

## CHAPTER I THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

### Life as Journey

There have always been observations that life is a process consisting of stages. Jaques' celebrated observations in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* "reflect a philosophical and iconographic tradition that had its roots in antiquity and was still flourishing in Shakespeare's time":<sup>11</sup>

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms  
And then the whining school-boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwilling to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined.  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends with strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The adult stage of life was often seen as a single stage after education, the entry into marriage and adult responsibilities. As an adult one's development was essentially complete, except for the physical decline characteristic of the aging process. Roger Gould well expresses this:

Like a butterfly, an adult is supposed to emerge fully formed and on cue after a succession of developmental stages of childhood .... Equipped with ... wisdom and rationality, the adult

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<sup>11</sup>. Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, NY: Methuen, 1981, p. 1.

supposedly remains quiescent for another half century or so. While children change, adults only age.<sup>12</sup>

With this perspective it would be hard to view adult life as a going somewhere, a journey. However, there is no century such as ours that has so consciously and analytically explored and theorized about the stages of development, and most of this over the last twenty years. Though psychological and sociological studies initially focused on the development of children, Jung, Erikson and others<sup>13</sup> view all of the adult period of life not as physical decline or a journey away from world and life, but as having its own tasks and opportunities.

In various ways the image of journey will be suggested for spiritual development. Though other images may be chosen, it is important to have an image of life to live with, a symbol which has its own energy and ability to provide a structure for experience but which may also grow and be transformed by experience. Above all it should not be a rigid symbol which tells one what one has experienced or should experience. A woman who is a mother and professional found helpful the image of a wheel with a hub. God was the hub out of which and around which her many activities moved. This, she felt, better described the complexity and non-directionality of her experience than "journey" would. The image of improvisation will also be treated briefly as another alternative.

In some of the great spiritual classics adult life has been understood as an internal journey, such as in Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*,<sup>14</sup> or a journey from this world to the next, involving a growing detachment from the world. The issues of these journeys lay in the difficulties one encountered within or without, for both these worlds were fraught with dangers and temptations which dissuade one from the true journey.

A good portrayal of the journey from this world to the next is the great spiritual classic, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the spiritual formation course I use this as a paradigm, as expressed in Ralph Vaughan Williams' opera *Pilgrim's Progress*. This beautiful presentation occupied Vaughan Williams from 1904 to 1949. This brief description cannot do it justice. In his portrayal of the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City he makes some changes, "because I want the idea to be universal and to apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life..."<sup>15</sup> Thus his hero he calls "Pilgrim" rather than "Christian." He also adds a number of biblical texts in the opera for which he creates musical settings.

Pilgrim sets upon the journey with a book in his hand that condemns him and a burden upon his back. Directed upon his way by Evangelist, he is met by four neighbors who seek to persuade him against the journey: Pliable, Obstinate, Mistrust and Timorous. Pilgrim stumbles up to the cross before the House Beautiful. Three "Shining Ones" take the burden from his back and lay it upon the Sepulchre. Interpreter opens the gate and invites him in to rest in a chamber called "peace." Interpreter marks him on the forehead, sealing him with the Holy Spirit, and removes from him the garment of mourning, replacing it with a white robe. Here Vaughan Williams inserts a lovely nocturne for the sake of a scene change, but which expresses Pilgrim's faith in the Lord of his journey:

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12. Roger Gould, "Adult Life Stages: Growth Toward Self-Tolerance," *Psychology Today*, Feb. 1975, p. 78. Quoted in Kenneth Stokes, *Faith Is A Verb*, Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989, p. 51

13. See discussions of this in chapters seven and eight.

14. See chapter four for a discussion of the Spanish mystics which includes Teresa of Avila and the *Interior Castle*.

15. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, London Philharmonic, Sir Adrian Boult, EMI SLS 959 Stereo.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. ....

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord, who had made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; he that keepeth thee shall neither slumber nor sleep. ....

Pilgrim then sets his name down for the journey with Herald, who registers it, and then Herald, Pilgrim and the chorus carry on a dialogue for which a hymn serves as background:

Who would true valour see  
Let him come hither.  
One here will constant be,  
Come wind, come weather,  
There's no discouragement  
Shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent  
To be a pilgrim.

Pilgrim is then equipped with the armour of light, the shield of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the Spirit, and proceeds to the narrow Valley of Humiliation where rules Apollyon, the "Destroyer", the prince of this world. The two struggle in mortal combat, from which Pilgrim comes wounded and is ministered to by two heavenly beings. Branch Bearer brings him the leaves of Eden's tree of life for his healing and Cup Bearer brings him the water of life. Evangelist equips him with the staff of salvation, the roll of the word, and the Key of promise.

Pilgrim then proceeds to the Town of Vanity where Vanity Fair is in process. Here he is confronted by Lord Lechery and women from the brothel, such as Madam Wanton and Madam Bubble. He is exhorted to buy while he can for "nothing endures." "The world is all substance, Time nothing but days, Life's what you get for it ..." The chorus confirms: "Vanity! Vanity! All is Vanity! All is Vanity Fair!"

Lord Hate-Good and the citizens of Vanity condemn Pilgrim to death and while in prison he remembers the Key of Promise which opens the lock of his cell.

Near Delectable Mountains he meets a boy cutting wood, who reminds him:

He that is down need fear no fall,  
He that is low, no pride;  
He that is humble ever shall  
Have God to be his Guide.

Mister and Madam By-Ends would share his pilgrimage, but they do not accompany him for his commitment is too radical. They are from the town of Fair-Speech and have such kinsmen as Lord Turn-about, Lord Time-server, Mister Smooth-man, Mister Facing-bothways, and the parson is Mister Two-Tongues. Then shepherds care for him and remind him of the protection of God. In a very lovely passage the Voice of a Bird sings Psalm 23.

Then a messenger arrives:

Hail Pilgrim.  
I bring thee tidings that the Master calleth for thee, and expecteth that thou shouldst stand in

his presence this day in clothes of immortality. I give you herewith a token that I am a true messenger, and bid you make haste to be gone. An arrow with the point sharpened with love, let easily into thy heart, that at the time appointed thou must be gone.

Shepherds annoint him for death, and he plunges into the deep waters of the River of Death behind which lies the Celestial City. While Pilgrim prays that the deep not swallow him up, shepherds and chorus sing:

Be not thou far from him, O Lord. Thou art his succour, haste thee to help him. When thou passest through the waters, He will be with thee, and the rivers they shall not overflow thee. Be not thou far from him, O Lord.

When Pilgrim reaches the Celestial City there is a distant trumpet, and two choruses begin to sing, "Alleluia," while soloists backstage respond:

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house, they will always be praising thee.

Behold thy Salvation cometh and his reward is with him.

Blessing and glory, honour and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, for ever and ever.

The singing fades. The opera began with Bunyan in prison, as if dreaming a dream. At the end it returns again to Bunyan:

Now hearer, I have told my dream to thee.  
See if thou can'st interpret it to me.  
Put by the curtains, look within my veil,  
Turn up my metaphors and do not fail,  
There if thou seekest them, such things to find  
As will be helpful to an honest mind.

This book will make a traveller of thee,  
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be.  
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,  
If thou wilt its directions understand.  
O, then come hither,  
And lay my book, thy head, and heart together.

When one listens, one cannot help but turn up one's metaphors and feel some deep call to "lay my book, thy head, and heart together." Though this journey sees the world and life in much too negative a perspective for most of us today and does not provide for the adult stage as a journey *into* life rather than *from* life, yet there are profound truths about God's care for those who journey through this world. And it is true that the final element of the journey is through the river of death to join God in another dimension. What a different perspective it places upon death to see death as "an arrow with the point sharpened with love, let easily into thy heart."

The biblical material is full of the image of journey. One only has to think of Abraham's venture for God in his journey from Ur of the Chaldees, of Moses leading his people from Egypt through the wilderness to

the promised land, and of Jesus own journeys through his life, eventually to Jerusalem in a journey that took him through crucifixion back to God. The great twelfth chapter of Hebrews reminds us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Parable of the Prodigal**

The parable of the prodigal in Luke 15 is, from my perspective, the heart of the Christian Gospel. It is the story of a Father (God) who calls his children to the developmental process by which they may return to him. This is a journey, but it is not to somewhere. Rather is it to Someone. It is not even to somewhere or someone that we have never known or is distant. It is a journey to One who is present. The Father was always at home, waiting, in the heart of the world and in our hearts: a home which is our home. Thus the journey is a *returning* to the home for which we long, the home where we were born and yet from which we fled.

The Parable of the Prodigal is misnamed because it is really about two sons and a father, the father being the central character in the story. Though one may call the younger son "prodigal", so also is the father since the father acts out of character with the customs of his community: he allows his sons a freedom and extends to them a love that the community would judge inappropriate and foolish. The younger son by asking for his share of the inheritance before the death of his father, has effectively wished his father dead, jeopardized his father's future economic security by depriving him of part of his property, and thoroughly embarrassed him before his friends. The older son, though he remained and assumed responsibilities, seems to have no understanding of the love of his father for him, was emotionally absent to his father, and publicly embarrasses him by refusing to act as host at the banquet held for his returned brother. How the neighbors must have nodded their heads at the seeming inability of the father to manage his two children. In a society that emphasizes dignity of the elder and the maintaining of face, the father risked a great deal. To be laughed at is the worst humiliation. The father was willing to endure this for his two sons. One hears no coercion in the story. The father is able to be present fully for his children apart from local custom without personally being destroyed, because he knows who he is and what he wishes to do: i.e. he does not waver, though he undoubtedly endured deep pain.<sup>17</sup>

The unique character of the action of the father is clearly illustrated by a parable, traced to Buddha, which portrays a father who receives his son back "little by little":

There was a householder's son who went away into a distant country, and while the father accumulated immeasurable riches, the son became miserably poor. And the son while searching for food and clothing happened to come to the country in which his father lived. And the father saw him in his wretchedness, for he was ragged and brutalized by poverty, and ordered some of his servants to call him.

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16. Heb. 12:1-2.

17. For many today there is difficulty in identifying God as "Father" because of childhood abuse or because of the patriarchal implications. And yet it must be remembered how radically this father separates himself from cultural roles and how radically he exists for his children.

When the son saw the place to which he was conducted, he thought, "I must have evoked the suspicion of a powerful man, and he will throw me into prison." Full of apprehension he made his escape before he had seen his father.

Then the father sent messengers out after his son, who was caught and brought back in spite of his cries and lamentations. Thereupon the father ordered his servants to deal tenderly with his son, and he appointed a laborer of his son's rank and education to employ the lad as a helpmate on the estate. And the son was pleased with his new situation.

From the window of the palace the father watched the boy, and when he saw that he was honest and industrious he promoted him higher and higher.

After some time he summoned his son and called together all his servants, and made the secret known to them. Then the poor man was exceedingly glad and he was full of joy at meeting his father.

Little by little must the minds of men be trained for higher truths.<sup>18</sup>

### The Context

Though in a sense the parable has its context in the whole of the Gospel and is related to Luke's understanding of the Gospel, the immediate context is Luke 15. This chapter contains three interrelated parables preceded by a brief historical setting. The tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes complained that "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Here it is important to keep in mind that "sinners" did not mean to the Pharisees "someone who has done something terribly wrong to someone". It merely meant someone who did not know or did not obey all the Law. Thus it was almost a synonym for the common and uneducated folk. The issue then was that Jesus associated with those who were regarded as unclean by the religious establishment. One must be kind to the Pharisees, however, because they felt that those who did not obey the Law were jeopardizing the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. This anxiety was augmented by the tragedies of Israel's history which they interpreted as due to Israel's unfaithfulness and impurity, much as an individual who experiences a number of tragedies wonders why "God is doing this to me", and tries to evade further tragedy.

To answer their accusation, Jesus replies with three parables which are cleverly arranged to move the Pharisees to confrontation with the central issues of the situation. The first two parables are told in such a way that the Pharisees would basically agree. One is about a lost sheep and another is about a lost coin. The point of each parable is essentially that "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents". The Pharisees, though rejecting contact with sinners, would have been willing to accept that a repentant sinner was a different matter. They could understand the joy of God and the religious community over one repentant. However, the third parable is different. Though the younger son plans to give to his father his half-hearted repentance, the father receives him before he gets a chance to repent and the joy of the father is not dependent on the repentance. The elder brother also fails the father by refusing his wishes, his proper place at the feast, and above all by not understanding his father's love. The father speaks of his love without asking repentance from either.

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<sup>18</sup>. Robert M. May, *Physicians of the Soul*, NY: Crossroad, 1982, p. 136.

Thus the father accepts both children prior to and without repentance. Whereas the Pharisees could agree with the first two parables, they could not with the third. We might wonder how long it took them to realize that the third was different from the first two, or whether they were nodding their heads in approval when suddenly they realized Jesus did not mean what they thought he meant. It is important to note that the older brother only enters as a significant character at the end of the story. Thus the Pharisees could not realize the direction of the parable until its end. His protestation of faithful service to his father and disowning of his brother make him the paradigm of the Pharisees. Suddenly, at the end of the story, they find themselves.

The stories of the younger and elder brothers are not finished in the parable. We don't know whether the younger came to truly relate to and understand his father and we don't know what the elder brother finally did. For the sinner and the Pharisee the parable is unfinished, for the listener must complete it. Thus the whole complex of introduction and parables leads to a climactic story in which the listeners find themselves and where the completion of the story is up to them. It is masterfully conceived.

### The Parable

What follows now will be an interpretation of the parable which is based in the parable, but which is also affected by contemporary response to the parable. It is an interpretation as I see it and respond to it. Perhaps this moves somewhat beyond the historical meaning, but that is what interpretation must always do to be a "creative remembrance" of the tradition about Jesus.<sup>19</sup> I will interpret the parable as not only speaking of younger and older brothers as separate persons, but as a part of each person, our personal styles sometimes being weighted in the direction of the younger or the elder.

The father is asked by the younger to give him his share of the property that would fall to him at the death of the father. He must be free to go away, to find himself, to express his inner drives and needs, to do all that he cannot under the wing of the father. The story says that the father then divided his property between "them" (the two). This means that he split his property, probably selling part of it or allowing the younger son to sell part of it. To fully understand this one must sense the feelings for property in the Ancient Near-East and its relationship to the ancestors from whom it had likely been inherited. The elder brother then became master of the rest. The text indicates that the father divided "his living", which makes clear that this act jeopardized his economic security. The fact that the rest of his property was given to the elder brother indicates that he really placed himself at the mercy of this son, of which the son, to his credit, did not take advantage. Thus the father risks his existence and because of his action publicly embarrasses himself before his community. This is the nature of his love. It is also important to note that the father is psychologically and spiritually free of his estate, able to divest himself of it. The children are of more value than the estate.

Why did the children have such difficulties with a father who loved them in this way? Why did they not realize his love sooner? One might guess that part of the reason is the developmental process of each person which necessitates some form of freedom and rebellion towards parents in order to gain identity. But part of the problem was the estate which provided the context for their life. This context included the opportunities and obligations of property, a community with its customs and restrictions, a family with its dreams, expectations and traditions. Our contexts, besides providing us with a home, may entrap us. They determine and limit what we become and present various types of issues. In real life one must live

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<sup>19</sup>. Creative remembrance is a term sometimes applied to the handling of the Jesus' tradition in the Johannine community, which has a consciousness of the Spirit's role in remembering the tradition : e.g. John 16:12-15.

somewhere, and the context into which we are born is never chosen, only given. New contexts, even if chosen (or fled to), present issues of their own, as the younger child discovered. The father was free of his context. He stayed in it by choice, but freed himself of it by divesting himself of it. He found a way of being himself in it. By being himself in it, he helped pose for his two children the most crucial question: what would they do with their father? For their home was not a place, but Him.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, at the conclusion of his highly autobiographical novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, describes the burden of context. The love which existed in his and in many a home is the love of expectation which by its demands smothers life. He says:

It would be difficult to persuade me that the story of the Prodigal Son is not the legend of a man who didn't want to be loved. When he was a child, everyone in the house loved him. He grew up not knowing it could be any other way and got used to their tenderness, when he was a child.

But as a boy he tried to lay aside these habits. He wouldn't have been able to say it, but when he spent the whole day roaming around outside and didn't even want to have the dogs with him, it was because they too loved him; because in their eyes he could see observation and sympathy, expectation, concern; because in their presence too he couldn't do anything without giving pleasure or pain. But what he wanted in those days was that profound indifference of heart which sometimes, early in the morning, in the fields, seized him with such purity that he had to start running, in order to have no time or breath to be more than a weightless moment in which the morning becomes conscious of itself.

The secret of that life of his which had never yet come into being, spread out before him. Involuntarily he left the footpath and went running across the fields, with outstretched arms, as if in this wide reach he would be able to master several directions at once. And then he flung himself down behind some bush and didn't matter to anyone. He peeled himself a willow flute, threw a pebble at some small animal, he leaned over and forced a beetle to turn around: none of this became fate, and the sky passed over him as over nature. Finally afternoon came with all its inspirations; you could become a buccaneer on the isle of Tortuga, and there was no obligation to be that; you could besiege Campeche, take Vera Cruz by storm; you could be a whole army or an officer on horseback or a ship on the ocean: according to the way you felt. If you thought of kneeling, right away you were Deodatus of Gozon and had slain the dragon and understood that this heroism was pure arrogance, without an obedient heart. For you didn't spare yourself anything that belonged to the game. But no matter how many scenes arose in your imagination, in between them there was always enough time to be nothing but a bird, you didn't even know what kind. Though afterward, you had to go home.

My God, how much there was then to leave behind and forget. For you really had to forget; otherwise you would betray yourself when they insisted. No matter how much you lingered and looked around, the gable always came into sight at last. The first window up there kept its eye on you; someone might be standing there. The dogs, in whom expectation had been growing all day long, ran through the hedges and drove you together into the one they recognized. And the house did the rest. Once you walked in to its full smell, most matters were already decided. A few details might still be changed; but on the whole you were already the person they thought you were; the person for whom they had long ago fashioned a life, out of his small past and their own desires; the creature belonging to them all, who stood



day and night under the influence of their love, between their hope and their mistrust, before their approval or their blame.<sup>20</sup>

Each person engages in a different life journey. For some the journey is more like the younger or the older brother, but there are ways in which we can identify with the experience of both. If we have not left home as the younger brother, there are parts of ourselves that long to be free of the responsibilities and constraints of context, to live our humanity and individuality to the fullest, experiencing what responsibility and limit have prevented. If we leave home and live with greater freedom, there are inner longings for the voices of childhood and the home to which we once belonged with its security and structure. *Fundamental to all human issues is the need to come to terms with the longing for a home and a foundational relationship.* Development leads us away from and returns us to this. The soul remains restless until returning, in some way, to the source from which it was born.

*The father loves each child and gives each the freedom to be what they can, but he cannot give them freedom they will not take nor adequately understand.* The father seems to realize, beyond the customs of his society, the need of his children to be themselves. But he also knows their need for his love and a "home". Thus he provides a place to be loved and come back to while each goes on a journey, the younger going physically away and the elder going psychologically away. Though the younger rehearses repentance, the father goes to meet him and sweeps him into his arms before he has a chance to repent and calls for a feast. He rejoices that his child is found. To the elder he says, "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." *That the father so loves his children gives them the power and freedom to complete the stories of their lives.* How their stories will be completed is up to them. The fact that the parable is not completed makes it certain that the father's love is not dependent upon an appropriate completion of the story. The father's love is only dependent on himself and remains part of his character. As Shakespeare says in a Sonnet: "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."

*If we see some of each child in us all, then we will understand how some of the issues of later life are determined by how we have earlier reacted to our context.* It has been indicated that in human development there is often a crisis in which we long for what we have not chosen or been allowed to choose. The one who has left home longs for the home that has been left. The one that has stayed longs for the freedom and life experiences missed.

The essential message of the parable is that whatever our issues, whatever the path we have taken, whatever we feel we have missed when we choose to re-view our life, whatever in us is incomplete, there is a home to come back to or rediscover. Because the father divested himself of the estate, the home is no longer the place to which we reacted. We are also called upon to divest ourselves of the issues related to our early life context. The home is not a place, but in the heart of the father. We are called upon to allow ourselves to be swept up by the arms of the father and clasped to his breast, as portrayed in oil so movingly by Rembrandt. This is the home from which our soul came forth into the world.

Perhaps one significance of the unfinished nature of the story is that for most of us the story is never finished. We never completely leave behind the influences of our childhood or the consequence of past choices, nor do we lose the ambiguity of our desire for structure and freedom. Moreover, the need continually to remake the choices we once made is never left behind. Life and its issues draw us to our home and draw us away from our home, and we constantly confuse life contexts with our home. But the

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<sup>20</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Vintage Books, Random House, 1989, pp. 107-109.

Father is always there. As we become more rooted in his heart, however we are drawn away, we carry him in ours. And home becomes where we are.

At some point in our journey to the Father we need to begin to become for others what the Father is for us. This is part of our maturing and what is meant by "love." I have been intrigued with the way some, in meditation upon this parable, are drawn to identify with the Father. A friend said to Henri Nouwen, "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Call to Journey**

One finds in the New Testament a call to journey expressed in the commissions which Jesus presents to his disciples at the end of the Gospels.

When we think of the commission of Jesus to his disciples, we often frame our understanding in terms of the Matthaean "Great Commission" or perhaps the words of the ascending Jesus in Acts 1:8. It is my conviction that each of the Gospels ends with some presentation of the commission while in the body of each preserving materials supportive of its understanding. How then did the communities and individuals behind the New Testament Gospels understand this?

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus, in a Galilean resurrection appearance, says to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.<sup>22</sup>

This universal mission in Matthew is seen as a post-resurrection mission. According to Matthew, Jesus previously had told his disciples: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>23</sup> Thus Israel receives the message first and the Gentiles, later. This is similar to the discussion between the leaders of the Jerusalem Church and Paul in Galatians 2 as to whom they should first go to, the Jews or the Gentiles. Although Matthew uses Markan materials descriptive of Jesus' mission in Gentile areas (Mark 7; Matthew 15), he does not understand its significance as Jesus leading his disciples into experience of the Gentile mission.

According to Matthew Jesus first speaks of the authority given him out of which he commissions the eleven to make disciples of all nations. That is to take the form of baptizing the nations in the name of the Triune God and teaching them what Jesus has commanded them. He then promises to be with them to the close of this age when the Kingdom of God will come. Scholars have pointed out that the Gospel of Matthew and the form of this commission seem to reflect the practices of the later first century church and of a particular Christian community.<sup>24</sup> There is no role for the Spirit here as there is in Luke, except for

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21. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, N.Y: Doubleday, 1992, p. 19. In this excellent presentation of the parable, and his meditation on Rembrandt's portrayal of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen presents us with a significant personal model for the spiritual journey.

22. Matthew 28: 18-20.

23. Matthew 10:5.

24. An analysis of the materials selected by Matthew and their perspective seems to indicate a religious community very similar to the mother Christian church in Jerusalem, as described in Acts, and the Jewish Essene community at Qumran.

the baptismal formula.<sup>25</sup> Jesus promises to always be with them. However, they seem to have thought of this as speaking of his continuing presence in some way within his community, through the transmission of his teaching and the authority given to the 11, or to Peter (Matthew 16:17ff). The parables in Matthew 25, added to the discourse about the end-time in Matthew 24, really imply Jesus' personal absence until his return at the end.

Because little role is given the Spirit in Matthew and because the presence of Jesus to the church in the here and now seems to be understood in terms of the preservation of what Jesus taught and commanded, transmitted by the church, the disciples' future consists of teaching others and gaining their commitment to the Jesus of the past, making them disciples of Jesus and his tradition. There is little sense of God (the Spirit) and the risen Lord Jesus moving with the church into the future in *new* ways. Life is seen as somewhat static, for all that one needs has already been given. One has the church and the teachings of Jesus and nothing more is needed than to convince people to accept and apply this. If one examines Matthew's perspective in the light of its implication for adult development, it means that one already has all that one needs. The adult task is to realize this and accept the disciplines which will enable it, such as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>26</sup> If any journey is implied, it is a journey which appropriates the past, lives responsibly with the past in the present, and hopes for a future which will be a realization of what Jesus taught. This is similar to the Pharisaic view of the Law which was created before the foundation of the world, anticipated in Abraham, given through Moses, interpreted by the prophets, and to be the instrument for the recreation of the world in the future.

In Luke the commission is found in 24:45-49 (reflected in Acts 1:8).

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You shall be witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."<sup>27</sup>

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Whereas Luke in Acts indicates a synagogal pattern of structure and life-style for the churches founded by Paul, he is clear that the Jerusalem pattern is quite different. Thus there seem to have developed different approaches to Christianity and Christian life based upon the background and differing convictions of those who were converted to Christianity. There were differences between various "branches" of early Christianity and differences within the same branch (note I John's description of the split that occurred in the Johannine community). Outside of Mark 16:16, part of an ending later added to Mark, there is no other Gospel in which baptism plays such a crucial role in the mission of the disciples. John 4:2 even notes that Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples did (perhaps an apologetic against baptism in a community that had ceased to practice baptism). The formula of baptism is also late, being triune rather than what we encounter elsewhere as baptism "in the name of Jesus". The emphasis on teaching what Jesus has commanded fits the Matthaean community's understanding of Jesus as the true teacher of the Father who brought a Law greater than that of Moses (Matt. 5:17ff).

25. In Matthew there is little role for the Spirit which appears primarily in passages borrowed from Mark and not in the distinctively Matthaean materials.

26. The Sermon on the Mount is regarded by modern scholarship to be a topical assemblage of the sayings of Jesus for the purpose of providing the community with a discipline.

27. The RSV translates vs. 48 as "You are witnesses of these things." However, as is often the case in Greek, the verb "to be" is not stated but left to be understood. In the light of the context the future tense makes best sense, thus meaning: "You shall be witnesses of these things." The verse following that then promises them the Spirit, expressing what is found in Acts 1:8: But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

The role of the Spirit as the empowerer of both Jesus and the church in Luke is well known, and in Acts the experience of the Spirit accompanies the preaching of the Gospel and empowers the journey of the church into the future..

This message is understood to have radical social implications, which is variously reflected in such passages as Luke's presentation of the Beatitudes (Luke 6) and Jesus' use of Isaiah to express his mission in Luke 4:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to  
preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release  
to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>28</sup>

For Luke the expression of the life of the Jerusalem Church as described in early Acts is probably the ideal of social transformation, the creation of God's new people. The mission to the Gentiles is not a post-resurrection phenomenon, as in Matthew, but the post-resurrection period is the time when the church struggles to come to terms with this universal mission, the Spirit driving the church into broadening arenas of mission as part of its journey. Though Luke sees the tradition of the past as being important (e.g. he has written a Gospel about Jesus), the dynamic center of the mission includes both tradition (what is born witness to) and the Spirit (the source of the witness' power and direction). Thus Luke is compelled to produce two works: one on the tradition of Jesus (the Gospel) and the other about the action of the Spirit in the journey of the church (Acts).

The Commission in John also has its own characteristics. Jesus appears to the disciples and sends them as his Father sent him, so that they may represent him as he represents the Father:

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.<sup>29</sup>

He then breathes on them and says:

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

The receiving of the Spirit seems to be understood differently than the Pentecost experience, which is alluded to in John in the Spirit sayings of chapters 14-16. Jesus makes himself present in his disciples so that their journey will be his. He gives his authority to his disciples to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness. This forgiveness results in the "life" of the Kingdom.

As his disciples move on their journey into the future, the Spirit will be their teacher, preparing them for situations not anticipated during Jesus historical ministry:

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<sup>28</sup>. Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>29</sup>. John 20:21.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.<sup>30</sup>

The commission is difficult to discover in Mark 16 because the early church made so many changes to the end of Mark since it lacked resurrection appearances, originally ending at 16:8. I understand the commission to be in vs. 7. Here the angel at the tomb reminds the disciples of what Jesus previously said in 14:27-28:

You will all fall away; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.

It would seem that the changes made to Mark 16 have also affected verse 7:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.

As the verse presently stands it has the angel tell the disciples that Jesus is going to Galilee first, they should go there and there they will see him -- thus following a tradition that resurrection appearances occurred in Galilee. However, when one reads Mark 14 it becomes evident that is not what the saying originally meant.<sup>31</sup> Jesus is the Shepherd who is stricken, and so his disciples are scattered like sheep. However, when he is raised up he will again go before them. To understand this one has to recognize that the Palestinian shepherd led the sheep by going before them rather than driving them from behind. Jesus has then promised to again lead his disciples. Galilee may be understood as his leading them back to the scene of their ministry, but since Galilee in Aramaic means "outskirts" or "limits", in the original Aramaic the saying of Jesus may mean more: "I shall go before you to the ends/limits." This is similar to the promise in Matthew to be with them to the close of the age. However, Jesus does not tell his disciples to teach his former commandments, but that he will lead them, implying that what they will do depends on what he will lead them to do

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30. John 16:12-13. There is a similar passage in John 14:25-26. The Johannine community then struggled out how this new revelation was to be related to what they knew of the historical Jesus, which struggle is reflected in I John.

31. It would seem that the phrase "there you will see him" may have been an early addition to vs. 7 so that the ending of Mark would now refer to a resurrection appearance. The same rationale seems to have been behind the addition of the longer (often printed as vs. 9-20) and shorter endings attested to in our manuscript tradition. However, the reference to a Galilean appearance immediately after the resurrection creates serious difficulties as to where the resurrection occurred, for John 20 and Luke 24 all refer to appearances in Judaea. Matthew follows the implication of the ending of Mark by speaking of a vague appearance in Galilee whose only significant content is the Great Commission. The solving of the problem of the ending of Mark does not then merely result in the discovery of a Commission there, but also helps to deal with the strange emergence of a tradition that Jesus appeared early in Galilee. John 21 recounts a late Galilean appearance after Judaeian appearances.

It should also be noted that the endings added to Mark include much more detailed information about the Commission, including the signs that will accompany belief: such as exorcism, tongues, handling serpents and drinking poison.

One must wonder then why Mark ended his Gospel as he did, without resurrection appearances and without any detailing of what the commission meant or what they were to do with it. It is my conclusion that Mark wanted to present at the end of the Gospel a situation existentially similar to that of the women when they heard the message from the young man (angel): "He is risen -- he goes before you." The women responded to the message, though unable to share it because of their fear, without yet having seen him and without yet knowing what to do. That is also our situation. We need to go behind as he goes before and discover.

Thus all of the Gospels, in fact the whole of the New Testament, reflect a consciousness that Jesus has given a mission and called to a journey. This mission and its implications are variously formulated according to the perceptions, context and experiences of various segments of early Christianity. The Matthaean community understood itself as given a mission by Jesus to call persons to discipleship of past tradition, Jesus' "commandments". The on-going presence of the resurrected Jesus was described as existing primarily within the tradition and authority given to the church.<sup>32</sup> Thus its mission could only be defined out of the past, in responsibility to the past. Its emphasis on "teaching" was characteristic of a church influenced by Pharisaic Judaism and with a tradition to transmit. Such a community would then have difficulty believing that new contexts called for contextual and sometimes new responses, and that *many of the answers to the future lay in the future with Jesus.*

The hesitancy of the Matthaean community to speak much of the activity of the resurrected Christ within the on-going history of the community was not only influenced by its theological stance, but is understandable as an historical issue. All of the New Testament traditions speak of the cessation of Jesus' resurrection appearances after a relatively short period of time. Paul knows that his experience of the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road was unusual.<sup>33</sup> Those segments of the early church which found religious experience to be a central aspect of their religious life, actually the majority, usually defined this as experience of the "Spirit". In this way they distinguished it from experience of the resurrected Christ. And yet they knew that the resurrected Christ sent the Spirit and was in the Spirit. In Gal. 4:6 Paul speaks of the Spirit of God's Son. In John 16:12-15 Jesus speaks to his disciples of "the Spirit of truth" who will guide them into all truth: the truth which is Jesus' and is ultimately derived from the Father. Thus Jesus in various ways came to them in the experience of the Spirit, but it was an experience more nebulous, less defined, more "spiritual". Consequently most of the early church that believed in the role of the Spirit had to struggle with how to relate this subjective experience to the objective historical traditions about Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

It is helpful for us that the early church struggled with the nature and definition of spiritual experience and recognized that "Christ in the Spirit in the world" was not always easy to discern. However, they were not willing to give up their faith in the living Christ in the world because of difficulties of discernment. They experienced the dynamic of the Spirit as well as believing in the presence of God and Christ within the world. The very ambiguity of identifying the Spirit with both the Father and the Son supported the relationship of the two. With faith in the Spirit much of the church then looked to God's/Christ's actions and leadings in the present to clarify mission and journey in the church's changing contexts. Life was to be defined not merely out of the past, but also out of the present and future.

The simple commission in the original Markan ending best expresses the modern journey of both individual Christians and the church. As Jesus said, when he is raised he will go before us into the world, unto its ends. We stand before this message as did the women at the tomb, hearing it with "trembling and astonishment". *Where Jesus is and what he intends we will only discover as we follow. That is to be our journey.*

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32. The Matthaean community, if one may judge from the parable of Jesus' identification with suffering humanity (24:31), may also have seen Jesus as present in those to whom they ministered.

33. I Cor. 15:8 - "as to one untimely born".

34. See, e.g., I Cor. 12:1-3, I John 4:1-3.

## Improvisation as an Image

As indicated above, the image of journey does vary within the New Testament, from the more structured Matthaean presentation to that of Mark which leaves the details of the journey completely open. However, many feel that this image is no longer appropriate in our modern world because of the way it has often been used. In our changing world it is not so clear where we are going and the way that we must travel to get there. It is not so easy to identify the possibilities of the future with the traditions of the past. Moreover, some have identified the images of journey often used to describe spirituality as distinctively masculine.<sup>35</sup> One image more suitable to women and others who are experiencing the disintegration of previous definitions of roles and clear directions within society is that of improvisation. Mary Catherine Bateson, in *Composing A Life*, develops this image and illustrates it through the biographies of five women.<sup>36</sup> Though she uses this image to describe a life process rather than a spiritual journey, I find her approach helpful to those seeking a more flexible image appropriate to our modern context.

In speaking of the quest/journey image she says:

... there is a pattern deeply rooted in myth and folklore that recurs in biography and may create inappropriate expectations and blur our ability to see the actual shape of lives. Much biography of exceptional people is built around the image of a quest, a journey through a timeless landscape toward an end that is specific, even though it is not fully known. The pursuit of a quest is a pilgrim's progress in which it is essential to resist the transitory contentment of attractive way stations and side roads, in which obstacles are overcome because the goal is visible on the horizon, onward and upward. The end is already apparent in the beginning.<sup>37</sup>

Regarding her approach to life, she says:

This is a book about life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic. It started from a disgruntled reflection on my own life as a sort of desperate improvisation in which I was constantly trying to make something coherent from conflicting elements to fit rapidly changing settings. At times, I pictured myself frantically rummaging through the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinets, convinced that somewhere I would find the odds and ends that could be combined at the last minute to make a meal for unexpected guests, hoping to be rescued by serendipity. A good meal, like a poem or a life, has a certain balance and diversity, a certain coherence and fit. ....

.... I believe that our aesthetic sense, whether in works of art or in lives, has overfocused on the stubborn struggle toward a single goal rather than on the fluid, the protean, the improvisatory. We see achievement as purposeful and monolithic, like the sculpting of a massive tree trunk that has first to be brought from the forest and then shaped by long labor to assert the artist's vision, rather than something crafted from odds and ends, like a patchwork quilt, and lovingly used to warm different nights and bodies. Composing a life has a metaphorical relation to many different arts, including architecture and dance and cooking. In the visual arts, a variety

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35. Classical images have been journey (Abraham, Moses, the Exodus), climbing a mountain (such as Moses going up the mountain or Jesus' Mount of Transfiguration), and climbing a ladder (for example, Jacob's ladder), now often viewed by feminist theologians as masculine images which present a structured, aggressive, and individualistic approach.

36. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing A Life*, NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

of disparate elements may be arranged to form a simultaneous whole, just as we combine our simultaneous commitments. In the temporal arts, like music, a sequential diversity may be brought into harmony over time. In still other arts, such as homemaking or gardening, choreography or administration, complexity is woven in both space and time.<sup>38</sup>

As life is a day-by-day process of self invention, for what is searched for does not exist until found, so the past and its remembrance provide not completed experiences but the raw material which becomes part of the composing of a life.<sup>39</sup>

The process of improvisation that goes into composing a life is compounded in the process of remembering a life, like a patchwork quilt in a watercolor painting, rumpled and evocative. Yet it is this second process, composing a life through memory as well as through day-to-day choices, that seems to me most essential to creative living. The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future.

### Identifying Religious Experience

All of these descriptions of journey and the process of life, from our perspective, presuppose the involvement of the Transcendent, God, in life and that life cannot be adequately understood otherwise. But how does one discern or identify the role of God in life. Some of the chapters that follow will present the complexity of life. If life is complex, then God cannot be simply identified with all that happens. However, if one is to deal with spiritual formation, one must gain a sense of God's participation and the directions and patterns of one's life within this complexity. Especially in our culture which is becoming secularized and pluralistic, and no longer supports the Christian perspective, each individual needs to have their own personal sensitivity to God's involvement in life. This is the foundation stone upon which one's life is spiritually formed. As Barry and Connolly indicate in their book on *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*:

For better or worse, in our world at any rate, each person can only find a rock that will not give way or shatter by answering the question: In my own experience do I meet a mysterious Other to whom I can say: You are the Rock of my salvation?<sup>40</sup>

The best way to approach this is by the doing of a spiritual autobiography. I remember with appreciation the spiritual autobiographies that were shared and reflected upon as a starting point of spiritual discipline in the Lilly Endowment Project on the Deepening of the Spiritual Life of the Seminary Faculty.<sup>41</sup>

Along with the need to understand God's participation in the human journey there is the need for each individual to accept their own journey, whatever its composition. In articulating a life journey this is brought before the God who in grace surrounds it with love, making it possible to accept the mixture of good and failure which is part of anyone's story.<sup>42</sup> I have become very fond of Arthur Honegger's

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38. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

39. Ibid., pp. 28ff.

40. William A. Barry and William J, Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, NY: Seabury Press, 1982, p. 17.

41. See the section on the history of the contemporary spiritual formation movement in chapter two.

42. This does not ignore that God also judges. However, judgement happens in a context of love. In some sense love is also judgement, because the disparity between how we are loved and what we are becomes clear. The point is that judgement must be approached through love rather than seeing love as something that comes after judgement. This is the radicality of love as portrayed in the Parable of the Prodigal (see previous discussion of this parable).



symphonic psalm *King David*, after a drama by Reno Morax. This Psalm provides a significant paradigm of the complex elements which are involved in the life and growth of a person. Through Samuel God selects David to be anointed king, removing him from a simple pastoral life into the complex life of contender for the throne against Saul. He slays the Philistine giant and is engaged in complex relationships with Saul and Saul's children, Michal and Jonathan. With Saul and Jonathan slain in battle he ascends to the throne. Though he seems established and his glory is sung, he experiences the limits of his destiny by being unable to build the Temple. Falling in love with Bath-sheba, he has her husband killed and takes her to wife. This results in what is interpreted as God's punishment in the death of their first child and later family tragedies. David then determines upon a census which brings further judgment. When he grows old, he proclaims Solomon king, and in the words of the narrator is able to look beyond the limits of his life, with all of its difficulties and failures, and express his faith in what is beyond him and the goodness of life itself:

And David said: The spirit of God is within me. One cometh after me to lead my people in the fear of the Lord. O how good it was to live! I thank thee God, thou, who gavest me life.<sup>43</sup>

Part of our journey is to come to terms with the individual characteristics of our persons and journey in the light of grace, and to be able to affirm: "O how good it was to live! I thank thee God, thou, who gavest me life."

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<sup>43</sup>. My acquaintance with this composition is from its performance at Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem, PA, Oct. 29, 1983, of which I made a recording. It is my understanding that at that time a recording of this composition was not otherwise available using an English text.

### **Exercise: A Form for Writing A Spiritual Autobiography**

Frequently life merely "happens" to us and we give little thought to what it means. And yet at various times we raise the question of meaning. For the adolescent the question of meaning is seen in terms of the options for his/her personal and vocational development. For the person in mid-life there frequently are some very basic questions which relate to the issues of the latter half of life:

- Will I ever accomplish what I hoped for?
- What does my life mean -- does it have any pattern and make any sense?
- How can I make sense of my diminishing physical powers and ultimate death?
- Having spent much of life in doing things, are there depths to my person and life that I have not yet plumbed?
- What do those experiences mean when I seem to sense God or a world beyond me? How does this other world and God affect my life and its course?
- Is there another world or dimension in which I may invest myself and gain inner peace and satisfaction besides the often elusive material world? How can I gain the resources and stability to deal with my world?

For Christians and others who believe in the spiritual dimension of life, the perception of the spiritual and God in life is important. It is difficult to begin to talk to others about God, to convince ourselves about God, and to deal with the issues of spiritual formation (growth), if there is no conscious perception of the spiritual in one's life. For religious professionals, whose primary function is guiding others in the life of the Spirit, this becomes especially important -- but often difficult since most of us were educated in knowledge and skills but had little help in exploring the nature of human and spiritual experience. Thus we need to develop new sensitivities to the spiritual.

The following exercise is designed to help you discern the patterns of your life, the meaning of your life, the influences on it, and the role of God in it. It is designed to be done "intuitively", without a whole lot of careful thought and analysis, so that those elements of your life of which you are not so conscious may speak to you and tell you things that you might not think of. This intuitive or meditative approach is also designed to give God a greater chance to participate in the process. The whole process will take about 30 min. on the first two days and perhaps a little longer on the third. You will find it well worth the little time that you will be spending.

#### **I DAY ONE -- THE PEOPLE, EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES THAT COME TO MIND**

Begin by asking God to participate in this process. Then sitting in some quiet place, reflect back over your life, perhaps in periods of five or ten years. Allow the people, events and experiences which influenced you to come to mind. Don't try hard to remember, but merely record "what comes to mind when I think back on my life". List each person, event or experience and describe in a phrase or sentence what you feel it meant to you or has come to mean to you. It is not necessary to get everything in chronological order at this time. Place a check mark beside the experiences in which you feel God may have been active.

II DAY TWO -- THE PEOPLE, EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES THAT COME  
TO MIND

Do the same as on the previous day. You may remember different persons, events and experiences on this day, though many will be the same. To remember some different things is natural. That is the way our mind works.

### III DAY THREE -- STEPPING STONES AND PATTERNS

On a third day, after asking God to participate in what you are doing, sit again in a quiet place and look prayerfully at the two lists that you have made of persons, events and experiences. Then do the following:

#### A. STEPPINGSTONES (A term for important experiences)

Underline the 10-12 persons, events or experiences, which may appear in either or both of the lists, that you consider the most important or significant for you. You might want to do this by reflecting on how strongly you feel about something (positively or negatively - please note that negative feelings also indicate important events). Then list these below, in the order in which they occurred, chronologically. Again, place a check mark beside the experiences in which you feel God may have been active.

This then provides you with a basic outline of your life as you now perceive it.

#### B. PATTERNS AND IMAGES

Now look quietly at your list of important persons, events and experiences. In your imagination step into the flow of your life.

Do you see any patterns in your life experience, any sense of direction, any persistent issues? If so, jot them down.

Have you been drawn to any images which express to you your life, its meaning and direction?  
Have these images changed for you over the years?

Does any new image now come to mind as you review your life? You may wish to reflect on this again after you have finished C and D below.

#### C: GOD'S PARTICIPATION

You probably checked some of the events, persons and experiences of your life as ones in which you had a sense of God's participation. Comment about the following:

Can you say anything about how you feel God has been active in your life?

Do you feel that God has had anything to do with the patterns of your life?

What have you learned about God by observing your own life? (It is important to remember that much of the Bible consists of reflection on what has been learned about God out of life experience.)

How does what you observe fit with what you understand from the Bible or your church about God's participation in life?

**D. RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

Over the course of our lives we develop many relationships, some of which last and some of which don't; all of which have their ups and downs.

As you think back on your life, are you aware of a relationship with God?

How would you describe this relationship? Is it similar to other relationships you have? Is it helpful to you?

Do you have any particular practices (prayer or other) to assist the development of this relationship