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How to Find A Guide for Spiritual Fitness

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HOW TO FIND A GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL FITNESS

AND OTHER WRITINGS

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Chapter 8:

How You Can Make Something of Yourself

Some years ago there was a strange story in the newspaper about a man who found himself in serious trouble. He was a quiet, mild-mannered factory worker in Detroit. The trouble began when he bought a new wristwatch. He was able to get it wholesale, and he showed it to some of his friends. He told them about the good deal that he had managed to get. They were impressed, and wanted to know if he could get discounts for them. He did, and soon he had the reputation of a man who “could get it for you wholesale.” More and more of his fellow workers came to him with orders for appliances, jewelry, clothing, even automobiles.

There was a small problem. Aside from that wristwatch, he never got anything wholesale. He paid the full price, and then passed things on at a bargain rate. It cost him a lot of money, and he spent every nickel of his savings. He began to borrow from banks, and when that source dried up he turned to Easy Finance Companies. The whole thing came to light when someone gave him 250 dollars as a down payment on a car, and he was unable to deliver. His friend went to the Wayne County district attorney’s office, and he was charged with obtaining money under false pretenses. When they unraveled his accounts, they discovered that over two or three years he had accepted \$120,000 from other people, but had actually spent more than \$160,000. He did not know how he got in so deep. His attorney pointed out that he wasn’t cheating anybody except himself, and a psychiatrist, testifying for his defense, called it “a typical ego-satisfaction which, probably unknowingly, he valued more than money.”

There is something both sad and funny about that story. Perhaps you can sympathize with him. Everybody feels the need to make a name for themselves. It is a common impulse. We want to be somebody. We want to be people who count for something, who can make a difference to others. We want people to know that we are here, and when we are gone, we want them to remember that we were here.

There's a story in the Book of Genesis that has to do with this human instinct. The story is so old that it has to be considered a legend. The writer begins with these words:

Once upon a time the whole world spoke a single language and used the same words. As men journeyed in the East, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar, and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us lay bricks and bake them hard." They used the bricks from stone and slime for mortar. "Come," they said, "Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves. . ."
(Genesis 11:1)

We call this the story of the tower of Babel. According to the story, God was displeased because He thought that His creatures were becoming too ambitious. Their aspirations were too high. They had over-reached themselves. So God decided to come down and confuse their speech. No one was able to understand the others. That's how the place got its name. God made a babble out of their language. And that, according to the legend, is why people speak different languages, and have different customs, and seem to have so much difficulty in communicating with each other. It all came about because man reached too high, and God decided to come down and put him in his place.

It is a primitive legend, and a naive attempt to explain why there are so many different languages and dialects in this world. Some people seem to think that the story is an indictment of all human pride and aspiration. They think that there is something evil about the impulse itself, that no one has a right to try to make a name for himself. I believe that is a misreading of the story. The impulse can get us into trouble, as it did the man in Detroit, or those men on the plains in the Land of Shinar. There are times when out of sheer frustration we are driven to do foolish things. But it is not the impulse that is at fault. It is the way in which we go about trying to satisfy it.

I'd like to think with you for a few moments about how you can make something of yourself.

1. First of all, if you want to make something of yourself, you must be open, teachable, and willing to learn.

I don't suppose there's any greater gift that life has given us than the capacity to learn. We learn from our own experience, and we can learn from the experiences of others. We learn from teachers, from books, and from the everyday encounters of life. One little boy, coming home from his first day at school, was asked by his mother what he had learned in school. He replied that he hadn't learned anything in school, but he had learned plenty on the playground. Life has equipped us to learn. The sad thing is that there are so many people who allow that gift to go unused. Somewhere along the line they have lost their curiosity about the world around them. They do not really want to know what is happening, or why it happens. They're satisfied if they know enough to get themselves from one day to the next.

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God must have had something better in mind when He created us with intelligence. I think that God wants you to make yourself at home in this world. He wants you to learn everything you can about the earth, and the people who live here, and the record of the past, and things to come. This earth is our home, and we ought to know everything we can possibly know about it.

In the church where I grew up, we used to sing a hymn. We sang it so often that I suspect that it must have been a real favorite. In that church, incidentally, the preacher didn't always choose the hymns. Sometimes, like on Wednesday evenings at prayer meeting, people got to select the hymns. One that got chosen often began with the words, "I'm but a pilgrim here, heaven is my home."

It is a beautiful hymn, and as I think about it now I understand why it was such a favorite in that congregation. When I was a boy, more than half of the members in the church were immigrants. They had come to this country from northern Europe. They left the old country because opportunities were few there. You were born into one class, and there was nothing you could really do to elevate your status. Times were hard, and unless you were the oldest son, options were limited. They heard about the fabulous New World, where almost everybody seemed to be rich. When they arrived in this country, it wasn't that easy. They discovered that money did not grow on trees. They were cut off from family and friends at home. Some of them went to work in the mines, some in the timber, some out here on the mid-western plains. Some of them, like my great-grandfather, worked in factories.

It was not as easy as they'd been led to believe, and more than that they felt like strangers in a hostile environment. They could not always understand the language, and when they tried to use it in their own faltering way, many times they were laughed at or

scorned. The result was that they tended to come together in tightly-knit little communities, churches more often than not. There they could use their own language, and they had a common bond with other people who had come all this way. They really were pilgrims. And the world seemed like a dangerous place to them. They could not go back. Life was hard here. When death came, it was a release from all the hardship of this world. That's why they sang with such fervor. "I'm but a pilgrim here, heaven is my home."

I'd love to sing that hymn again, because I get more and more nostalgic as I grow older. But I'm not a pilgrim here. This is my home. God has given us this earth as a home, and God did not give it to us as a corrupt, evil, dangerous place. He gave it as a place where we can make a home for ourselves, if we are willing to learn.

I think God wants you to know everything you can about it. If you want to make something of yourself, you have to be willing to learn.

In one of Robert Penn Warren's novels, the main character is a man who grows up to become a scholar. He comes from a very impoverished background, both spiritually and materially. His father is an irresponsible, hard-drinking man, who was kicked to death one night by a mule on a country road. His mother has higher aspirations for her life but was trapped in that marriage. She takes her only son, and moves to a small town named Dugton to find employment. Her one remaining hope is that the boy will get an education, and escape from his environment.

The best thing he has going for him is his intelligence. He remembers an older boy, a high school freshman. One night after school, he happens to open a textbook that belongs to the older boy. It's full of strange words that don't make any sense at all. He asks

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what it is, and the older boy explains that it's Latin, "the language that the Romans spoke." He begs the older boy to explain it to him, and the older boy shows him how there are two columns on a page, with the Latin words on one side and the English words opposite. He is so intrigued that he asks to borrow the book. The older boy begrudgingly lets him have it over the weekend for a nickel.

Then he says this:

So it cost me a nickel every weekend all that year.

For the life of me, I would not have been able to say what drew me on, weekend after weekend, poring over the book, copying out what I meant to learn during the week to come. There was a blind need, that was all. I was hungry and I ate.

Now, however, as I look back, I think I understand things better. It was not hunger, it was magic. It was as deep, and as primitive, and as subtle as that. In Claxford County, reality had been bleached away. But if you found a new name for all the things of the world, you could create a world that was real and different. The crazy word on the page was like a little hole in the great wall. You could peek through the hole and see a world where everything was different and bright. That world was not far away. It was just on the other side of the wall.

If you want to make something of yourself, be open. Be willing to learn. God wants you to make yourself at home in this world, and to know everything that you can know about it.

II. If you want to make something of yourself, you have to be willing to be a servant.

That's what Jesus told his disciples. He said that if any man would be great among you, let him be the servant of all. That, of course, is where pride gets in our way. We would rather be masters than servants. We do not really understand how we can become great by being anybody's slave.

Many years ago I heard a story by Bishop A. Ramond Grant. He was my bishop, but he's been gone now for a long time. I'll never forget a story he told from the early days of his own ministry. It was one of those Sundays when the preacher put on his pulpit gown and went to visit the Sunday School classes. The theory was that the children would get to see a preacher in his "working clothes" and know what he looks like. I guess the theory is also that the preacher would find out what Sunday School children look like.

On this particular Sunday, the preacher was visiting the primary classes. He came into a class of five and six year olds, who were sitting in a circle on tiny chairs. He sat down in the circle with them. He asked them what they wanted to do when they grew up. There were the usual answers. Some of them, of course, blushed and giggled and were tongue-tied. There was the boy who wanted to be a policeman, and the girl who wanted to be a nurse. One little boy, wearing glasses, wanted to be a preacher. The preacher finally pointed to one little boy and asked him what he wanted to do. Very solemnly he replied, "When I grow up, I want to lead a blind man."

I've tried to imagine how that idea emerged from the mind of that boy. I think I know what happened. Maybe one day he was with his parents on the street. They came to an intersection, and there was a man standing there with dark glasses. The boy saw someone come

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up and offer his arm, and wait until the traffic had stopped and then lead the man across the street. Maybe the boy asked his mother why. The mother may have replied, "It's because he's a blind man." Then the boy would want to know, "What is a blind man?" The mother would have to explain that a blind man was somebody who couldn't see, and it would be very dangerous for him to try to cross the intersection alone. Maybe that's how it happened. That little episode made such a profound impression on the boy that he decided then and there that when he grew up, he was going to help blind people cross the street. I don't suppose you could make a career out of that. But people do make careers of compassion, kindness, and concern for others. There are people, in every field of life, who find ways to use the knowledge that they have to serve other people.

That's the best way to make a name for yourself. You can build a tower of service. You do it not in order to make a name for yourself. The name just follows naturally.

In the Gospel of Luke there is a story in which Jesus sent his followers out across the countryside to all the little towns and villages and hamlets near by. When they were welcomed into a home, they were to bless that house. If they were turned away, they were not to give up but to go on to the next place.

When those followers returned, they were ecstatic. They had succeeded beyond their imagination, and everyone had a marvelous story to tell. They were all talking at once.

Do you remember what Jesus said to them? He said, "What you should rejoice over is not that the spirits submit to you, but that your names are enrolled in Heaven."

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I hope you want to make something of yourself. I hope you want to make a name for yourself. The good news of the Gospel is that you already have a name. You count for something, and better than any achievement in this world is the simple fact that your name is enrolled in Heaven.

Chapter 12:

How to Give a Transfusion

We are going to think together about how to give a transfusion. This is not a course in First Aid, and I don't want to pretend to know more than I do about medicine. All that I know about blood transfusions is what I have been able to observe on those occasions when I have been a donor, and that isn't much, because by the time you get done worrying over the needles, the transfusion is usually over. The most vivid recollection that I have of a transfusion is one that I gave before the days of plasma and blood banks. I was serving as a student pastor in a small church, and one of the boys who attended my church developed some kind of jaundice and needed blood. It was 7:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning when I went to the hospital and took my place beside him. When the transfusion was over, the doctor thoughtfully suggested that I might like "a little something" to buoy me up for the duties of the day. What he had in mind was hardly appropriate for a young minister on a Sunday morning. I virtuously declined his offer, and went on to teach a Sunday School class, preach the morning sermon, play several hours of sandlot football in the afternoon, and then preach once again at the evening service. I am still a bit awed when I remember my recuperative powers in those days. Since that time, the techniques for transfusions have changed, and like more of you, I have donated blood from time to time without knowing who the beneficiary was going to be.

Now that is one kind of a transfusion, and it doesn't require any special knowledge on our part. You don't have to worry about how it will be done. All you have to do is to show up at the right time and the right place, and the nurses and doctors will do the rest.

But there is another kind of transfusion which is needed from time to time, and which is not nearly that simple. I am thinking now of those situations where someone desperately needs a fresh supply of courage, or hope, or strength. There are people who are the victims of a spiritual anemia, and we watch them pit their waning strength against problems and situations which threaten to overwhelm them. We wish that we could somehow give them something that would restore their self-confidence, their faith, or even their will to live. But it is never easy. Perhaps the hardest thing we are ever called upon to do is to help another human being. Oh, we can always help them on a superficial level. If they need money, we can give it to them, or at least help to raise the necessary sum. If they need a character reference, we can usually find a way to sum up their good qualities. If they need someone to run an errand, we can always find time to do that. But whenever we try to help people at the deeper levels of their being, we discover that we are up against one of the hardest jobs in the world.

Take, for example a young man who is floundering. He cannot decide what he wants to do with his life; he does not seem to have discovered any purpose or faith to live by. A sense of values seems to be virtually non-existent for him. You know that unless someone is able to penetrate beneath that protective shell and find a responsive chord, he is headed for unhappiness. Ah, but how do you do it? How do you get through to him? Or take a man who has lost his self-confidence. He is not longer sure of himself; he has lost his touch, we say, "He no longer feels that he is needed or that his life counts for anything." What he needs more than anything else at the moment is to be able to believe in himself, but how in the world do you go about giving a man that kind of transfusion? Or, take someone who is filled with remorse and a sense of guilt, and feels no assurance that God loves him or that God will ever forgive him for whatever it is that he associates with his guilt feelings. Maybe

the thing that he worries about seems like a very minor matter to you, but it is not minor to him. You know that God's grace is greater than all his guilt, imagined or real, but he does not know it. How are you going to give him a transfusion of faith in the love and the mercy of the Almighty? Or take just one more example—someone who is caught in the clutches of depression. He seems to be bogged down in a veritable swamp of despair. He has lost all interest in the future; he sees no help coming to him from any direction; he is not aware of any divine grace surrounding his life; it seems to him as if God has shut his ears to his prayers. How do you restore his faith and his joy in living?

One of the most popular correspondents during World War II was Ernie Pyle, who survived the European campaign only to be cut down by a sniper's bullet in the South Pacific. His dispatches, which were characterized by an intimacy and an attention to commonplace details, were eagerly read by people who had loved ones overseas. But Ernie Pyle's own life was miserable and unhappy; his marital situation was a shambles; he dreaded the day when the war would be over and he would have to go home again. In one of his several diaries, discovered after his death, he wrote, "If anyone has any light, for God's sake shine some in my direction. . . God knows I've run out of light." How do you give a transfusion to someone who needs light in the dark corners of his own mind and soul?

I. First of all, you have to care for the person you are trying to help.

Now that is not true when it comes to an ordinary blood transfusion. Your personal feelings do not really enter into the transaction. You can give blood to a total stranger; you can give blood to someone you actually despise or resent. The only thing that matters is that your blood type be the same as theirs. But when you try to give a

transfusion of courage, or hope, or faith to someone else, you cannot do it unless first of all you care for that person.

Dan Walker told a story once about a girl who was riding with her boyfriend on a streetcar. It was a very cold day, and she was feeling depressed. "Nobody loves me," she complained, "and my hands are cold." "You shouldn't say that," her boyfriend replied, "God loves you, and your mother loves you, and you can sit on your hands!" Well, that wasn't exactly the answer she was looking for. You can always sit on your hands to keep them warm, but that is a far cry from having someone who really cares for you reach out to take hold of your hand.

One of the fundamental conditions for a successful transfusion of the kind we are thinking about is a genuine compassion and concern for the person you are seeking to help. It can't be feigned. If you do not feel that compassion, you may be the best actor in the world, but your indifference will betray you to the person who needs help. People are almost always more sensitive than we realize. But by the same token, when you do have compassion for the person needing help, that fact will also become apparent. You do not have to worry about how you are going to communicate your love. Unconsciously on your part, the love will manage to communicate itself. One of my colleagues tells about leaving a hospital room one day, where a small child was seriously ill. As he walked down the corridor with the mother, the woman said, "You know, when I went into Mary's room this afternoon, I asked her how she felt. She answered, 'Let me look at you, mother.' I turned and smiled at her and she said, 'I'm feeling better today, mother. I can always tell how I am by the way you look.'" Oh, there is a sensitivity between us that communicates without the necessity of language.

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Now if you do not really care for the person you are trying to help, you can observe all the proper rituals of counseling and say all the right things at the right moment, and still fail miserably. And by the same token, when you do care deeply for the person you are trying to help, you may not know the first principle of good counseling, and you may make blunders that would drive a psychologist to despair, and still achieve the thing that needs to be done. You see, this quality of love and compassion lies at the very root of the transaction. It is basic to everything else. And in a very real sense, it puts the burden on the counselor. It means that it is not just enough to want to help people; we have to want to help them for the right reasons.

One of the great men of our century was Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Some years ago he was in England to receive a high honor from the Queen for his humanitarian work. The next day there appeared a notice in the papers of Europe that for five days he would be available at the rear of a little second-rate restaurant on an out-of-the-way street in London, and anyone who so desired could come to him without an appointment and discuss with him their mutual interests and concerns. On the last day, the man who was trying to direct traffic said, "Dr. Schweitzer, why do you spend your brief holiday this way?" "Because," the great man answered, "I believe more people are led to God through kindness than any other way!"

The Apostle Paul, who more than once managed to give transfusions of hope and courage to Christians of the first century, has something to say about the essential quality of love in one of his best known letters. He said that one could be a great orator, but if he lacked love, his oratory would be empty and meaningless. One could be a great humanitarian, and give everything he had to feed and clothe the poor, but lacking love, it was a hollow gesture. One could be a brave hero, and even give his body to be burned for

the faith, but unless he had love, it amounted to little. We could go on, I think, to add our own experience to his, saying that even if one were to spend all he had in trying to inspire and encourage his fellowmen, it would be a meaningless venture without love.

How do you give a transfusion of courage? Well, to begin with, you have to care for the person you are trying to help.

II. The second thing to be said is that you can only share what you have.

In order to be a blood donor, you must have an adequate and healthy blood supply of your own. It is not enough just to care for the person who needs the transfusion. This is true when it comes to a transfusion of courage, or hope, or faith. You can never give what you don't have. The man who has been careless about his own spiritual vitality will scarcely be in a position to nourish someone else. The man who leads an undisciplined life can hardly expect to be ready for the emergency when someone needs help from him.

Dr. Spurgeon was one of the great preachers of a bygone generation. Recently, an eminent German theologian and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, published a book entitled Encountered with Spurgeon, in which he has assembled some of the great preacher's notes and lectures on preaching. In a foreword to the book, he has an interesting passage describing Spurgeon's own personal discipline. "It is characteristic of the nature of his preaching," he writes, "that despite the turbulence of a successful life in which he was surrounded by crowds of people, he did not allow himself to become swamped with externals and consumed with busy-ness. Instead, he immersed himself in the quietness of prayer and meditation, receptively filling his mind and soul, and then went forth recreated from these quiet hours to pour himself out without

reserve. Hence the temptation of becoming the star preacher and enjoying the respect and adulation of men held no attraction for him. Neither did he become a ‘soloist.’ Instead, as a serving member of the church, he sought out the ‘ensemble’ in which to work. It was there that he radiated his spirit, in order to impart not only the effects of his gifts but also the gifts themselves, and not in order merely to attract people to the greatness of his own personality.”

As I read that description of Spurgeon, I could not help but be reminded of another preacher who resisted the temptation of becoming a “star” and merely attracting people to the greatness of his own personality. I refer, of course, to Jesus. He, too, had a way of sharing not only the effects of his marvelous gifts, but the gifts themselves. This is how a transfusion takes place. We must be willing to share what we have, and we can never share what we do not have, ourselves. The person who takes no time to nourish their own faith, will have very little faith to share with another. The person who feeds on the adulation of people is not likely to have much courage and strength to impart to others.

It is not so much a matter of our credentials as of our own inner resources. We sometimes make the assumption that because of his office, or training, or status, a person is able to perform this ministry. But that is a faulty assumption. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead has a great story from the days when he was a British soldier, serving in Mesopotamia. It was before he began his theological training and distinguished career as minister of City Temple. He was in the hospital, and he tells in a sermon about a chaplain and a nurse. “When I was lying in the hospital, I used to be visited with painful conscientiousness by a chaplain, whose denomination I will not reveal. He would come and stand at the end of the bed and look at me out of the most doleful eyes I ever saw in a long face. After a

while he would say, ‘Well, Captain Weatherhead.’ Then I would say, ‘Well.’ Finally he would manage, through a desperate effort, to draw the conversation around to religion. After a time whenever he came into the ward, I would pretend to be asleep. I suspect he was as relieved as I was not to have to talk to me. Working on the same ward was a little nurse, who though she said an occasional damn when she dropped the thermometer, nevertheless managed to keep a cheerful countenance, even in temperatures of 115 degrees. The officer in the next bed to me used to discuss with me a fascinating question. Did I think that the mournful parson would go to heaven? Because for himself, he would rather go to hell with the cheerful nurse than to heaven with the mournful parson. In this I fully agreed with him. Neither was much like Jesus, but of the two, the nurse had it easily.”

Sometimes the most effective transfusions are provided from the unlikeliest sources, simply because it is not so much who you are, but what you have to share, that makes your ministry efficacious.

III. That brings me to the third and final thing that I want to say, which is simply, you can only give a transfusion when you, yourself, are willing to bleed a little.

There is always the element of sacrifice in a successful transfusion. There is no way to remain aloof from the person you want to help. There is no way to evade their anxiety, their depression, their sadness. Unless you can feel that with them, they will never be able to feel your faith and joy and confidence. One of the most poignant stories I have heard is that of a little boy who was giving a transfusion to his brother, who was critically ill. In all the hurry and pressure, no one thought to take time to explain to him what he was doing. He was wheeled into his brother’s room on a cot. The nurses inserted the needle and tube into his arm, and then extended it to his

brother's arm. The little boy had not said a word during all of the preparation, until finally he looked up at the doctor with wide eyes, and asked in a shaky little voice, "When do I croak, Doc?" He thought that he was being asked to give his life for his brother. But he was not far from the mark. There is an element of sacrifice in the transaction that we are thinking about.

Thornton Wilder has written a play based on the story of the Pool of Bethesda. You remember that the Jews believed that those waters had healing qualities, but only at certain times when they were mysteriously roiled, and that unless a person got into the water at the right moment, they could not be helped. Wilder imagines a man who tries to get into those precious healing waters, but is held back by an angel. The angel says, "Stand back, please, healing is not for you. Without your wounds, where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. Not the angels themselves can persuade the wretched and blinded men as can one human being who has been almost broken on the wheel of living. In love's service, only the wounded can serve."

The man turns sadly away from the pool, his path blocked, but as he goes back toward the crowd a man steps forward and says, "Perhaps, friend, it will be your turn next time; but meanwhile, please come home with me to my house. My son is lost in dark thoughts, I don't understand him, and only you have been able to raise his spirits. And as for my daughter, since her child died, she sits in the shadows and won't listen to me . . . please come with me for just an hour!"

Oh, it is true, in love's service only the wounded can serve. When we see someone who needs our help, someone who is dear to us, we can never really give them a life-bringing transfusion of faith

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and hope and courage until we ourselves are willing to bleed a little. Unless we can feel their anxiety, their sense of frustration, their hopelessness, there will be a barrier between us that will effectively interpose itself and stop the healing flow.

Well, those seem to me to be the basic conditions of giving a transfusion. You have to care for the person you seek to help. You must have something of your own to share. And you have to be willing to bleed a little yourself, if you are going to effectively reach the one you are trying to help.

But what if you have done all of this, and still seem to have failed in your endeavors? All I can say is that there is a point at which life, or nature, must take over, and using the additional resources that you have been able to introduce, begin the healing process. So it is in the process of a spiritual transfusion. You cannot effect the healing yourself. Only God can do that. All that you or I can hope to do is to lend our own resources to provide a margin of strength until the one we want to help is able to recuperate.

God moves in mysterious ways that we do not always comprehend. Dr. Nels Ferre tells about hearing once of a Southern Baptist minister who was being severely criticized for his theological and social views, to the point of persecution. Ferre had never met him, but had only heard about him. He began to pray for the man, and sent him a postcard, trying to encourage him. Some years later, when he was teaching at Oxford, Mississippi, the doorbell rang, and this man stood there. He said, "I had to come by to thank you. I had gotten to the place where I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown, and my wife and I had agreed that I could not continue in the ministry. We were sitting discouraged in the living room, and I went to the mailbox, and there was your card. God wiped the windshield clean. And I started over again!"

HOW TO FIND A GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL FITNESS AND OTHER WRITINGS

This is how it happens. We offer our help, but God brings the healing.

Chapter 22: How to Trim a Feeble Lamp

There is an old hymn which some of you may remember. It goes like this.

Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From His lighthouse evermore,
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning,
Send a gleam across the wave,
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

I was reminded of that hymn when I had the chance to visit Miami. It was already dark when we arrived at our hotel, and when the bellhop had installed us in our room, I asked him in which direction was the ocean. Instead of answering immediately, he simply pulled the drapes on one wall, revealing a door that led out onto a little porch. He said, "It's right out there." Sure enough, as we walked out onto that porch, we could see the surf breaking on the beach below us. After three years of living on the prairies in Nebraska, it was good to be that close to the ocean again, and to feel the salt air and hear the waves pounding out their rhythm on the beach. That first night, as I stood there, I became aware of some very small lights, a long way off shore. Some of them seemed stationary, and I could see that others were moving slowly across the horizon. It was a dark night, and the wind was blowing, and those lights would sometimes disappear from view and then re-appear, almost as if

they were trying to signal to us. I knew of course that they were from ships, some of which were lying out there waiting for daybreak, in order to come into the harbor, and others were heading north or south.

There is something mysterious and romantic about the lights of a ship, at night, across the waves. If you are like me, you find yourself wondering what kind of a ship it is, how big a crew it carries, what its homeport is, and where it is headed. I suppose that it is my Scandinavian ancestry, but there is something in me that responds to those ships that pass in the night.

When you have a mind that is homiletically conditioned, you can't experience something like that without beginning to draw parallels to our human situation. And so I found myself thinking about the words of that old hymn, "Let the lower lights be burning, send a gleam across the waves. . ." That is precisely what we, as Christians, are called upon to do.

There is a great deal of darkness in this world in which we live. I'm not thinking now about nocturnal darkness, which means simply that the sun has gone down. I'm thinking about the darkness that has settled in around the lives and affairs of so many people. Sometimes it is a darkness that comes from unrequited grief and sorrow. Sometimes it is the darkness of misunderstanding and bitterness. Sometimes it comes from frustration, and the feeling that life has dealt less than fairly with us. Sometimes it is the much deeper darkness of serious emotional disorders, or deep-seated problems that bewilder and confuse us. There is more darkness in the world than some of us may realize. The man who wrote that hymn would probably have lumped it altogether under one category, the darkness of sin. I am sure that sometimes we have oversimplified the problem, by calling it sin, but by the same token

there is an element of sin in our darkness which some of us would rather not confront. We are in the dark because barriers have come between us and God!

And it is in this world, where the darkness is sometimes so thick that you could almost cut it with a knife, that we are called upon to project light. The Quakers have a marvelous saying, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," and Leonard Griffith has amplified on it. He says,

The Christian does exactly that. In the darkness of duplicity, he lights a candle of honor; in the darkness of prejudice, he lights a candle of tolerance; in the darkness of luxury, he lights a candle of modesty; in the darkness of suffering, he lights a candle of courage.

This is our calling as Christians, and I think sometimes that it can be frightening to contemplate the density of the darkness and the frailty of our little light.

The question that I want to address is how to trim a feeble lamp. We are under no illusions about the darkness, because we see it all around us. We know that there may be people who depend on us, literally, for guidance and encouragement and morale. Furthermore, we know that our own lives at best are not brilliant. How can we ever measure up to the responsibility that rests upon us? How can we trim our feeble lamps?

I. Let me begin by saying first of all, that we have to be willing to confess that the lamp is feeble.

Unfortunately, there are some people who either do not recognize it, or will not admit it. It hurts their pride to admit that they don't have all the answers, or that they cannot overcome the darkness by themselves. The lamp will never be trimmed unless a person is

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willing to concede that it needs it, and that it sometimes burns dangerously low.

It is a healthy thing for a person to be able to acknowledge their own frailties. You may have heard about the Boy Scout who confidentially asked one of the other members of his Troop, “Do you ever have days when you feel just a little untrustworthy, disloyal, helpless, unfriendly, discourteous, unkind, grumpy, cowardly, dirty, and irreverent?” Well, I don’t know what the other boy’s answer was, but I know that we all have days like that. In other words, we may not be heroic twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There may be times when we are plagued by temptations that we would never want to admit to another person. The light that is in us may be dim, and almost out. And we would be healthier as individuals, and our light would be more effective in the darkness, if we could only concede the truth to ourselves.

When Leslie Weatherhead made his final report as the outgoing President of British Methodism, he suggested that one possible reason for the lack of relevance and effectiveness of the pulpit was that ministers preached the ideal of the gospel and not their own experience of it. If they would preach what they know, they would no longer discourage laymen by false implications that while the laymen fail to find glorious and constant victories of faith in their personal lives, the ministers do so. He thought the ministers should tell the truth about their mental and spiritual failures and doubts, their sins and their sorrows.

Well, that was a great testimony from a man who has seemed to his generation like a Rock of Gibraltar in the Christian faith. He was confessing that he too was a man, with human limitations, and that he understood the problems of others for whom the lamp has flickered low.

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It reminds me of something that Robert Benchly once said. He said that after twenty-five years of writing, he discovered that he had no talent for it, but by then he had become so famous that he couldn't quit. There are Christians like that. They have saintliness, and they do not dare to admit to themselves, let alone anyone else, that there have been moments of doubt and anxiety. And yet, how much more effective our light would be, if people in trouble knew that we too had experienced what they are now experiencing.

The late Dean Inge of St. Paul's Cathedral kept a diary for many years and portions of it were published after his death. Every New Year he was in the habit of taking inventory of his own spiritual life, and his entry for 1925 is especially interesting. He wrote,

This has been a happy year. I am treated with great consideration, but sometimes I fear that I am beginning to run dry. I preach too many old sermons touched up, and accept too many invitations. My devotional life is not what it should be. I do not meditate enough on the great things!

I don't know what that means to you, but I can hardly describe what it means to an ordinary preacher like myself. Dean Inge was one of the greatest Churchman that England has ever produced, a profound scholar and a mighty Christian. And yet, on New Year's Eve, as he looked back over the preceding year, he was ready to concede that it left much to be desired, and he was resolved to trim his own feeble lamp. Do you see what that can mean to another minister? It means that there is not something abnormally or unusually wrong with his ministry. Those pressures and frustrations that they feel have been shared by someone whose own light was brilliant and effective.

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This is the first thing to be said: no one ever trims a feeble lamp, until they have brought themselves to the place where they are willing to concede that it is feeble.

II. Now the second thing I want to say is that some of us need to recognize that ours is not the only light along the shore.

There are too many people who seem to believe that they have the only light there is. They don't have time to trim their light, or to take care of the routine disciplines and responsibilities of light keeping, because somehow or other, they feel the total weight of all the darkness on their own shoulders. I want to suggest that it is a great comfort to know that I don't have the sole responsibility for the light in this world, and that if my lamp grows feeble, it does not mean that the darkness has finally won.

The late Alben Berkley, who was famous as a storyteller, had one story that he loved to tell about an indispensable man. He was a tradesman in a small town in Barkley's home state of Kentucky, who bought a quantity of goods from a Paducah wholesaler and then did not pay the bill when it was due. After six months had gone by, the innumerable requests for payment had been ignored, the wholesaler sat down and wrote a letter demanding immediate payment. At the same time, he addressed several other inquiries to the town where the tradesman operated. He wrote the local bank president, inquiring about the man's credit. Finally he wrote the mayor of the town, asking the name of a good lawyer, in case he had to bring legal suit to recover.

In a few days he received a letter from the debtor himself, which read, "Dear Sir: As station agent of this town, I am glad to advise you that the goods were delivered. As president of the local bank, it gives me pleasure to inform you that my credit is good. As mayor

of the town, I am compelled to advise you that I am the only lawyer here. And if it were not the fact that I am also the pastor of the Baptist Church, I would tell you where you can go!”

That, Berkley used to say was as close to anyone could come to being an indispensable man! Well, we are not indispensable in the sense that all light, and honor, and truth, and courage, and decency resides in us. You may sometimes feel that way and some of us manage to give others that impression, but it is not true. You are only one of the lights along the shore, and when the time comes to trim your little light, God will manage to keep His witness alive in our society.

For some reason or other, Christians are apt to feel this way. Sometimes we seem to think that we are competing with other light, rather than with the darkness! Even within the Christian family, we sometimes act as though our particular denomination or sect has a monopoly on the light. We are suspicious of the Presbyterians, or the Unitarians, or the Episcopalians. As Protestants, we are suspicious of the Catholics, and many Catholics are suspicious of Protestants. As Christians, we are suspicious of Jews. Those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition are leery of other religious backgrounds and traditions. We do not understand that God may have more light to offer this world than just that which happens to shine through our particular theological position.

For that matter, as Christians today we are discovering that sometimes the light shines in the social darkness, even through people who make no profession of Christian faith. One morning when I preached in Miami, I made some reference to the race question and Christian brotherhood, and a few hours later, a woman who had been present at the service came up and introduced herself. She said that she was from Philadelphia, Mississippi, which is

where a triple slaying occurred. She no longer lived there, and I was encouraged to know that having moved to another state, she discovered that she was beginning to see the problem in a different light. But in our conversation, she mentioned the Oberlin students who spent their summer rebuilding churches that had been burned in Mississippi. She told me something that I had not heard before. The faculty advisor who accompanied those students on their church-building project, according to her, was an atheist. That bothered her, and it made the project look a little suspicious. It was rather surprising bit of news, to think of an atheist voluntarily giving his time to the rebuilding of churches. But my reaction was different from hers, I guess. My feeling was that we could use more atheists like that! I am convinced that God would be more pleased with an atheist who tried to rebuild churches, than with a Christian who sets fire to them!

Just because we call ourselves Christians does not mean that we have a monopoly on the light in our world! And somehow, when I realize that, it lends encouragement to me, and makes me better able to trim my own feeble lamp.

III. But there is a third and final thing. The light which we project in this world is not something we generate from within, but something that by God's grace is reflected through us.

There is a great story from the early days of the National Broadcasting Company. One day, in the great volume of mail that flowed into NBC, there was a strange letter from a rancher out in Idaho. His violin was out of tune. He was isolated, too far out in the hills to make a special trip to town just to tune the old violin. He was not blessed with perfect pitch, and there was no way to tune the instrument accurately. But he had a great idea. He wrote the officials of NBC in New York City, explaining his predicament.

Then he said, “Would you, please, during your Sunday afternoon symphony pause long enough in the program to have the pianist strike an A?” And so it happened. One never to be forgotten Sunday afternoon, with the whole country listening, the program was interrupted long enough for the pianist to meet the strange request, by striking an A, allowing the Idaho rancher to get his fiddle back in tune.

Oh, there are times when we have to trim our feeble lamp, and we wonder how we will do it. Our own resources are so limited, and we are so overwhelmed by the forces of darkness. But, you see we don’t have to generate the light that overcomes darkness. It comes from God. It will be reflected through us, to reach out to those who struggle and faint, with encouragement, guidance, and sustenance. In a troubled home situation, where little disagreements and grievances have been allowed to fester and develop until we feel helpless, we don’t have to possess the wisdom and grace to set things right. We can let ourselves be used by God to do that. In a troubled community, where social problems are composed of complex and deep-rooted involvements, we cannot possibly be wise enough or good enough in ourselves to dispel the darkness. But God can, if we will allow ourselves to be used by him. The light comes from God, not from us, and it is a light that heals, and restores, and saves people from despair.

Perhaps you have heard that old story about the tourists who were being conducted through one of the caves in the Southwest. They were standing together in an area, where the guide was accustomed to turning the lights off suddenly to give people the experience of the total darkness that prevails under the earth’s surface. A little girl who was in the party was so frightened that she began to cry, and then they heard her brother comforting her. He was saying, “Don’t

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cry, Susie. There's someone here who knows how to turn on the lights."

Oh, that's the good news of our Gospel. Don't cry; there is Someone here who knows how to turn on the lights. We sometimes feel as though we are drifting across a sea of darkness -- the darkness of duplicity, the darkness of prejudice, the darkness of sorrow, the darkness of fear. Our lamp is feeble, and the light has all but gone out. That's when we need to remember the words of the old hymn, "Brightly beams our Father's mercy, From His lighthouse evermore; But to us He gives the keeping, Of the lights along the shore."

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