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The Mirror of the Heart: Narcissus and the Journey to a Whole Self

"Let me know myself, that I may know You." — Saint Augustine

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." — Mark 12:30

Each season, *Covenant* invites us to pause, breathe, and listen to the quiet movements of grace in our shared life. This reflection begins with an ancient story, one that still mirrors our deepest longings.

The Forgotten Self

The story of Narcissus is often told as a warning against pride. But perhaps it is the wonder about the shock of encountering oneself in a way never truly seen. Narcissus did not die because he loved himself too much; he died because he did not know how to love what he saw.

In our lives and ministries, we risk living on the surface, serving others, playing roles, meeting expectations, while drifting from the heart of who we are. When we stop listening to what moves inside us, ministry can become mere performance, and our connection with God loses tenderness. Saint Augustine's prayer, "***Let me know myself, that I may know You,"*** remains a summons to honesty. Self-knowledge is not vanity; it is reverence, the courage to face our truth in the light of grace.

The Heart That Listens

To love with all our heart presupposes that we know that heart. The language of emotion is one of God's oldest dialects. When we welcome feelings with compassion, rather than judge or suppress them, we open the door to encounter. In this sense, emotional awareness becomes less a tool of psychology but a mere practice of the soul. Brené Brown reminds us that emotions are ***"data, not directives"***—signs that reveal where grace is waiting to meet us.

Jesus Felt Deeply

The Gospels show that Jesus did not hide from emotion. He wept, grew angry, rejoiced, and trembled in the garden. His emotional life was not weakness but witness, the revelation that to feel deeply is part of being fully human and fully open to God. When we deny what we feel, we fragment the very self God longs to redeem. When we bring our true emotions into prayer, even without words, they become the raw material of love.

Relationships as Mirrors

In every sphere of life, community, friendship, marriage, or ministry, relationships reveal who we truly are. Ignored grief isolates us; unspoken anger can turn into rigidity or resentment. But when we face our inner movements with honesty, our hearts regain their tenderness. Emotional truth sets us free to meet others not from obligation, but from love. As Thomas Merton wrote, God's most intimate question is, ***"What is your real self?"*** The journey toward integration begins in our willingness to answer.

From Reflection to Communion

If Narcissus perished gazing at himself in isolation, our call is the opposite: to see ourselves in relationship, with God, others, and the world entrusted to our care. The mirror of the heart is not for self-fascination, but self-offering. When we dare to look into that mirror with tenderness, we do not find perfection but presence. There, in the gentle light of truth, we rediscover that we are held, seen, and loved, even in our contradictions.

An Invitation

Renewal seldom begins with grand resolutions. It begins in the quiet willingness to see ourselves truthfully and to let God meet us there. The gift of self is born of self-awareness.

As you read this issue of *Covenant*, may you hear within its pages an invitation to return to your own heart, to listen for what stirs there, and to rediscover that loving God with all your heart begins by learning to dwell within it fully.

Sincerely,
Rev. Francois Diouf, O.S.B., Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

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The Gift of Self: How Emotional Awareness Deepens Spiritual Life

By Marc Simpson, MSW, RSW

Spiritual formation is at the heart of religious life and ministry. Yet many people discover, sometimes painfully, that spiritual growth without emotional awareness can leave us unbalanced, disconnected, and at risk of burnout. Emotional maturity is not a distraction from spiritual life; it is essential to it. It is part of the lifelong journey of integration, in which God invites us to bring our whole selves, mind, heart, soul, and body, into communion with grace.

Southdown serves ordained clergy, women and men religious, lay pastoral ministers, and others engaged in ministry. Many have been conditioned to set aside emotional needs in favor of duty. While well-intentioned, this can lead to fatigue, disconnection, or diminished sense of self. When given space to understand emotions, individuals often find renewed clarity and peace.

The Cost of Disconnection

A priest I worked with appeared calm on the outside but battled chronic irritability, fatigue, and isolation. His prayer life had dulled. He interpreted spiritual dryness as failure. Only after entering therapy did he begin to process grief, shame, and fear. His story is not unique. At Southdown, we frequently encounter individuals who have dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to ministry, community engagement, and spiritual disciplines as a way of coping with long-standing emotional pain. Their commitment is genuinely a heartfelt desire to be faithful, resilient, and fully devoted to their calling. Yet, this drive to keep going can sometimes serve as a means of avoiding the emotional wounds that need care. When difficult feelings are set aside instead of acknowledged, it can lead to spiritual exhaustion, a sense of inner disconnection, or even despair.

Emotional Awareness as a Spiritual Discipline

Developing emotional awareness is not about becoming self-focused. It is about cultivating inner freedom, the ability to respond to life with authenticity and grace, rather than from fear or automatic reaction. It invites us to pause and ask: *What am I feeling? Where is this emotion coming from? What might it be trying to teach me?*

Psychiatrist and neuroscientist Dan Siegel (2010) coined the phrase ***"name it to tame it,"*** highlighting how simply identifying an emotion can lessen its intensity and help us regulate it more effectively. This kind of self-awareness not only supports healthy management of difficult feelings, but also opens the door to greater clarity, presence, and depth in our spiritual lives.

Those who cultivate emotional awareness are better equipped to navigate the demands of religious life, set healthy boundaries, and remain fully present to the joys and struggles of others. It fosters compassion, discernment, and a reduced tendency to react from unresolved wounds. In this way, emotional literacy becomes a form of humility, recognizing our limitations and allowing God's grace to work through them.

Integration and Emotional Health

Emotional integration is a cornerstone of overall well-being. When able to recognize, reflect on, and regulate our emotions, we often feel more grounded, present, and connected in both our relationships and daily life. This process is not about eliminating distress but about learning to engage with it in ways that foster resilience and clarity. In our work with those in ministry, we see that emotional integration can deepen a sense of purpose, strengthen relationships, and enhance the meaning found in vocational life.

Some worry that acknowledging painful emotions might cause them to unravel, but often, the opposite is true. As we grow more aware of our inner world, we gain clarity, peace, and a greater capacity for presence. For those in ministry, this integration supports both personal healing and the vitality of their work.

Practices such as therapy, spiritual direction, and intentional reflection can help cultivate this awareness. Attending to our emotions, exploring them through journaling, or simply observing how stress shows up in the body can become sacred practices, acts of honouring our inner experience and opening space for God's presence.

A Path Forward

Emotional awareness is not a luxury, nor is it only for those facing crisis. It is a lifelong invitation to wholeness, one that enriches our faith and expands our capacity to love.

At Southdown, we see repeatedly that when people are equipped to recognize and understand their emotional lives, spiritual growth naturally follows. The journey toward holiness passes through the heart, through joy, sorrow, anger, longing, and love. God calls us to wholeness, and that wholeness begins not in denial, but in honesty.

By cultivating deeper emotional awareness, we honour the fullness of who we are and respond more fully to the call to love with all that we have. ■

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Emotions and Spirituality Through the Lens of Focusing

By Beverly O'Grady, M.T.S., D.S.D.

Tuning In to the Body

In today's fast-paced, 21st-century world, much of our attention is spent in the mind, analyzing, planning, and strategizing. But what if there was a way to check in with the body to sense the right next step? Focusing offers this pathway: a practice of connecting with emotions and bodily sensations to gain insight and clarity in how we live.

The Origins of Focusing

Dr. Eugene Gendlin, a philosopher who worked alongside Carl Rogers, developed Focusing as a tool in psychological therapy. Its potential, however, extends far beyond therapy. In Catholic circles, it has been embraced as *Bio-Spirituality*. Frs. Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon, collaborators of Dr. Gendlin, introduced Focusing in retreats and spiritual workshops across North America, emphasizing its use as a tool for spiritual growth and personal transformation.

As Campbell and McMahon write in Bio-Spirituality: Focusing as a Way to Grow:

"We also find that Focusing can support spiritual growth by inviting a person to step beyond the mind's perennial quest for control. It provides a practical framework for encouraging that 'art of allowing,' within which we can gently learn to trust a deeper, bodily-felt wisdom." (p. 52)

Practising Focusing

To begin, find a relaxed state, not as deep as meditation, and direct your attention to the centre of your body, from the chest to the lower abdomen. Notice any physical sensations without rushing for answers. Initially, these sensations may not carry a clear message, but you can keep them company with ***"interested curiosity."***

Describe the sensation out loud to explore which emotion may be present. Approach difficult or painful emotions at a comfortable distance so an internal dialogue can unfold. Ask: *What does this need right now? What is it trying to tell me?* Often, the body's response may be a call to self-care. Engaging with these sensations through patience and self-compassion can reveal insights into your needs, emotions, and spiritual life.

Emotions as a Path to God

Ignoring or suppressing our emotions can distance us from God. In contrast, attending to them allows divine guidance to emerge. Feelings of dread, sadness, or aversion often point us toward deeper truth: *What would bring peace, fulfillment, or the right next step?* Giving space to emotions, without bypassing them, supports both emotional and spiritual well-being.

As Campbell and McMahon note:

"What we have in Focusing is, then, a setting for sound spirituality that is simultaneously realized within a context of sound psychology." (p. 53)

Emotions as a Pathway to Wholeness

Emotions are a gift, offering a doorway to your full humanity. You are not a machine capable of predicting every outcome; you are a sensitive, unique human being, responding to a world full of unknowns. Your body carries messages meant to guide and inform you. By listening, you can discover the sacred within yourself: mystery, creativity, and longing to give and receive love.

Let your emotions be part of your prayer life. Invite your whole being, mind, heart, and body, to see, feel, and embrace the mystery at the heart of being human.

Experiences of worship can awaken awe, gratitude, and joy. Music and singing lift the spirit and foster well-being. Time in nature can connect us to the beauty of creation. Grief reveals the depth of our love for others. Reflect for a moment, *why would God give us emotions if they were not meant to be honoured and integrated?*

For most of us, God's guidance is not heard as clear words, but as a sense of knowing, often emerging in silence. Our feelings need time and space to communicate, especially when difficult emotions have been suppressed or ignored. In a world that is noisy, rushed, and chaotic, creating room for this dialogue with God is essential.

Let your emotions be part of your prayer life. Invite your whole being, mind, heart, and body, to see, feel, and embrace the mystery at the heart of being human. God dwells within you, patiently waiting for you to welcome this sacred presence. ■

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From Our Communications Team

This Fall/Winter issue of Southdown's *Covenant* Newsletter invites reflection on the integration of heart, mind, body, and spirit. Our articles explore emotional awareness, spiritual formation, and the ways our feelings guide us toward wholeness.

We are also delighted to welcome four new members to the Southdown team:

Melissa Himelfarb, *Accounting Specialist*, brings her expertise in financial operations and a commitment to supporting the smooth functioning of our programs.

Helen Hwang, RN, *Nurse Manager and Quality Lead*, joins us with extensive experience in clinical care and a dedication to maintaining the highest standards of quality and safety.

Jean Zhou, MBA, CPA, *Chief Financial Officer,* brings leadership in financial leadership and strategic management, supporting Southdown's mission with insight, precision, and care.

Housai Rahimi, *Manager of Mission Communications and Human Resources,* brings expertise in communications and human resources, ensuring our programs, stories, and reflections continue to reach the community with clarity, heart, and alignment with our team's mission.

We hope you enjoy this issue and take time to pause, reflect, and connect with yourself, with others, and with God.

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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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