

# COVENANT

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## The Prodigal Son & Mindfulness

by Benjamin Williams, PhD



One of the most enriching elements of my ministry is that within the holistic approach of Southdown I am challenged to consider, and work with, the integration of psychological health and spiritual well-being. The use of mindfulness practices, which have a deep religious context and origin as a spiritual tradition (including the Catholic contemplative tradition), has been brought into the mainstream of psychotherapy over the past 15 years. Mindfulness is often thought of as a set of practices and exercises including mindfulness meditation. However, mindfulness can be brought to any situation and is perhaps better thought of as a manner of approaching life. As such, it is a life path that involves cultivating a present-minded focus, and awareness and acceptance of our experience. It is an invitation to participate in the present moment in a state of complete awareness of our behaviours, body sensations, thoughts, and feelings without filters or the lens of judgment. The power

of mindfulness is that it allows for a kind of waking up from the automatic and unconscious manner in which we typically go about our lives and an embracing of the richness (and struggles) that life throws our way.

In my practice, I am often struck by the consistency between the life lessons and growth that arise out of psychotherapy and the wisdom that is available to us in the Scriptures. *The Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15: 11 - 32)* is an example of this phenomenon

in that each of the characters embodies or fails to embody key elements of the mindful path.

<sup>11</sup>Then he said, "A man had two sons, <sup>12</sup>and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So

the father divided the property between them. <sup>13</sup>After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation."

We are not told the motivation of the younger son in asking for his inheritance and leaving home, but it would appear that he is

running from something. He forgets, or puts behind himself, who he is, and squanders his inheritance, likely on things that feel good in the moment. The turning point in the story arrives when the son has a moment of acceptance and awareness. The passage says that the son comes to his "senses," a process that allows him to recognise who he is, and provides him the space to respond to his circumstances from that perspective. Shifting from "autopilot" to mindful awareness allows him to see his need for forgiveness and he seeks this out by returning home.

Unfortunately, like the lost son, much of our lives are lived on "autopilot". We respond to the day without awareness of ourselves by doing the next logical thing, or whatever the situation is pulling us towards. This can be dangerous when our "autopilot" activates maladaptive coping. For example, we can run from, or seek comfort from, distress by whatever is soothing in the moment (e.g. alcohol, food, etc.) without considering the consequences of the long-term and repetitive use of such strategies.

<sup>28</sup>He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup>He said to his father in

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reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'

Judgemental thinking is a ubiquitous phenomenon. We are often bogged down by our constant focus on the way things are, which in our minds is different from the way things should be. Unbeknownst to us, viewing our world through a lens of judgement leads us to blaming. If things are not the way they "should be" then someone must be to blame. Focusing on how others are to blame pushes us towards maintaining broken relationships, while focusing on self-blame pushes us into toxic shame. So much of our personal suffering comes from the accumulation of years of self-talk regarding how we are inadequate,

that we do not live up to the standard of what we "should be". We beat ourselves down and motivate ourselves to do what we think is "right" by guilt and fear of our shame. In those moments when others act in a manner that we deem "wrong" we feel justified to pour out judgement on them. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that the character we can most often identify with in the parable is the older son. If we are honest with ourselves, when we read the story, there is a part of us that is right there with him in his self-righteous indignation that his brother be restored, and to add insult to injury, a party is being thrown in his honour.

The mindful path involves a radical acceptance of what is. This approach invites us to embrace the truth of our lives (regardless of whether we like it or not) in order to respond in an effective manner to the curves that life throws our way. The place of mindfulness and acceptance frees us to respond to life in an intentional manner, and in a manner consistent with our identity and values. Judgemental thinking gets us stuck as

it amounts to a kind of non-acceptance, a refusal to acknowledge what is. It also places us in a position that is outside of our identity. Who are we to determine how things "should" be? Is standing in judgement our place? The older son is not able to recognise the significance of the moment or find restoration in his relationship with his brother as a result of his mindless judgemental thinking.

<sup>20</sup>While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

The older brother's response to his younger brother's return stands in stark contrast to that of the father who notices his son "while he was still a long way off"

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and rushes out to meet him. The father appears to most embody the mindful way of all three players. Ever watchful, attentive, and aware, he recognises the significance of the moment immediately. Although the behaviour of his son has likely hurt him deeply, he acts in a profound manner out of his sense of fatherhood, with joy that his son has returned to him. While he recognises and honours that there are consequences to his son's behaviour (his inheritance is lost), he is not bogged down by judgemental thinking, and his attunement to his identity and values allows him to restore his son and celebrate. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could live out of this freedom; if we could join the party each and every day?

The therapeutic value of the mindful path is illustrated so effectively in the parable of the lost son. A thread that is all too often common in our brokenness and suffering is that of being stuck in one way or another by our refusal to accept what is. It is only through mindful acceptance that we can act in an intentional manner and live out of our true identities as children of God. ■

Quotations taken from The New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE). March 9, 2011

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## SAVE THE DATE

**April 13, 2016**

Healthy Ministers for a Healthy Church – Critical Personnel Issues Conference – Toronto

**May 12, 2016**

Annual Benefit Dinner – Toronto (call 905 727 4214 or e-mail [events@southdown.on.ca](mailto:events@southdown.on.ca) to request an invitation for this special evening and celebration of our 50th Anniversary)

Check our website frequently at [www.southdown.on.ca](http://www.southdown.on.ca) for new information about our upcoming events.

# God's Presence in Human Impasse

## by Barry Lynch, CFC, MA, MPS



As our journey of life unfolds, our experience of challenges in communication, our loss of hope and the rise of our anxiety and/or fear can lead to human impasse. These very human emotional “no way out” experiences are characterized by spiritual writers as dark nights or as human impasse. Our inability to right a situation despite our good intentions and efforts, the dwindling of hope as well as the rising of disillusionment can lead to an obsession with our inner turmoil. What looks like and often feels like disintegration and meaninglessness is faith leading us to healing. It is new life and deepening awareness of God’s forgiveness and God’s love. The Spirit, the Indwelling One educates and transforms us through these inescapable and uninvited impasse experiences. As we deepen in our response to the call of the Spirit to embrace the impasse experiences of our life, we are freed to live more fully, to hope more fully and to love ourselves and others more completely.

In our journey of life, Christian spirituality remains attentive to and aware of the centrality of the self in one’s search for God’s presence and for human wholeness. With our contemporary knowledge and practice of psychology, we are regularly invited to integrate our experience of human impasse with our spirituality, and our life with God. There is the centrality of the self in our stages of faith development,

in our passages and in our crisis of growth. In our search for God and for human wholeness, the healing of self remains an important focus for all who are committed to deepening their faith journey. Inevitably, our human impasse experiences cry out for meaning. As well, our experience of God in our spiritual life matures as it emerges from our concrete life situations. As we unfold the mystery of human impasse in our life and discern its symbolism, we grow in our ability to name and claim our experience of God.

In the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke, we notice that the disciples have reached a place of human impasse. They have lost hope in Jesus as the promised Messiah. When Jesus meets the disciples on the road in the midst of their feelings of hopelessness, in their “slowness of heart”, Jesus says to them: “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!” (Luke 24:25). The human impasse of hopelessness that we all experience begins to lift for the disciples as their hearts are gradually opened. They invite Jesus to stay with them. Is this not our call in the midst of our impasse moments?

As we wonder about and prayerfully ponder God’s presence in our moments of impasse, we are faithfully opening our hearts to the impact of God in our journey. If we can open our minds and our hearts to the impact of God and take the risk of surrendering, we may experience our God urge to meet us, to

change and transform us in our deepest need. As we journey in God’s surprising presence in the darkness and confusion of human impasse, we are gifted with God’s self-bestowing love – a love that changes us and a compassionate love that helps us to trust and to be brave. This love and compassion of God helps us to surrender to God at that threshold place of uncertainty. We risk trusting God’s presence which dwells beyond this threshold. It is no longer despair but the Spirit and the presence of God. Yes, our God seems absent but our God is a self-outpouring God who longs to transform us. The darkness of this uncertainty and impasse reveal the Spirit of God who has the power and the desire to work a resurrection within us – “Open up your hearts. Let this Lover, this Tremendous Lover, into your being.” This call spoken of by St. John of the Cross encourages us to embrace our impasse moments with Love.

Certainly, this opening up of our hearts can be painful. It means allowing ourselves to become vulnerable, leaving behind things and ego stances that give us security. This opening calls us to deepen our faith in God. Through the inevitable emotional pain of personal impasse, we are called and guided to union; gradual evolving union with self and with God that gifts us with compassion for self, forgiveness of self. We are called to trust the Spirit and to give space in our hearts for Love. It is truly a paradox that ultimately liberates us and brings us to that place of healing and inner peace. ■

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## Spirituality and Psychology: Gifts and Opportunities

by Michael Sy, PhD



In describing their experiences individuals who struggle with clinical depression often say that not only their feelings, but also their appetite, memory, concentration, comprehension, and sleep, are disrupted. They similarly note that the return of these functions herald

recovery. In the midst of a depression, individuals feel increasingly desperate, helpless, and often question the value of life. The possibility of recovery seems remote and hopeless. In terms of their spiritual life, depressed individuals describe having difficulty with prayer, a dryness, and, for some, a total collapse in their spiritual life. They describe the

experience as a “dark night of the soul.” The collapse or loss of such a mainstay in life is upsetting and it increases the depth of depression. A spiraling sense of failure or shame ensues. Self-blame and a creeping sense of worthlessness develop. Individuals often describe feeling a deep sense of

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isolation and disconnection that they are unable to breach in their relationships with others. This is also true about their relationship with God.

In such cases, psychology and psychiatry have effective treatment protocols and treatment strategies that can be followed. How to proceed with someone who is at a loss in terms of their spiritual life in the course of depression is not as clear. It is important to provide reassurance that the losses and changes in spiritual life are also a function of depression and that treatment will not only alleviate the symptoms of depression but will also bring about recovery in their spiritual life. The presence of family, friends and community members also contributes to the healing process. William Styron accounts his own experience with depression in the book *Darkness Visible*: "It may require on the part of friends, lovers, family, admirers, an almost religious devotion to persuade the sufferers of life's worth, which is so often in conflict with a sense of their own worthlessness."

The impact of personality organization is often overlooked as far as its effect on spiritual life. In psychodynamic terms, anxiety can have a powerful influence on how individuals see the world and relationships. How they relate to others often mirrors their relationship with God. For instance, a relationship with God for someone with a dependent personality is often based on fear. God is seen as uncompromising and unforgiving. Life is lived from a perspective of punishment. Another example is the need for perfection in the world of an obsessive compulsive individual who struggles with scrupulosity and rigidity. These defenses are also present in his or her spiritual life. The adherence to rules and expectations that provides the relief from anxiety can extend to spiritual functioning.

Recognizing how spiritual life can mirror personality structure and its defenses can be a challenging yet life giving opportunity for change. Revisiting and making changes in relationships with others is a complex and difficult but necessary task in order to function well. Making changes in relationship with God is similarly an important aspect of spiritual development. Accomplishing this task calls for a commitment to engage the best resources of psychology and spirituality. It also calls for a willingness to relinquish control and for taking a risk to trust others and God in the journey of recovery. ■

## FROM MY DESK TO YOURS:



Hosting our first Annual Benefit Dinner in May, we were honoured to have Sr. Veronica O'Reilly, CSJ and Most Rev. Douglas Crosby, OMI as our guest speakers. We are most grateful for their wisdom, inspiring words, guidance, and their support over these years.

Sister Veronica opened with sentiments first articulated by St. Paul: that the world needs people to witness to the Gospel who are experts in humanity, familiar with their own emotions, and able to share these emotions with others. At the same time, it is important these people are contemplatives who have fallen in love with God. Southdown's mission encompasses two convictions: that those who come here come to engage courageously in the process of becoming as fully whole as most of us can hope to be, and, that they might celebrate that fuller humanity in renewed relationship with community and their God who has loved us to the lengths of Incarnation. Sister Veronica also spoke about a key characteristic of a resilient community, which is to honour the traditions and histories that have shaped their particular mission while remaining open to change, even bringing about change.

Bishop Crosby shared some thoughts on gratitude: that saying "Thank you" stops us from taking things for granted, it rids us of a sense of entitlement, and pushes away misery. The mission of the Church is always waiting for us to heal wounded hearts, to open doors, to free people, and to say that God is good, God forgives all, and that God is tender.

Our hearts are filled with gratitude for all guests who attended the first Benefit Dinner. Your support of Southdown is vital for the continuation of our mission. We will continue this tradition with our next Benefit Dinner to be held May 12, 2016. Our founding documents were signed in July of 1965 with our doors opening to receive our first residents on December 15, 1966. We are planning various activities to celebrate this significant milestone beginning December 2015. We look forward to seeing you at our next Benefit Dinner and at other events throughout the coming months.

Whether your season is the beginning of summer or the beginning of fall, I wish you and your loved ones abundant blessings.

Dorothy Heiderscheit, OSF, MSW, ACSW, RSW  
CEO  
Southdown

**Covenant** is produced and published by The Southdown Institute. Its purpose is to inform and educate the readership about clinical issues that surface in our work and to invite integration of the emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives.



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