

The Chopra Challenge: Why Spiritual Formation is Essential for Christian Ministry in the Twenty-First Century

Lois Malcolm
Luther Seminary

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you,
revile you, and defame you, on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven;
for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets (Luke 6:20-26).

“Beware when all speak well of you,” the president of Luther Seminary warned me after the faculty vote for my tenure. A few minutes later the dean greeted me with the same warning, “Beware when all speak well of you.” And a few minutes after that the department chair said the same thing, “Beware when all speak well of you.” Several months later, at a conference I was greeted by a professor from our seminary who had transferred to another school with the same response when told about the vote on my tenure, “Beware when all speak well of you.” When asked, each one said he did not know that the others were going to say the same thing to me. So, was this sheer coincidence? Were they just being thoughtful Lutherans not wanting me to sin the sin of pride by basking too long in the glow of a unanimous vote? Or was there something here that I should be attending to here?

Coming out of generations of pietists, my most immediate response to a situation like this would have been to ask myself whether God was trying to tell me something. But many years of graduate training in theology had taught me not to speak too glibly about messages from God and that if I were to interpret anything from this it could only be by way of a careful analysis of the situation in which it occurred—and of the text being referred to and its context. On the other hand, in order to get through the dissertation and tenure process I had had to read a lot of self-help books, and in these books, the best of which were usually not written by Christian authors, there were frequent references to the force of divinity within ourselves and the world, and to ways that force or presence could be tapped into and manifested in order to achieve success in life. Further, these books would stress that if one wanted to succeed in life, one needed to be self-defined—self-differentiated from others and one’s environment, not always seeking approval from others. Thus, from the perspective of these books at least, there

was a kind of “synchronicity”—to use one of their terms—between the warnings I had received and what I was working on personally.

But if I were to interpret the meaning of these warnings within their context in the Gospel of Luke—in the Sermon on the Plain—it would be clear that they were not simply about my need for personal success and self-definition. Indeed, this warning is preceded by blessings on the poor, the hungry, those who weep and are reviled, and woes for the rich, the satiated, those who laugh, and those people speak well of. Of course, to feel “blessed” when one is being excluded, reviled and defamed means that one must have a fairly good sense of self-definition, and throughout the gospels, Jesus is clearly a self-defined person. He was not afraid of what others thought of him and made definite choices about whom he wanted to be with--“tax collectors and sinners”--and whom he would challenge--the “Scribes and Pharisees.” But the kind of success he achieved may not have been the kind of success talked about in the self-help books. The culminating event of his career was the crucifixion, and though the stories of his life end with the resurrection and his sending of the “Holy Spirit with power” to his followers, they also make clear that this was not the end those followers had expected.

And yet the self-help books I had been reading had gotten me to start thinking about how the circumstances of my life might have a larger meaning and purpose. They provided me with a way of thinking again about how God might actually present in my daily events and relationships--in spite of my theological training. But how did the practices they recommend differ from classical Christian ways of doing these things? Given the popularity of these books, it was clear that they were addressing not only my own but a lot of other people's questions about life and how to live it more fully. In many cases, these books were clearly addressing distortions in our culture of Christian ways of thinking and experiencing God in daily life--such as thinking of and experiencing God as a harsh taskmaster, a legalistic tyrant, an abusing father. But the divinity they often spoke of--that infinite source of power and creativity--was often presented as not distinguished from the self. And, the interests they were interested in protecting often did not go very far beyond those of the individual self who needed to survive and succeed in a highly competitive world. So the question: how did the God of these self-help books differ from the God of Jesus of Nazareth?

To answer this question, I offer a point by point comparison of themes outlined in one of the most popular--and in my view, one of the most systematically written--of these books, Deepak Chopra's The Seven Spiritual Laws with those of classical Christian belief and practice. In the tradition of John, Origen, Irenaeus, and others who had to define Christianity in relation to the existing forms of spirituality of their day, I would like to do the same. My intent is to use Chopra as a guide for becoming more aware of the profound—and highly explicit—spiritual need that can be found in a global capitalist culture. Chopra can help us understand more fully what this need is all about and why it is there. Further, he can be a helpful reference point for clarifying how the gospel of Jesus Christ—and the attitudes, beliefs, and practices it entails—offers a very different response to this need.

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

There is no doubt that we are living in a time when there is explicit interest in spiritual things. One need only observe the swelling New Age section in Barnes and Nobles bookstores to recognize this. And even the swelling self-improvement section in these bookstores contains much that could be called “spiritual.” A recent copy of the Rolling Stones had two lead articles dealing explicitly with spirituality—one interviewing Chopra on a recent book about God and another interviewing a famous singer from the 1970s who had now become a pastor. The latter article even ended with the writer asking the singer-turned-pastor for prayer for healing. Even Harvey Cox, who had written The Secular City, has most recently written a book on Pentecostalism in which he writes:

Even before I started my journey through the world of Pentecostalism it had become obvious that instead of the "death of God" some theologians pronounced not many years ago, or the waning of religion that sociologists had extrapolated, something quite different has taken place . . . The prognosticators had written that the technological pace and urban bustle of the twentieth century would increasingly shove religion to the margin where, deprived of roots, it would shrivel. They allowed that faith might well survive as a valued heirloom, perhaps in ethnic enclaves or family customs but insisted that religion's days as a shaper of culture and history were over.

This did not happen. Instead before the academic forecasters could even begin to draw their pensions, a religious renaissance of sorts is under way all over the globe. Religions that some theologians thought had been stunted by western materialism or suffocated by totalitarian repression have regained a whole new vigor. Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism, Islam and Shinto, and many smaller sects are once again alive and well. For many people, however, it is not always good news that religions that were once thought to be safely moribund or at most peripheral have again become controversial players on the world stage. We may or may not be entering a new "age of the Spirit" as some more sanguine observers hope. But we are definitely in a period of renewed religious vitality, another "great awakening" if you will, with all the promise and peril religious revivals always bring with them, but this time on a world scale.¹

Why is this? Why this burst of interest in things spiritual? One reason is simply economic. The mind has emerged as the most central and dominant factor in economic activity. We have shifted from a manufacturing to an information economy. There is now a rapidly growing need for knowledge workers with advanced verbal, mathematical and social skills. We are facing a continuing and escalating explosion of new knowledge, new technology, and new products and services, which keep raising the requirements for economic adaptiveness. A global economy of unprecedented competitiveness has

¹Harvey Cox, Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

emerged, which is a continual challenge to our ingenuity and belief in ourselves. There is an increasing demand on individuals at level of every enterprise—and not just at the top but throughout the system—for self-management, personal responsibility, self-direction, a high level of consciousness, and innovation, and commitment to top priorities.²

As a result, we live in a society where, in the words of Larry Seligman, a psychologist who studies depression, we find “the waxing of the self.”³ We live in a society that exalts the self, talking its pleasures and pains, its successes and failures with unprecedented seriousness. Our society grants to the self power it never had before: power to change the self, power even to change the way the self thinks. We are in an age of personal control. And along with the waxing of the self there is the waning of the commons in which traditional ways of providing human beings with meaning and hope—what this psychologist calls our “spiritual furniture”—no longer speaks in ways they traditionally had. Such “commons” include traditional beliefs about God, family, the nation, a purpose that transcends one’s individual interests.

Within such a context, how the individual self thinks and feels becomes extremely important. As another psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, has pointed out, when left to its own devices, the mind moves toward entropy. It begins to follow “random patterns, usually stopping to consider something painful or disturbing.” Without order, attention is attracted to whatever is most problematic at the moment: “some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long-term frustration.”⁴ It is only by conscious focus—by having a purpose—that it can channel its psychic energy towards ends it chooses. But such a purpose cannot simply be imposed upon one. One needs to discover it. And we discover it in what motivates us, what attracts us and in what we resist, or what frustrates us. Thus, many contemporary people have been turning to spiritual exercises of all kinds since they have recognized that it is only when one surrenders to life that one can truly enact one’s intentions. Spiritual exercises enable one to live with the paradoxes of being free to choose who one wants to become, while surrendering to the facts one finds one’s self faced with. They enable one to perceive a broader purpose in events while also assuming that anything can happen at any time. And in the process they enable one to give up the bad thinking patterns—like blaming other people, or being overly controlling, or overly fearful of what others think—that keep one from making the most of opportunities that come one’s way.

Success in life—and success defined not only in terms of wealth, but in terms of good health, health, energy and enthusiasm for life, fulfilling relationships, creative freedom, emotional and psychological stability, a sense of well-being and peace of mind—

² See Nathaniel Branden’s description of the major developments in the past few decades in the national and global economy that have led to “making the need for self-esteem more urgent for all those who participate in the process of production, from the leader of an enterprise to entry-level personnel” in The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem: The Definitive Work on Self-Esteem by the Leading Pioneer in the Field (New York: Bantam, 1994), pp. 228-229.

³ See Larry Seligman’s discussion of the “waxing of the self” and “waning of the commons” in Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), pp.282-292.

⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), p.119.

-is now linked largely with the self's capacity to think and feel. It is not surprising that books that help one take control of the human spirit are highly popular.

Let us examine the assumptions of one of these highly popular books, Chopra's Seven Spiritual Laws.⁵ Chopra begins with the assumption--drawing on classical Hindu belief--that we are all "divinity in disguise." We are all gods and goddesses in embryo. Our success is linked with our unfolding the divinity within us. It is precisely when we perceive the divinity in all we experience—in the eyes of a child, the beauty of a flower, the flight of a bird—that we can begin to experience our lives as the unfolding of a miraculous process. Only then can we achieve the success we truly desire.

What he outlines then are seven laws—seven processes for manifesting the divinity within us. The first, the law of pure potentiality, presupposes that we are in an essential state of pure consciousness and that as pure consciousness we have pure potentiality. We are filled with possibility and infinite creativity. What this means is that our internal reference point is that of pure spirit—not objects outside of the self, like situations, circumstances, people, and things. If our thinking is “object-based,” that is, based on the “objects” external to us—like other people’s approval—then we will act on the basis of fear. When we act in response to these objects, our internal reference point is the ego, not what we really think, but our social mask, which Chopra contends, wants to control, thrives on power, and operates out of fear. By contrast, our true Self—our spirit and soul--is free of these things, immune to criticism, feels beneath no one, yet at the same time is also humble and feels superior to no one because it recognizes that everything else is the same Self, the same spirit, in different guises.

The second law is the law of giving. The assumption here is that the flow of life is nothing other than the harmonious interaction of all the elements and forces that structure the field of life. The universe operates through dynamic change; nothing is static. Our energy is an expression of this cosmic energy. The word consciousness implies not only energy and information but also the fact that energy and information is always alive in thought. The key assumption here is that thought has the power to transform. What one has to do, then, to get what one wants is participate in the flow of life. If you want to be blessed with the good things in life, then learn to silently bless everyone else with those good things. If you want joy, give joy to others. If you want love, give love to others, if you want attention and appreciation, then give attention and appreciation. When you learn to give that which you seek, you activate the dance with “an exquisite, energetic, and vital moment that constitutes the eternal throb of life.”⁶

The third law is the law of “karma” or cause and effect. Karma has to do with both action and the consequence of that action; it is cause and effect simultaneously because every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in like kind. Thus, the key law of karma is that if you want to create happiness then you have to sow the seeds of happiness. Karma entails conscious choice making. Hence the more you bring your choices into the level of your conscious awareness, the more you will make those choices which are spontaneously correct—both for you and those around you.

⁵ Deepak Chopra, The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams (San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1994).

⁶ Chopra, The Seven Spiritual Laws, p.32

Now what about past karma and how your or others' past decisions affect you now. There is a perfect accounting system in the universe, and everything is a constant to and fro exchange of energy—thus, you may need to pay your karmic debts, or you can transmute or transform your karma into a more desirable experience, asking yourself, for example, why is this happening, and what message is the universe giving to me through this? How might I make this experience useful for other?

The fourth law is that of the law of least effort. This law is based on the fact that nature's intelligence functions with an effortless ease and abandoned carefreeness. This principle of least action or no resistance is instantiated when you don't seek to control others or have power over them. When your actions are motivated by love, your energy multiplies and accumulates and its surplus can be channeled to create anything you want, including, Chopra suggests, "unlimited wealth."⁷ How does one do this? By accepting who one is and what one is faced with, by taking responsibility for one's actions, and by remaining defenseless—that is, relinquishing your need to convince or persuade others to your point of view. You only meet resistance when you become defensive and blame others, and do not accept and surrender to the moment.

The next two laws flesh out this law of least effort in more detail. The first, the law of intention and desire, presupposes that the whole universe is, in its essential nature, a movement of energy and information. Our task is to become aware of the energy and information that is the localized field of each of our individual bodies. We experience this "localized field" as our thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, memories, instincts, drives, beliefs, and so on. We can harness this field by way of attention and intention. Whatever you place your attention on will grow stronger in your life. Whatever you take your attention away from withers, disintegrates, and disappears. Intention, in turn, triggers the transformation of energy and intuition by enabling you to mobilize it in relation to a purpose. Thus, attention organizes your consciousness around a focus; intention organizes it around a goal. When you hold your attention on an intended outcome with unbending purpose you are freed from obstacles that might consume or dissipate the focus of your attention.

But intention has to be coupled with detachment. Here we arrive at the difference between "desire" and "intention." If you want to acquire anything in the universe you have to relinquish your attachment to it. "Desire" occurs when you have intention with "attachment," that is, when you must have a particular outcome or else you won't be satisfied. "Intention," by contrast, occurs when your desire is coupled with "detachment," that is, when you open yourself up to a range of possible outcomes. When you combine a single-pointed intention with detachment, you relinquish your attachment to a particular outcome, to getting a specific thing. True wealth consciousness is linked with the ability to intend anything you want, but still factor in uncertainty, the fact that you might not get a particular outcome. Once you presuppose uncertainty---that anything could happen---then you have the capacity to create wealth. You enter into the field of all possibilities—a field of excitement, adventure, and mystery--while maintaining your single-pointed attention. You remain focused on your purpose, while being ready for anything to happen. You set well-defined goals, but recognize that when you go from

⁷ Chopra, The Seven Spiritual Laws, p.55

point A to point B there will always be infinite possibilities. In sum, you factor in uncertainty.

Finally the last law has to do with dharma—meaning in Sanskrit, one’s purpose in life. The field of pure potentiality, which you find in yourself, is “divinity in essence” and this divinity takes human form to fulfill a purpose. According to this law, you have a unique talent and a unique way of expressing it. The task of life is to harness that unique talent and match it with the needs you find around you. “When these needs are matched with the creative expression of your talent, that is the spark that creates affluence. Expressing your talents to fulfil needs creates unlimited wealth and abundance.”⁸

How do Chopra’s spiritual laws differ from Christian belief and practices? Let us do a point by point comparison. We could use many different guides from within the Christian tradition. I will draw on Martin Luther and Ignatius Loyola. Though radically different from each other, they both have a profound sense of Christ’s grace and how it impinges in very concrete ways on how we interpret and respond to life.

Like Chopra’s law of pure potentiality, Christians also believe that we are in touch with a pure source of infinite possibility and creativity and that from the standpoint of this source we need not fear anyone or seek anyone’s approval. In his treatise on “The Freedom of the Christian,” Luther describes justification as the way “the Word” communicates “to the soul all things that belong to the Word.” “If a touch of Christ healed,” he observes, “how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word.”⁹ Because, God’s promises are “holy, true, righteous, free, and peaceful words, full of goodness” the soul that clings to them becomes “so closely united with them and altogether absorbed by them” that it not only shares “in all their power” but is “saturated and intoxicated by them.” Indeed, the Word “imparts its qualities to the soul,” in the same way a “heated iron glows like fire because of the union of fire with it.”¹⁰ Thus, we have full union with Christ. In our death we have been baptized into his death—we have been crucified with him—and now live out of the full power of his resurrection life.

But this union does not mean a loss of our identities—or a loss in God’s identity. This union is a dialogue, a conversation with God and one another. Yes, by the Spirit’s power and presence, we fully enter the mutuality Jesus, the Word, shares with the Father, a mutuality we then share with one another. But differentiation is not effaced in this mutuality. Just as in a healthy marriage, where two people become most fully themselves, and therefore the most fully mysterious to each precisely in the growth of their intimacy, so God’s remains hidden to us—God remains radically Other—even as our intimacy with the Father and Son grows through the Spirit’s power and presence. Likewise, the mutuality we share with one another intensifies our individuality—our differentiation from each other—precisely as the justice and mercy of our community with one another grows.

⁸ Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws*, p.96.

⁹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. with an intro. by John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp.42-85.

¹⁰ Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” p.58.

Like Chopra's law of giving, this Trinitarian reality is one of mutual sharing and exchange. And not only ourselves, but all of reality is being restored to God through the spirit of Jesus. And, as we partake of the life of that Spirit, we then participate in the restoration of all things Christ. The classic Christian image for this is that of a bridal union—an exchange that takes place within the heart of God's life, and at the very heart of the universe. In this exchange, Christ not only takes on our human form in order to enable us to share in God's life, but also, indeed, takes on our sin and even our death—he becomes sin for us. This is why the forgiveness of sins and healing was so central to Jesus' ministry—and why his death and resurrection are at the heart of what we have been baptized into. Christian faith—at its core—is about repentance, forgiveness, healing—the transformation from death to life, sickness to health, enmity to reconciliation. And our baptism into Christ's life means that we too are ambassadors of this reconciliation, ones who are called with him to bring about the restoration of all things in God.

This entails a very different understanding of the law of karma. All our thoughts, feelings, and actions now live out of the confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus—and the forgiving, healing, and resurrecting power of that love. This then gives us the freedom to look at ourselves and the world around us with full clarity. It is only out of the confidence of that love that we can see what radical sinners we are. And sin for Christians is always primarily sin against God—the failure to fully love and trust God in all that one thinks, feels, and acts. Thus, we can look at our resentment, our envy, our anger, our fears, our anxieties, our obsessions with things we should not be obsessed with with brutal honesty—these are all forms of idolatry and blasphemy against the power and presence of the Spirit in our lives. These are manifestations of the dreadful sin against the Holy Spirit that Jesus spoke of. And we can open ourselves up to the Spirit's power to transform this idolatry and blasphemy into trust. Every moment of our lives—every thought, feeling, and action—can now become an opportunity for experiencing the Spirit's forgiving, healing, and resurrecting power in our life. We now become witnesses to the way grace perfects our nature, to the way the gospel radically transforms our understanding of the laws of the universe.

And so, we do live our lives operating with the “law of least effort.” This law of Chopra's is very much like Reinhold Niebuhr's “Serenity Prayer”: “Lord help me accept those things I cannot change, and change those things I can, and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.” As we become more free from ourselves—from our fear, jealousy, pride, resentment, and our nagging selfish obsessions—we are better able to see things for what they really are and act accordingly. Life does indeed become more effortless.

As Chopra's law of least effort was expanded upon by the laws of intention and desire and the law of detachment, so we can expand upon this law with two analogues from Ignatian spirituality: “seeking God in all things” and “indifference.”¹¹ As we enter into Christ's life more fully we are now able to perceive God acting in all we experience—in all that happens to us—and can now discern how we might intentionally enact God's will, God's purposes, in our responses to those experiences. But this seeking God in all things must be accompanied by “indifference.” Being indifferent in this context does not

¹¹ See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image Books, 1964).

mean being apathetic or insensitive. Rather, it has to do with the calm recognition that we were created, in Ignatius Loyola's words, "to praise, revere, and serve God our Lord," and that we are to pursue all that enables us to do this and avoid all that does not, and thus are to be indifferent to whatever comes our way—whether health or sickness, wealth or poverty, honor or contempt, a long or a short life and so on.

The only thing we were truly created to desire is that we might realize the purpose we were originally created for. But since we are individuals, we praise, revere, and serve God in radically different ways. This seeking God in all things and indifference enables us to perceive in each moment of our lives precisely how we are to do this. In this way we discover our "dharma" in Chopra's words, or in classical Christian language, our vocation. To repeat a frequently quoted phrase, our deepest desires can indeed respond to the world's greatest needs.

But all of this need not simply be theoretical. Ignatian spiritual exercise is precisely about discerning precisely how God is using our desires—our affections—to shape and form us so that we can become more fully like Christ. What is attracting us? What are we resisting? What are we being repelled by? The key assumption here is that the Christian life is primarily about joy. As the diverse parts of our lives are being healed, we become freer—and more at peace with ourselves. On a daily basis, we are being formed into Christ's image, and we can intentionally observe and work with the Spirit in this process. What is bringing joy and peace in our lives? What is better enabling us to praise and serve God? What does not bring that joy and peace? What is causing us not to praise and serve God in all that we do? In Ignatius' terms, what brings consolation and what brings desolation?

Of course, this is precisely where there is a need for discernment because precisely what appears to be good may be bad for us, and what appears to be bad, may, indeed, be good for us. It is not an accident that so much of Gospels in the New Testament is about the reversal in our understanding of who the greatest sinners are. It is often the ones who think they are righteousness that are the greater sinners, and in turn the tax collectors and sinners—who know their need for Jesus—that most fully receive his benefits.

To aid in this discernment we need objective as well as subjective criteria for discerning how God is acting in our lives. It is Christ's life that we have been baptized into; thus, we have an objective pattern to guide us. The full complexity of his life--the way he dealt with people, how he made decisions, what he did—offers an explicit guide of what we are to do and be. Thus, we need to spend time learning more about who he actually was and what he actually did—with the Pharisees, the tax collectors, the demon-possessed people who came to him to have their demons exorcised, the many sick people who came to him to be healed. What was at the heart of the message he preached about the kingdom? What were the stories that he told about this kingdom? To fully enter into the complexity of his life, we need to see, hear, feel, and taste what actually happened to him. Thus, the importance of reading, studying, meditating upon, and contemplating his life within the full context of the rest of the Old and New Testaments.

Further, we are not alone as Christians. We have entered a communal divine life, a life we share with one another. We come together to share Christ's palpable presence

among us in the preaching of the Word and partaking of the sacrament of bread and wine. In local congregations, and as the body of Christ throughout the world, we discern together precisely how we are indeed to be that body of Christ. In community, our provincialism, our self-interestedness—as individuals, as nations, as races, as genders—is corrected. We are forced to see things as others see them, and thus gain greater clarity about how God is acting among us. Finally, following I John, we cannot love God without loving one another—even those who are poor, and need food and shelter. Thus, yet a third objective criterion to that of our affections is the sheer fact that we cannot love God without loving our neighbor. Seeking to do God’s will always entails seeking, in Luther’s words, the neighbor’s good.

In sum, in our baptism, we have been flooded with Christ’s forgiving, healing, and resurrecting love. We have been given a share of God’s life. We do have access to the deep joy and peace the Trinitarian persons share with each other. This is what establishes the center of our being; this is who we fundamentally are in faith. This is what lies at the core of our identities in faith. This means that we become most fully ourselves as we participate most fully in Christ’s life. All our faculties are awakened—our memories, desires, and our will--and we begin to experience a harmony among the disparate parts of ourselves. God unites all that the Spirit touches. We can move beyond either a naïve enthusiasm that refuses to face the difficulties of life, or a withered perfection that smothers rather than enhances life, and truly live life as God intended us to live it. And as become more fully ourselves, we become freer to shift the focus off of ourselves and onto the world around us—the people and tasks God has given us to work with. We can now place ourselves at the heart of the world and let its aspirations re-echo in our own desires. We are freer to discern what might help others grow and what might bring peace, justice, and hope to the contexts we find ourselves in. In the words of Francois Roustang, a contemporary Jesuit spiritual writer, “to discern God’s will, our first care must be to let things and beings assume their own value and their own weight, to thrust aside previous impressions and to welcome as a living reality this world in which God is at work.”¹²

This requires spiritual intelligence, what St. Paul calls the “wisdom of God”—letting the Spirit, which searches all things, reveal to us the “deep things of God,” the “mind of Christ.” This kind of intelligence is not measured by scholastic aptitude tests. It is rather, to quote Roustang again, a “power of attention to the real, a respect for the facts that impose themselves upon us, an absence of obstinacy and a keen desire to penetrate to the heart of things, beings or events.”¹³ This intelligence is linked to humility because it rejects ready-made theories, it never thinks it know enough, and doubts whether it has understood. This kind of intelligence is continually capable of being opened to new truths. It is capable of being surprised. It is characterized by a youthfulness of mind that consents to receive life from what actually is.

This intelligence lives out of truth of the future—that all things will indeed be unified in Christ. It lives out of the promise that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus. But it also respects the past and recognizes that all of life is constituted

¹² Francois Roustang, S. J., *Growth in the Spirit*, trans. Kathleen Pond (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p.141.

¹³ Roustang, *Growth in the Spirit*, p.201.

by our previous situations, events, relationships, acts and thoughts. Thus it respects this past. Although it recognizes that this past derives its value from the future God is preparing for us, it recognizes that the future can also be a dangerous myth if it does not accept that past—or fully recognize where and what things really are in the present time. Thus, the need to attend to the present, to the specific and concrete ways God is working precisely in what is going on in one's life—both the good and the bad.

To conclude: There is no question that we are in a time of deep spiritual hunger. We as leaders within mainline Christian churches both experience this hunger ourselves and see it in the worlds we participate in. Much of what Christianity has taught or done in our history—both individual and collective--has not opened either us to the power and presence of the Spirit in our lives. We are awakened to the fact that others, like Deepak Chopra, are responding to the spiritual needs of our time in highly effective ways. But the god he speaks about—this divinity that is coextensive with the self and its self-interest--is not the God of Jesus Christ. But if the Spirit of Jesus is to respond through us to the needs that Chopra is addressing, we ourselves need to experience—in concrete and tangible ways—the forgiving, healing, and resurrecting power of Spirit's presence in our lives. Our very weakness and vulnerability—indeed, our sin, the blasphemies we daily commit against the Holy Spirit through our anxiety, our fear, our resentment, our envy—is precisely what makes us recognize that we need Jesus, and that we can demand, with the Syro-Phoenician woman, his healing touch so that we can bring that touch to a world that deeply needs it.

But as we know, Christianity is not a guarantee for success, at least not success in the world's terms. Jesus might not have gotten tenure at my seminary, or any other for that matter, given his record for conflict with religious authorities. The call to discipleship can lead to martyrdom. It definitely entails working for peace and justice, and enacting Christ's mercy in the world, especially among those who have the least power. But we can only truly serve those God has given us if we are filled with the Spirit's joy. In that joy, the more we choose God in all we do, the more we experience the paradoxical unity of passion and liberty, determination and detachment, tenacity and flexibility. In the Spirit's joy we reject only that which keeps us from loving God and our neighbor but freely accept all else that comes our way--whether poverty or riches, hunger or satisfaction, weeping or laughter, being hated, excluded and reviled, or even for that matter, being spoken well of!