The Five Vows
Raising Your Spiritual Commitment to the Next Level

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The idea for this book came as a result of a conversation I had with my neighbor Jared, a family man and software engineer in Silicon Valley, who wants to live a spiritual life but is not particularly drawn to any church or religion. He grew up in an Catholic family, so he’s familiar with religious orders and knows that the members of such communities take vows, and he has a general idea of what those vows are. But like so many others, Jared thinks that vows are for “those” people—nuns, brothers, and priests. He had no concept that he himself could take vows, that he could in effect enter into a personal contract with God, one that would not only come with responsibilities but would also have immediate spiritual benefits. He would not have to give
up his wife, his family, or his career to take his spiritual aspirations to the next level.

I explained to Jared that vows are a blessing from God, not a set of rules. They are not an addendum to the Ten Commandments, but rather they are streams of consciousness from the Mind of God into which we enter, sort of like continuous downloads from a server in heaven (I had to speak Jared’s language to some extent!)—a stream of consciousness filled with information and updates that would help him adapt to the ever-changing demands of his busy life. At the same time, they would keep him focused in his pursuit of a greater realization of spiritual truth.

The best part for Jared was that no one would be telling him how to run his life. His entire journey in this life would be under his control. The decisions that his life would present to him throughout the coming years would be his and his alone. At no time would another human being, no matter how wise or persuasive, make his decisions for him. This way, I assured him, his own conscience would be the sole authority in his life. His own conscience would be, by virtue
of the vows he could take, a direct link to the source of universal truth and wisdom.

To Jared, taking vows began to look like a way to live a spiritual life in this secular world, privately and autonomously. No one would have to know of his decision, and no one would be dictating to him how he should live up to those vows or how he should interpret them. God would do that, through Jared’s own conscience and moral sense. Jared already knows that what he does with his life is his responsibility and no one else’s. Taking vows would give his spiritual life structure and direction.

His autonomy would in no way prevent Jared from seeking the advice of a spiritual counsellor. His vows would, however, continually remind him that whatever course of action he took, whether by his own reckoning or by the advice of a teacher, that he would be solely responsible for it. He would be assuming a level of spiritual maturity that many seekers never achieve—spiritual self-responsibility.

This book is for you, because chances are that you have been led to it by a desire similar to Jared’s—to lead a spiritual life without separating
yourself from the things that are important to you. After all, life is to be lived, not merely endured. Life is an opportunity to explore your potential, not a test to see if you can simply follow a set of rules. You have probably already mastered the rules anyway; at least your conscience is developed enough to tell you right from wrong. Now it’s time to advance to the next stage of your spiritual journey, to make a meaningful commitment to God, without having to join an order or some other kind of spiritual group. It is possible to live up to your secular responsibilities and also lead a deeply profound and personal spiritual life.

Here is the main idea of this book: *vows are empowering*; they are not restrictive. Vows are designed to align you with Divine consciousness, not separate you from your humanity. The vows facilitate the integration of your human nature with your divine nature; they do not purge or eliminate your earthly identity. The vows recognize that in order to lead a spiritual life *and* be engaged in the world, you must be a fully empowered human being with your head in heaven and your feet on the ground.
This book focuses on the five traditional vows of humility, poverty, service, purity, and obedience. Certainly there are others, but these five form the core, the universal guideposts of the spiritual path.

Just as pride is the greatest sin, humility is the greatest virtue. This book looks primarily at humility, the quality of receptivity. The other vows are subsets of this one over-arching principle. Poverty is the principle of non-attachment as it applies to our possessions—those of the body, the mind, and the spirit. It is the state of consciousness that makes generosity possible. Service has to do with the polarity of our heart and our willingness to give to others without thought of self—that which makes love possible. Purity speaks to our clarity of vision and our ability to focus on the real. Obedience is our willingness to hear the truth as it expresses itself from the core of our being and to follow its dictates, even when everyone else says we are wrong. It is that which enables us to be true to our highest calling.

These four subsets of the vow of humility have one thing in common: they all look to that which
is larger than ourselves—God. This is the essence of the spiritual path, the devotion to That which is greater than us. And just as the spiritual path is the road that leads us to God, it is also the road by which God pours grace into the world. The vows are the primary tools of those who have dedicated themselves to this two-way street, this Jacob’s Ladder, those whose calling is to act as mediators between heaven and earth, whose dedication to serving humanity supersedes all desire for personal gain.

Here’s to you, my fellow servants of the Way.
Vows are principles. They are the generic standards by which we can ensure a healthy and vibrant spiritual life, as universally applicable to our soul as the simple laws of right diet, exercise, and proper rest are for maintaining a healthy body. And just as these simple laws of health are universally applicable to everyone—regardless of race or locale—so are the vows universally applicable, regardless of one’s religious calling or spiritual path.

There is one basic spiritual truth: we did not make ourselves. God created us. Even if we do not believe in a “God,” the fact remains that we find ourselves in a system that was here before we showed up. Our body, the planet Earth, nature, this solar system—we were born into these with little or no say about them. In an oblique way, we
could say that this is the Will of God that theologians talk about. But rather than an individualized prescription, the Divine Will is simply the pattern of creation within which we are born and live out our lives. We did not create the pattern, but when we understand how it works, we can more easily adapt to it and even use it for our benefit.

There are rules—principles of nature—by which we must abide. But as binding as these laws are, they also give us great freedom to explore the potential of what we have been given. Just as the discipline of science has liberated us from ignorance and enabled us to do things that were once deemed impossible, so do the vows—the principles of the science of Spirit—empower us to live a more effective spiritual life.

The keyword in any spiritual discipline is *growth*. This is why we are here. Every soul has a beacon that guides it through the dark night of materiality. To most, that beacon is nameless, though it is usually given the amorphous title “God.” The more aware we are of our soul’s beacon, the better able we are to integrate our ideas of spirituality into our daily life. It is only by
setting a course and sticking to it, overcoming obstacles as they arise and taking advantage of new strengths as they develop, that we are able to grow spiritually.

Unfortunately, vows have been linked with one’s commitment to an organized religion or church, which has made them nearly useless in describing the spiritual principles they represent. Ostensibly, vows are taken to God, but everyone knows that it’s the organization that judges whether they are being kept. This turns vows into a set of rules one must follow. In a world already overburdened by rules, it is no wonder that vows are looked upon with suspicion, even by the most spiritually oriented people.

Vows are intrinsic to spiritual life. They are its basic framework. They are broad enough in scope that we can apply them to any religious practice, and yet they are scientific enough that we can apply them to any mundane activity as well. As principles, the vows are as useful to us in our programs of spiritual development as the laws of thermodynamics are to engineering.

Since vows are principles, spiritual aspirants hold them in deep contemplation until they
become amalgamated with their soul. The key to this amalgamation is action. As we live the principles, we rewire our thinking. Every time we choose to act in accordance with our vows instead of catering to old habits, we become more receptive to God’s influence in our lives. This is the process of atonement, or *at-one-ment* —the attunement of our human nature with the Divine.

Through right action, we align ourselves with God. But, what is *right action*? This is a little like asking what is spiritual. The tendency is to think that right action and spirituality are objective forms of behavior, sets of rules that we can follow, conduct we can measure according to recognized standards. In reality, while they are universally real and applicable to all, right action and spirituality always express themselves uniquely in the lives of individuals. The principle is universal; the expression is unique. As long as we remain focused on the principle, our actions will eventually come into alignment, naturally and organically. But the principle must exist for us as a possibility, not as a fixed idea, not as a definition of right action, or a clear-cut image of what it’s like
to be spiritual. We have to hold in mind the understanding that we do not know what the principles are, not in their complete reality, and yet remain open to the Divine influence they make possible. Our conception of these principles will grow as we grow.

By taking vows, we create a line of demarcation in the span of our life, establishing a point of departure from the world mind. When we ritualize the event, we formalize it. We make it a definitive action in the presence of our spiritual community and in the presence of God. Witnesses add their spiritual support; they bless our new level of life. And since the vows themselves are blessings from the Divine, the entire action is a positive flow of spiritual energies. The language of the vows, along with our understanding and acceptance of them, creates the patterns into which we will live our lives. These patterns give our spiritual life focus and direction, thus empowering us to achieve the transformation we seek.
The Unnamed Calling

There’s nothing like an unnamed calling to keep you up at night. You know you should be doing something more with your life but you don’t know what. For some, it’s the feeling that their passion—art, the environment, children, politics, whatever—is on the verge of a breakthrough, as though some new thing were welling up from the depths, a spiritual realization that has yet to breach the surface of your awareness. It feels like a looming presence whose stare is fixed on you, a presence that can be felt but not seen.

Such an impending emergence in our lives can feel ominous if we let it. Someone unaccustomed
to spiritual presences might find it so. But for those who are mystically inclined, what looms just out of sight feels more like something wanting to be born, something undeniably important.

The excitement of the new emergence can be maddening. It can feel like there’s a barrier keeping the new realization from being born, as though something is sitting on it, preventing it from seeing the light of day. Intuitively, you suspect that it’s you who’s getting in the way, that whatever it is that’s trying to make itself known is waiting for you to step aside, to relax your expectations, to relinquish some false belief or idea about what it is you should be doing with your life. It’s as though the new thing wants assurance that your rational mind won’t rip it apart the moment it exposes itself, trying to force-fit it into ideas you already have, instead of letting it show you something truly new.

So, you resort to any and all methods you can think of to get at it, to help the bubble burst and allow the new thing to breathe. Meditation becomes important to you; you begin to probe the very depths from which the new thing is
trying to emerge. But unless you can leave your preconceptions and expectations behind, your presence there can look like a threat, and the thing you’re seeking recedes farther into the darkness.

It is then that you realize that you have to start dismantling those preconceptions and expectations, to let go of them and assume the inner posture of being willing to accept the new thing as it is and not try to remake it into something familiar the moment it comes into view. You begin to realize that you might have to coax it from behind the amniotic curtain that separates it from your conscious awareness. Instead of midwife, you become the courtier, wooing the unknown out of its shyness and into your arms. You lay down your preconceptions and expectations and invite it to be what it is, with the promise that you will not impose your everyday biases upon it. Instead of grabbing for it, you let it come to you in its own time.

In order to coax the emerging realization into your waking consciousness, wooing it into its physical expression in your life, you must undergo a certain amount of preparation. One
cannot put something new into something old. You can’t expect a higher vibration to blend seamlessly with a lower vibration, lest the discordancy shake the whole thing apart. So you begin with certain inner disciplines. You examine your pride—the exaggerated sense of self-worth that inclines you to believe that anything new that comes from within will automatically match what you already know. You make the conscious effort to acknowledge that the sheer tonnage of what you don’t know vastly outweighs your current understanding of both the cosmos and your place in it. You start to listen more carefully to other people, giving them the benefit of the doubt, entertaining the notion that they might have something of value to offer you, even those whom you would normally regard as less enlightened. You make yourself available to wisdom no matter what outlet it chooses to make itself known, knowing that as you do so, you pave the way for the true wisdom, the Noble Sophia, whom you so badly want to know, to come forth into your waiting embrace.

The quality of spirit you must cultivate for this to happen is humility. Humility is the entrance
fee to the spiritual path, the prerequisite to experiencing the reality of God. And rather than the self-effacing, grovelling sense of worthlessness that the ego finds so frightening, humility is just the opposite. It is the burgeoning awareness that reality is so large! It’s not that we are so small, it’s that God is so big. We don’t have to artificially construct an obsequious attitude, we just allow ourselves to be blown away by the magnificence of it all. Any inflated sense we have of our own significance is automatically rendered irrelevant.

As a spiritual quality, humility is not acquired through study alone. It must be recognized as a state of consciousness that one must enter into. Humility is an aspect of God’s personality, which might seem contradictory to the notion of what it means to be humble (How could God be humble?). But as illogical as this may sound, it is only our human sense of logic that finds it so. Like the hammer that sees everything as a nail, the ego sees everything as a mirror. Since the ego thinks that it’s a god worthy of all worship, the idea that God is also humble seems...well, ungodlike.
It’s helpful to think of God’s personality as being like the sun. Its aspects stream forth as beams of light that vivify everything they land upon. They have a kind of wave form, a distinct frequency that leaves footprints on our soul. Our thoughts about humility activate these footprints, and we sense them as evidence that something living has left a path for us to follow. The Sanskrit word *marga* means the path left by an animal. It means more, however, than the marks in the dirt or the pheromones in the air. *Marga* alludes to this kind of trail, but insinuates a trail of a higher vibratory nature. When an advanced soul, such as Jesus or Buddha, lives out his life of service on Earth, he leaves a “trail”—his ideas, his choices, and the connections that make up his experience of the Divine. The quality of these aspects, their *scent*, if you will, is a feeling with which we can easily resonate. That feeling is *awe*.

Awe is not an aspect we normally associate with people such as Jesus or Buddha. We tend to think of them as deities, their soul-personalities raining down upon us in a strictly top-down, hierarchical way. But, it is precisely their *awe* that makes them mediators. If we look to them as the
pinnacle of Spirit, we commit the very sin that they warned against. Buddha said, “The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon,” referring to himself as the teacher, not the goal. And Jesus said, “I am the way;” never did he say, “I am God.” When we connect with Jesus’ feeling of awe, the feeling he has when he “lifts his eyes to heaven,” the vibratory signature of that feeling magnetizes our inner compass and establishes our true north forever.

The scent of the aspect of God’s personality that we detect has a bit of God in it, the “hem of the garment,” so to speak. So, when we come in contact with it, we are coming in contact with God. The vibratory pattern we are picking up matches exactly the vibratory pattern of the aspect. In other words, the scent is alive. It is not a remnant or an artifact; it’s a direct connection with the thing itself. Once we touch it, or are touched by it, we will never be able to let it go.

Once the aspect is activated on a person’s soul, it remains there as a living presence, continually pointing the way to its source. It becomes part of our soul’s makeup. We can ignore it, but it is always there. We will never feel complete within
ourselves until we acknowledge its presence and submit to its calling. When we finally surrender to it, its vibration permeates our entire being. We are changed from the inside out. No one needs to tell us “lo here! or, lo there!” because we know where the path is. It is within us.

Over the centuries, those who have trod this inner path have found ways to help new travellers by putting them in direct touch with an aspect of God’s personality—in this case, the aspect of humility, which makes possible our sense of awe—forever giving them an inner path to follow. The mechanism by which this is done is the vow. Unfortunately, taking vows has become, in our scientific age, merely a public ceremony, an outward expression of one’s intention to live up to one’s word—a promise. And while there’s nothing wrong with that, this interpretation falls far short of reality. We need a new interpretation, a new way to understand what it means to take vows.

Re-Envisioning the Vows
The last thing most people want to do is to vow themselves to something—an organization,
a religion, a spiritual teacher. Rightfully so. There are too many examples of the abuse of power perpetrated in the name of spirituality. Even when vows are administered with the understanding that they are taken to God and not to an organization or a person, they usually wind up becoming just that—a means to govern and control the spiritual lives of others. The entire concept of vows needs to be re-envisioned in a way that serves people, not corral them into a prescribed ideology or way of living.

The vows are not about what we have to do, nor are they about what we have to not do. The vows are states of divine consciousness. Taking them opens the door to the experience of those states. Thinking that you will have to change yourself if you take vows is like thinking that you will have to change your personality if you move to a different city. You will take on a different character with time, that’s for sure, but that isn’t something you can make happen. No one changes by force of will, either ours or someone else’s. God does the changing. All we have to do is show up.
Basic moral principles are designed to bring the animal part of our nature up to a certain level of refinement and development. We learn these principles as we live our lives. But the tendency is to think that we have to continually revisit them, because the slightest act of selfishness, pride, avarice, anger, or lust can cause us to feel guilt. We start to doubt ourselves, and we begin to feel unworthy of the Higher Mysteries of Illumination, Self-realization, and the Priesthood. If we try to perfect that which has already been sufficiently established, we are only wasting valuable time. Besides, it’s egotistical to strive for perfection, because perfection serves no purpose in this world, except to prove ourselves better than others. In order to be effective in our spiritual life, we have to embrace the idea that good is good enough.

Learning basic moral principles also raises our consciousness to the level where we can recognize the existence of higher worlds. The farther we progress on the spiritual path, the less important physical survival becomes. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, as Joseph Campbell points out, carries no weight in the lives of artists and mys-
tics. One’s vision is the important thing, even more important than life itself (“He who loses his life will find it”). We all have a vision; it’s what carries us forward in our spiritual strivings. If we are not obedient to the energies that arise out of that vision, our life becomes a living hell.

We should not try to turn the vows into enforcement mechanisms, as many tried to do in the past. The laws of God have been written in our hearts, and no one needs to tell us right from wrong. Usually, disobeying our conscience requires a concerted effort of will on our part, whereas in the earlier stages of our spiritual evolution we had no choice but to simply obey our instincts. Our conscience was not yet fully formed.

The vows are openings into higher states of consciousness. They are meant for us to use as tools to help us achieve our higher calling into God-consciousness. They are made for us—we are not made for them. We know that we are on the spiritual path; no one has to coax us. No one has to convince us that we should seek reality. We already know that that’s what we want, and we look for anything and everything that will
help us get there. If we can see the vows as aids along the Way, they start to look attractive. We take them willingly. We understand that they strengthen our relationship with God, not weaken it. We don’t need layers of intermediaries between us and the Self. Rather than tell us what we have to do, the vows immerse us in the spiritual energies they represent. We come into the higher levels of consciousness at a natural pace, which allows for deeper and therefore longer-lasting integration with our personality. We become the virtues, not just adopt them.

**Vows—Why Take Them?**

In the final scene of the 1991 movie *Grand Canyon*, the characters drive to the Grand Canyon and see it for the first time. The entire movie up until this point has been about the chaos in their lives, their dramas and traumas and self-absorption, all of which were of epic proportion. But when they get out of the car and see the immensity of the landscape in front of them, all of their problems are obliterated in that moment. If you’ve ever been to the Grand Canyon, you know what I mean. Being in its presence can literally take your breath away.
Spiritual experiences are like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time. They have the power to transform your life. When you experience the presence of God for the first time, your life is changed forever. The power is overwhelming. Technically, the word “power” means the capacity to do work—the ability to change things. Spiritual power is the sense we get of being in the presence of an infinite potential, a living energy that both knows and hears us, an energy that is at once both vast and intimately close. It makes us feel incredibly small and at the same time enormously important—“So small between the stars, so large against the sky,” as Leonard Cohen so artfully puts it—a presence so powerful that we can feel ourselves instantly lifted into a different reality. This is real power, the kind we all seek when we embark upon the spiritual path.

Sometimes, we can sense this kind of power around another person, usually a spiritual teacher, but not always. We get the sense that the power they are exuding is coming through them, not from them. They are the channel for it, not its source. This is a wonderful experience, and
we’re fortunate to come into contact with him or her. Jesus was such a person. So was Buddha, and so many others, both living and dead.

There is power in taking vows. It may not seem like it, given that so many vow rituals are treated as though they don’t really matter, as though they were merely a formality, or something nice to do. Or they might be thought of as simply a promise one makes to God, as though the person taking the vow is the giver and God the receiver. This would be like trying to stuff electricity into a wall socket—clearly a misunderstanding of the principles involved.

Another common misconception of vows is that they derive their power from consensus. By stating our intention in front of witnesses, they somehow strengthen our resolve. But this too misses the reality. The power to perform does not come from taking vows, nor does it come from our desire to live up to our word. Power is there, but it doesn’t come from us, and it doesn’t come from another person. However, it can come through another person, if they know themselves to be a channel for it and can get out of the way, letting the grace of God do its work.
So, what are vows? It helps if we think of them as states of consciousness rather than as ideas. Vows are more than just concepts; they are a living part of the Mind of God. Being alive, they act upon those who enter into them. Being part of the Mind of God, their action never ceases. The action of each vow is different from the others. If we can understand the action, we can understand what the action does. The important thing to understand is that it is not we who are doing the action, but God. We let the vows act upon us.

Action is perhaps the most important distinction to make when it comes to understanding God and Spirit. Action is power manifesting as energy. This energy moves from a source, through a medium, to a receiver. The application of energy upon a receiver is called force. So, you have three elements: power, energy, and force. Force, scientifically speaking, is neutral. A rolling ball striking a wall exerts a force upon the wall; it is not “forcing” the wall to do something the wall doesn’t want to do. This isn’t a metaphor, an obscuration of scientific meaning. Force, in the
context in which we are speaking, means energy applied, nothing more.

Along with action, there is another word crucial to understanding vows. Some might call it “reality,” but that word, like “love,” has many different meanings. When someone says, “I love you,” it has a different meaning from when they say, “I luv you.” When something is real, we mean that it is a part of God—an aspect of the Divine that is all-pervasive, all-inclusive, and eternal. Reality, for the sake of this discussion, does not mean my reality or your reality; it means that which is real to God. Of course, we cannot know completely what God’s reality is, but we can assume that it exists. The act of assumption at least makes more of it available to us and gives us new and useful ways to understand it.

For instance, things that are real to God appear archetypal to us—over-arching, abstract, non-specific. Like love. The word “love” is a general term to us, but for God it is highly specific. Love is either present or it is not. Love is a part of God’s being, an aspect of God’s personality woven into the fabric of reality. It is not a con-
cept. So, if we know this about love, and we have experienced it, we can enter into the reality of love as though we were entering into an energy field, one that is alive and sentient. Since love is an essential aspect of God, when we experience the reality of love, we are experiencing the reality of God.

Remember the three-part principle of power, energy, and force? Well, if a person has gotten in touch with the reality of love, then that person becomes a channel of love for other people. Through the connection we all have with each other, the real displaces the unreal—the energy moves from an area of higher concentration to an area of lower concentration. And if a person is receptive to this flow of energy, a force will be applied and a transformation will take place.

Transformation is the purpose of taking vows. Otherwise, why take them? But like the words “love” and “reality,” transformation has been transformed into something different from its spiritual meaning. Transformation is usually thought of as changing into something new, whereas in its spiritual context it means changing back to the way God originally created
us. It washes clean the encrusted self in order to reveal that which was there all the time, only hidden. It is the *return* to our own Divine Nature.

When a person of high consciousness acts as a channel for God to immerse a willing person in the real energy of God’s own being, the person receiving the blessing is cleansed of the false energy patterns created by years of illusionary thinking and behaving. A vow is a blessing. It is a movement of divine energy that bestows grace upon the receiver, enabling him or her to overcome the inertia of the sensory world. Vows enliven the divine spark within us.

Let’s explore, now, the Five Vows.
You may have heard the story of the prospective student and the overflowing teacup. The master pours his visitor a cup of tea and then keeps pouring even as the tea starts spilling out onto the floor. The prospective student is alarmed and offended. He questions whether the master knows what he is doing, whereupon the master informs him that just as there is no room in his cup for more tea, there is no more room in his mind for further teaching. The student thinks he already knows what the master is going to say and is therefore non-receptive.
Humility is all about being receptive. It is the willingness and the ability to learn. It is the foundation of successful spiritual training. And it does not come by degree—you are either humble or you are not. You may cycle in and out of the state of being humble, but there is no such thing as partial humility.

It has been said that the ego is the first thing to be attracted to the spiritual path and the last thing to let go. It takes one look at the possibility of spiritual development and says, “Hey, this is for me! I can really use this to make myself look important.” When spirituality becomes a system of knowledge rather than a quality of being, it’s just one more merit badge on the ego’s uniform. High achievers will naturally be drawn to the spiritual path, because it has a reputation for being difficult. This isn’t such a bad thing, because it is difficult, and it can take a considerable amount of self-confidence to weather the disappointments that the ego will have to endure before it gives up willingly.

Therefore, you will probably be learning humility your entire life. The moment you think that you have it is the exact moment you do not.
And this will never cease to be an issue, not as long as you are living on Earth in a physical body.

This is why in all valid courses of spiritual study, humility comes first—not high-minded theories, or tidbits of information designed to impress you, or that you can use to impress others.

**NOT-KNOWING**

The state of not-knowing is a source of great power. Humility is a virtue, but in order for virtues to be spiritually useful, they must be empowering. They must open a way in us to manifest the life and power of the Spirit. Not-knowing gives us a way to create that opening.

For example, the scientist who admits to herself that she’s not seeing the whole picture is in a much more powerful position than she who thinks she knows what she’s looking at. (All the best scientists are humble.) In this case, the power lies in being open to something new, no matter how much it might fly in the face of what one already knows. The same applies to our spiri-
tual searching. For are we not scientists also, seeking to know what is real?

It’s one thing to say, “I don’t know.” It’s quite another to put yourself into a state of not-knowing so that the real can show up. To say “I don’t know” only amounts to a negative, self-limiting prayer when it fails to take that stance as a means of pulling the truth out of the Cosmic Mind. What good would it do to be humble if it only kept us ignorant?

Saying “I don’t know” may be appropriate for a novice, because it puts one in a receptive frame of mind. It makes us teachable. But the mature Christian mystic seeks his or her wisdom from within. Here is where humility becomes a tool, not as a means to boost one’s ego, but to raise one’s consciousness to a higher level. Nature abhors a vacuum. Not-knowing turns the mind into a vacuum, a vacuum that must be filled.

“Not this, not that,” says the Upanishads. When the mind jumps in with an answer, the wise meditator says, “Not this, not that.” The mind then says, “Well, how about this?” to which the wise meditator says, “Not that either.” Eventually, through the process of elimination, the
field of mind is cleared and the truth comes bursting in.

The truth cannot be destroyed. We slay our concepts until none are left standing. That which remains is devoid of our concepts. It may not be the ultimate truth, but it will always be closer to it than anything we have seen before.

When a person of high consciousness, one who also has the authority to administer vows, gets in touch with the reality of humility and then escorts another into that same state of consciousness—one who has stated his or her intention to experience it—then the Holy Spirit moves, and the vow is placed upon that person’s soul, not as a burden, but as a blessing, a pattern of power that will assist that person in his or her journey toward God-realization.

God’s consciousness flows into the world like water into a garden. The energy of Spirit is raw and undifferentiated. It cares not who is just or unjust, but rather gives to all alike. It nurtures souls according to their need, bringing to fruition their deepest, most fervent desires. To be humble is to get out of the way of the process and let it work. God knows what to do. People who have
attained to the consciousness of humility live in a state of constant wonder and amazement at the miracles taking place all around them.

Try this: Pick any ordinary object, such as an apple. Look at it for a full minute, then ask your mind, “Is this an apple?” The mind will say, “What, are you kidding? Of course it’s an apple!” But being rule-bound as all minds are, it has to take your question seriously. So it digs deeper. It begins to throw out all of the assumptions and categories into which apples have been placed and seeks a wider and deeper context in which to interpret the object called “apple.” All of a sudden, the apple no longer looks like just an apple.

If you do this exercise right, you will be amazed at what you haven’t been seeing. The mind likes to think in words. When you challenge those words, it forces the mind to reconsider, to re-examine the thing it has been taking for granted. After using this technique on common, ordinary objects, you might want to turn it on
yourself. Look in the mirror and ask, “Am I a human being?” This will open some doors, believe me. Depending on your stamina, you will see things about human being that may surprise you. And if you’re humble, you won’t take it personally.

**The Temptation in the Wilderness**

When Jesus was preparing to go public with his mission, he encountered three negative aspects within himself that first had to be expunged.

First, there was the desire to fulfill his physical appetites: “Turn these stones into bread.” Next came fear: “Throw yourself off of this cliff.” And finally (saving the best for last) came pride, and I will paraphrase: “You have the power to fix all the problems of the world, so who could be better for the task? It is your *duty*, therefore, to take charge, to tell people what to do.”

The first step in spiritual development is learning how *not* to impose our will on others. We teach by providing opportunities for others to grow. Growth is why we are all here, so there is no need to inculcate this desire in another
person. Growth is the soul’s primary motivation, leading us into every experience we encounter. So, let your motivation be one of service, and never place an obstacle in the path of another’s journey toward the realization of God. Do not take away their opportunity to grow by making their decisions for them.

The prime directive for spiritually-minded people is the same as it is for physicians: “Do No Harm.”

**Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit**

The directness of Jesus’ words in The Sermon on the Mount tells us that he is addressing those who are sincerely seeking wisdom and not those who are merely looking for something to think about. The audience is not the general public but rather a group of applicants for discipleship. So what he has to say deals more with the necessary character traits one must have in order to qualify for discipleship, not points of philosophy. And the very first trait—you guessed it—is humility.

These people are God-seekers. They are not asking for rules to follow, but rather they want to know how they should be—more precisely, what their attitude of being should be in order to ach-
ieve enlightenment. They are looking for “be-
attitudes.” So, Jesus gives them the most impor-
tant attitude of being right up front: “Blessed are
the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of
heaven.”

As a serious spiritual student, you are looking
for more than just knowledge—you are looking
for a quality of being. And while knowledge is
certainly a part of that, it is not the goal; it is
an aid for reaching the goal—Christ-conscious-
ness. But while knowledge can help us, it can also
be our biggest obstacle to God-realization,
because the ideas we possess often define who we
are to ourselves. So, Jesus is telling his prospec-
tive students that in order to receive the truth
from him, they must not be attached to what they
already know. They must be poor in spirit.

Jesus is also telling them that Christ-con-
sciousness is higher consciousness, that the truth
of God is not necessarily going to fit in with their
pre-existing concepts. We like things to be con-
sistent with what we already know. So, he warns
them not to listen solely for those ideas that will
reinforce the opinions they already have. They
have to be willing to let go of their ideas and be
receptive to new ones. He is telling them that they are going to have to be humble.

On the spiritual path, we seek that which is greater than ourselves. But the lesser cannot comprehend the greater—thus the importance of humility. Unless we can empty our mind of all preconceptions and adopt what Buddhists call “beginner’s mind,” we cannot receive anything more than what we already know. There will be no room in the inn.

All Streams flow to the sea because it is lower than they are.
Humility gives it its power.
—Lao-tzu

Trust

Humility is impossible without trust. You have to know that God intends you no harm but only wants your absolute good. This is fundamental to your spiritual growth. Otherwise, you will always be protective and not receptive, and you will subordinate your intuitions to your rational mind for its approval, a task for which it is entirely unsuited.

Trust is the real message within the saying, “God loves you.” God is not vindictive or preju-
diced or given to favoritism. God does not punish or condemn anyone for any reason. These are concepts invented by theologians to keep people afraid. If you are afraid of God, you will not be able to open up to the subtle energies that will come to you during meditation—the energies that will transform you.

Humility, trust, meditation—this is the format.

**Getting Real**

Unless humility can be explained in terms of power, energy, and force, it can be of little use to us in our quest for Self-realization. We have to find out what humility is *really*. If it motivates a movement of the Spirit, we need to know how. Spirit is real, it is capable of producing effects in our lives, and it heals people. It is not a theological concept, though many have tried to make it that. We need more. If Spirit is real, we need to know how it works, and humility is the key.

If you can sense the power of God, if you have a sense of life as energy in action and not just a set of circumstances, if you’ve had the experience of seeing the world pregnant with possibility, bursting from within with the urge to demon-
strate itself in outward manifestation, if you know it as the “force that through the green fuse drives the flower,” then you know that Spirit is real.

Spirit is not just energy, it is also intelligence. It is sentient, and it pours itself into the world in a way that can only be described as love. Whether we are conscious of it or not, Spirit is always working, always expressing. It does so because it has to—moving into form is its very nature. Once we know this about it, our most natural reaction is to want it to move towards us. Once we know that God is real and not just a concept, once we know God and not just believe in God, we want the experience, and we want as much of it as we can get. And when we have it, we want to share it, because sharing it increases its power. The more power it has, the more we can experience it, so we share it as much as we possibly can.

As a word, “humility” has lost nearly all of its meaning, because it does not address the alive-ness of God. If we saw God as the source of Life, we would rush toward God with eagerness. But the word “humility,” the way it is used today, would have us crawl toward God in shame in a kind of reverse egotism that would deny the flow
of life energy that is God’s will to bestow upon us.

The Spirit cleans everything it touches, so why feel shame? Shame and humility are antithetical to each other. Shame is a clever dodge by the ego to keep itself in play. In order to be truly humble, shame has to go.

Humility is the expectation of a movement of the Spirit. It doesn’t try to force that movement—it knows the movement will happen. It knows the same way a catcher knows that the ball is going to land in his glove. He doesn’t even have to think it, because he IS it. The way you can tell if a person is truly humble is by the way he expects God to act. Certainty of fulfillment is the hallmark of humility.

How does this work? How can we be certain that God will act in accordance with our expectations? Is it realistic to think that God will come through in the way we expect? If we were dealing with another human being, then we would have no right to expect anything from them with any degree of certainty—unless, of course, it’s a motorcycle cop. If you speed past a motorcycle cop who has his radar gun homed in on you, the
chances of him NOT pursuing you are about as good as winning the lottery. Why? Because the motorcycle cop HAS to chase you if you are speeding. It’s the law. In the same way, God HAS to respond to our expectations, if those expectations are based in reality.

We have to think of God as the functional fabric of reality. Our thoughts continually pour into the Mind of God. If our thoughts are consistent with the laws of nature, and we do not weaken our thoughts with contradictory thinking, then we can reasonably expect that our physical reality will mirror the ideas we picture in the Mind of God.

Everywhere we see people who feel defeated in life because they believe that God doesn’t particularly like them. They feel shame about things they’ve done, or they buy into what others have told them about how you have to be “lucky” to do well in life. They think of God as a father figure, one who is too much like their own father, the one who never gave them a break. This way of thinking about God is anthropomorphic in the worst possible way. It’s the kind of thinking that we must rid ourselves of completely. Why?
Because it simply is not in accordance with reality.

We don’t have to be religious to accept the notion of the Mind of God. In fact, it helps if we throw out our religious sentiments altogether, at least for a moment, so that we can think about God scientifically. Here’s what I mean: matter is composed of patterns of intelligence. The molecular and atomic structure of matter is nothing more than vibrating energy, and it vibrates in very specific ways, each element according to its place on the Periodic Table of the Elements. And not only does it vibrate, it is continually changing its vibrations every time it interacts with another bit of matter. These interactions are, in a sense, relationships, and like any relationship, they change as circumstances change. We are, in the most real sense, living in a sea of interacting, energetic relationships, each of which MUST behave according to the laws of physics.

Just because we say that matter is composed of patterns of intelligence doesn’t mean that it is self-conscious. The intelligence of matter is automatic, the same way that most of our bodily functions are automatic. If we think of the physical
universe as the “body” of God, then it’s easy to see that, like our body, much of what happens in our physical reality happens automatically. Just as our physical body responds to the tone of our thoughts—our habitual ways of thinking and the feelings we pump into them—the world at large responds to the thinking that we humans think into it.

You can either accept this proposition or reject it, but it’s worth your serious consideration. And unlike other, more philosophical propositions, this one you can test. If you have sufficient control of your thoughts and emotions and are capable of filling your mental atmosphere with the visions and feelings that you want to experience, then you will see that this works. Do it often enough, and you will expect it to work every time you activate it. You will expect it with such certainty that you would be shocked if it didn’t happen. You would expect it the same way you expect the light to come on when you flip the light switch. You would expect it the same way you expect your letter to reach its destination when you drop it in the mailbox. You don’t expect it because you think you’re special; you
expect it because that’s how things work. Do this, and that happens. Simple cause and effect.

When the centurion asked Jesus in the eighth chapter of Matthew to heal his servant, he didn’t expect him to actually come to his house and do it personally. That would have been like expecting the mailman to personally deliver the letter we dropped in the mailbox. The centurion knew how power, energy, and force works: “Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” Jesus was impressed. He could see that the centurion understood the laws of creation better than his own students. Space and time can offer no resistance to the word of one who is truly humble.

What the scientific community today doesn’t accept is that mind has anything to do with physical reality. They concede that stress affects our health, but they don’t believe that our stress affects someone else’s health. Parents who are at all perceptive know that there is a bond between them and their kids. What the parent thinks, the
child feels. That’s easy enough to see, but it helps to understand that our thoughts and feelings are not restricted to the confines of our skull. We are broadcasting stations, and like the patterns of intelligence that make up the physical world of atoms and molecules, our thoughts and feelings make up the world of our experience. What we put out we get back. The tenor of our thoughts creates the relationships we have with the world. We get what we expect. There are times when it doesn’t work out the way we want it to, but this is just the inertia of the world. If we persist and we work in accordance with mental law, the conditions we want will assert themselves in our lives more and more until they are the predominant pattern.

When we are truly humble, we expect things to work. We expect them to work because we know that they don’t need us in order to do what they are supposed to do. The light switch connects the power generated at the power plant to the light bulb; we don’t magically cause the electricity to flow. It’s not our power. We tell it what to do, we don’t force it with our superior intelligence and will. Just imagine what it would be like if every
time we went to turn on the lights we had to do an internal inventory to see if we were worthy enough to cause the electricity to flow. We might feel like we had to meditate first, or maybe help an elderly person take out their garbage, or say a rosary. Each time we went to flip the switch, we’d say to ourselves, “God, I hope this is gonna work!”

“God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike.” The reason that good things sometimes happen to bad people is that bad people are usually good at knowing what they want and have a ruthless determination to get it. They don’t care if other people get hurt in the process. I’m not condoning that kind of behavior. I’m simply pointing out that there is a way that things work, and until we really get that, we cannot use power effectively. As long as we believe that we are the source of power, we will never be able to summon enough of it to make a difference. We cannot by force of will “make one hair white or black.” But when we know that power is all around us and that it is perfectly willing and able to respond to our intentions, then we can use it to make our lives and the lives of others better.
One more thing about humility and power: when we find ourselves caught up in a situation where other people are using power in a way that’s interfering with our happiness, we learn right away that any resistance on our part only makes the situation worse. Why? Because we are caught in the belief that we have to overpower the energies in play. This never works, and if it does seem to work, it only works temporarily. Energy can be steered, but it cannot be destroyed. Once in motion, we have to deal with it on its own terms. We have to redirect it, not tell it to stop. Energy does not know “stop.” It only knows that it has to play itself out in a way that is consistent with its momentum. When we know that, life gets a lot easier. You don’t try to stop a punch with your face; you step aside and let the unconnected swing throw your assailant off balance. Then, you are in control of the situation.

**God’s Humility**

One way we can tell that our normal understanding of humility is insufficient is by entertaining the idea that God is also humble, that humility is not just a human virtue but a divine principle. Humility is a necessary component of
creative power. Without humility there can be no power and no creativity. Humility is the source of power. Humility is the vacuum that nature abhors.

While it is true that God can create anything, God still has to abide by God’s own laws, not because God is restricted but because Law—principle—is part of God’s nature. God can create in no other way. When Genesis says that we were created in God’s image and likeness, this means that we too are bound by the laws of creation. We cannot simply wish things into being. There is a way in which creation takes place, and in order to get in touch with the vast empty space of divine undifferentiated potential, we have to empty ourselves of the belief in limitation. This requires great humility.

Let’s examine the statement “God knows everything.” This idea is meaningless and misleading. The rules for creativity are the same for God as they are for us—we have to know nothing before we can know anything. Divine, undifferentiated potential is no-thing. It is empty and void and yet pregnant with the ability to become. In the beginning, according to Genesis,
“Darkness was upon the face of the deep.” The vast, undifferentiated potential of God’s own being is where God had to start in the creative process. It is into that potentiality that God spoke the Word, and the worlds were brought into being.

Not-knowing creates a space within which all things are possible. Not-knowing breaks down the barriers that keep us imprisoned in the known. The known is a parched desert—nothing grows there. Once a thing is known, it ceases to live. Not-knowing is the key to life. You can’t exist in a state of not-knowing and believe that God knows everything. If God knew everything, everything would cease to be. It is God’s not-knowing that keeps the universe growing and evolving. It is the very thing that generates life.

Consider that our greatest awakening occurs in the space created by not-knowing. Why would it be different for God? We are the microcosm of the macrocosm. What is true for us is true for It. If we believe in statements like “Man, know thyself” and “We are created in God’s image and likeness,” then we have to afford God that which provides the opening within us—not-knowing.
Only in a society caught in the glamour of the intellect, a society that values knowledge and information above all else, can you find the concept that God knows everything. When knowing everything is the highest concept of good, then naturally the god of that society must epitomize that concept. But the mystic knows better. The mystic knows that in order for God to be the creator of all life, there must be that within God which creates the emptiness within which life can occur. Unless the universe holds that space within Itself, the whole thing would grind to a halt.

The one thing that is guaranteed to produce movement (life) is a vacuum. When we stand in the place of not-knowing, we effectively create a vacuum in the universal mind, the Mind of God. God then rushes in to fill the vacuum that we make ourselves to be.

In order to understand this concept, we have to think in terms of power, energy, and force. God is not an external entity—God is the living, sentient being in Whom we live. The only thing that keeps us from the experience of God is the belief that we exist as a separate self. This is the
lie perpetrated by our own senses. When we turn away from the senses and go into the silence within ourselves, we begin to experience God as a presence. And by that I mean a living power that knows and experiences us to the degree that we know and experience It. God’s love is a two-way street—love begets love, although, “we love because He first loved us.”

Taking the phrase “first loved us” out of the context of space and time, which is what we have to do if we want to know God, “first loved us” means that we exist in a field of love, a conscious energy that is always here and now. “First loved us” means that we did not create it—it was already here when we arrived. But when we get quiet within ourselves and open up to it, we allow love to occur in the world. This is our place in the scheme of things. As Unity teacher Eric Butterworth put it, “We are an inlet and an outlet of God.”

It is imperative that we stop thinking of God as something external. God is that which keeps the Cosmos in motion, from the very smallest to the infinitely big. It is all one thing. Emerson said, “There is no great and no small to the mind that
maketh all.” Size and distance are creations of the mind. They do not exist in God’s reality. If we want to know God, we have to be like God and think the way God thinks. This is not as difficult as it might sound, because, again, God knows nothing about difficulty, either large or small. We need only ask for help and help is given. And asking is intrinsically humble.

As a side note, when a spiritual teacher pushes the idea that God knows everything, what he’s really saying is, ”I know more than you do.” The assumption is that the teacher is closer to God and therefore naturally knows more of what God knows. This is a well-known tactic to gain power over one’s students. The true teacher, on the other hand, seeks to draw students into the state of not-knowing, so that together, the entire community can become one with God in that state. The Buddha of Compassion, Avalokitesvara, vowed not to enter into enlightenment until all sentient beings were saved. And in Hebrews 8 we read, “And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Not-knowing is the
Causeless Cause of the act of creation. It is the organizing principle of all that is. “Of myself, I do nothing.” This is humility.

**Contemplation**

Humility is the sign of a spiritually mature person, but it is important that you not forget everything you have learned prior to beginning your training—that would be naive. You have to practice meditation in order to expose yourself to higher consciousness and be changed by it, but unless you integrate what you receive into the “body” of you, what you receive will do you little good. Here we have the true function of the rational mind, but it can only function properly if it is humble.

The rational mind is the *servant* of the Self, not its censor; at least, this is what it should be. The term “bride of Christ” is a metaphor for the relationship of the rational mind to the Self. The proper role of the rational mind is to receive intuitions and to integrate them into your experiences. Part of this function is to test and prove that which is received—not because the intuition might be faulty (it never is), but because what is received might not be entirely clear or complete.
For this, we have contemplation, which we learn to do after we have become proficient in meditation. In contemplation, we let go of the steering wheel of our mind, so to speak, and let our thoughts think themselves. A new thought has a life of its own and will show you things about itself that you could never figure out with your intellect. This differs significantly from simply letting your mind wander in that it takes a mastery of concentration before a thought can stick to its own trajectory without being deflected by an unrelated thought. Meditation is the act of receiving thoughts and impressions from the Higher Mind. It is the mastery of receptivity, requiring a profound stillness in our personal mind and equilibrium in our emotions.

One manifestation of contemplation is inspiration. During meditation, we might receive a melody, one that we want to use in a song we’re working on. But the melody we hear is only a fragment, so we can either take the fragment and flesh it out with our intellect, or we can sit with the fragment and let it fill itself in. This is contemplation. It takes a well-trained intellect to allow this to occur. We have to hold our intellect
in check so that the Higher Mind can express itself without interference. Our intellect can observe, but we must not let it intervene.

It takes a lot of work to achieve this level of thinking.

Contemplation requires a subtle, unbiased state of mind in which you gently view each new idea as though it were a precious gemstone with many facets. But the second you judge a new idea, you corrupt it, because judging is the rational mind’s way of forcing one idea to agree with another. So as you can see, contemplation takes practice, and it takes humility.

Humility is the most important character trait you will develop. It begins with knowing that if a thing is real in the mind of God, it is a living entity with a life and mind of its own. Being humble means you have the ability to allow it to express itself. Only then can you truly know what it is and what it can become.

There is nothing new under the sun, but the possibilities are infinite. As we avail ourselves of that knowledge through the practice of meditation, we are changed, transformed from the inside out. And as we contemplate our inner
experiences, we integrate them into our everyday lives. Thus we rise to ever higher states of being, knowing at all times that the engine of our progress is God, and God alone. We show up, but it is God who raises us up.

AN EXERCISE

Sit quietly in meditation and know that your mind is an extension of God’s mind, and that it has direct access to that mind. Know that that mind is within you, not in some distant location, and know that you are within it. This is not difficult. The air you breathe is both outside of you and inside of you. And I don’t mean just in your lungs. The air you breathe is literally in your cells, in the tiniest parts of you. The air you breathe becomes the tissues of your body. Think about the mind of God in this pervasive way.

Breathe slowly, deeply, and rhythmically. Let your thoughts coast gently to a stop. Orient your attention as though you were listening for a faint sound in the distance, only the “distance” is an inner space, the kind you might experience in a dream.

Be attentive to what you experience there, what you see, what you hear. Later, you will write
these down in your journal. The language of the subconscious mind is symbols, and after you have finished with your meditation, you will want to examine them consciously and with respect.

Now, as though you were offering a gift to God on the altar, mentally elevate the pure concept of humility. I say “pure” as a way of saying that the concept of humility already exists in the mind of God, and that this is what you are asking, not what you already “know” about it. Forget what you’ve heard or read, even what you have read in this chapter. Let God show you what humility is.

Don’t be concerned if nothing seems to happen. If your intention is intact, and you truly desire to receive, the knowledge will come through. It has to. God is incapable of holding back from a true request. You might not be conscious of the answer, but what does that matter? The effects of what you receive will emerge, sooner or later. To the degree that you trust that this will happen, it will happen. “Be it done unto you according to your [trust].”

When you are finished with your meditation, and after you have written down any pertinent thoughts, get up and do something else, some-
thing that will occupy your mind entirely, so that you forget about what you have just experienced. This is very important. As long as you are engaged with the process, it cannot begin its work inside you. You have to let it go, the same way you have to let go of a seed so that it can germinate. Let the experience fall into the fertile soil of your deep, inner consciousness. Do not try to dig it up later just to see if it’s working. That would only interrupt the process.

**How to Practice Humility**

Humility is more than just a word. Humility is a state of being. Understanding what the word means helps us attain to that state of being, but we have to slip over from the concept to the reality.

The transition from concept to state of being is a process with many parts—components that exist in a dynamic relationship with each other. To attain to the humility state of being, we first examine its many parts individually, which unfortunately separates them from the whole. We want our perception of God to be one of aliveness and the joyous interaction of life with life. So, remember this conceptual dissection for
what it is, and try not to mistake the component parts for the dynamic whole.

The first component in the process of attaining to the humility state of being is practice. And there are several ways we can practice being humble. The first and easiest way is to approach other people as though they have something to teach you. No matter how smart you are or how spiritual you may feel, every person you meet will have a quality that is unique to them. No one else possesses their unique quality in the same way. Your job in this first step of the process of attaining humility is to identify that quality and to let it occupy a space in your awareness.

You have heard the saying that we are each created in the image and likeness of God. This image is alive and exists in a state of interaction with other created beings. Think about this. Every descriptor we have for God, in whose image we are created (e.g., love, life, light), implies interaction. Even the Holy Trinity divides God up into component parts, each of which is necessary to complete the whole.

So, when we look at others with an eye to their unique spiritual quality, we are looking at them as
though they were God, as though they were plucked off of this planet and given a planet of their own, and we get to observe the nature and quality of their godhood. What unique personality would they bring to their planet? What would the people of that planet look like if the evolutionary goal they were striving toward had this same unique spiritual quality? How would the nature of life feel on their planet?

This is not as far-fetched as it might seem. For if we are in fact created in God’s own image, then in an individualized sense we *are* gods. Our fundamental spiritual function is identical with that of this Great Being in which we live, move, and have our being. God’s image and likeness is not anthropomorphic. It is spiritual. Our physical body is merely a vehicle that enables us to experience the physical world. The other dimensions of our being (e.g., mind, soul, and spirit) are the “source data” for all of its functions. God’s image and likeness includes the entire spectrum of our existence, not just our flesh.

Exercising your awareness in this way will allow you to examine something in the other person that is very large, spiritually speaking. It is
so large that you will find it worthy of your reverence. And in that moment you will be in the state of being called humility—you will be humble. And if you persist in this, you might get a glimpse of yourself and your own unique spiritual quality, which can be extraordinarily interesting and can lead to all kinds of spiritual awakenings.

But be careful not to use this as a way to categorize other people, or to manipulate them in any way. That would only degrade your ability to see the divinity in yourself, which would be tragic and very costly for you in your journey toward God-realization. Be aware also that seeing the deeper spiritual aspect of another person can potentialize your connection with them, and they will feel it. Do it too much and they might begin to mistrust you or misinterpret your feelings in other ways. Keep your observations brief, and ask God to bless each person you look upon in this way.

HUMILITY AND FORGIVENESS

Another way to practice humility is through forgiveness. Forgiveness seems difficult because often it is confused with condoning the action that has harmed us. Or, we think that we are
obliged to love the perpetrator as though “love” meant affectionate regard. These misunderstandings make forgiveness nearly impossible, if not downright repugnant. To forgive in these contexts would open us to charges of weakness and moral cowardice. So to appear strong, we cultivate hatred and thus lose our humanity.

The problem with condoning a harmful action or feeling affection for the perpetrator is that both of these postures are emotionally reactive. Siding with the wrongdoer is borne of fear—if I act like I’m one of them, maybe they will leave me alone. Or, if I pretend to like them, maybe they will like me back and stop hurting me. Both of these strategies give power away to the aggressor and can only perpetuate the problem. Therefore, they have nothing whatsoever to do with forgiveness.

The concept of forgiveness can also be misconstrued to mean excusing the malicious acts of another person, to simply overlook them as though they did not matter—to “rise above” them. But just as anger cannot be ignored or suppressed, neither can the negative traits of another be swept aside as though they did not exist.
Instead, they can be allowed to be what they are.

Instead of resisting what you do not like in the other person, give it space—allow it to be what it is. Give, as in *give way*. Do not resist—do not try to superimpose your sense of right and wrong onto the other person. If you do, you will always be disappointed, and eventually your disappointment will turn into indignation.

Indignation blinds us to what is and makes us ineffective. In the movie The Godfather, Michael Corleone says, “Never hate your enemy—it affects your judgment.” We are offended by those things that reveal our own weaknesses. Real strength is never—*can never be*—offended. So look for the lesson. Your adversary is your teacher.

This is the opposite of pressurizing or trying to contain what other people are putting out. Pressurizing them is the same as judging them; judgment is trying to force other people to be as you would have them be. No one responds well to that. Do you?

Forgiveness acknowledges that there is more to the other person than you are seeing and is
therefore an aspect of humility. Carelessness, malice, greed, ignorance—these are all symptoms of deeper problems. We cannot ignore them, but we can look past them to see what is really there. The ego is always in competition with other egos. When we look for the divinity in the other person, we are bypassing his or her ego, and our indignation begins to fall away.

What can you accurately say about a violent person? What is the “what is” of him? Violence is the outgrowth of anger. Anger is the outgrowth of the sense of having been wronged. The sense of having been wronged is the outgrowth of the violation of a preconceived idea of how things should be. You might call this the wounded wounder—it is a human tendency to act out the abuses suffered earlier in life. This doesn’t excuse bad behavior, but it does give us a way to understand it, and by understanding it we can deal with it more effectively.

By understanding bad behavior, we demonstrate humility by putting our energy into effective action rather than letting it inflame our already indignant ego.
Here is another way to understand a violent person. Take, for example, the pathological killer. When people are split within themselves, they tend to see their separated part as the enemy. But in their insanity, they are unable to understand that their tormentor is a part of themselves, so they project it outward onto other people. By killing the other, they mistakenly believe that they are killing the part of themselves that is causing them pain. This is obviously insane, but such is the belief of a fragmented personality.

This is why in hostage situations, hostages are encouraged to talk to their abductors, to try to get them to see that they are real people rather than faceless, nameless “things” to be abused. The more real the other person becomes in the mind of the perpetrator, the harder it is to project his inner demons upon them.

Again, this is not an excuse for deranged behavior, but rather a way to understand and thereby be more effective in one’s response to a dangerous situation. Sometimes that response is lethal force. When the perpetrator is so blinded by rage or so hardened in his heart that no amount of reasoning or caring can talk him
down, he must be stopped by any means necessary, lest he cause more damage. But extreme situations are never isolated incidents. Rather they are the culmination of a long string of events, the fatal outcome of many mistakes made by everyone—you, me, the perpetrator, and society at large.

Until our collective consciousness expands to include an awareness of the seeds of problems, and our hearts develop to the point where we actually care about everyone and not just ourselves, we will continue to create an environment where human tragedy can flourish. No one is exempt from the chain of cause and effect. Action or inaction, knowledge or ignorance, zeal or apathy—the choice is always ours. Everything we do or not do, say or don’t say, accept or reject shapes the world in which we live, and our wrongful choices will inevitably, as night follows day, come back to bite us.

Jesus said not to fear those who can kill your body but to be [damned afraid] of those who can cast your soul into hell. No one can cast our soul into hell, but they can induce us to do that to ourselves. And that is the danger Jesus warns us
about. When we regard an insane person as an “evil” person, we start to hate him. Hatred is the “fires of hell.” Hatred corrupts the hater, making him identical, spiritually speaking, to the object of his hatred. Science fiction author Frank Herbert once said, “We tend to become like the worst in those we oppose.”

Mastering forgiveness does not mean there won’t be a fight—it only enables you to keep a clear head. Never go into a fight blindfolded. The violent person believes that there is something wrong with the world and is attempting to fix it. If you know that, you are in a much better position to deal with him effectively.

According to George Lamsa, expert in Aramaic and Middle Eastern idioms, the saying, “Turn the other cheek,” means “do not start a fight”—do not react. Reaction is powerless, because you are letting the other person state the terms of engagement. It is better to walk away and wait for the opportunity to begin a new round, one that will allow you to take the high ground.

Historically, the fiercest warriors have been the Samurai—the armies of the warlords of feudal Japan. The mythologist Joseph Campbell tells
the story of one Samurai sent to avenge the murderer of his master. He takes the warlord by surprise, and just as he is about to cut off his head, the desperate warlord spits in his face. The Samurai warrior immediately sheaths his sword and walks away, leaving the warlord unharmed. Why? Because it is against the Samurai code of honor to kill in anger.

Forgiveness abates anger. And while anger can induce us to act, to pry us out of a rut, it must be quickly sublimated into willpower, or it will work against us and lead us into bigger problems.

Action is powerful when it operates at the level of cause. But re-action only gives power away. Reaction makes us want to hurt the other person back, instead of focusing our attention on taking an appropriate response. Turning the other cheek does not mean letting the other person continue to hurt you. What would be the purpose of that? Turning the other cheek simply means don’t start a fight. It does not mean, however, that you can’t finish one. Lashing back at our aggressor in the heat of the moment rarely if ever serves us well. A great example of this is in the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Atticus
refrains from striking the man who spits in his face. Hitting him would not have served any purpose but to assuage his ego. Later, he wins the courtroom battle—he finishes the fight.
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