

# **Journey Into the Depths of Self, Where God Is Revealed**

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It may be only because I am an Augustinian writing this on the Feast of St. Augustine that I see clear parallels and similarities between Augustine's spiritual journey and the process of Psychological Assessment. Among Augustine's famous and infamous reputations is that he predated Freud by fifteen centuries as the pioneer of healing and change through self-reflection. Although Augustine never sought therapy (many say he could have benefited tremendously!), took the MMPI, or projected onto the Rorschach Inkblots, he did subject himself to intense personal self-examination with the goal of self-knowledge and was profoundly changed in the process. The prayer that guided this journey for Augustine, "Lord, let me know myself, let me know you," could well be a prayer that guides and inspires all those who seek more accurate self-knowledge by using the tools of Psychological Assessment.

While Augustine was a brilliant rhetorician and philosopher, preacher and theologian, his most popular and lasting legacy has been his gift of self-awareness and self-disclosure. He really couldn't help himself in either quest. Frustrated in his several attempts to satisfy his curiosity about the meaning of everything by searching outside of himself, he turned inward and found himself drawn by curiosity to the mystery of his own being. He became "a question to himself" and engaged in what frequently appears to be an unduly ruthless and rigorous examination of as many aspects of his experience as he could. As he searched through the complex dynamics and conflicts among his experience, behavior, feelings, desires and longings, he was discovering within himself a mystery far greater than himself. Having made this discovery, he exclaimed to God with both anguish and joy "You were within me, while I was outside of myself."

Southdown is a holy and blessed place because it is a temple in which the awesome and incomprehensible mystery of God's presence is revealed in similar journeys of self-reflection and self-disclosure. As was true for Augustine, this revelation rarely occurs with instantaneous insight or enlightenment. Rather it occurs slowly, gradually, and often fearfully and painfully. It occurs by holding up experience to scrutiny in the presence of others. It happens through a commitment to rigorous honesty and the courage to look inside without knowing what one will find. Like Augustine, this journey of revelation frequently begins with skepticism and doubt and can quickly and easily settle for comforting half-truths that neither hurt very much nor fill us with awe and wonder about the mystery of ourselves. For those who, like Augustine, persist in the journey because they are unable to rest without knowing themselves as thoroughly as possible, this journey inevitably leads to the awareness that God truly lives in and with them and loves them in the deepest and often darkest and most painful spaces of their experience.

This issue of the Covenant focuses on the first and most courageous and difficult steps on the journey of revelation that is possible at Southdown. Michael Sy writes about how

that journey can begin with the concern of others who judge someone worthy to know some hidden truth about themselves. Karl Loszak writes about how a good assessment provides an opportunity for us to balance various and perhaps contradictory pictures of ourselves in the service of having a glimpse of what might really be the case.

Augustine's reflections on the awesome and unruly nature of his sexuality provided him with his most fertile field for self-awareness. Phil Dodgson writes with his typical sensitivity and clarity about how assessment procedures can provide a window into this mysterious and deeply personal area of our lives. Susan Roncadin, from our nursing staff, writes about how a medical assessment can point out ways that we may be strangers in our most personal of homes, our own bodies. John Haley and Barbara Gaudet, both from our Spirituality Department, write about how a spiritual assessment can begin to show us how we might be strangers to our own souls.

Psychological Assessment is not really designed to be a religious or spiritual experience. It is a scientific tool developed as an aid to personal growth and healing. It has many flaws and weaknesses. Over reliance on it or over confidence in its results will inevitably lead to frustrating dead ends. It is natural and normal to look upon an assessment as an unwelcome intrusion into private and sacred places. The procedures of assessment, no matter how compassionately and empathically they may be administered, are reasonably experienced with anxiety, trepidation, and mistrust. Even an accurate and valid interpretation of all of the data collected during an assessment will not take the place of or even come close to the kind of revelation that can occur on the journey into the depths of self where God is revealed to us.

An assessment at Southdown includes psychological testing as well as interviews by psychologists, psychiatrists, spiritual directors, addiction counselors, and nurses. It is a process in which a person can share him or herself to others trained to examine and analyze various aspects of that person experience. It is an opportunity to hear from those trained professionals about what they have seen and heard as they have watched and listened over the course of several days. While we have seen and heard responses to the "results" of our assessment program range from angry denial to humble submission, it is not at all uncommon for us to hear gratitude and relief as long hidden truth is made available for redemptive healing and grace. However, one of the hallmarks of Southdown is that the spirituality and holiness of all aspects of the therapeutic process can be highlighted and celebrated as sacred and sacramental. Trust in this process and faith that it does indeed reveal the true God to a true self is yet another example of what makes doing psychology at Southdown such a privilege.