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THE ELEMENTAL LIFE



(The Earth, Wind, Fire, And Water Of The Passionate Spiritual Life)

DAN WILT

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The Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water of The Passionate Spiritual Life

By Dan Wilt, M.Min.

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Written by Dan Wilt, M.Min.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who have accepted that the spiritual life is a wandering toward a Person, as the ancient Celts framed it, and looks more like a dance than a spiritual math equation.

Cheers to you, as you wander – as you dance – with Christ.

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Session 1

"*God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit.*

God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful: wise counsel clear understanding simple trust healing the sick miraculous acts proclamation distinguishing between spirits tongues interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when."

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 *(The Message)*

A VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION
An Introduction

"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

Michelangelo

The dream lasted through the night. The same image turned and turned over in my mind, finally revealing itself as a gift, a trustworthy sign, that change would surely come. An image of a partially opened chrysalis covered in dew and hanging from a damp tree branch, hung gently in my mind's eye throughout the turbulent night.

In the dream I sensed hope and possibility, renewal and transformation, but only the small crack in the translucent chrysalis remained. The wing, dark and pulsing, lay behind the crack, eager to exert its strength and heave open the door of its self-made womb.

When I woke from my dream, hope ran like water to the lowest places in my soul. "This is the state of your heart," a voice whispered inside my mind, "and you are about to see the world in a way you never did before."

Spiritual Formation And Resurrection

Many years have passed since that dream, but the image remains etched in my mind. The *anastasis*, or resurrection, is often described by the metaphor of what happens inside a chrysalis to the emerging butterfly. Resurrection is *not* the new birth of something that was never before. Rather, it is the formation, indeed the transformation, of something that, in its essence, already was and is in a new phase of emerging.

Spiritual formation is like resurrection. We are in a continual process of living and dying, and each choice, each thought, each action, each experience either aids or stunts the development in our hearts we each so eagerly desire.

What is the goal of spiritual formation? For us, like the caterpillar, we realize that there is more to come, more to be discovered, more to be embraced about who God is, who we are, and what

we are called to be about in this world. Yet something else is also true. We are aware that our end goal is not simply to be "self-actualized," fully aware of our own becoming as if we were a part of a story that began and ended in us (I quite fancy the idea that one day a movie will come out about me entitled, *Me, Myself, and I: On Becoming Dan Wilt* – but something feels slightly wrong about that idea).

If you are a follower of Jesus (and if you're not, may I encourage you to consider that he may have a claim on your life), then your spiritual formation is about you moving

From the image of God, into
the likeness of Christ.[i]

A Limited View Of A Lifetime

For the lowly caterpillar, pudgy and filling itself with food in anticipation of its next phase of being, the view must be very limited. An entire lifetime, if one could get inside the mind of the unwieldy larvae, is spent on a lowly journey climbing over limbs and twigs, eating holes in every leaf and morsel in site. "Could you imagine yourself to be the butterfly you see overhead?" asks a passing moth. "No," says the caterpillar. "The view I have now is the only view I have ever known."

Content, the caterpillar is; to be just who it knows itself to be.

Yet, something is going on deep inside the caterpillar. An urge, unspoken, irresistible, is forcing its way to the surface of the caterpillar's consciousness – "Build," it says, "Build a shelter, a womb, a place of transformation." With energies renewed by the leaves it has chewed, and secretions from its own body, the caterpillar builds that shelter.

But is it a womb, or is it a tomb? The encasing being created surely could become either. For now, however, the end must not be considered. Our caterpillar must create and enter its shell, sealing itself off from the outside world of light and life, and allow whatever greater purpose is at work to have its way.

Life Leads To Transformation

As days and weeks pass, what must seem like an eternity is spent seeing only glimpses of life passing by through the translucent walls of the chrysalis. Then something violent begins to

occur. From the inside out, changes are taking place in the entombed creature. The instinct to build the chrysalis has yielded its most excruciating consequence – complete, inside out change. Skin breaks, organs shift, cartilage hardens, stiffens and creates a fabric – dark and moist – between its bones. The caterpillar must feel as though it is turning inside out, so many new parts appearing and old parts passing away at the same time.

Then the day comes. There is a push, a struggle from within that forces pressure against the strong wall of the womb. A sharp sound is heard within the casket. It is the slight crack of the outer shell the caterpillar created. Death it seems, has not won the day. Effervescent life is stirring in this womb, and daylight comes coursing into the cave through a small crack. A wing stretches out, bursting the vessel more widely open, and out falls the strange new creature onto the soft bed of humus below.

The caterpillar looks around, realizes it is no longer on the branch, and stretches its arms to yawn after such a long, strange sleep. An arm indeed. An expansive wing opens in the glistening sun, damp, yet colorful and poetic. The butterfly basks in the light of the new day, wings drying, stiffening, preparing for flight. The wind moves along the ground, stirring the veined membrane that is the butterfly's new limb. Antennae high and opportunity above, the butterfly breakfasts on the day of its completed metamorphosis, and takes to the skies.

A Tale Of Our Own

Here, in the butterfly's story, is a tale all our own. We were made for flight, for color, for fanciful dreams that become healing realities in the world around us. We were made for something, Someone as an ancient Christian would happily say, yet, many of us remain in the familiar caterpillar's posture, expecting a magic wand to be waved over us, a ship to come in, a letter or phone call to change our lives for the better.

We want transformation, but without cost.

We want to become who we were designed to be, but without long processes and enduring hardship.

We want the dream of being formed into Christ's likeness yesterday,

And that dream to be mingled with tangible successes in other spheres of life today.

If our chrysalis is life, and our shaping factors in God's work in us and around us, what usually occurs?

It is possible that we follow one of the four responses to spiritual formation below. Our limited acts of proactivity are met with challenges, and we decide 1) the chrysalis is either a figment of our irrational dreams, 2) a womb too challenging to be built, 3) a tomb we would rather never face the possibility of building again, or 4) a cave whose walls are solid – and we are unsure that we can burst from within.

Can you find yourself at one of these stages?

1. The Irrational Dream: I'll Never Live That Way – It's A Fantasy.

Maybe you think who you were designed to become is actually a dream, an elusive, laughable emotional fragment within you without foundation or cause.

You marvel when a figure skater wins a gold medal in the Olympics, overcoming the loss of a family member only weeks before, and sense the presence of the dream within you edging its way toward the front of your consciousness as you hear the person's story. You react – you shove it down. The money has always been tight. The children may need attention in their challenges. Maybe you aren't able to have children, and they were your dream. You must buckle down, make due, and carry on the stiff upper lip that generations before you have held. You are a SilencedHeart; a RemnantRealist.

Your dream to become the butterfly dies a quick, deliberate death – a suicide perhaps. Late nights of unrestrained tears stain the path to your spirit's funeral. The womb never had a chance to be; you passed from this life a noble caterpillar, among the very best. If the womb had become a tomb, the same result would have occurred. You died – never connecting with your high calling in Christ "for all the right reasons."

2. The Impossible Dream: I Could Have Lived That Way – Now It's Too Late.

Maybe you think who you were designed to become is actually in seed form within you – you believe the impulse within you and see it as a divinely bestowed gift – but you see what it would take to become such a magnificent creature.

You know the job would not be all your own, transcending the familiar and reaching out into the abyss of the unknown. But still you know that your part would cost you more than you are willing to offer at this stage in your life. You are too old, or too poor, or too comfortable, or too responsible, or too married, or too tired, or too afraid to try. You silence the impulse to build the chrysalis; you busy yourself with the mundane, and

build a worldview around the necessity of being a DutyFulfiller and a ResponsibilityMinder.

Your dream, that for which you believe you were made, haunts you day and night. It whispers in the night "You were made for more than this; if only…." If only what? You would risk building the womb and diving into potential transformation? If only you would create the space to gain the momentum it takes to persevere through the trials that inevitably obstruct a dream's path? If only you had the courage to leave your day job and go for broke? You die as well, only it is a haunting death extended over many decades. Perhaps a half-built chrysalis stares at you from the basement, the garage, the mirror, or the screen.

Is this getting better, or worse? Is it better to die quickly, in a spiritual suicide, or to die slowly, haunted by a dream that barely got off the ground? Many different people would have different answers to this question. The only ones that matter – belong to you and God.

3. The Elusive Dream: I Once Tried To Live This Way Once – And Ended Up In Loss.

Maybe you think your last attempt to be who you were designed to be is the marker for whether or not your dream is real. You tried, and you failed. Of course, you know that many factors may have also contributed to loss of the "dream that never was," but teasing those apart is too emotional of an endeavor.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick," the scripture says. For you, the sickness in your heart has never been healed, and to touch the possibility of being the hero you once believed you were called to be is not only too remote an option to consider, but also the bearer of a familiar sting that makes you feel even worse about your wasted time, energy and money.

When others speak of their dreams fulfilled, you cringe on the inside feeling the weight of your failure crashing in on you. Failure becomes no longer an event in your life, but rather a statement about *who you are*. When still others speak of their dreams yet to be fulfilled, with anticipation and enthusiasm dancing in their eyes, you become the NaySayer, the DreamKiller, the AdvanceWarner. "Get a job, settle down and do the predictable" is no longer an answer you have discerned is necessary for a particular individual – it has become your mantra, a projection you place on others and a vindication of the new life you've chosen in the face of a failed dream. Everyone gets the same answer now – you may regard it as a pastoral answer, a right answer, a "been-there-and-done-that" answer. But what if it is a *wrong* answer?

Your dream has become your nightmare. You did it, sacrificed what you had to in order to see your wings spread – but you died in the womb you created. It became your tomb, and the evidence of your pain is all around you. It is possible that you sacrificed family, friends, finances and more to aggressively pursue your wings. Your belief in God's will, your own spiritual strength, and the counsel of others has diminished to the point of nostalgia and pained memories.

To pursue the dream again, though you've heard the stories behind great names like Edison, Lincoln and Mother Theresa, is not for one of your stamina. Your spirit has waned. You may go through the motions, but you're too far-gone to try again. The life of relinquishment seems the only option, and at your age, the culture tells you "Go back to sleep; leave the dreaming to the young, capable, fortunate and well-funded."

4. The Impending Dream: I Am Trying To Be Who I Was Made To Be – But It's Hard.

A respected Christian artist many years ago was a man by the name of Rich Mullins. He is endeared to me and many others because he was own of our few hammered dulcimer player heroes to whom we could look up. He wrote a very simple song that has stayed with me for many years. Rich Mullins wrote it. The chorus is quite complex. It says:

It's hard.

It's so hard.

Oh yes, it's hard to be like Jesus.

Don't you know it's hard.

It's so hard.

You know it's hard to be like Jesus.[ii]

That about sums it up for me. Becoming like Jesus, and then doing that for which he made me to partner with him in doing, seems all but possible. "It's hard," Rich said – and I agree.

Maybe your dream is on the edge of fulfillment. You have passionately done all you knew how to take your part in the fulfillment of your destiny. The checklist is complete – your strengths and abilities are affirmed by honest voices around you, your passions have been economically applied over a long period of time, you are on a long obedience in the same direction, and a number of possible pathways rise on the landscape before you. But, it has gotten too hard.

You need to be a good parent, a good spouse, a good worker, a good friend, a good son or daughter, and a visionary, missionary, superhero all at the same time. On top of all of that, you have a heart that proves itself deceitfully wicked from time to inopportune time. You bend the truth in the moment of confrontation, you lack courage in the face of even small fears, and you wish you could sin in myriad ways far too often.

If being like Jesus were a once and done thing, you would be fine. But no. It is dragged out over time, the chrysalis is aging, and you are wearing thin as time goes on.

But you're almost there, friends say. You have all the marks of both a saint and a spiritual success. You are ready to achieve great things for God, and your character matches your calling. You are becoming, in personality and habits, like Christ. As a good friend said many years ago, "You can't shoot a cannon out of a canoe." Great power and calling necessitate a deep, broad, strong foundation of character to be wielded and executed well. But that formation has been a long haul for you, and you're not sure you can keep going.

Even at this stage of doing well, you're more afraid of failure than you have ever been, and a small, nagging voice in you says "People from your family line don't accomplish things this great. Get some perspective, get in line like everyone else, and appreciate your successes and blessings to date. Besides, maybe this dream will fail like the last. Your own children show that you are an imperfect parent, and your spouse can clarify your shortcomings should you begin to believe your own press. Stop now, give up, and choose the easier path."

Your dream is an ache inside you, demanding that you stay still and present long enough for the wings to fully form and the colors to become vibrant like a fine wine becomes mature. You either fear that you will burst your chrysalis and be killed upon reentry (the fall is from a great height, and both fragile and vulnerable is a newborn butterfly), or that you won't be able to take the next step of faith without losing everything for which you have worked so hard. You consider "self-sabotage," putting your dream on pause and taking the easy way

out. The TV calls at night, the preoccupations you could choose are many – but still, the niggling within you is pushing out of the womb, into the scary, cold, death-defying life for which you've been preparing.

You are about to fly, my friend. Don't give up now.

Are You In Your Element?

Why all this talk about butterflies, dreams and destinies? I though we were here to talk about spiritual formation – how we become like Jesus in this brief lifetime we each have been given?

In my experience, many people lose their way in becoming passionate "*little Christs*" in their own spheres of influence not because they did not apply the latest principles in spiritual habits, nor because they simply let something rooted in money, sex or power begin to dominate their lives.

Now hear me; I deeply believe that classic studies in spiritual formation are absolutely vital to the Christian life. But something, in my estimation, has been missing. Fasting and prayer, Bible reading and giving are not the only things that make heroes who impact the world. Heroes are shaped by all those things – as well as by joy, action, mission, love and creativity. Spiritual habits, it seems, have everything to do with who each of us are made to be.

In my experience, many people becoming increasingly less like Christ because their vision of what being spiritually formed actually means is limited by the way they see spiritual "success." They believe that a cookie-cutter way of being a Christian is the goal to which they are headed, marking certain pastors, artists, role models or others as their primary marker for spiritual formation.

When these people think about their own spiritual transformation (and I include myself in their ranks for at least the first half of my life), they often leave the language of dreams behind, or at least on the side of the discussion. For them, their version of faith tells them that their optimal life is becoming a selfless servant, always giving and only ever receiving as an accidental side effect of their service.

Burnout Is The Result Of Unhealthy Spiritual Formation

The 80% burnout rate among pastors should prove to us that without adequate, and even exemplary, self-care – neither you nor I may make it to the next stage of joyful leadership for which we were made.

Now, on one level, everything you and I have ever learned about discipleship is right. As Jesus said,

"Whoever would be the greatest among you, must become the servant of all."

There's no denying that Jesus said that very thing. However, how did Jesus model the nature of a servant? Did he spend all of his time waiting on every table available, picking up after everyone, making sure everyone's children were being watched while they had a pleasant evening at the opera?

No. Jesus knew that for which he was among us. He was very intentional, and very committed to a singular mission that God had put on his heart. Jesus lived the life of the butterfly – dancing and moving and flashing before the eyes of these caterpillars made after his own image.

Could you see yourself today, with the wings of Jesus?

Further to this, he was uniquely gifted, skilled, studied and spiritually formed to aim directly at his target – and to hit it. I am sure he was distracted by other options and possible lives; aren't we all. However, Jesus understood what his "element" was, and he stuck with it.

On the fore stroke, Jesus taught, told stories, expressed compassion, studied hard, and spoke passionately to large crowds. Nowhere in the scriptures is it even hinted that he played an instrument, knew how to cook fine foods (the breakfast fish in a frying pan don't count), or even parented. On the backstroke, he washed feet, built stools and probably cleaned out a few outhouses in his day.

Were they the primary point of his life among us? In some ways, yes, but in other ways, no. He had a clear mission, and he stayed right at the center of that invitation from God to change the world.

Jesus In His Element

Jesus was in his element as he carried the story of humanity in his breast. He was energized by many of the arenas in which he spends his life energy. We see this in candid moments where it is clear he could have been hiding away in less controversial roles – but instead is filled with joy, fire, anger and passion.

These are the symptoms of someone living in their element. The fasting, prayer, worship, scripture study and other attributes we commonly associate with spiritual formation were enhancers to this high calling to be express God in his every action, and yet to do so out of the center of who he was.

You Have Something To Do That Shows Who God Is

Your life is a gift to the rest of us. You were designed to live in your element, in that unique way that only you can live in this world.

When you live in your element, the rest of us are impacted – we're grounded, we're inspired, we're empowered, and we're connected to one another. We are the richer for you allowing yourself to be spiritually formed by God into the amazing creature he gave you to us to be; we are all poorer when you withhold your permission for God to conform your life to the life of His Son.

You were made for spiritual greatness – a destiny that ends in God, is walked toward with us, and begins in your own heart of hearts.

The New Testament says this about living in our element in 1 Corinthians 12:4 (*The Message*):

> *"Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful…."*

In other words, you have a part to play. If your own spiritual formation is simply about you being good around good, good around people, and well-behaved when your door is locked, then Eden would have been all about happy little cubicles where only we and God could interact.

No, Eden was a garden, and we walked together within it. We were made to share, to care, to live, to love and mutually serve one another out of great love for the God who is all of our Father. Our spiritual formation is not just about us individually – it is about us all corporately.

You, living in your element, allowing God to lead you with love, grace, correction and intention toward that goal, is the greatest gift you will ever give to another human being – spouses, children, friends, faith communities, and neighborhoods included.

The Ancient Celts And Elemental Language

The Four Elements Of A Spiritually Passionate Life

There are 4 life elements to which we all must attend if we want to live fully alive before God and people, healing this world and glorifying God with our lives.

> ***The element of Earth*** speaks of *the grounded life*. This is a life deeply rooted in things that don't change. We are grounded in our faith, growing in our marriages and family life, engaged with the character traits of integrity, humility, faithfulness, perseverance and courage.
>
> ***The element of Wind*** speaks of *the inspired life*. This is a life that raises its sails with focus and intention to catch the joyful winds that renew us, refresh us, and give us the strength to reach our destination.
>
> ***The element of Fire*** speaks of *the empowered life*. This is a life that is spiritually vibrant, actively pursuing connection with God, with people, with the culture with strength to act missionally that is beyond our own.
>
> ***The element of Water*** speaks of *the communal life*. This is a life that is invested in authentic friendships, accountable relationships, and in key life-to-life mentoring exchanges. Like water, we run to the lowest places, and breathe life into the valleys of one another's souls.

The following pages are intended to help you embrace the elemental life – to aid you in living at the very center of your calling. You will find no quick fixes here, God-fads meant to turn your life in this core direction with the application of a repetitive prayer or spiritual salve.

No, living in our element is about the spiritual formation of a man, woman or child into the ultimate human being they were designed to be. Jesus was the truly human being – moving among in grace and truth, healing and delivering our broken world through his commitment to living in the center of his element.

Each one of us, it seems, is given something to be and to do that shows who God is. When we do this, when we learn to live in our element via our interior life of devotion, and our exterior life of activity, we are entering into the most exciting life possible this side of death.

You were made to live in your element. Will you join me in this discovery?

This book is based on a series of real-world metaphors, related to these very human, and very rich, "elemental" images reflected in creation. The four elements used here simply serve as a guiding metaphor that will help us unpack a life lived passionately in the presence of God.

Let's move into each element, and use its imagery to help us understand a vital component in our walk with Jesus.

EARTH: A GROUNDED LIFE
Faith, Family and Character

"While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, 'Everybody's looking for you.'"

Mark 1:35-37 *(The Message)*

When I was a young boy growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, I first learned the lesson of gravity. It wasn't in a classroom. It was the day I decided I wanted to impress the neighbor girl on the playground near our home. I climbed to the top of the monkey bars while she stood watching, enthralled with my courage and wild daring. Like a superhero at the top of the Empire State building, I thrust my arms into the sky, and I leapt into the air.

My memory of what happened next is quite foggy. I remember my feet hitting the ground first, my knees second, my chest third and my nose and face, last. As I lay wheezing on the ground, gasping for air and feeling the warmth of the blood pouring from my nose, I heard a young girl's voice say matter-of-factly "That was dumb."

I remember thinking a simple thought in that moment: "I thought the ground was softer than this."

Earth: A Grounded Life

Earth speaks of those things of that don't move in our lives – those things that don't break on us – rather we break on them. Earth and "grounding" speaks of dirt, the foundations under our feet, our roots, our stabilizing patterns, and organic places in which life can grow. Earth is also connected with ideas related to dust. We came from dust, and to dust we return.

At the time of this writing, three earthquakes have just occurred in different places in the world in the past few months – one in Haiti, one in Chile, and one in Hawaii. For those who have gone through an earthquake, it seems that the most unsettling feeling they experience during that event is the movement of that which they thought was firm and reliable – the earth beneath their feet.

We rely on the earth to remain stable beneath, to give us firm footing in an otherwise unstable world. Earth is comforting, and we fall to it in times of great awe or great distress. We come from it, and it supports us in this life.

Earth speaks of life elements like faith and a healthy spirituality. It speaks of our commitment to growing in vibrant spiritual life through the regular study of the scriptures, and through regular and steady conversation with God in prayer.

Earth speaks of life elements like family and the immediate relationships within our circles of flesh and blood relations.

Earth speaks of life elements like character and the quality of your soul: integrity, honesty, perseverance, courage, faithfulness, and goodness.

Earth speaks of our ability to live generously in a world that tells us to withhold for our own benefit. It speaks of our ability to live substantial, elegant spiritual lives in a world that positions celebrities as those who look the way that we would like to look, who make the bazillions of dollars we would like to make, and who spend those resources in ways that we would like to spend them.

Are you living in the elements of Earth – are you tending to those elements of life that ground you, stabilize you, provide a foundation for living well, finishing well, in your lifetime?

Grounded In Faith

In this case, we'll use Earth to speak of staying rooted in communication with God (prayer), in meditating on the Scriptures, in staying connected in worship settings that continue to reaffirm and reinforce the reality in us that God is in charge and His Story is advancing.

Spiritual formation has everything to do with staying oriented in a disorienting world. Just as a compass always points "true north," so too our lives are designed to be fine instruments, sensing God's magnetic pull and moving in that direction.

My father-in-law was involved in military intelligence, and he tells me of his days orienteering in military exercises. Dropped into the middle of a forest, a soldier must look to their compass to find their way out of their unsettling predicament to a safe haven. It is not until we are lost that we begin to look to our instruments. Unfortunately, by then, it is sometimes too late, and much ground has been lost.

What is our compass in everyday life, in the midst of what can be an incredibly disorienting world? The gift of God to us is the life of Jesus, mapped out in the scriptures, bookended by the vital story of humankind before him, and the new humanity he inaugurated after him. We connect with his life by reading and prayer.

Madame Guyon was a French Christian devotional writer in the 17th century, and she says this about learning to read the Scriptures slowly, and learning to pray the Scriptures.

> *"'Praying the Scripture' is a unique way of dealing with the Scripture; it involves both reading and prayer. Turn to the Scripture; choose some passage that is simple and fairly practical. Next, come to the Lord. Come quietly and humbly. There, before Him, read a small portion of the passage of Scripture you have opened to. Be careful as you read. Take in fully, gently, and carefully what you are reading.*
>
> *Taste it and digest it as you read. ...In coming to the Lord by means of 'praying the Scripture,' you do not read quickly; you read very slowly. You do not move from one passage to another, not until you have sensed the very heart of what you have read. You may then want to take that portion of Scripture that has touched you and turn it into prayer.*
>
> *...'Praying the Scripture' is not judged by how much you read but the way your read. If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar."*[iii]

Madame Guyon is reflecting on a more ancient idea made popular by the early church monk Benedict, called *lectio divina* or "divine reading." In this practice, you read a passage, and speak a Psalm, the whole way through. You are listening for one word or phrase that is meaningful to you, and connects with you for some reason. Then, you read the entire passage again, asking God in silence at the end for wisdom as to how that word

or phrase connects with your life. Finally, you read the passage once more, a third time, asking God in silence at the end if there is any response to this word or phrase that He is inviting from you. In this way, the scriptures can begin to come alive to us in a fresh and living way.

Another idea is for you to connect normal, everyday routine actions with prayer. For example, every time you drink a glass of water, pray "Lord, I recognize again that you alone give living water, and I drink deeply from you today." You may paste a phrase such as "I will lead today," on your bathroom mirror, and as you brush your teeth you commit yourself to furthering God's mission in the world every day.

Another practice I have found helpful, shown to me by a dear friend here, is the lighting of what I call my "Candle of Devotion." Every morning, as best as I can, I begin my time of prayer by lighting a small candle. As I light the candle, feeling the warmth of the flame and seeing it flicker against the wall in the morning light, I pray this prayer: "Lord, in lighting this candle I recognize that you are completely devoted to me. I say in return, that I am completely devoted to you."

My students through the years have done this exercise as well and have been deeply changed by it, not as some strange magical incantation, but as a symbolic action that viscerally, experientially, expresses the relation they have with God at the beginning of every day.

Grounded In Family

Many years ago, I walked into my home after a long day of faithful work and ministry. I was emotionally exhausted, frustrated over the lack of "listening" from others I had experienced, and I walked into my home with hollow gaze in my eyes.

"Honey," my wife said. "I love you. But I don't need a pastor; I need a husband. Your children don't need a worship leader, songwriter or artist. They need a daddy." I was stopped in my tracks. My wife, glorious gift that she is to me, is unimpressed with my great achievements or my stunning work ethic – at least at work.

She grounds me. I can't "fake it" with her, do a psychological dance around her that fools her into believing I'm something that I'm not. My children are similar in this. They see right through me, and especially for little ones, they are keenly aware that I am somewhere near the center of their universe.

I have learned that my family is needed by me as much as I am in need of them. When I honor my wife and children with the best of my time, energy and resources, as best as I can in the challenging situations in which we often find ourselves, then my life is falling into rhythm with God's highest plan for families.

What does spiritual formation have to do with our families? Almost everything. Martin Luther once said, "Marriage is the training ground of the Christian." He understood that spiritual habits are most evident, and most applicable, in the face of the person who knows us best on this earth.

When we tend to our families, we must:

> *Play together*. This teaches our spouses and children to laugh in the face of life's many spiritual challenges.
>
> *Work together*. This teaches our spouses and children that there is life to be shared in meaningful labor together that feeds, clothes and supports the family unit.
>
> *Act together*. This teaches our spouses and children that we live in a bigger Story than world is currently telling us through media and in our daily education and work experiences.

Intentionally plan these kinds of activities into your daily, weekly, monthly, yearly and lifetime rhythms. They will shape your family life over time, and create a vibrant community of faith at the center of your support systems – for the rest of your life.

Grounded In Character

"Reputation" said Horace Mann, "is what men and women think of you. Character is what God and the angels know of you."

Becoming spiritually formed into the likeness of Christ will always, in some way, come back to key virtues modeled in his way being invested in the way we do life.

> *Integrity* is who you are when no one is watching.
>
> *Humility* is who you are when you are in a position to elevate yourself.
>
> *Patience* is who you are when you must wait.
>
> *Perseverance* is who you are when you are in pain.
>
> *Courage* is who you are when you are afraid.
>
> *Love* is who you are when you are in a position to value someone.

These are just a few ways that we "put on Christ," as we move through our lives. The passage noted here suggests the actual act of "cloaking ourselves" in Christ – literally putting on his personality like clothing at the beginning of every day.

When we tend to the areas of character in our lives we are choosing to be substantial people – not those who simply "look good," but those who actually "are good. We choose the pathway of a secret life of good choices before God, and entrust the visible results to him.

Some of the ways we remain grounded in character are:

Choosing which fruit of the Spirit we will respond to another in, who may be coming at us in an adversarial way.

Choosing to disclose our weaknesses to God and key individuals so that our accountabilities to act with integrity, honesty and courage are higher.

Choosing to live in such a way that our interior life of character gives commands to our exterior life of moment-by-moment choices.

Character.

It is authenticity, it is sincerity; it is quality, wisdom, passion, restraint, contentment.

Character.

We know it when we see it; we see it when we encounter it.

Character.

It is centered and deliberate; neither scattered nor defensive.

Character.

It is rock; it is hard. It is soft; it is sweet.

Character.

Some build with it. Some build on it. Some are built by it.

Character.

Essential to the leader; attainable by all.

Embrace a grounded life. A firm foundation beneath our feet will enable us to act lovingly, passionately and substantially in the world – and will lead us increasingly to be conformed to the person and likeness of Christ.

Session 1
Reflection Questions

First, if you are doing this with a group, take some time to write in your answers to the following questions before you gather. Highlight page numbers, key quotes and ideas that moved you. Make sure you write in the margins, circle words, or anything that will help you interact with the material and remember core ideas.

1. What ideas moved you the most from this section?

Talk about the ideas related to worship that particularly moved you during your reading (or from the media or supplementary book if you used those).

How might the ideas that moved you help all of us to understand what worship is really all about?

2. What arenas of family life, faith and character are your greatest strengths? Your greatest weak spots?

What did you discover about your own heart in reading this session?

Session 2

WIND: AN INSPIRED LIFE
Beauty, Heroes, and Dreams

"One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: "Let the children alone, don't prevent them from coming to me. God's kingdom is made up of people like these."

Matthew 19:13-14 *(The Message)*

A number of years ago, I was sailing on a boat with my family and friends on a blustery afternoon on Lake Ontario. We decided to go swimming, and while the rest of my family was hanging onto a rope attached to the boat, my oldest daughter and I were not.

The wind kicked up, and it was then I understand the incredible power of such an invisible force. Like a lion loosed from a long captivity, the unseen element grabbed a hold of the sails on the boat, and whisked it away. As the distance between my daughter and I and the boat increased, I remembered something very important. I don't swim well. In fact, I have almost drowned 3 times in my life. This, my intuition quickly told me, might be another. My daughter and I were getting separated as well, and we fought the wind and waves to get to one another. If there ever was a time I wished Jesus would appear and welcome me to walk on water, it would be now.

I sought to encourage my daughter that all would be well, while at the same time convincing myself. We floated in the turbulent waves as we watched the boat rapidly become a small speck quite distant from us. My friend knew exactly what to do. He was familiar with the arts of handling the wind, no matter which direction it was blowing. He moved quickly, grabbed the rigging, threw his many sails into the sky, and masterfully found his way right back to us."

Wind: An Inspired Life

Why would I begin this chapter on Inspiration speaking of such a harrowing experience? Furthermore, what in the world does "inspiration" have to do with being spiritually formed into the likeness of Christ?

From my perspective, if there is one thing that any man or woman could say about Jesus, regardless of their faith, ethnic or generational background, is that *Jesus lived an inspired life*.

Wind, to continue our elemental metaphor, speaks of an inspired life. As the boat mentioned in the story above, we can be "inspired" and moved by ill winds, and we can be inspired and moved by good winds. The art of living an inspired life begins by understanding the stark difference between the two, and raising our sails at only the appropriate moments.

Some people, to guard themselves from ever getting out of hand or becoming inspired by the wrong things, keep their sails out of the sky as a matter of course. They see a dispassionate life of limited motion as a high calling, and use the language of personal discipline and altruism as their reason for never unfurling the canvas.

If your rigging is down, inspiration can kill you. With the wind swirling all about you, you have no capacity to harness it, guide it, use it toward the goals for which you were made.

Or, you may lift your sails, but with no apparent direction to your life. You will be at the whim of the wind, and you may name that wind God ("the Spirit blows wherever he pleases…") – but I deeply believe you will be wrong, like the rest of us, at least half the time. Many people spend their whole lives skirting around the world, looking for the next wind to fill their sales, aimlessly moving too and fro with any breeze that gives them emotional stimulation. This can kill a soul, over time – we drown in our need for constant stimulus – we are addicted to spiritual buzz. That is not the kind of life of which I am speaking.

Wind, in this case, is the element that speaks of a life that is in *a continual state of renewal, remembering and refreshing*. Beauty is a necessary *renewing* ingredient for our lives to be energized on a daily basis. Having heroes touching our lives through books, or events, or art or otherwise, causes us to *remember* the greatness that God has placed within each one of us as those made magnificently in His image. Finally, a peaceful relationship with the dreams that God has placed within us *refreshes* us and propels us forward toward the destination uniquely set apart for each one of us.

Wind speaks of life elements like appreciating beauty, and engaging with elements of beauty that sensitize you, encourage you and excite you.

Wind speaks of life elements like finding heroes that will call you forward in skill, in passion, and in faith – stimulating your desire to be better at what you do than you already are.

Wind speaks of life elements like dreams, giving ample room for the hopes and desires within us to be tested, matured and reshaped along our life journey, for the betterment of ourselves and

the doing of justice, the expression of love and the renewing of faith and courage in those impacted by our dream.

Wind speaks of our ability to find the renewing agents in our lives, from our youngest years until now, and to make them a part of our common experience. Wind whispers from our earliest years to us – did you once love to draw, desire to be just like a school teacher, or dream that one day you would find a cure for a debilitating disease? Wind speaks of those life elements that that move us toward where we want to go, that deliver us from our belief that we can do nothing, and instill in us God's belief that we can do anything ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me").

Wind speaks of life elements like art and beauty, gardening, great concerts, inspiring books, energizing friendships, passionate vocational work and spiritual encouragement. Wind speaks of our need to lift our sails into the wind, to learn the arts of riding the winds that are sent to us, and working with God to manipulate our sails so that we can get to where God has invited us to go.

Are you living in the elements of Wind – are you tending to those elements of life that make you feel fully alive, like you could have an impact in some significant way, that recharge you and strengthen you to fulfill your responsibilities in your lifetime? Are you living in the element of Wind? Are you tending to those elements in your life that inspire you, renew you, that bring you joy, that provide you with the energy you need to move forward day by day through the responsibilities of life?

Inspiration and Bernard's Four Degrees Of Love

Bernard of Clairvaux was a man with an intense zeal for God, and a passion to welcome others to experience the inspiring, renewing love of God. A profound leader in his day, he speaks to us out of the 12th century.

Bernard said that there are four degrees of love that the Christian must go through on our journey to God.

The first degree is where we all start: *the love of self for self's sake*. We're in this thing for us; we're the beginning, middle and end of our every thought, choice and action.

The second phase we move into is *the love of God for self's sake*. We love God because this works for us. Our faith is "us-centered," but at least now God is involved.

The third degree Bernard says is the *love of God for God's sake*. This is where most of us stop. This seems to us to be the goal of spiritual leadership. We're sure that to simply love God because He is worthy of that love, is our end goal. However, Bernard doesn't stop there, and God may not stop there.

Bernard says that's there is one more step for the healthy follower of Jesus – *the love of self for God's sake*. Listen to these words from Bernard's *Four Degrees of Love*:

> *"Just as a little drop of water mixed with a lot of wine seems to entirely lose its own identity as it takes on the taste and color of the wine; just as iron, heated and glowing, looks very much like fire, having lost its original appearance; just as air flooded with the light of the sun is transformed into the same splendor of the light so that it appears to be light itself, so it is like for those who melt away from themselves and are entirely transfused into the will of God."*[iv]

In other words, Bernard is saying that there is a place in the disciple's life that goes beyond the recognition that God is worthy of all praise, and steps into the realm where we recognize that we ourselves are the vessels of that praise, and that to care for the state of our own hearts, being fully devoted to glorifying God in all aspects of life, is as much an act of worship and devotion as any world-transforming activity – be it leading another worship service or caring for the poor in our towns and cities.

You and I, radiating the glory of God, may be a higher goal for us as human beings to attain to – with giving God the glory from our lives the ultimate "full circle" activity of worship! The early church father, Irenaeus of Lyons said it this way, "The glory of God is a human being; fully alive."[v] Fully alive to God, then to ourselves and others – this is a life of worship.

Inspired By Beauty

At the writing of this chapter, I am traveling with dear friends and members of our Learning Community through the lands of Greece, Turkey and Italy. When I turn a corner, and a see something very, very old half-buried in the ground, I have an immediate, primal response. I feel profoundly connected to the past in that moment, and am renewed in my sense of calling to connect the past, present and future. I am inspired by the art of other ages, in painting, architecture, and music.

Inspiration, for all of us, is a necessary ingredient to living a joyful life. Yet, inspiration is unique to each one of us. Beautiful scenery and tender novels inspire my wife. I am inspired by beautiful art and poetry. "Inspiration" literally speaks of that which *puts spirit* into us.

Listen to Annie Dillard's words about what inspires her, from her Pulitzer prize-winning book, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*:

> *"It was sunny one evening last summer at Tinker Creek; the sun was low in the sky, upstream, I was sitting on the sycamore log bridge with the sunset at my back, watching the shiners the size of minnows who were feeding over the muddy sand in skittery schools.*
>
> *Again and again, one fish, then another, turned for a split second across the current and flash! the sun shot out from its silver side. I couldn't watch for it. It was always just happening somewhere else, and it drew my vision just as it disappeared: flash, like the sudden dazzle of the thinnest blade, a sparking over a dun and olive ground at chance intervals from every direction.*
>
> *Then I noticed white specks, some sort of pale petals, small, floating from under my feet on the creek's surface, very slow and steady. So I blurred my eyes and gazed towards the brim of my hat and saw a new world. I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world's turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone.*
>
> *…It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. …I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."*[vi]

What a beautiful description of a moment of inspiration. Annie, in this piece, in her element, in her uniqueness and personality is writing about what inspires her. She says, "I'm still spending the power" – the power of a moment of inspiration, where God's life meets ours through things that we uniquely find to be beautiful.

Here's the big spiritual formation question for you. What is it that you do, that when you do it, you feel as though you've been "lifted and struck" like a bell? What do you find to be beautiful and inspiring? Take a moment right now and begin to jot those things in the margins of this

book. The music of a favorite band? The smell of flowers? The macro-world of planets turning or the micro-world as seen through a biologist's scope? The changing of hearts as they learn to follow God, or learn to simply love their spouse?

Annie is telling us that we need to learn to take the time to see the things that will inspire us – if we will make the time for them. What inspires you should be a part of your weekly rhythm, your weekly pattern. I fight hard to write songs and prose and poetry once a week. It gives me the life I need to rehearse, to lead worship Sunday after Sunday, to parent my kids, and to be a helping hand at my daughter's school.

Inspired By Heroes

Heroes in our lives help us to remember that God has placed greatness in us, by reflecting that greatness in their own life's work. My grandfather, the late John Allen Wilt, is one of my greatest heroes (second only to Jesus and my father, John Benjamin Milton Wilt). As my grandfather was dying of heart disease, I would sit out on cool Spring nights with him as a teenager and listen to him pontificate about women, money, the stupidity of some church systems (he had some bad experiences) and the glories of air and water (he was on an oxygen tank and could only eat ice chips).

Before my grandfather died, he and my grandmother left me an inheritance to help me pay for my college education. In that letter, my grandfather, in his beautiful word-smithery, told me what a bright future I had ahead of me. He called me to faithfulness, and put his money where his mouth was. I still have the letter that inspired me to go back to school, find out what God had for me to do, and to get about doing it.

To this day, whenever I am down, and disbelieving that I will ever be as loving as Jesus, impacting as Jesus, or able to endure my own hardship like Jesus, I hear a voice in my head. It may be the voice of God, but in that moment He is sounding an awful lot like my grandfather. "You can do it," I hear. "I believe in you."

I have another set of heroes – my Masters students. Each of them is uniquely retooling their lives to courageously become startlingly good at what they do. Some of them are on a quest to be a brilliant musician, others to write powerful books, others to become influencers of entire movements of creative leaders, still others to do the small things with such integrity that the world of just one or two people are impacted for eternity.

When I see these heroes in operation, mimicking my greatest hero Jesus, I want to do what I do to the utmost of my ability. Some of them inspire me musically. Others inspire me to care more deeply about people, injustice, roots music, worship leadership and… well, the list goes on and on.

Name your mentors, and name the area in which they inspire you. Now, expose yourself to times of learning with those mentors – concerts, coffee times, written memories, etc. Write down the words, phrases or tips that keep you getting out of bed and believing you could become that influencer, that pastor, that spouse, that figure skater, that mother, that businessperson or that president.

We are wired by God to look to heroes, always through the lens of our great hero of humanity, Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean one of your heroes can't be a drummer who happens to be an atheist. It just means that you should take cues from them on drum skills – not worldview.

Inspired By Our Dreams

Do you have a dream, or does a dream have you? Dreams are very challenging for us. For many, their dream(s) are so elusive and so painful to revisit they silence them forever. For others, the dream moves some or many of their choices, but never fully shapes their lives. For still others, pursuing their dream (never fully teasing apart the motives that drive the dream) becomes their all-consuming desire – and they sacrifice their families, friends and integrity to "make the dream come true."

None of these are options for the person of faith. You have one lifetime, and a calling that only you can fulfill in our midst. Dreams never look like what someone imagined them to be – but rather they fulfill a God-given function for us, and they are there for a reason. Dreams show us the state of our hearts, the nature of our place in the world, and in some cases, the exact mission we are called to fulfill in the world. Dreams help us to get out of bed and do something in the world. Dreams motivate to reach far beyond what we can do, into what we can only do "through Christ who strengthens us."

Their roots can be many, some planted in healthy soil and others in less healthy soils. Dreams become fantasies when they are not rooted in our mix of gifts, or talents and we want things motivated out of our own self-protection or fulfillment. Others around us can help us to understand the nature of our dreams, and how well matched we are to actually seeing them occur one day.

Let's start by putting the wind of our dreams in perspective.

In order to keep our dreams from pushing us to live in the land of fantasy, we must learn to be inspired in the midst of the duties, the "have-to's" of life. G.K. Chesterton, the great early 20th-century author of books such as *Orthodoxy* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* became a Christian later in mid-life. He said this about being inspired in the midst of our routine activities:

> *"Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged.*
>
> *They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."*[vii]

Every time you get up in the morning, every time you rise from bed and prepare to "do it again," God says which joy, "Let's do it again! Do it again, and again, and again." If Chesterton is correct, and God loves the repetition of good things, we would do our best to relish each thing we have to repeat every day, to draw inspiration from it, whether it be expressing love by doing the dishes, or faithfully going about loving people who are hard to love knowing that God loves our feeble attempts at being like Him.

Now let's talk about dreams that go beyond the realities with which we are faced every day. What did it take for Jesus to rise from the soil of his Jewish reality, answer the whispers of the Father in his spirit, and rise beyond small Galilee to affect his nation, the world and all of human history?

He needed to be inspired by what was in front of him, yes. He cared for the poor, studied the scriptures and generally, it is my guess, enjoyed the company of everyone from the children to his more laughable disciples (yes, Peter wins – unless you'd like to try out for the part).

But Jesus also had a clear sense of mission beyond himself. He constantly was refreshed by the dream that God had put in his heart – it was a dream about humanity restored, new creation coming in people and in the cosmos, and deliverance coming to his people Israel.

He kept that dream in front of him, and I believe that dream is what enabled him to step out of the Garden of Gethsemane and to be about the business of offering himself on our behalf.

Is your dream written down anywhere? Can you say it one sentence? Have you bounced it off of people you know, love and trust to see who you are, what they believe God has put within you, and will be brutally honest with you about their experience and that of others?

I have a notebook – a journal. It goes with me everywhere. In the back, I have written down the dreams and plans that I believe God has for me. Daily, I read it at the beginning of the day. Daily, depression takes a back seat as I embrace the dream for which I believe I am made. I hold it loosely, as I know that God will reform that dream at thousand times before I see its fruition in my life. But nevertheless, I keep it in front of me.

Keep the dream in front of you. It will inspire you, keep you going, and be a pathway to God's greater dreams for you – unknown only to us. God has your dreams in mind – it is very possible He Himself put them there.

What inspires you? Name those things, and in some way, as you learn to be inspired in the routine duties of life, plug in the experiences you find to be beautiful on a weekly basis. Plan them in your calendar, and don't let urgent things steel them away. Start small, maybe one hour a week, and then work up as you can – not down.

Session 2
Reflection Questions

First, if you are doing this with a group, take some time to write in your answers to the following questions before you gather. Highlight page numbers, key quotes and ideas that moved you. Make sure you write in the margins, circle words, or anything that will help you interact with the material and remember core ideas.

1. What ideas moved you the most from this section?

Talk about the ideas related to worship that particularly moved you during your reading (or from the media or supplementary book if you used those).

How might the ideas that moved you help all of us to understand what worship is really all about?

2. What aspects of beauty, heroes, and dreams are still not well cared for in your life?

Can you imagine a life that is constantly being lived in constant renewal and inspiration from the sources God sends your way? What would that be like, and what can you do to work with God on that process in your own life?

Session 3

FIRE: AN EMPOWERED LIFE
Passion, Mission and Restraint

"For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, 'They're yours – lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours.'

Jesus' refusal was curt: 'Beat it, Satan!' He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: 'Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.'"

Matthew 4:8-10 *(The Message)*

I remember my first real encounter with fire. I was working at a garden center, and my boss asked to go burn the massive wood and scrap pile from the trimming business that was our landlord. He gave me matches, and a can of gasoline to get it going. I walked back to the pile seeing that it was filled with chips and wood, but also a fair amount of furniture. I tried to light the corner of a couch. No luck. I tried to light the wood with a match. No luck again. Then, my eyes caught sight of the can of gasoline. "I've never started a fire in my life," I thought. "How does he expect me to get it started?" Then, I had an idea. I would douse the whole pile in gasoline – then light it. I took the can and poured gasoline all over the pile. Standing in the middle of the pile, I lit a match.

Yes, you may grant me my award now.

Throwing the match into a hole in the pile, I saw nothing happening. Then, just 5 seconds after this, I heard – whoooosh. Yes, that fire had lit strong, and I was standing right in the middle of the burning pit! I raced off the pile, and we watched the flames rise. Cars and trucks were parked near the pit, and were getting increasing hotter and hotter. My boss ran outside shouting – Dan, get away from there! We moved cars and vehicles, and, thankfully, no paint bubbled. The fire had needed to be lit, cared for with wisdom and attentiveness, then to do its job. It was the picture of heat and power, strength and energy – however, it was out of control and destroying both its objects (trash) and possibly its maker (me).

One hot summer afternoon, a man named Paul walked into a Roman city known for its sexual promiscuity and religious confusion - Ephesus. With passion, he teaches the message that has changed his life to anyone who will hear. After beatings, mockery and more, he stays his course. He risks his life, his security and his safety to share his message of love, forgiveness, transformation and justice. Why? Fire.

Have you ever been asked if you have a "mission" in life? While well meaning, this very question puts us at the very center of our story. But the more substantial question is this: "Does you have a mission or does a mission have you?" What is it that puts fire in your bones, and gives you something worth dying for? As it has been said, the truest tragedy in life is not dying for a cause – rather it is in having no cause worth dying for.

Empowered people are living in a Story that is bigger than they are, and are dependent on a source of strength that is beyond their capacity to draw from within. Let's take a brief look at fire, and the importance of being empowered by God to lead a sacramental life – a life in which all things are holy, and our actions embody and are energized by our beliefs.

Fire – An Empowered Life

Fire speaks of an empowered life. I've interacted with many friends around the world who, like me, have endured life-threatening battles with severe depression. In each case, there are many layers, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual that can add up to the sense of powerlessness that many feel holds their life in chains. I have watched those same lives, in a time of prayer, or in a season of ongoing encouragement renewal and counsel, come back from the dead, burst through the chrysalis, to live a colorful, resurrected life. A life almost extinguished, can become a life ablaze in spiritual flame.

Fire speaks of those life elements that empower us, that revive us and give us a strong and vivid sense of destiny and purpose in the world. Fire speaks of a spirituality that celebrates God's greatness and our own.

Fire speaks of ongoing personal development in areas of our passion and our skills. It speaks of study, risk, and placing ourselves in situations where wild adventure is the only option.

Fire speaks of life elements that remind us that we are someone's hero in this lifetime, and that we have strength beyond ourselves to drawn on – to accomplish our unique heroic mission in our lifetime.

Are you living in the element of Fire? Are you tending to those elements in your life that catalyze energy, passion, skill, hope and faith within your soul? Are you living in such a way that you are regularly empowered to do what you are called to do?

Ignatius And How Souls Work

First of all, let's get something important out of the way. Many spiritual leaders speak of living an "empowered" life as something that comes from outside of you – gifts of God make you spiritually able and "powerful" to do God's work. Then, you do it. Often, you will burn out. But hey – isn't that the way it goes? Wouldn't you like to burn out for faith's sake? Isn't that a noble way to view the spiritual life?

No – that is our short answer. This utterly and completely dysfunctional view of the empowered life is tomfoolery incarnate, and has destroyed leaders and families throughout faith history, at least in spirit.

Every spiritual leader could use a good dose of wisdom from Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order. Ignatius of Loyola was a wealthy young man, born in Spain in the 16th century. After a wound in a skirmish with France put him in a hospital bed, Ignatius began to read. He read *The Imitation Of Christ* by Thomas a' Kempis, *The Life Of Christ* and other books. He had a profound conversion, gave up his wealth and began to have many mystical encounters with Jesus. Out of those encounters he wrote *The Spiritual Exercises*, which he wrote to help others to pray the Scriptures. He founded the Jesuit Order, and these scholarly monks used his patterns of prayer in their daily devotions.

Ignatius suggested that our souls work a certain way, and it would do us well to understand how they work. We are constantly moving, Ignatius said, between two "states of the heart." One is the state of *Consolation*. The other is *Desolation*.

Consolation

Consolation, from the prefix "con" which means "with," and "solace" which means "peace," speaks of the seasons of the soul when we are living out of the vibrant center of an intimate walk with God. In this picture in your notes, our lives are crackling with the immanent presence of God, our lives are strong and substantial in the center, our interior life is thick and dense with love for God and devotion, and that strength enables us to move outward in community, in spiritual friendship, in leadership and in mission and action. Our lives aren't a vacuum, sucking everything to the center, trying to take affirmation and identity and hope from everyone we know and everything we do.

Desolation

Ignatius suggests that our soul often enters another state that may be as familiar, or more familiar to us, that he calls *Desolation*. Desolation means "without solace," or "without peace." In this picture, our center is embattled; we don't sense God near, we're not aware of His presence.

With our identity at stake, we begin to struggle to make good decisions. Even though we look like we're giving in ministry, we're actually taking our identity from it, and even from the people who think we're so great at what we do. The movement of the soul in desolation is toward the center, pulling us away from true community (sometimes activity with people mimics true spiritual friendship and community, but it is not the same thing).

We move away from spiritual friendship in increasing isolation and loneliness, away from leadership and thoughtful mission and action. In those times we tend toward isolation, and without good support become disillusioned and afraid that God is no longer present.

Here's how Ignatius explains both of these movements of the soul:

"I call it consolation when the soul is aroused by an interior movement which causes it to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord and consequently can love no created thing in this world for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all things. ...I call desolation all that is contrary to (this), as darkness of the soul, turmoil of the mind, inclination to low and earthly things, restlessness resulting from many disturbances and temptations which leads to loss of faith, loss of hope, loss of love.

...For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation."[viii]

In other words, Ignatius is saying that our souls move. They're not static any more than waves in the ocean are static. We're affected by life, and that is normal. Our goal however, is to keep the essential things moving in the same direction, a long obedience in the same direction as Eugene Peterson called it, building toward a way of doing life that works, and that loves and heals and restores and increases in hope and faith and love over a lifetime.

Empowered By Passion

As I write this, my dear friend Jamie Gillentine is within my view. To anyone who would see him walk today, they might say he is a tall, handsome young father, with dark hair and an intensity that energizes his every word. He is passionate about his devotion to Christ, and to leading teenagers to a vibrant, living encounter with God.

A few years ago at a church picnic, Jamie dove head first into a sandbar hidden under the water at a beach. He broke his neck, and was paralyzed from the neck down. He and his tender wife Deb were told he would be a quadriplegic for the rest of his days. Jamie, with his head held still by a medical head-rack, looked at the hospital ceiling.

Inside his heart, a fire was burning – a fire of passion. Looking into that flame, Jamie remembered that God had been faithful to him, his family, and those he had pastured for many years. Jamie felt the warmth of a flame that assured him that his life was not over, but rather was just beginning. Jamie gazed into the light of that flame, and recalled his place in the world as an encourager, a pastor and a friend of the young. Jamie had the flames of passion to love, serve and care for the weak in society.

Jamie had surgery and received the use of his arms. Jamie got up. Jamie began to use the legs he was told would never be used again. Jamie began to walk, jump, hop and run. Today, Jamie is my hero. We have walked miles, side by side with friends, in Europe. Jamie continues to serve as a spiritual leader in his large local church. Jamie is a courageous vision of leadership to his own children, to his faith family, and to anyone who learns his story.

The word "passion" comes from the Latin word, *passio*, which means "to suffer." What is it that you "suffer" to do, long to do, even though it takes work and diligence? What is it that aches in you, and when you do it, you feel the pleasure of God as it helps others? Name your passion, and say yes to God's invitation to work with him to encourage others through that passion.

Empowered By Mission

I have had the great privilege of working with many socially engaged leaders, and Gary Best is among my closest friends. Gary is one of those men who are marked by greatness. His message is singular, his passion is always burning, and his mission is

clear. He is a man of whom it can be said that he does not have a mission, but rather a mission has him.

Gary is convinced that a younger generation must learn how to care for the poor, do justice in society, and to live missionally in the world. So, Gary lives missionally and intentionally. He doesn't wait for things to happen – he partners with God and takes initiative. I have watched him motivate tens of thousands of worshipers through the years, and he does so less by words and more by action.

To be empowered by mission, is to step out in following Jesus into the places of life unfamiliar to us, and expecting God to meet us there. The Spirit of God meets and empowers us not when we "get anointed, and then go," but rather when we "obey" – and are met by the Spirit's power in the moment of obedience.

Empowered By Restraint

Why would we ever talk about restraint when looking at an empowered life? Like a bobsled, your life and mine run on tracks honed and heightened for the purpose of propelling us to our destination. Every limitation on that track is thrusting us forward – every "yes" is saying "no" to something else.

Some people want the powerful life with a snap of the fingers and a wave of a wand. Fortunately, it doesn't work that way. We exert our passion, seeking to remain true to God, but then we listen for those areas in our lives to which we say no – in which we must urge restraint.

"Just because it can be done, doesn't always mean that it should be done," said a Jewish man about some of today's modern art. When we learn the art of saying "no" to the wide range of passionate fires burning within us, we learn the art of trusting God to act through our fewer decisions.

Like that bobsled, the track's very limitations are the stuff of speed. If we want to have power and speed getting to our destination, the answer is not to run in a wide-open field where anything goes. Rather, the answer lies in narrow, focused tracks that guide our passion on its journey toward action.

> When we learn to say "No" to ourselves through various spiritual habits, such as study, meditation, prayer, fasting and more, we develop a stronger a launch cannon by which our passions will reach the unique target group that is our own.
>
> Unrestrained, fire can wreak havoc. Almost fully restrained, fire will die out for lack of oxygen. To live an empowered, fiery life for the long haul, we need these two factors balancing one another out. We need controls on the fire, but not so much we might put it out.

What empowers you? Do you have an ongoing set of personal patterns that rekindle your passion to know God and to make Him known in the world? The apostle Paul did – every song, letter, every gathering of the believers was an opportunity to have someone pray for him, for him to pray for someone else, and for the gospel to spread out in the spacious world.

Christ's love compelled him, because God's Spirit indwelled him. That's the way empowering works. I get up every morning and tell myself, face to face in the mirror, "You my friend, are a hero. Go and be that for someone today." I welcome God's Spirit to strengthen me for the day's tasks, and then I keep the prayers rolling under my breath. This is spiritual empowering – a renewed sense of the possible in the face of the impossible.

Lead an empowered life, for the sake of those who are weak.

> *Establish a core "prayer circle," made up of family and friends who are committed to praying for you. We have over 40 people.*
>
> *Make yourself vulnerable to the prayers of others in any given worship or life situation.*
>
> *Choose to place yourself in obedience situations that feel somewhat uncomfortable, but into which God has invited you.*
>
> *Always, always, always – spend time welcoming the Spirit of God to join you, as you join him, in the work that he has for you to do.*

Find peace with God regarding the missional activity, the empowered activity, with which you grow in this world. As Paul said, may you be able to say:

“I consider all things loss, that I might know the power of Christ in his death and resurrection.” I couldn’t agree more.

Session 3
Reflection Questions

First, if you are doing this with a group, take some time to write in your answers to the following questions before you gather. Highlight page numbers, key quotes and ideas that moved you. Make sure you write in the margins, circle words, or anything that will help you interact with the material and remember core ideas.

1. What ideas moved you the most from this section?

Talk about the ideas related to worship that particularly moved you during your reading (or from the media or supplementary book if you used those).

How might the ideas that moved you help all of us to understand what worship is really all about?

2. What areas of passion, mission and even restraint are marking your life right now?

Put your heart on a scale. How are you doing in these areas?

Session 4

WATER: A COMMUNAL LIFE
Healers, Guides and Encouragers

"I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love.

Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning.

No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father."

John 15:11 *(The Message)*

I remember the moment like it was yesterday. I had battled seasons of depression continually throughout my life. This particular day, I was sitting in the passenger's seat while my good friend Bruce was driving. 'I really think I'm about to lose my mind,' I said, 'And I don't know if I can pull up this time.' Without missing a beat, my friend glanced toward me and said, with a strong and firm voice, 'No. You hear me? No. That's exactly what will not *happen. You will not lose your mind. You will get through this.' In a moment, with a statement punctuated by a decade of friendship, the mental loop in which I had gotten lost was broken."*

Water – A Communal Life

Water speaks of a communal life. This chapter recalls the simple fact that you and I were not designed to traverse this challenging journey of life alone. To the degree you are nurturing rich and healthy relationships in your life, from spouses, to friendships, to children to spiritual mentors – to that degree you will find ongoing resource that will carry you through your most desperate times of need.

I love fly-fishing. One of my favorite summer pastimes to stand in a river with a friend down the way, casting my line into placid, lush pools where the fish are resting. In the river and its pools, one sees the very nature of water. H20 runs to the lowest places. It nurtures the growth in those hidden areas that teem with life and they become alive. It swirls and moves around the rocks, around the obstacles, and reaches its destination. One can't tell where one bit of water begins and another ends. In one fluid motion, waters run together, become one, and increase their strength when mingled.

Water speaks of those life elements that connect us with one another in a deep and growing sense of community. Water speaks of friendships maintained over the course of decades, of lifetimes, that are nurtured on a daily or weekly basis. Water speaks of the hope that comes in a moment of tremendous distress, where lives with which we share both joy and pain come around us, run to the lowest places in our hearts and nourish the seeds that are buried in the soil of our suffering. Water speaks of our faith communities, spiritual friendships, our connection with our tribes, and our intentional connection with our communities.

Are you living in the element of Water? Are you tending to those life elements that nurture encouragement, accountability, shared wisdom and mutual inspiration in your life? Are you tending to relationships that simply bring you joy, laughter, and a sense of well being in the world? Are you living in such a way that authentic relationships are running to the lowest places in your life, because you are running to the lowest places in theirs?

Bonhoeffer On True Community

Now we have come to the part of our spiritual formation that will always involve our greatest joys and struggles in this life – *other people*.

Listen to these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran pastor and theologian who offered his singular voice in the midst of Nazi Germany and the loneliness of the concentration camps.

> *"But God has put this Word in the mouths of others in order that it may be communicated to us. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find his living Word in the witness of a brother (ed. or sister), in the mouth of a man (ed. or woman). Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him.*
>
> *He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth.*
>
> *He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. he needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."*[ix]

Bonhoeffer is saying here that Christians should rightly long for one another as friends and companions on the journey of life. Creative people I know have a tendency to seek out community, but often with those who think like them. We all want to be with people who think like us, on some level. It makes us feel as though we have a place, a tribe, in this world.

However, we also need to cultivate relationships with those who are not like us, who will see things in our lives through a different lens. In the Meyer-Briggs, I'm an INFP - a Dreamer/Healer. My wife is an ISTJ - a Trustee. In the same house, the flames of love and the flares of battle can be seen and felt, as we work out our "community life" with joy and trembling! But our differences are what make our relationship "work" – one's blind spot is the other's clarity. Some of my closest friends are very similar in ilk to me; others are quite different. I've found most often that the one's who are different speak the most deeply into my world.

You and I need to be connected, on a weekly basis, to good friends. You need good friends who don't always look at you as a worship leader or worship pastor or leader. You need to make time to meet with those friends just to play and to hang out. Plato said, "We learn more about another person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of work." Yet we also need friendships that feel a great liberty to speak into our marriages, our way of doing life, our heart attitudes and our failings. Accountability is two people pursuing one another, not one person pursuing another to keep them in check. Right now, think of those with whom you have this kind of honest relationship.

It's not okay for you to be lonely and isolated. You need "real deal" support, and your spouse shouldn't be the one who has to do it all, get the earful all of the time, or always pick you up when you're down. You need spiritual friends disconnected from work and maybe even ministry to stand in the gap for you. How does that happen? Often, it happens because we have become the kind of friend who does these same things for others.

Community As Healer

I have had the privilege to be a part of many communities in my journey as a Christian. The shared life of spiritual friendship had a different temperature in each of those communities, and I could often trace that sense of warmth back to the primary leaders of that community. If I sensed great friendship and shared accountability in the leaders of the community, I tended to sense it in the congregation.

The most recent community of which I am a part has the uncanny ability to take extremely broken people, even those who are mentally ill, and enrobe them in love, grace, friendship and prayer over a long period of time. The results have been stunning to watch. Women who were beaten by ruthless husbands are now confident, passionate spiritual leaders in their community. Men who were broken by the loss of jobs and family were restored to dignity, and welcomed by all manner of other men from other income levels and experiences to serve alongside them in Kingdom work.

When I first came to that community, I remember smiling for many months whenever I would look at the senior leader. One day, when it felt particularly awkward, I said, "I'm so sorry I keep smiling whenever I see you – it seems to be an involuntary response with some hidden meaning. It's like the itch when something is healing. I think our friendship is healing me." We laughed in agreement. I was interacting with a leader who embodied community and extensive grace in his manner of leadership, and it was bringing wholeness to me in unseen ways.

Community As Guide

In our community, we practice something we call "Discernment Prayer." When someone is going through a major life change, a challenging season, or some other situation requiring an impacting decision, a number of people gather around that person for a time of listening prayer.

Three types of people are invited: 1) Close friends of the person or couple, 2) People who are good at listening to God and giving honest thoughts, and 3) Others who are learning this method of listening, discerning prayer.

After the couple shares for just a few moments, we sing a worship song or two, then move into 5-10 minutes of "listening," with pen and paper in hand. We are listening for scriptures, images, or other pieces of information that the Spirit might deposit in our hearts for this person. We attempt to be as open, and as vulnerable as possible to ideas that might be beyond our normal thoughts about the state of the person's affairs.

After this time of silence, we share our thoughts in a circle. It is always stunning how often very similar pictures are shared, words and images dovetail with other words and images, and profound themes emerge. Never is the person or couple "told what to do," nor are they subtly persuaded to move some particular direction that would benefit the community. The community has come together to listen, to trust, and to offer what they sense God may be speaking.

At the end, an experienced leader seeks to sum up what has been said, suggesting a few threads that may have emerged, and concluding the time in a prayer of blessing for the person or couple.

Having been the recipient of these times of discernment, we as a couple have seen the powerful lasting guidance that came to us either during, or as a result, of those times of community prayer. Community, in its common voice, can bring much needed guidance to us in times of need. In an autonomous society, more committed to doing its own thing than in relying on the wisdom, love and counsel of others, this way of allowing community to guide us is a lost art.

The church, and the disciple of Jesus, is called to revive it. Take good counsel from those around you who you trust, but also who may have a different perspective than those who might simply agree with you to make you feel better. Community, at its best, can guide us like a river carrying a boat to its destination.

Community As Encourager

It was one of the most painful seasons in our lives as a family. We had made a difficult decision that would be received in various ways by all of our children, and we did not expect the financial, emotional and psychological traumas that would come with the move.

Around us, our friends had gathered. Open wounds in our spirits, widened by fear after fear, were burning and aching in ways we were close to believing were unbearable. But the community had a balm to give, a salve to apply, a wrapping to hold us together. Counsel, gifts, and actions inspired by deep love came pouring out of our closest friends. Many of these peers were men and women with whom we had shared a small lifetime to date, in just a few short years.

As I look back on that season in our lives, it feels as though it was yesterday. So much pain pressed me to believe that God was distancing Himself from us, stepping back from our lives due to some unspoken contempt for us. I battled in the night with my irrational and faithless thoughts. Had we failed God, or was He failing us? Was there a way out, or had we come to the end of our lines, all of them at once?

In those moments, community spoke. I would receive daily emails, phone calls and gestures of encouragement. Our support system had rallied, and there seemed to be no end to the friendship being expressed toward us.

One day, I asked one of our dearest friends, showing so much generosity toward us, how they could keep their heads in the game with us for so long? The answer was both shocking and profound. “After the encouragement you have given to us?” he answered. “How could we not stand by you?”

In the midst of our great travail, my heart was being healed even as the wounds were being inflicted. Community was teaching me to be an encourager even as it was encouraging me. In our darkest hour, true friends point us to Christ, and believe with us that God is in the midst of our greatest trials and most painful processes.

In this case, without community, I cannot confidently say that I would have made it through. My heart was through the floor. Friends went into the basement, found it, and lifted it up to God and to me again.

What connects you to community? Do you personal life habits continue to cultivate deep and giving friendship, because of the way you act toward others? Christ himself nurtured the habit of community. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus’ broken-hearted, seeking to wake his friends. He wished they could have waited for him, with him, just as he had done for them so many times in the past. In this case, community may not have failed him – but simply disappointed him.

The reality is, community will always disappoint us at some point. Bonhoeffer suggests that some of us hold a “wish dream” about community – and idealized vision of what community is all about and what we should expect of every community of which we are a part. In reality, our wish dream, he suggests, is precisely what kills true community. Our expectations are too high – the one who loves “community” the most ends up killing it because they have an idealized vision of what it should provide.

You need community around you, but you and I need a relationship with Christ more. Why? Community, even at its best, will fail us. Christ will never fail us.

Lead a communal life, for yourself and for those who watch your leadership.

Invest yourself deeply in that community in which God has made you a part. Serve, love, give, with no expectation of being served, loved or given to in return. Take your stand to be a community giver, a committed friend, and a longsuffering compatriot.

Look for crisis in your community to which you can attend, out of a pure heart and with a sense of affirmation around you.

Ask those who lead your community how you might better contribute to strengthening that community. They may have ideas for your calling and gift-mix that would go beyond what you already know to be in your community.

Be thankful for the community that God sends you. Don't run away when things get tough – love deeply, fight for love, and entrust your own heart's needs to Jesus. He will support you, and lead you through the pain of community to the other side – real community.

Plan time with friends – those who bring you joy – in your weekly calendar. Yes, they are as important as any dental, doctor, or spiritual life appointment you have.

Plan time with your spouse, if applicable, on a consistent and weekly basis. It is in the friendship that is marriage that we are to share the greatest of all emotional intimacies. Guard those intimacies, and make sure that you are expressing them primarily with your spouse rather than with others.

Hear these words from Jesus, a prayer for all of us who would seek to follow him no matter our generation:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:20-23

The goal of unity is a worthy one, according to the Scripture. The element of water, the nurturing of that community, is a vital element for anyone truly desiring to become like Christ.

This friendship, this elemental journey into community, is the answer to Jesus' prayer for each one of us.

Session 4
Reflection Questions

First, if you are doing this with a group, take some time to write in your answers to the following questions before you gather. Highlight page numbers, key quotes and ideas that moved you. Make sure you write in the margins, circle words, or anything that will help you interact with the material and remember core ideas.

1. What ideas moved you the most from this section?

Talk about the ideas related to worship that particularly moved you during your reading (or from the media or supplementary book if you used those).

How might the ideas that moved you help all of us to understand what worship is really all about?

2. What roles do healers, guides, and encouragers have in your life right now? Can you name them?

Do these kinds of community strengtheners in your life exist right now? Who can you healthily draw strength from in these areas?

A FINAL WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *The Elemental Life*. If this book has impacted you in any way, it would be my privilege to host you in an ongoing conversation over at www.DanWilt.com. Many others will join us there who also are fighting for something beyond us related to worship.

Bless you as you faithfully participate in, and encourage, the elemental life.

If you would do me the kindness of leaving a review on the Amazon or iTunes page where you downloaded this, it would be so helpful. Others can then connect with your response, and find their way to the worship conversation.

Grace and Peace to you,

Dan Wilt
Author, *The Elemental Life*

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and leave a comment or three.



Written by Dan Wilt, M.Min.

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[i] I first heard this phrase from friend, Dr. Peter Fitch.

[ii] Mullins, Rich. *Hard*, © 1993 BMG Songs, Inc. (Admin. by BMG Music Publishing)

[iii] Foster, Richard and James Bryan Smith, eds. *Devotional Classics, Revised Edition: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005, 302-303.

[iv] Ibid., 41.

[v] Irenaeus Of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, Book 4.20.7.

[vi] Foster and Smith, 346.

[vii] Ibid., 334

[viii] Ibid., 194.

[ix] Ibid., 274.