulation. People who can identify and articulate the movements of their inner lives, who can give names to their varied experiences, [what he calls the movements of the heart with all its polarities] need no longer be victims of themselves but are able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the Spirit from entering.⁵

That means learning to attend to your hungers for God and your resistances to embrace God as your here and now responses to God and allowing God to speak into your “capable flesh” and call you to transformation. This is no quick fix—it is a life-long journey of formation and transformation.

⁴ *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; p. 74

⁵ *Spiritual Formation, Following the Movements of the Spirit*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; pp. xx-xxi.

Spiritual Exercise on Waking up to God in Your Life

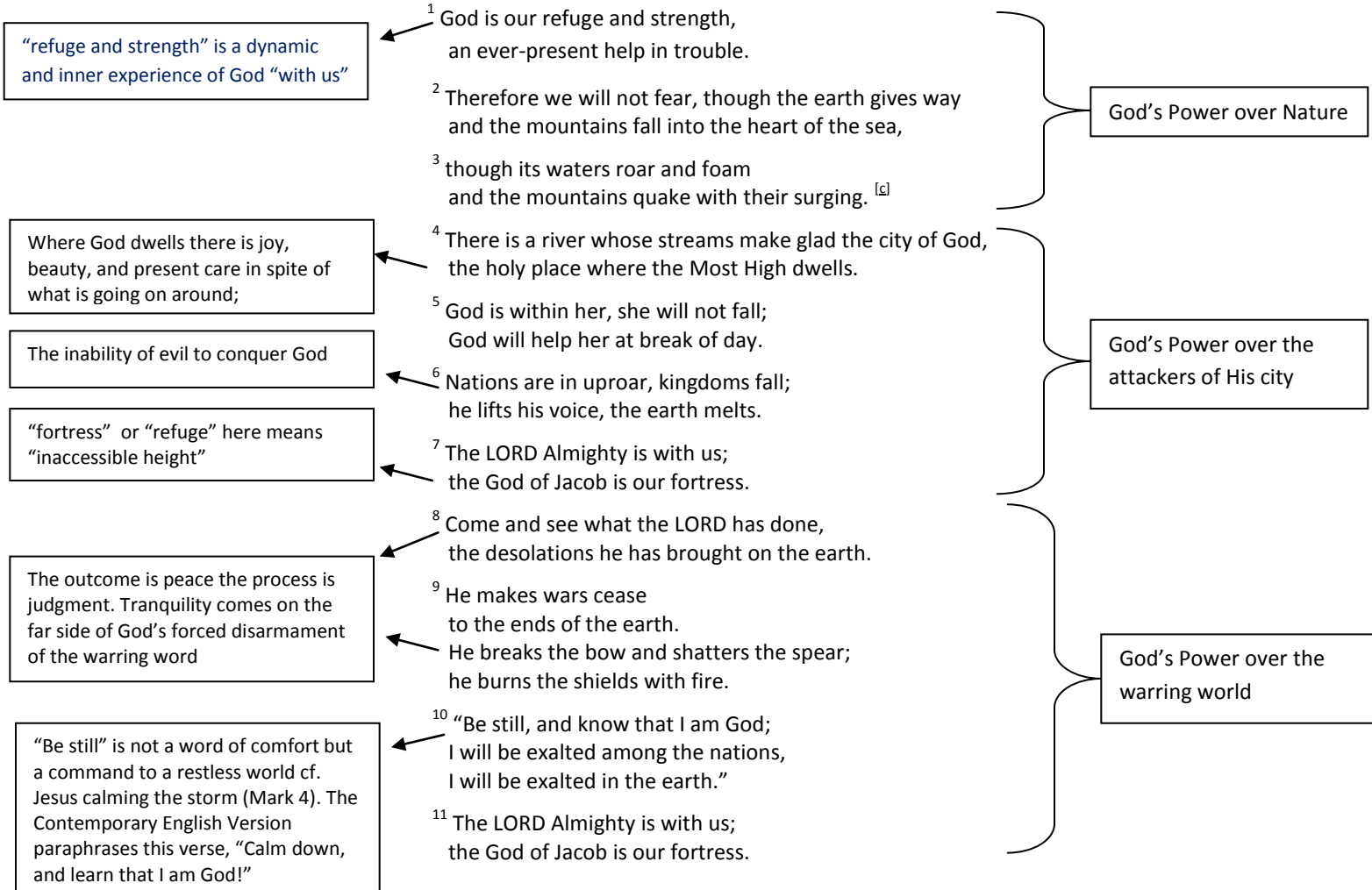
An exercise to be done in the mentoring session

1. Goals:
 - a. to learn how to attend to God's presence in your life
 - b. to learn how to "see" God at work attend to God
 - c. to change your experience from "seeking" to "being found"

2. Your experience of God. Briefly "tell your story" of your experience with God.
 - a. How do you imagine God to be like?
 - b. What is your experience of God's absence?
 - i. How has this unwelcome or unfamiliar experience of God impacted you?
 - c. What is your experience of God's presence?
 - i. How has this experience impacted your life?

3. To wake up to God we first have to become aware of who we are waking up to. The Bible is the best source we have to discover who God is and ways He acts. Let's compare what we learn from Psalm 46 with how you imagine God to be like.
 - d. Read Psalm 46 aloud [from Today's New International Version]
 - e. Talk through the Psalm section by section [vv. 1-3; vv. 4-7; vv. 8-11]
 - i. What do you notice about God in contrast with earth, mountains, and sea?
 - ii. What happens where God is present in spite of what is going on all around?
 - iii. Note in v. 3 that the NT fulfillment of the "place where God dwells" is with his people wherever they are.
 - iv. Add your own insights to those listed in the margins.
 - v. Summarize by verbalizing what this Psalm teaches us about God being "with us"

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamo. A song.



4. As to God "with us" consider also Jesus promise to his disciples recorded in John 14:16-17:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. [NIV]

If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you. I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can't take him in because it doesn't have eyes to see him, doesn't know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be in you! [MSG]

5. Guided mediation on Psalm 46:10 and John 14:16-17
 - a. Sit quietly
 - b. Read aloud John 14:16-17 and Psalm 46:10
 - c. All that is asked of you in this moment is that you be with Jesus.
 - d. Let these word sink into you—into your present life; your joys; your pains
 - God is your stronghold
 - God is your refuge
 - Jesus is your shepherd
 - Jesus is your wisdom
 - e. What images come to mind?
 - What life memories past or present arise? Jesus is present there. God is with you.
 - What are you doing?
 - What is Jesus doing?
 - What is Jesus saying?
 - What is clear? What is hidden?
 - Before you leave this scene, let God love you there.
 - vi. Bring this guided meditation to a close
 - f. Discuss what this experience was like.
 - Verbalize and write down brief answers as best you can to these questions. We are establishing a point of your awareness and experience of God with you that we can come back to at the end of these mentoring sessions to see what has changed.
 - g. How do I to let myself be found by God?
 - h. How do I to let myself be known by God?
 - i. How do I to let myself be loved by God?
 - j. Who am I to God?
6. Optional assignment to bring back to the next mentoring session and review briefly.
 - a. Henri Nouwen comments that there are four realities in walking with God that those who are awake to God's presence grapple with over the course of their spiritual journey. These four realities are not the full picture of who God is, but nonetheless critical to a vital relationship with God.
 - b. Your assignment is to "rewrite your life story" from the perspective of these four realities about God. Use the format from the previous mentoring session—Five Aspects Of Life Formation

- i. Telling one significant thing from the perspective of these four realities about God and how it is significant/different from your first telling of your story
 - o Childhood
 - o family
 - o romance[s]
 - o spirituality
 - o struggle or tragic incident
- c. Four realities about God⁶
 - i. **God is with us**
 - o God is not a distant God, but...God-with-us..a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom,...our helper, our shepherd, our love
 - ii. **God is personal**
 - o God is with us in a personal way. The best New Testament image of this is found in the word *Abba*, best translated *Daddy*. Here is the image of kind, gentle, and most intimate father. *Abba* does not have any connotations of authority, power and control that the world *father* often evokes. *Abba* implies embracing and nurturing love that is personal yet beyond gender limitation and that we may also experience from fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, spouses, friends and lovers.
 - o This love is exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son—a story that speaks of love that existed before any rejections was possible and that will be there after all rejections have taken place. This is the everlasting love of God.
 - a. This love transcends any gender image. The return of the prodigal son implies a very feminine metaphor—it is as if the son is returning to God’s womb—where God as Mother is receiving back into her womb the one whom she made in her own image. Here is maternal love marked by the grief, desire, hope and endless waiting for her offspring who was lost.
 - iii. **God is often hidden from our awareness**
 - o One of the paradoxes of our experience of God is that he is both present and hidden. When we first experience God’s presence we are sheltered

⁶ *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; pp. 73-81

from his hiddenness. As we continue in the life of faith we discover that we cannot understand or grasp all of who God is. We cannot explain God or God's presence in history.

- If we unequivocally identify God with a specific event or situation we distort the truth that God is beyond our knowing. There is a great temptation to say where God is working and not working; where He is present and not present.
- The simple fact is we don't know. We are surrounded by the unseen and the unknown. What we can say is that God is with us in the unexplainable absurdities of life.
- Prayer is the place where we embrace the mystery of God's absence in our perceptions and experience; in this "cloud of unknowing" we can still find God with us.

iv. God is looking for us

- We do not find God. God finds us. God is the good shepherd who looks for us. God is the woman who lights the lamp, sweeps out the house, and looks for lost coin until she finds it. God is not the kind of patriarch who sits at home and expects his family to come to him. Like the father of the prodigal God is scanning the horizon for you longing to bring you home.

d. Now, "rewrite your life story" from this perspective:

- i. God is personal, with us, and looking for us
- ii. All our experiences both joyous and painful are invitations to experience God who is always there as our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble [Psalm 46:1].
- iii. Sometimes or often this invitation and the reality of God's presence may be hidden from us.

7. Optional Assignment—Buy and read *The River Within; Loving God; Living Passionately* by Jeff Imbach⁷

⁷ Jeff Imbach has spent many years as a pastor and spiritual director. He was the founding president of the Henri Nouwen Society in Canada and an adjunct faculty member of Carey Theological College. Jeff is co-founder of SoulStream, a ministry that provides spiritual direction training, and retreats in the Vancouver area. Jeff's other books include *The Recovery of Love and Words of Hope and Healing: 99 Sayings* by Henri Nouwen.