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Daily Practices to Cultivate Franciscan Nonviolence

Transformative nonviolence is a process of bringing us back to our truest selves. Ultimately, its techniques and strategies must draw their life from the well of sacredness. Practically speaking, this means consciously cultivating those dimensions planted by God deep within our being, which bring life to ourselves, to other human beings, as well as to the earth and all its inhabitants. Now more than ever, our spiritual disciplines must deepen in us the vision and methods of nonviolent transformation. To this end, we are called to cultivate the spiritual dimensions of the nonviolent life on a daily basis. Here are some spiritual qualities that lie at the foundation of a spirituality of nonviolence, plus some suggestions for practicing them.

Awe

Often we are so absorbed in our everyday life that we assume that this is all there is. We come to believe that the structure and horizon of the world we experience -- at home, in the work-place, and through the media -- is "reality." By making this assumption, we often miss the fact that this social reality is *constructed* -- it is a system of rules, beliefs and motivations that shape and limit our view of life. We tend, therefore, to overlook the fact that life is much more mysterious and unfathomable than the systems we manufacture to navigate through the world. As theologian Karl Rahner, S.J. held, these systems are like tiny islands floating on a vast sea of mystery. When we cultivate a sense of awe for the great and irreducible mystery of our lives, we are able to see that life is more than the systems in which we live. We are also able to see that those systems can and must be transformed when they contradict or offend the great mystery of God that is our beginning and end.

One way of exploring this sense of mystery is to reflect on our encounters with other persons. On the one hand, these exchanges can be like following an agreed-upon formula. In that case, we are often like two billiard balls knocking against each other. On the other hand, our encounters with others can be experiences of deep communion. They can be holy moments where presence receives presence, experiences where, as phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, there is a "flow of infinity between one another's eyes." When two subjects encounter one another in this way -- giving but not being destroyed, belonging but not "belonging to" -- they experience in a momentary but tangible way the "ground of all being," the inexhaustible mystery which creates, preserves and embraces us.

One way of cultivating this sense of awe and mystery is to take some time in a quiet place and call to mind a very important encounter you had with another person. After imagining this event in detail, consider how it happened and what some of its consequences were. Notice your feelings as you remember this event. Reflect on the ways that this exchange had an unpredictable quality, a sense of possibility, transcending prescribed social ritual or conventional scripts. Sense the mystery of the situation. Reflect on how this mystery comes in part from the way that the depth dimension of both

people was shared. This depth dimension or inner mystery is that aspect of us that cannot be reducible to our assumptions, expectations or systems. Throughout the day, cultivate an awareness of this mystery.

Gratitude

A nonviolent stance is one of deep gratefulness for our life and for all life. It is a posture which acknowledges the source of this life. It recognizes that each one of us is on a spiritual journey and that all of our experiences -- happy or sad -- teach and transform us. It salutes all the ways we have been gifted by God, our family, our teachers, our friends. One way of cultivating gratitude is taking some time in a quiet place and recalling 10 people who have given of themselves so that your life could be better. Call to mind their faces. Remember in some detail what they have done for you. Recall the ways people have lavished their time, energy and resources on you. Then consider how God has lavished God's presence on you and on our world. Cultivate this awareness throughout the day, increasingly acknowledging how our entire life -- and everything that passes through it -- is a gift.

Receptivity

How do we cultivate our openness to those around us? One way is to practice letting go of the ego's armor in order to receive and heal the world. Here is an exercise which you can practice in the morning before leaving for work, or at any other time of the day.

Stand up, dropping your arms to your sides. Allow your entire body to relax. Breathe in God's grace; breathe it out into the world. Then slowly raise your arms and cross them in front of your eyes. Feel yourself protected and guarded. Slowly extend your arms outward in an attitude of openness to the world. After a few moments, move them in a gesture embracing the world. Repeat several times. This ritual can be performed alone or with others.

Compassion

Active nonviolence opens us to the two fundamental dimensions of all beings: sacredness and woundedness. It teaches us to share the suffering of others, as well as their fulfillment. Active nonviolence seeks to put this form of accompaniment into practice as each opportunity arises.

One way of cultivating compassion is to imagine someone with whom you have an unresolved conflict or unresolved negative feelings. Imagine them sitting in front of you. Look into her or his eyes. Share your feelings about this conflict with this person. Then ask her or him to speak. You may want to write down the "dialogue" that unfolds between you (as Ira Progoff suggests in *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal Process* [New York: Dialogue House Library, 1975]). Finish this encounter by praying for one another.

Joy

The horrors of this world are often overwhelming. Though these are not to be ignored, awe, gratitude, receptivity and compassion demand nothing less than engaging them fully. Horror is not the *ultimate*

reality. Active nonviolence is a spiritual path that cultivates a keen awareness that *the meaning of life is found by joining wholeheartedly in God's joy*. How do we join in this divine rejoicing? We do this by letting it flow into all parts of our existence, including our modest efforts to mend the brokenness of our world.

We can cultivate this on a daily basis by becoming quiet and imagining God laughing. Go deeply into this laughter, into its roots -- into that place where God declares that creation is good, that its inhabitants are good, that life is good.

Let us recall the words of Julian of Norwich: "The worst has already happened -- and it has been repaired!"