

SPIRITUAL FORMATION INTERVIEW.

Questions by Len Hjalmarson. Responses by Paul Fromont

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What is spiritual formation to you?



Christian Spiritual formation, in many ways hinges on how we understand the word “spiritual,” i.e. what does it mean for us to be *spiritually* formed?

Spirituality, it seems to me, has a lot to do with what David Bosch describes as being in tune with what God is doing in the world and participating in God’s work (*missio Dei*). It also has to do with being in tune with what God is doing inwardly *in us* – for this too is part of the *missio Dei*.

At the end of the day, however, Christian spirituality has simply to do with our responding to the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit within and without us. “...*Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God’s Spirit is doing...*” (*The Message*, 1 Cor. 2:10-16).

A friend, Mike Riddell talks about a “vibrant spirituality... [one] that needs to be earthed, conversant with human suffering, attainable within the complexities of life, holistic, creative, communal, and contextual.” Christian spirituality nourishes ways of being vulnerably and openly human in the face of such complexities. It’s concerned with the *heights* and *depths* of life.

Provocatively perhaps, given that we don’t use the word much nowadays, I have a lot of sympathy for any definition of Christian spirituality and spiritual formation that has at its heart a theology of becoming holy. As Geoffrey Rowell has said well, the quest for holiness is the quest for God, and that quest turns out, we discover, to be God’s search for us. This is pure irony, given that in focusing on *our* formation and *my* spirituality, we often miss the point, that this is about God, its about our *responding* to God who loves, *woos* and invites us to become *more* whole and holy than we currently are.

So, spiritual formation for me is concerned with a life lived into the wind of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8 & Gal 5:13-25), such, that in my orientation toward God and in my living I become increasingly human after the likeness and example of Jesus. Jesus, as the second *adam* perfectly embodies what it means to “image” God humanly (*imago Dei*), and in becoming increasingly human I’m learning how, in the midst of *all* of life, to live more vulnerably, more holily, more wholly, more lovingly alive, more honestly and authentically, and thus more humanly in relation to God, *myself*, and other human beings within the variety of contexts that I find myself. “St. Irenaeus, a church leader in the second century said that ‘the glory of God is a person fully alive’.”¹

How have your views evolved in the last ten years or so?

My views over the last ten-years have paradoxically become more refined and increasingly broadened. The leading edge of this paradoxical journey has been my working with what it

¹ Quoted by Luci Shaw in *The Crime of Living Cautiously*, p. 37.

means to “image” (*imago Dei*) God. The text, which in 1991 triggered this exploration, was: Alan J. Spence’s “*Christ’s Humanity and Ours: John Owen.*” In *Persons, Divine and Human: King’s College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Christopher Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton.

What traditions or streams have influenced your views of formation the most?

A short answer: Two broad streams really: Anglo-Catholic (“pre” & “post” Reformation) and Anabaptist. We need different things at different stages in our faith development and spiritual formation. Different traditions offer “wells” of varying depth from which we are able to draw. Some are shallow and soon dry up; others are significantly deeper and we continue to draw from them, even when all around us is desert and wilderness.

What do you practice to be formed...personally ... communally?

I have a number of priorities or practices that put me in the way of God’s grace and nourish my becoming more wholly human in relation to God, *myself*, other human beings, and the contexts I find myself in.

- The discipline of reading, study, and learning.
- Nurturing people-contact, particularly close friendships, but also more casual friendships and connections with people.
- “Three’s”.
- Regular Eucharist (although I must say that’s become a bit irregular over the last six-months).
- Silence (this demands creative solutions when one shares a small house with one other adult and three young children. Having a partner that can occasionally have the children for a 2 or 3 hours during a weekend is a gift).
- At least one or two, four to five-day retreat’s a year. Last year I got to do three retreats including a five-day silent retreat, and a five-day guided retreat (Again, it’s a gift to have a sympathetic and supportive partner)
- Coffee-stops; Café, pub and restaurant visits with interesting and stimulating people.
- Formal prayer (in particular ‘seasons’) – I use *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary*. Compiled and edited by Maxwell E. Johnson.
- Scripture reading and imaginatively praying with Scripture, particularly the gospels.
- Spiritual Direction (both as a directee and as a director).
- Therapy (at those times when a bit of outside help is needed). Particularly the interrelated (and often combined in practice) practices of *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, *Behaviour Therapy* and *Dialectical Behavioural Therapy*.
- Workshops and formal learning opportunities.
- Engaging with movies, particularly when that engagement is at the cinema, and hopefully it’s a shared experience.
- Writing.
- Regularly placing myself in particular environments that nourish, refresh and draw prayer from me e.g. the coast.
- Lawn mowing.
- Blogging.²

² See my reflection *Bloggng – A Creative Way of Exploring and Discussing Spirituality?* In the Summer 2007 issue of REFRESH (A journal produced by Spiritual Growth Ministries Trust (Aotearoa New Zealand).

What further practices attract you, might you eventually add...?

- Drawing from the Benedictine tradition I want to formulate a *rule* or a “rhythm for living.” A *rule of life* that will help me respond to two questions: Who do I want to be? How do I want to live? Actually it will be a rule of life that will seek to address the *interplay* between these two questions within the context of my everyday living...³
- From the Ignatian tradition I want (and this will be included in my “rule”) to adopt the *examen of consciousness* (I prefer “awareness examen”) as a daily practice – a daily way of learning to recognise and become *open* to the presence and activity of God in all of life. A way of learning to recognise God in the everyday ‘ordinariness’ of life.
- The practice of living simply; increasingly dependent upon God, and interdependent in relation to others.
- Painting.
- *Tai Chi Chuan* – Although a martial art, I have formerly valued it as a way of using movement to create a deep inner stillness and peace; a stillness and peace that I want increasingly to carry into all of life – a life which would, as a consequence, be lived more reflectively and gently; a life lived in such a way as to be able to increasingly recognise and honour the sacrament of the present moment.

³ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. This book, published by evangelical publisher IVP (2006) has a very useful, easy to read introductory chapter to “rules” – *A Rule of Life: Cultivating Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation*.