

A Spirituality of Service

Freely Give, Freely Receive



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INTRODUCTION



When MCC celebrated its 75th anniversary, Ted Koontz wrote that a *theology* of service is not enough to sustain us for another 75 years. He compared MCC to a flower that has been cut and placed in water. A cut flower is beautiful but eventually wilts and dies. In the same way, a theology of service is like water that sustains us for a limited time. If MCC is to continue into the future, we will need to root ourselves in a *spirituality* of service. I identified with his perspective since I had already personally experienced the limits of trying to live my theology without the sustenance that comes from a personal relationship with God who loves me unconditionally. This paper is an effort to articulate my understanding of what sustains a call to service.

A spirituality of service depends on giving to others what I have received from God. When Jesus sent out his disciples he told them, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt. 10:8, NIV). Peter expressed the same thought. “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10). Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians that he is passing on what he received from Christ (1 Co. 11:23, 15:3). Recognizing that some of the Corinthians were becoming boastful he asks pointedly “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Co. 4:7). Receptivity to God is crucial to serving others.

The implications of receiving from God in order to give to others are profound because receiving from God requires a new way of thinking about myself in relation to God and others. Instead of perceiving myself as one who actively initiates a response to the needs around me, I begin to recognize that my concerns for justice and peace are planted in me by God. God is the Source of my desire to serve and I am the recipient of God’s concerns, dreams, and activity in the world.

The following thoughts provide a summary of this paper and my understanding of a spirituality of service. A spirituality of service is based on:

- Recognizing that a theological foundation for service is not sufficient in and of itself. We can only follow Jesus as we receive the grace to do so. Receiving from God in order to give to others is essential to a spirituality of service and requires reflecting on our understanding of God, our understanding of ourselves, and our way of acting in the world. This aspect will be the focus of the first section.
- Understanding that the call to serve makes service a path for our spiritual growth. God calls us to service, not just because others have needs, but because we need to grow and mature. In the second section, I will use my own experience of growth through service in order to introduce several stages of spiritual development.
- Willingness to risk looking beyond the work we accomplish in order to allow God to deepen our motivations. In the appendix, I will raise the issues as I see them in order to stimulate thought and discussion.

PART I

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What is Spirituality?

I think of spirituality as a whole which includes the source of our energy, the spirit that motivates us, and the way that spirit manifests itself in the world around us. Spirituality connects and integrates our understanding of where we come from, who we are, and how we live. The following metaphor expresses my understanding of spirituality as a whole.

The water system in the village where I used to live in El Salvador symbolizes God as my Source, myself as recipient, and my actions as the natural outflow of a healthy relationship. The system was simple. Villagers tapped a spring in a hill above the village and built a cement storage tank. Then they installed pipes from the tank to the homes below allowing water to flow naturally to the village. I think of God as my Source or spring of life and energy. I am the pipe through whom God's love flows. My actions in the world are like the water that comes out of the faucet. If I am connected to God, and, if my channel is clear, then the love I receive will flow through me in tangible ways. I will be of service because "True love cannot be contained. Its very essence is to reach out and to care for others."¹

Spirituality is based on the assumption that spirit manifests itself in external form no matter what spirit motivates us. Every religion manifests its beliefs in a particular way. In other words, every religion has its particular spirituality. Even those who do not profess a religion or any interest in spirituality, still live the truth that the spirit which motivates us is made visible through our actions. Take consumerism, for example. The action of buying more and more things can be motivated by a spirit of fear as we seek security and acceptance through the things we own. A spirit of fear can also manifest itself through withdrawing, controlling, lashing out, worrying, etc. These and countless other examples express the relationship between our actions and the spirit behind them.

Christian spirituality is the manifestation of the Spirit of Jesus. Because I am Christian, I believe that God is my Creator, the Source of Life, and I want my actions to be motivated by the Spirit of Jesus. It also happens that I am an *Anabaptist* Christian which gives me a particular understanding of who God is and how the Spirit is expressed in me and in the world around me. Besides being an Anabaptist Christian, I have a specific call to service so I am interested in understanding how service is a particular expression of the way God manifests God's self through me. The thoughts in this paper, then, are based on a Christian spirituality which is Anabaptist in orientation and expressed through a call to serve.

Jesus makes the connection between the inner spirit and outer actions with the metaphor of a tree and its fruit. "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit . . . The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil" (Lk 6:43). Some people associate "spirit" and "spirituality" with the inner life as opposed to the outer life of action.

However, I believe that the separation is false. I cannot disconnect my actions from the spirit that motivates them. Spirituality looks at the whole, at both my actions *and* the spirit behind them.

Ted Koontz challenged MCC to deepen our roots by moving beyond a *theology* of service towards a *spirituality* of service. What is the difference between theology and spirituality? Theology defines what we believe about God, ourselves, and our call while spirituality breathes life into those beliefs by integrating them. A theology of service provides the foundation for our action in the world but we need the Spirit to give life to that foundation by rooting us in God's love and grace. Theology and spirituality play essential but distinct roles in integrating our faith into a living whole.

Spirituality integrates three key questions: Who is God? Who am I? And how am I called to live? First, we need to think about our understanding of God. Because God is much bigger than our human ability to grasp, God reveals to us only those characteristics of God's self that we need in order to live our own particular call. For example, if God calls someone to a life of contemplative prayer, God will invite that person to embrace the characteristics of God that nurture a call to contemplation. Since God has called me to service, God has awakened in me interest in the characteristics that support that call. Second, we need to think about our identity because the flow of God's love through us depends on our ability to live the identity with which we were created. Third, we need to think about how we are called to live. Frequently, we begin reflecting on service from the standpoint of action. I have come to believe, however, that action is not the starting point but the result of living connected to God, the Source of love. Christian spirituality integrates our understanding of God, ourselves, and our actions.

Who is God?

An experience of God's love changes our concept of God.²

MAUREEN CONROY

My concept of God influences what I channel to the world around me. Returning to the image of the water system, I think of my concept of God as the cement tank which stores the water as it slowly filters from the spring. The water from the spring may be pure and clean but the quality of the water that flows to the village depends on the condition of the tank in which it has been stored. The tank may be big or small, clean or dirty, sealed or cracked. In the same way, the "water" from God, my Source, is pure but it has to pass through the filter of my perception of who God is before it flows into the world, and my perception may or may not be a healthy reflection of God.

I need to think about who I believe God to be. Perhaps I need to enlarge my "tank" because my concept of God is narrow and limited. Maybe negative experiences in my past have left my "tank" cracked and leaking. Realizing that I have held the concept of a demanding God has helped me understand my tendency, especially in the past, to push myself and push others. I need to be open to new ways of perceiving God in order for God's love to flow more freely through me.

It is important to understand both our theological concept and our operational concept of God in order to bring together differences between what we intellectually believe about God and our lived experience of God. For example, theologically I may believe that God

is love. I can point to Scripture texts that support that truth and try to live out the implications in my life. But I may have a hard time believing that God unconditionally loves *me*. Our operational concept of God has to do with our experience of God and the unconscious factors that influence the spirit behind our actions. In this case, the operational concept is that we need to earn God's love so we try to please God who demands certain behaviors. Spirituality helps us integrate our theological belief that God is love by deepening it into an experience of receiving God's love.

I would like to look now at several characteristics of God that are important to a spirituality of service: God is present in all things, God is good, and God is active. All three are based on the understanding that, above all, God is love.

God is present in all things

My call to service is sustained by my understanding that God is present in all things. Paul describes God's presence in Acts when he says that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The psalmist emphasizes God's presence when he asks "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Psalm 139:7,8). If I feel called to respond to a particular need, it is because God is present, God has felt the need, and God is inviting me to respond.

During a time of personal crisis in El Salvador, I was overwhelmed by the war and death which surrounded me. I described what I experienced as an abyss of evil that abruptly opened and then closed again just as suddenly. I thought I had glimpsed as deeply as one can see, and what I saw was ugly and violent. It has taken years for me to begin to comprehend that God's goodness is deeper still, that God's love is big enough to embrace even the depth of depravity that I glimpsed.

It is easy for me to imagine God's presence in the beauty of a sunset, in the vulnerability of a newborn, or in the majesty of the mountains. But it is a challenge to sense God's presence in the agony of land that has been environmentally destroyed, in the violence of war, or in the suffering of an abandoned child. That is when I need to stop and ask myself how God feels. What does it do to God's heart to see a baby abandoned by her mother? How does God feel when we destroy the earth that was given to sustain us?

A simple experience with plants reminded me that when I find myself wondering *if* God is present, I need to ask instead, *how* God is present. The lectionary reading one morning was from Psalm 33. "The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." It seemed an appropriate verse for a morning spent working with plants. As I tried to chip a hole in the hard clay dirt in front of my house, I wondered how the love of God could be present in such worthless soil! The response came quickly. "God's love is present in the agony of land, once fertile and fruitful, now exploited and destroyed."

God is present in every aspect of life. The question is, "*How* is the Spirit present in a given time and place?" Is the Spirit groaning in agony as we destroy the earth and each other? Is the Spirit celebrating our efforts to respond in solidarity? Giving fruitful growth? Patiently waiting?

Service workers need to be particularly aware of God's presence in every aspect of life because we frequently find ourselves in situations of overwhelming suffering. Our natural response is to think that God must be absent because surely a loving God would

do something. Which, of course, is precisely why we are there. God *is* doing something. God has planted God's own concern within us which is what draws us to a particular place, issue, or people.

Kazoh Kitamori, a Japanese theologian, makes a connection between ethics and God's pain in what he calls "an ethic of pain."³ God is in intense pain at the condition of our world and invites us to share that pain as we discern our response. I have frequently reflected on Jesus' desire for his disciples to accompany him as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. His only request was for them to stay awake with him. But they could not do it. How is Jesus inviting me to share his pain? Am I able to stay awake as he prays? A spirituality of service is based on being open to God's pain which is an essential element for discerning our call to action and for assuring that our response is rooted in compassion.

God is good

God's goodness may seem obvious but the implications of God's goodness came as a life-giving discovery for me during a time of intense searching. As I experienced the pressures of war, I asked myself how the Anabaptists dealt with persecution and death. I wondered what sustained their commitment as I struggled with sustaining my own sense of call.

My youthful impression growing up was that God expected me to put my faith into practice and to live a life of discipleship. My starting point was the visible fruit of a changed life. As an adult, I discovered that the starting point is not my action but God's goodness and grace. Here is a summary of what I found:

God is good. The Anabaptists believed that God is good and God's creation is good. Original sin did not destroy the seed of goodness planted within us by God.

Grace nurtures the essence of goodness within us and enables us to grow in the divine image. The Anabaptists believed that the presence of God in creation enables humankind to distinguish between good and evil and choose to turn towards good. Pilgram Marpeck, an Anabaptist leader, called the ability to choose good over evil "original grace" or "first grace." "First grace" enables us to turn towards God and "second grace" enables us to grow in God's image. Through grace and the Holy Spirit, God renews the divine image in humankind and makes us participants in the divine nature.⁴

Surrendering to God's love allows grace to transform us. Grace transforms our lives so that we grow in God's image and likeness. Surrendering or yielding (*gelassenheit*) to God's love allows grace to work within us. The Anabaptists believed that God does not force or coerce so choosing to yield to God's love was essential.

Growing in the Divine image results in visible fruits. The transformation brought about by grace results in the choice to follow Jesus in tangible, visible ways. Our lives show the fruit of grace at work within us.

I grew up knowing that "good Mennonites practice their faith and produce visible fruits." I sincerely wanted to follow Jesus but I burned out because I tried to do it without recognizing the foundation of God's love, goodness, and grace. I thought I had to earn

God's approval by following Jesus and serving others. Now I am learning to receive God's love and to allow the visible fruits to grow from the roots of goodness.

What difference does it make to consider God's goodness as the starting point? Several thoughts occur to me.

Deepest desires can be trusted. God draws humankind towards goodness by planting God's own desires within us which is a very different perspective than my past suspicion that human desires lead to sin and cannot be trusted.

Everyone has the potential to grow and be transformed. Everyone carries the seed of God's goodness which makes growth, change, and transformation possible. At the core of the Mennonite theology of nonviolence is the belief that even the most sinful, depraved person has the potential to choose good over evil. Only God has the right to take life because killing someone eliminates the possibility of that person choosing to turn towards good.

Treating others with respect. If we believe that God has planted a seed of God's own goodness within humankind, then every person deserves to be treated with the same respect with which we treat God.

We have something fundamental in common. We all have something in common with each other because we were all created by God. Violence is based on the mindset that we have nothing in common with our enemies and can therefore feel free to "eliminate" them. However, we all carry the potential for God's goodness which gives us a starting point for a relationship.

Receptivity to God's goodness is essential to a spirituality of service because it plants within us the confidence that every person and situation carries the potential of being transformed. I do not want to be blind or naive but I do want to choose to hope that the seeds of goodness can flourish and grow because of God's grace.

God is active

If God is present in all things and if God's goodness enables transformation, then it follows that God is active. My unconscious assumption in the past has been that I am the active one who takes the initiative to work for justice and peace in the world. But I have come to believe that God is active and that God takes the initiative. God hears the cry of the poor and invites us to respond. God dreams of a new heaven and a new earth and draws us towards a vision of justice. God hurts with those who are suffering and asks us to share the pain. God is active and I am the recipient of God's action.

The Anabaptist concept of *gelassenheit* means yieldedness, surrender, openness to God, or passivity before God. When I first studied *gelassenheit* I was concerned that it could be used to promote withdrawal or complacency in the face of unjust suffering. In fact, a theology of passive surrender to God's will *has* been used to pacify people who are being oppressed. But a theology of passivity in the face of injustice is a distortion. God asks us to surrender to God's love, not to injustice. Yielding to God's love makes us receptive to God's initiative which is the basis of God's action through us and God's action through us is concerned with bringing about a reign of justice and peace.

God invites me to participate in God's action. In order to do so, I need to yield to God's initiative so that my action flows from the deep well of God's activity not the shallow well of my own energy. Many of us called to service, myself included, react negatively to anything that may imply passivity in the face of great need. It is particularly important for us to recognize that we are not initiators but partners in God's activity. It is tempting for us to think we are responsible for building the Reign of God rather than seeing ourselves as responding to God's desire for the Reign to flourish. There is a fine line between recognizing that God needs us and believing ourselves to be indispensable. God invites us to participate in God's activity but we are neither in charge nor indispensable.

Who am I?

*Let us consent to be ourselves, nothing but ourselves before God.*⁵

JEAN LAPLACE, SJ

God works through us, and our degree of openness facilitates or obstructs the process. Let me return once again to the water system comparison. God is the Source, we are the channels, and our actions are God's energy flowing through us. One day in the village where I lived, only about half the normal amount of water was flowing through the pipes so some men from the community went to see what was wrong. After digging up several pipes they found the blockage. A shampoo bottle that had been cut in half to use as a funnel had become stuck in a pipe so the only water that could flow through the 1 1/2 inch pipe was what could fit through the 3/4 inch opening of the bottle! In my spiritual life I need to reflect on the ways that I restrict the flow of God's love through me as the shampoo bottle restricted the water in the pipe.

In describing spirituality, I said that Christian action is motivated by the Spirit of Jesus. Unfortunately, not all of my actions are motivated by the Spirit of Jesus. I may work hard and accomplish a great deal of good work for MCC but, when I am honest with myself, I am aware that my motivations are not pure. They may include a tangled mix of obligation, desire to prove myself to others, fear of failure, guilt, and a need to make a difference. Spiritual growth has to do not only with seeking to act in Christian ways, but also with humbly discerning what motivates my actions so that both my actions and the spirit behind them become more and more pure.

True and false self

Service with MCC affects our sense of self. Helping others can have a positive effect as we allow the false self to be stripped away, which reveals what is true. Or it can have a negative effect by inflating our pride, our false self. Paul told the Ephesians to put away the false self and to clothe themselves with the new self (Eph. 4:22, 24). Service is crucial to our spiritual growth because it has the potential to confront us with our false self and invite us to the truth.

Henri Nouwen names three ways that our egos try to create a false identity. Our false self seeks identity through what we do, through what others think of us, and through what we have.⁶ MCC workers frequently find ourselves feeling vulnerable as we move to a new place, perhaps learn a new language, and live in a new culture. When we feel vulnerable

the ego tries especially hard to regain control. By monitoring our response to vulnerability, we learn about our particular traps in creating a false identity.

In my role as a spirituality resource person in Central America and Mexico, I have had the opportunity to talk with many workers who struggle with the frustration of feeling as if they are not *doing* enough. Our egos naturally try to build an identity around our accomplishments but development work defies quick, visible results, forcing us to search for a sense of self that is deeper than the difference we might make.

The sense of not doing enough is compounded by the fact that family and friends back home frequently have an exaggerated idea of what we must be accomplishing. What others think of us is another way that the ego seeks a false identity and we are susceptible to the influence of comments from home like “I could never do what you are doing!” We may allow those comments to inflate our sense of importance or we may respond by feeling as if we are failures. Both extremes are based on the tendency to create a false identity through what others think of us. What we do and what others think of what we do are traps for creating a false identity.

Nouwen’s third area of false identity is in what we have. Cultural influences in the North tempt us to look for identity through the degrees we hold, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, etc. I would adapt that for “MCC culture” by saying we are prone to a false identity according to what we *do not* have. The value of simple living and identifying with the people we serve can create a false identity out of having less than other MCC workers. If I live without electricity and running water, then surely that makes me a better MCC worker than someone else who has access to more physical comforts! But the principle is the same. Our egos create false masks according to what we do or do not possess rather than recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God to be used for the common good.

When we reflect on the true and false self it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the true self, the unconscious, and the ego. The *true self* contains the seed of God’s goodness, the potential of who we were created to be. The Anabaptists were unique among the Protestant Reformers in their belief that the true self was not destroyed by sin. I picture the true self as a small circle in the middle of the larger circle of the unconscious. The *unconscious* includes what we have learned from our family, culture, and religion about appropriate behavior and about God. The *ego* is the face we show to the world. The function of a healthy ego is to transparently reflect the true self in the center of our being. But we all struggle with the ego’s tendency to take control and to mask, instead of reflect, the true self. The unhealthy ego presents us as the person we think we should be, not who we really are. Clothing ourselves with our “new self” requires attentiveness to the relationship between our true self where God dwells, our unconscious, and our ego.

Since the ego tends towards domination and control, dealing with the ego is essential to allowing our true self to flourish. The ego tries to inflate its own importance and to create an identity outside of God’s unconditional love. But our true self is based on two facts: first, every human being has dignity because God loves us unconditionally and, second, God has created us to give to and receive from others. The search for personal identity becomes self-centered and egotistical when we try to separate our identity from God’s love and from our social nature. That separation strengthens the unhealthy ego by making it the center of control rather than recognizing our true self where God dwells as the center. We will never find our identity through a self-centered search for fulfillment but only through opening ourselves to God’s love and giving ourselves to others.

In her book *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, Sallie McFague suggests that sin is seeing ourselves as the center rather than seeing God as the center.⁷ Sin is believing that the world revolves around me and my concerns instead of recognizing that everything revolves around God and God's concerns. Knowing our true self in God "decenters" the ego so that we can receive God's love and give ourselves to God's concerns.

The process of decentering the ego and stripping away the false masks is painful and our natural tendency is to try to avoid it. When the ego is threatened, some respond by asserting power and control while others become timid and withdraw. One of the great temptations of service workers is to reinforce the false self through needing to be helpful. We want to help and may look for security in our ability to be useful in tangible, measurable ways. And the people we work with need help and may cling to us for security. I do not know how many times desperate people have told me, "You are our only hope." Accepting the dependency of others on us can be an "ego trip" if we take their needs upon ourselves and try to meet them on our own strength. Service work provides countless opportunities to reflect on the ways we are tempted towards a false identity and it takes courage to enter the process of stripping away the false to discover truth.

Because our natural tendency is to avoid ego-stripping and because it is so crucial to our spiritual growth, it is particularly important for MCC workers to be aware of the process and look for the kind of support they need to discern between the true and false self. It is also important for MCC support personnel to be familiar with both the process and the potential of unmasking the false self so that we can walk with others as we seek to clothe ourselves "with the new self, created according to the likeness of God . . ." (Eph. 4:24).

How do I Live?

Bernard Haring, a well known ethicist, says that ethics does not only raise the question "What should I do?" but also asks "Who should I be? What kind of person does the Lord want me to be?"⁸ In other words, if I know who I am I will know how to live. In this section, I do not try to outline precisely what I should do but to identify who I want to be as I live a life of service. I want to be content, prayerful, and receptive.

Content: God's Desire in Me

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

PSALM 131

I want to live satisfied that whatever God calls me to do is enough. Thomas Kelly, a Quaker, shared insights born of his personal struggle to be a peaceful activist. He wrote:

The loving Presence does not burden us equally with all things, but considerably puts upon each of us just a few central tasks, as emphatic responsibilities. On the universal level, we feel kindly toward many causes or issues; but we are dismissed from active ser-

vice in most of them. We cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to... [God] working within us, portions out His vast concerns into bundles, and lays on each of us our portion. These become our tasks.⁹

There is great satisfaction in living God's desires planted within me as specific tasks but comparing my tasks with others destroys that satisfaction. God gives each of us our own bundle to carry. I am called to carry *my* bundle, nothing more, nothing less. Comparing my bundle with that of others is destructive. Sometimes I have felt resentful as I compare because I think that others are not doing their share and I blame them for making me feel responsible to pick up what is being left undone. Other times I have felt guilty as I see what others do because my tasks seem insignificant in comparison. Comparing myself with others destroys the satisfaction of living what God has called me to do.

I was moved as I participated in a community work project with my neighbors in Nicaragua and observed the way they worked together without comparing. Reflecting on the experience I wrote:

Participation in the building project has been an inspiration. Once or twice a week as many church members as possible gather to haul sand and rocks from the river. The sand is mixed with cement for mortar and the rocks will be used to even out the floor. There is a saying in Spanish that we each have our "grain of sand" to contribute. I often think of that as we carry sand together. Five and six-year-old children carry small tin cans of sand. Older boys take pride in proving how much weight they can carry. Men wait at the top of the river bank with home-made wheelbarrows which are filled by women and children. When possible, someone brings a horse loading up two one-hundred pound sacks at a time.

I'm amazed that no one seems to compare themselves to others. The children don't look at their small tin cans and think that their little bit is useless compared to what Hermano Alfonso carries on his horse. Men pushing their heavy wheelbarrows don't look down on older women with their basins on their heads. We all have something important to contribute. The Reign of God would be reflected much more peacefully if we each trusted the importance of our "grain of sand."

God invites me to be satisfied with whatever bundle God gives to me. It does not matter what others do and it is irrelevant if my call is impressively visible or totally unnoticeable! I need only to listen to the desire that God has given to me and honor that desire as my way of participating in God's vision. God has given me a particular task to live and it is enough. I will be content like the child mentioned by the psalmist if I do not "raise my eyes too high" but find fulfillment in living God's desires in me, whether they seem impressive or insignificant.

Prayerful: Redefining Prayer and Action

A spirituality of service recognizes the unity of prayer and action. I grew up assuming that prayer is what we do when we close our eyes, bow our heads, and talk to God but now I am realizing that prayer is a life lived attentive to God. When I live aware of God's pain, responsive to God's desires for the world, and receptive to God's love, I am living the unity of prayer and action.

Living prayerfully is not a matter of trying to "balance" prayer and action as I thought in the past because prayer and action are not two distinct entities but part of a whole.

Prayer connects me to God and transforms me into a channel of God's love. Action is whatever flows through that connection whether it takes the form of contemplative living or social activism because God's energy is released into the world in many different ways. The conflict we often experience is not between prayer and action but between prayer and compulsion. If I am driven by compulsions that arise from my false self then my actions are not prayerful. But actions which flow from an attentive, receptive relationship with God are prayerful because prayer and action are two parts of an integrated whole.

As I anticipate leaving MCC, I feel called to spend my first year in the United States living in prayerful solitude. As I discern that call, I need to examine my motivations. If I am motivated by a desire to escape the reality of daily life in the United States then I am being motivated by a spirit of fear. But if I am following the Spirit of Jesus, then reentering U.S. culture by spending time in solitude becomes a radical alternative to the social pressures that drive us. If that is the case, prayerful solitude is not an escape but an active way of rooting myself in God's priorities.

Receptive: Receiving God's Energy

I am the recipient of God's energy, not the source. Jesus told his disciples, "You received without payment; give without payment" (Mt. 10:8). Popular wisdom tells us that we need to take care of ourselves in order to have something to give to others but that concept only expresses a partial truth. The full truth is that I take care of myself in order *to receive from God* so that I have something to give to others. What I have to share with the world around me is very limited if it consists only of the energy I generate within myself by resting. I can only give what I first receive because God is the Source and I am the recipient.

The image of the water system in the Salvadoran village where I used to live also speaks of receptivity. Water which seeps slowly from the spring fills the holding tank during the night when faucets in the village below are turned off. But if faucets are left open, the tank cannot fill and there will not be enough water the next day. In the same way, I need regular times of rest and quiet in order to gather the energy which flows from God, my Source. If my "faucet" of activity is always open, I am not able to be replenished by God's energy. I am called to live receptively so that God's energy can seep into my spirit and flow through me.

PART II

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Service as a Catalyst for Growth

Service is an important aspect of Mennonite theology; in fact, 67 percent of Mennonites in a survey said that “our denomination lets its light shine by service programs.”¹⁰ Service as a call from God has two purposes: it is a response to needs around us and it is God’s way of helping us grow. In the past, I thought of service only as a response to the needs of others with personal growth as a positive by-product. In recent years, however, I have come to recognize that spiritual growth is a central aspect of God’s call. If 67 percent of Mennonites believe that service is our way of being Christ’s light in the world, then service is also our way of growing into mature Christians.

Spiritual Growth as a Dance

In his classic work on spiritual growth, James Fowler describes faith development as a “dance.”¹¹ Words I spontaneously associate with “dance” include: movement, rhythm, expression, creativity, and feeling. Like a dance, faith is a response to God’s movement in and around us. Growth is not linear but circles and spirals sometimes returning to earlier development stages, occasionally pausing, now providing fleeting glimpses of future growth.

Fowler warns that if we do not rework our faith as we move through the seasons of life we run the risk of our faith becoming irrelevant.¹² Because the experience of service work with MCC impacts our lives in such significant ways, it is particularly important to make sure that we “rework” our faith as we learn about ourselves in relationship to other cultures, people, and issues. Important experiences need to be integrated into our spiritual lives in order for our faith to remain vital and relevant.

Spiritual Growth Through Questions

The uprooting that takes place through service with MCC makes us ask questions, a task which is essential for growth. I have reflected a great deal on the words of Rainer Maria Rilke who advises us to live the questions rather than seek the answers.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now . . . Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. —*Rainer Maria Rilke*

In their book *Dreams and Spiritual Growth*, Savary, Berne, and Williams make the same point by emphasizing the importance of responding to questions rather than seeking answers. “Responses open us up to fuller possibilities, while answers tend to close us

down to narrow and absolute definitions of things.”¹³ Living the questions invites us to an ongoing response while the certainty of believing I have found the answer stops the process of searching.

I have come to think of the key questions in my life as “guiding questions.” Guiding questions provide a healthy tension between two extremes—rigid certainty, on one hand, and muddled confusion, on the other. One of my guiding questions is “What does it mean to live?” The close proximity of violence and death in El Salvador challenged me to reflect on the meaning of life well-lived and, living a response to the question rather than answering it once and for all, keeps it alive so that the question continues to guide me through the changing circumstances of my life.

A Story of Faith Development

My experiences with MCC have had a major impact on my spiritual growth. The purpose of the personal sharing which follows is not to tell my story as such, but to use my story to encourage others to look for the ways God has invited them to grow through life experience. I hope to emphasize the potential of MCC service work for deepening the spiritual life of those who participate.

With that in mind, let me begin by revisiting a few of the specific places I have lived. I will use the metaphor of rooms as my starting point since picturing specific places is one way of returning to the past. I will also reflect on what was happening in my “interior room” at that time in order to identify how my understanding of God and of myself have grown and changed. Since I am proposing that a spirituality of service is based on receiving from God in order to give to others, I will specifically ask myself what I learned about receiving and giving.

I will share the journey from room to room in four sections: leaving my room, longing for a room, invited to a new room, and glimpses of a spacious room.

Leaving my room

Leaving the stability of the room where I grew up expanded my world view. I no longer lived comfortably in the suburbs. I lived in the isolated village of Nazaret, Bolivia, in a room that was as long as my bed plus the door and as wide as a table with a chair on each end. The rustic brick building had two rooms the same size: one was my home and the other was the clinic. Community members were proud of “la clínica” which they had built by hand. It was the only brick building in the area where houses were made of mud and thatch. I experienced a sense of adventure and excitement as I became acquainted with my new room and the surrounding environment.

That tiny room holds painful memories as well. My mother died of cancer just six weeks after I arrived in Bolivia and I was unprepared to deal with my emotions. During that time I was carried by the strength of my conviction that it was God’s will that I be in Bolivia. God was my authority and had a defined plan for my life that I needed to discern and follow. My family and church highly valued service with MCC and I was pleasing them by serving in Bolivia even though it was difficult for all of us.

My mother’s illness stretched my understanding of God. Some people in my home church had an either/or understanding of God and their prayers for my mother’s healing

were a source of tension. “If you aren’t healed then it is because you don’t have faith.” Their God was predictable. I knew that my mother’s faith was strong even though she was not healed. Rather than doubt my mother’s faith or doubt God, I chose to see God as larger than predictable boxes.

The poverty I saw in Bolivia shocked me into asking questions as I tried to make sense of my place in that context. Why were people so poor in a country rich in natural resources? Why was health care woefully inadequate? But the key question became “Why have I been blessed?” My mother’s death opened my heart so that I felt the suffering of my neighbors. I was starkly aware that my family at least had the consolation of knowing that everything medically possible had been done to save my mother’s life. My new neighbors, on the other hand, had to deal with the suffering of knowing their loved ones were dying needlessly because health care was not available.

The same question of why I was blessed returned with force two years later when I had an appendicitis attack. I became sick the night I was attending the funeral for two-year-old Demetrio. The only way of getting me to the hospital was by plane so MCC workers in a neighboring village tried desperately to ham radio for an airlift. When they heard the drone of a small plane they ran out of their house astounded because they had been unable to make radio contact. At the moment that I needed to be evacuated, the Catholic priest providentially flew in for a visit he made every three months. It was a miracle and I was grateful. But why did God miraculously intervene for me and not for Demetrio? I only knew for certain that God loved us both. The question of “why” could not be answered.

Leaving my former room meant letting go of a God who was predictable and understandable and learning to living with questions that had no answers. My new interior room was being stretched by the effort to bring my faith together with the reality of suffering around me.

Jesus instructed his disciples to freely receive and freely give. There is freedom and joy in that dynamic. But when I went to Bolivia my receiving and giving was not free. The verse “from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Lk 12:48) was significant during that time. I understood that I had received many blessings and took that as a demand to give in return. My giving carried elements of obligation, guilt, and desire to please the powerful God who demanded payback. Years later at a regional MCC retreat, I was in a small group in which six of the eight participants felt guilty for having been blessed and felt burdened by the demand to give in return. It was a moment of insight as we recognized how many of us experienced God as demanding. We were a long way from Jesus’ instructions to “freely receive and freely give.”

Early childhood development includes stages where children are taught to share by parents or authority figures who demand that they do so. As children grow and mature, they no longer need parents to tell them to share because the message has been internalized through what is known as the superego. The superego is the internalized authority figure which reminds us what we should or should not do and our response to it is frequently motivated by a mixture of guilt, fear, and obligation. Mature human development involves deepening our motives so that we share out of concern for others rather than from a need to appease our superego or external authority figures.

Faith development follows a similar path. It is normal to try to please God, whom we initially experience as making demands on us, just as our parents or other authority figures made demands on us as children. It is also normal to internalize the demands, which

is what I did in embracing a theology of service as a young adult. But, just as many adults remain controlled by the superego, many Christians remain controlled by an image of God who is demanding rather than loving. Faith development invites us to let go of an authoritative understanding of God so that a lived experience of God's love motivates our response to others.

When I began working with MCC, I was in what James Fowler describes as the Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith development, which normally begins in adolescence and continues through adulthood. The Synthetic-Conventional stage is characterized by conforming to external authority; my faith was what I had been taught by my family and church. I tried to obey what I thought God was asking of me but I was not living in touch with God's heart. Many adults never move beyond seeing God as an authority figure to be obeyed.

At that point, I did not think about my need to receive from God in order to give to others. But, looking back, I can see that God began teaching me receptivity through questions that had no answers. I began to realize the limitations of my understanding and the danger of claiming to understand God's ways. I did not want the boxes that make God small enough for humans to predict and explain. I also began to recognize the value of what life teaches me about God. Sensing that I had much more to learn, I was considering another term in Bolivia when the invitation came to work with MCC in El Salvador.

Longing for a room

I went to El Salvador in January 1984 with very little understanding of the complexities of humanitarian assistance in the midst of a civil war. I quickly learned that even the rooms I lived in sent strong political messages. The military in San Francisco, Gotera, mushroomed during the early 1980s, taking over every available space in the once-quiet town. When I arrived, I was told by the Poor Clare Sisters with whom I worked that I would live in the old convent "because the army might take it over if it's empty." I lived inside the military zone with soldiers on the doorstep 24 hours a day.

It was a time of being shaken both literally and figuratively. The convent would literally shake several times a week as mortars were shot from the barracks next door out into the countryside. I soon learned that the mortars were used to terrify civilians, forcing them to flee to the overcrowded camps of displaced people, which were under the watchful eye of the military. One night the guerrillas attacked the military barracks. Their homemade explosives shook my room so hard that the florescent light bulbs fell to the floor.

Figuratively, many of my interior constructs were being shaken in large and small ways. In 1990 I took time to reflect on those first years in El Salvador. I wrote:

I felt insecure as I recognized that there were shades of gray between my stark definitions of right and wrong. God was challenging me to enter deeply into the experiences of other people but doing that meant accepting that my well-defined boundaries were not applicable to everyone. Entering into the murky area was risky. I was afraid of being carried away by the stream. I realized, however, that staying safely on the riverbank would cut me off from the experiences I needed in order to grow.

I felt scared and insecure but the longing to enter a new room gave me courage to leave the old one behind. The desire to enter into life, to learn from experience, and to

grow encouraged me to risk letting go of some of my legalistic definitions of right and wrong. I was learning to discern what gives life and what takes life, an important theme some years later.

I was also shaken in a significant way when I was arrested by the military. As I became acquainted with the health needs in the area, I felt drawn to focus in a village outside of town. As my work in the village increased I began occasionally spending the night there and subsequently decided to rent a room. I was cleaning that room with two friends when we were arrested. We were taken by helicopter and airplane to the headquarters of the Hacienda Police where I was charged with teaching Marxist doctrine and interrogated for two days.

I learned in my prison room that faith has political consequences. I also learned that oppressive authorities are threatened when poor people come to realize that God loves them. Knowing themselves to be loved by God sets a process of questioning in motion. "If God loves us, then our suffering must not be God's punishment. If it's not God's punishment, where is it coming from?" The questions lead to an understanding of the social causes of suffering which leads to opposing injustice.

I was eventually released by a general who entered my cell and said he wanted to talk "Christian to Christian." He introduced himself as a personal friend of Pat Robertson and a supporter of the 700 Club. He warned me to be careful about how I used the Bible with the poor, who misunderstand it, and then released me. The difference between his understanding of God and my understanding of God was so stark that I did not even try to make sense of it. I could only commit myself to following the God of the poor to the best of my ability.

My prison room symbolically marks my move into the Individuative-Reflective stage of faith development. The Individuative-Reflective stage is characterized by making a commitment, taking a stand, and taking responsibility for one's decisions. It is motivated by an understanding of one's self as belonging to a social system which includes certain demands and responsibilities.

The outer constructs that had defined my faith had been dismantled and I was ready to make a commitment based on God's call rather than my previous sense of God's demand. Before my arrest I was feeling frustrated with the limitations of my work and wondered if I should leave El Salvador. Ironically, the experience of being arrested strengthened my resolve to stay. I had found a cause worth committing myself to and was determined to take a stand.

I pushed myself in El Salvador because I believed in what MCC was trying to do. I had internalized the call to respond to the poor and took risks to do so out of personal choice. But I did not know what to do with my fear and tension. I was aware that my will power and determination had limits but I did not know any other way of following through with the commitments to which I felt called. I had received a sense of call but I was limited in my ability to receive the grace that would enable me to live it healthily. Those experiences were preparing me to recognize my need to receive from God in order to give to others.

Invited to a new room

In November of 1989, the FMLN attacked San Salvador, six Jesuits and their housekeeper and daughter were killed, and my father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I went back

and forth to the United States several times that year until my father's death in August. My father was dead. My mother was dead. I felt like an orphan. I had no home.

Three months later the FMLN began a major military offensive in Chalatenango and I was caught in an ambush. When I finally managed to walk to my village, I found our small clinic filled with wounded. My already depleted emotional reserves eventually gave way and I knew I needed a break. As soon as I could leave, I went to the Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky for a two-week retreat. I ended up staying five months as the old foundations of my understanding of God and myself crumbled and new groundwork was laid.

My room at Loretto was spacious and airy, a stark contrast to the darkness that confined my spirit. Perhaps that is the place where I came to realize that I had an interior room and that it was stuffed with repressed emotions. When I first sat down with Elaine, my spiritual director and midwife of the painful growth process, I could only identify an overwhelming sense of darkness. During that time I was moved by a quote by Mary Jo Leddy, who wrote, "The darkness that dwells in our own subconscious can be unleashed by prolonged involvement in the sufferings of others."¹⁴ A life of service brings us into relationship with people who are suffering, which reveals our own wounds. How we respond to our woundedness determines if we grow more humble and compassionate or if we stymie the call to spiritual maturity by hardening and protecting ourselves.

During my time at Loretto I had to come to grips with the conflict between what I thought God was asking of me and what I was able to do. Theologically I believed in a loving merciful God but my operative concept of God, the concept that influenced my feelings and actions, was that of a demanding God. Underneath my theological and intellectual understanding of God was the sense that God made special demands on me because I had been blessed and that I could meet those demands if I tried hard enough. I was wrong. I needed to come to know that God loved me unconditionally even when I was unable to meet what I perceived to be God's demands. The experience of God's love gradually shifted my understanding of God as harsh and demanding to God as loving and accepting. I began the lifelong process of coming to know myself as limited but loved.

A crisis can serve as a catalyst for growth and my experience of coming face to face with my limitations was no exception. Dealing with my powerlessness moved me into the Conjunctive stage of faith development. Conjunctive faith involves the integration of opposites and an appreciation of paradox. It is a stage of deepening and broadening through symbols, stories, and tradition.

The theme of contradictions became important to me as I continued to live with issues that had no understandable explanation. I wrote down a quote by Parker Palmer. "Boldly become a pole of opposition; live the contradiction. The false crosses will fall away, while those we must accept will stay there in the middle of our lives, pulling right and left, up and down, until they pull us open at our true center . . ."¹⁵ Having experienced the pain of feeling pulled apart, I was relieved to think that a positive space was opening as a result.

Glimpses of a spacious room

Most of us only catch occasional glimpses of James Fowler's last stage of faith development which he calls "Universalizing Faith." Those in this stage have completed the process of decentering the self which begins in childhood. They have learned to see

deeper than their own perspective in order to see from the perspective of other people and what they believe to be the perspective of God.

My own glimpses of universalizing faith include a growing sense of what I believe to be God's vision for a new heaven and new earth. In the past I have been starkly aware of the many indications that something is desperately wrong with our world and frequently found myself *reacting against* what I experienced. Now I find myself more attentive to the potential for transformation and feel *drawn towards* God's hopes and dreams.

Technology broadens our lives through travel, the internet, and scientific discoveries but it is important to reflect on the relationship between broadening and deepening. In her booklet *In the Service of Life*, Elaine Prevallet distinguishes between the broad connections offered through technology and the deep unity experienced through the centuries by spiritual mystics. She suggests that globalization through technology has been placed at the service of greed and domination while global unity at a profound spiritual level results in a commitment to fullness of life for all. Prevallet asks a challenging question, "What are the consequences of a widened perception that does not, at the same time, include a sense of deepening, of communion?"¹⁶ Universalizing faith invites us to a broad understanding of God and the world lived specifically according to our particular call. Focusing a broad understanding of God enables us to live deeply without becoming closed and narrow.

Because technology offers so many opportunities for superficially broadening our lives, we need to pay particular attention to deepening as well. A simple metaphor comes to mind. The area of Nicaragua where I live is hot and arid and, during the dry season, the soil bakes until it is hard and cracked. When I first moved here, I tried to water my plants by pouring on buckets full of water thinking the more water I used, the more the plants would thrive. But I soon realized that the water was running off instead of soaking in. Then I discovered drip irrigation. Drop by drop, the water soaks straight down to the roots. The broad connections offered by technology can be compared to a bucket of water poured on hard earth which merely succeeds in superficially wetting a large circle around the plant. In order to live life deeply, we need to slow down and focus so that the deep connections that root us will be nurtured. It is increasingly important to be intentional about deepening since modern life offers so many opportunities for broadening.

CONCLUSION



I grew up familiar with the quote from the Anabaptist leader, Hans Denck. “No one can truly know Christ unless he follow him in life.” But I did not know the second half of that quote until I attended seminary many years later. “And no one can truly follow Christ except he first know him.” Knowing and following Christ are inseparable but my experience in the Mennonite Church has been that more emphasis is placed on following than on knowing. As a result, I knew a great deal *about* Jesus and the requirements for his disciples but I did not know *Jesus* as God’s unconditional love incarnate in human form.

The spiritual journey is a dynamic experience of following and knowing Christ so that Christ acts in and through us. What I knew of Christ made me want to follow and following resulted in situations which required a deeper knowing in order to continue the call to follow. The ego-stripping which occurs in the process of knowing and following makes space so that Christ does not remain on the outside as an external authority to be obeyed, but finds a home within us. Little by little, we die to ourselves so that we can say, like Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Acts of service done “In the name of Christ” carry the potential of transforming us into servants through whom Christ, himself, is active in the world.

“No one can truly know Christ unless he follow him in life. And no one can truly follow Christ unless he first know him.” Following and knowing. Knowing and following. The two are part of a whole. In knowing Christ I receive from him and in following Christ I give as he did. Service is sustained by freely receiving and freely giving.

NOTES



1. Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., *Experiencing God's Tremendous Love: Entering into Relational Prayer*, (Neptune, NJ: The Upper Room Spiritual Center, 1988), p. 71.
2. *Ibid.* p. 39.
3. Kazoh Kitamori, *Teología del Dolor de Dios*, Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1975, p. 119.
4. See Alvin Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation*, (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graff, 1977).
5. Jean LaPlace, S.J., *Prayer According to the Scriptures*, (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1991), p. 29
6. Henri Nouwen, ed. Robert A. Jonas, *Escritos Esenciales*, (España, Sal Terrae), 1999, p. 110.
7. Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 9.
8. Quoted in Roy H. May, "Ética social cristiana," Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, San José, Costa Rica, SEBILA, 1991, p. 31.
9. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 108 and p. 123.
10. Reported in *The Mennonite*, February 8, 2002.
11. James W. Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church*, (HarperSan Francisco, 1991), p. 94.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Louis Savary, Patricia Berne, Strephon Kaplan Williams, *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Judeo-Christian Way of Dreamwork*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press), 1984, p. 24.
14. Mary Jo Leddy, *Reweaving Religious Life*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), p. 126.
15. Parker J. Palmer, "The Way of the Cross," *Weavings*, March/April 1991, p. 20.
16. Elaine Prevallet SL, *In the Service of Life: Widening and Deepening Religious Commitment*, (Nerinx, KY: The Loretto Community), 2002, p. 16.

APPENDIX

Thoughts for institutional reflection



1. My stated premise is that God’s call to service has two purposes: to respond to the needs of others and to respond to God’s call for us to grow spiritually. I also said that, in my experience, more emphasis is placed on responding to others than in seeing MCC service as an invitation to grow. I believe that MCC could do more to encourage faith development, not merely as a positive by-product of service, but as an important aspect of God’s call. Do you agree or disagree? Why? If you agree, what would need to shift within MCC for us to more fully realize the potential for growth through service?
2. A theology of service has benefited MCC by providing people dedicated to putting their faith into action. A spirituality of service, on the other hand, requires institutional support for nurturing the Spirit that motivates our actions so that acts done “In the name of Christ” are indeed motivated by the Spirit of Christ. What are the risks of looking deeper than action? What are the benefits? What might it look like if MCC were to give greater priority to a spirituality of service?
3. Elaine Prevallet asks a critical question, “What are the consequences of a widened perception that does not, at the same time, include a sense of deepening, of communion?” Since its inception, MCC has played an important role of “widening” the experience of young adults by providing the opportunity to experience new cultures. But now we are offered so many opportunities for “widening” that it becomes almost impossible to “deepen” those experiences. It could take more intentionality on the part of MCC to help workers deepen beyond the superficial connections available elsewhere. How would you answer Prevallet’s question with respect to MCC? How might MCC’s role be changing?

A Spirituality of Service

Freely Give, Freely Receive



by Susan Classen