

all” spirituality. Each one was different, and for each the spiritual journey was a unique and ever-changing dance with God, not repeatable and not duplicated by any other.

After taking the “test” online several days ago I had more confusion about my spiritual life than I had answers. I answered each of the eight questions on the six-point continuum offered, rating myself on a scale that ranged from “stalled” to “fully committed.”

Stalled – Thinking about it – Just started – Continually growing – My purpose is clear – Fully committed

At the end of the evaluation, my life was plotted on a chart to show where I was in my spiritual life, and then I was promised a “map” that would tell me what I needed to do to grow and develop spiritually. It was so simple, so clear: a couple of classes offered by this group, perhaps some retreats, reading a couple of books . . . who knows? I could be moving from “stalled” or “just started” to “my purpose is clear” or even “fully committed” in no time at all!

Please forgive my cynicism. Can you tell that I feel strongly about this idea of measuring our progress in the spiritual life? After taking the survey a few nights ago – and after letting my blood boil for a few minutes – three immediate objections to this idea of “measuring our spirituality” rose up within me. I sat down to put them on paper. I got up an hour later, having come up with eight objections. Two more came later that night as I walked the dog.

I won’t go into the full litany here. I simply want to emphasize how difficult – and ultimately unnecessary – it is to measure progress in the spiritual journey.

A couple of things from my own spiritual path come to mind. First, for me and probably for you, spirituality has been forged in the hot furnace of trouble and difficulty. Cancer cells and broken relationships, lost jobs and dying loved ones, stinging betrayals and stark aloneness, bottomed-out depression and utter failure . . . these have been the elements in my formation. Classes, retreats, books . . . these have all helped shape, have all helped give a framework for the spiritual life. But the real grit of spiritual formation is shaped in the crucible of life, the bitter hardships and the joyful celebrations that are a part of daily experience. Those daily experiences are not “chart-able” and they often aren’t clearly on any map. They just are. And they *are* the material that God uses to shape our lives, to weed out of us destructive bents and to form us in the life of the Spirit.

Second, there have been countless times on my own journey when, after a new discovery, a fresh awareness, I have felt that I was at the end. No more to learn. No place further to travel on the path. I had come to the end. “What more could there possibly be?” “What other lands would there be to explore?” “This must be all of God there is!” How infantile! How ridiculous!

Looking back, I see how arrogant and faulty that thinking has been. There is always more beyond, always more outside our reach. But the nature of discovery is that it feels ultimate. It has a sense of completion about it.

I look back at all the new awarenesses and fresh discoveries of the last 15 years . . . and how often I thought, “This is it! There couldn’t possibly be more!” And yet, every discovery was *not* the

end, merely another threshold into something new, leading to another path, another part of the spiritual terrain that I was called to explore.

We don't see the end from the beginning. We really don't know where we are heading. The spiritual journey consists in taking the next step, one step at a time. Margaret Silf suggests it is something like walking across a river on stepping stones, where the stones appear one at a time, and each one appears only as we take our next step toward it.

There is no map, no one-size-fits-all way of travelling. There is simply faithfulness in this moment, faithfulness to the next ordinary thing. By all the faithful little steps, God slowly builds a life within us. But because we ultimately cannot see what that life will look like, it is impossible to chart and plan for.

What I've thought of doing - I'm confessing it here to you in the hope that this will help me *not* do this! - is logging onto the website as "Thomas Merton" and taking the survey in his name. Merton was perhaps the most influential, most fully alive Christian of the last 50 years. He wrote in one of his books on contemplative prayer, "I am only a beginner, and I will never be anything more than a beginner." With that quote in mind, I thought of taking the survey as Merton, as a beginner, to see what the chart/map said about him.

I'm not going to do that . . . but the fact that I *want to* is evidence of just how far I have yet to travel.

Peace to you,
Jerry

Poetic Voices

Witness

by Denise Levertov

Sometimes the mountain
is hidden from me in veils
of cloud, sometimes
I am hidden from the mountain
in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue,
when I forget or refuse to go
down to the shore or a few yards
up the road, on a clear day,
to reconfirm
that witnessing presence.

Keeping Quiet

by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

This one time upon the earth,
let's not speak any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be a delicious moment,
without hurry, without locomotives,
all of us would be together
in a sudden uneasiness.

The fishermen in the cold sea
would do no harm to the whales
and the peasant gathering salt
would look at his torn hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars of gas, wars of fire,
victories without survivors,
would put on clean clothing
and would walk alongside their brothers
in the shade, without doing a thing.

What I want shouldn't be confused
with final inactivity:
life alone is what matters,
I want nothing to do with death.

If we weren't unanimous
about keeping our lives so much in motion,
if we could do nothing for once,
perhaps a great silence would
interrupt this sadness,
this never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death,
perhaps this earth is teaching us
when everything seems to be dead
and then everything is alive.

Now I will count to twelve
and you keep quiet and I'll go.

Classes begin soon

SPIRITUAL FORMATION STUDY begins Sept. 10

On Wednesday nights this fall, Sept. 10 – Nov. 19, at 6:30 p.m. in LC201, The Center for Christian Spirituality will offer a spiritual formation study called *From Signs to Soul: Inner Movements in John's Gospel*. We will trace the outward signs and images in the Gospel as they lead us to inner realities of soul and spirit. The study will point us toward the Gospel of John as a text for prayer. Participants will be encouraged to draw the words and images of the text into their own lives and prayer. The course will not be a traditional Bible study on John's Gospel. Some crucial study tools will be utilized, but the focus of the course will be on prayer and working the text into our daily living.

From Signs to Soul: Inner Movements in John's Gospel will be led by Jerry Webber. He will lead us to consider the inner movements present in the Gospel of John. The class will follow the format of previous spiritual formation studies on Ephesians and the parables of Jesus.

If you would like to attend, please register your intention with Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION 101: *Exploring the Way* begins Sept. 7

A Chapelwood Core Course short-term, small group, introductory class to spiritual formation that will provide an orientation to the Christian spiritual life, led by Shannon Ford and Nancy Sterling, is being offered by the Center for Christian Spirituality. This group will meet for 7 weeks on Sunday evenings, 5:30-7:00 p.m., in LC201. The first meeting will be on September 7. A participant's book will be available for purchase at \$10. For more information or to sign up, please contact Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS will NOT be offered in September

Please note that the Spiritual Foundations class led by Jerry Webber will not be offered in September. This is a departure from our usual schedule of recent years. Those who are interested in this course might prayerfully consider participating in *Spiritual Formation 101: Exploring the Way* being offered on Sunday evenings.

This fall the Spiritual Foundations course is being offered in the daytime for the Chapelwood staff. Please be in prayer for our staff as they work through this important introductory course in spiritual formation.

Opportunities for Centering Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Group centering prayer and *lectio divina* is now offered four times each week. The prayer times are offered for anyone interested in these prayer practices in the Bride's Room (behind the Sanctuary). Nancy Sterling facilitates these gatherings. You may come to any or all of the prayer times offered.

Mondays at 9:00 a.m.

Tuesdays at 9:30 a.m.

Wednesdays at 9:00 a.m.

Thursdays at 9:30 a.m.

Please note: If you arrive after the group has already started the prayer, please sit in the Narthex and join the prayer from there. After the period of prayer, you may enter and join in the period of *lectio divina*. Thank you.

Prayer Shawl Ministry

Each month scores of knitters and crocheters work independently and in groups in anticipation of gathering at one or all of our three monthly meetings held at Chapelwood in LC211. These are held on the first and third Tuesday mornings at 10:30 a.m. and the second Monday afternoon at 4:00p.m. In September, those dates will be the 2nd, 8th and 16th.

Summer knitting and crocheting has produced many beautiful shawls, some of which have already been given away. We have some wonderful stories to share each time we are together; so many are about recipients and their responses to the gift of a shawl. One of these concerned a member of Chapelwood who was admitted into the hospital. He made sure to take his prayer shawl with him for the comfort, love, and prayer it represented.

We reached a milestone earlier this month when we gave away our 200th shawl. We are blessed to be a blessing. Please join us if you are able as we knit/crochet and pray together.
(Marty Shroff and Nancy Sterling)

RENOVARE' Conference October 2 – 4 in Houston

Life with God: Celebrating Lifelong Discipleship

October 2-4, 2008; Thursday evening – Saturday afternoon

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, 11612 Memorial Drive, Houston, TX

RENOVARE', in conjunction with Houston-area ministries and churches, will hold a conference celebrating the 30th anniversary of Richard Foster's landmark book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Oct. 2 – 4, at Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church. This special symposium will look at exploring spiritual formation and discipleship in the 21st century.

Conference speakers include Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, Lauren Winner, and Ron Sider. Workshop leaders include Chris Webb, Juanita Rasmus, Dave Peterson, Justin Campbell, Anne Grizzle, Chris Seay, and Robert Sloan. You can find more information online at www.renovare.org/lwgc.htm or by picking up a brochure at The Center for Christian Spirituality from Nancy or Jerry (on the rack outside LC201).

Chapelwood and The Center for Christian Spirituality are helping to sponsor the event. If you would like to attend, you can register at the "partner/sponsor" rate of \$99. On your registration at the "Organization" line, note that you are with "Chapelwood/The Center for Christian Spirituality."

Also, we have some scholarship assistance available. Please contact Nancy if you would like to enquire about scholarships: (713)354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

Group Spiritual Direction

Group spiritual direction is an experience of small groups meeting regularly to help participants give attention to God's presence in their lives. These groups meet twice monthly, forming safe communities of honesty and prayer. Those participating in small groups are intentional about their ongoing life with God. They commit to provide safe spaces for others in the group by listening non-judgmentally and without attempting to fix or give advice to one another.

Usual meetings times are the first and third Tuesday of each month, from 6:30 – 8:30 p.m. in LC201. Group facilitators have experience in the process of group spiritual direction.

If you would like more information about group spiritual direction you may contact Jerry Webber at jwebber@chapelwood.org. To register for group spiritual direction, please contact Nancy Sterling at nsterling@chapelwood.org.

Library Resources

The Center has a modest lending library of books, tapes, CDs, and DVDs to lend. The selection is continually growing. Most topics and authors are complementary with the classes and retreats offered by The Center for Christian Spirituality. You can take a look in LC201. A sampling of tapes, CDs, and DVDs includes:

- *Prophets Then, Prophets Now* by Sr. Joan Chittister & Fr. Richard Rohr
- *Thomas Merton's Path to the Palace of Nowhere* by James Finley, Ph.D.
- *Holding the Tension: The Power of Paradox* by Fr. Richard Rohr & Sr. Mary Beth Ingham
- *Spiritual Community* by Laurence Freeman
- *The Contemplative Journey* and *The Spiritual Journey* by Fr. Thomas Keating
- *A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Paula D'Arcy and Richard Rohr
- *The Anti-Gospel of Our Time* by Richard Rohr
- *Passion for God: The Path of the Bridal Mystic* by Tessa Bielecki

Contact Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org if you are interested in checking out any materials.

Check out the website . . .

www.centerforchristianspirituality.org

Have you checked out our website at www.centerforchristianspirituality.org? We try to keep the website current with classes, retreats, and other opportunities offered through The Center for Christian Spirituality, as well as offer some helps for spiritual formation and contemplative practice.