

Introduction

Setting the Stage

IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. I backed into spiritual formation. I didn't intend to. The main reason I got interested in it, I have to admit, was out of my own personal brokenness—and desperation.

When I was a young teenager, I once experienced an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. At that time, my heart said “yes” to him. I would follow him, heart, soul, mind, and strength. But over time, I discovered that the “yes” I said to God had slowly and imperceptibly morphed. I found myself believing in the presence of God much like I believed that the chemical formula of water was H₂O: it was good to know, but it wasn't a lived-out reality that shaped what I thought, how I felt, and how I lived. My actual day-to-day life was often miles away from what I said “yes” to in my head. Sometimes it even ran 180 degrees in the opposite direction!

Why does that happen? Why is it so difficult for me to live out my relationship to God in my everyday life? How is it possible to bring together what I have come to know in my head with how I live?

This incongruity of, on the one hand, wanting to live for God and, on the other hand, often doing exactly the things I knew were pulling me away from him, caused so much internal pain and anguish that I frankly don't know how I survived my teen years! The guilt I felt about living at odds with what I knew was true and good just about killed me.

I backed into spiritual formation because of this personal pain. It drove me to want to find out whether I could live with and for God every moment of every day. I wanted to bring together the thoughts and desires I had about how to live in God's presence with my actual experience. Is that even possible? If so, how is it possible? To me that is what spiritual

formation is all about. This book is the result of my searching for answers to these questions.

My story with God, however, began much earlier. The first divine encounter I recall having was with my grandmother. Let me tell you her story.

Anna Helene Kirsch

Anna Helene was born in 1891 in Lithuania, into a family whose history could be traced back to Austria during the time of the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther. When Catholic Counter-Reformation backlash arose, Protestants in Austria were given a choice: convert back, leave, or die. Anna Helene's forefathers chose to emigrate north and eventually found their way to Lithuania and Latvia. Anna Helene's life was filled with the difficulty and hardship that comes to those forced to live as a foreigner in another land.

Anna Helene came to faith early in life. She wrote in her diary, "On the 11th of October 1904 I came to faith and in April 1905 I was baptized. The happiest day of my life was when I came to faith. The most festive day of my life was my baptism."

Anna Helene married a man who loved her but was not always easy to live with. He didn't, let's say, always exude warmth. When she was about fifty, her husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack. She found herself alone, without a job, without income, and with three children to feed.

Then came World War II. Her only son was drafted into the army and sent to fight in the frontline. He was never heard from again. When the Russian army advanced on the Baltic States, Anna Helene had to flee, leaving her home and all her possessions behind. She spent most of the war as a refugee in Germany—constantly fleeing from one place to the next, in order to find food and shelter. She saw and experienced the horrors of war.

At the end of the war, Anna Helene was helpless and alone. Her daughter took her in and together they emigrated to America.

In the years that followed, she contracted Parkinson's disease, and because of it, she could not feed herself. On top of that, she fell and broke her hip, and from that time on, she could not walk alone. She could do

nothing for herself, and had to be dependent upon others even to go to the bathroom.

That was Anna Helene, my “Oma.” She lived with our family all through my childhood until the day she died.

Even though Oma was in constant pain, I never recall her complaining or falling into self-pity. Never!

Once, when I was about seven or eight years old, I slept in her room. In the middle of the night, I heard someone groaning, and I realized it was Oma. Physical pain had woken her up, as it often did, and she couldn’t sleep.

In the dark I could make out her figure in bed, and I stared intently at her and noticed that she was praying passionately and fervently for each of us seven kids and for my parents. I remember a feeling of awe came over me when I heard her pray for me.

After the prayer, in a half-whisper, she sang her favorite song:

*Solang mein Jesus lebt
und Seine Kraft mich hebt,
muß Furcht und Sorge von mir fliehn,
mein Herz in Lieb erglühn.*

As long as Jesus lives
And His strength lifts me up
Then fear and worry need to flee
My heart will glow in love.

In many ways, life had treated Anna Helene badly: the horrors of war, a refugee without a home, meager possessions, bad health, and the humiliation of being totally dependent on others for all of her needs. Yet, despite all this, she had the spiritual resources to sing in the pain and experience joy in Jesus’ presence.

This night is etched deep in my mind. As a seven-year old kid, it planted a seed idea of what it looked like when God’s presence within a person was a reality. I remember thinking to myself back then, “I want to be the kind of person who has that kind of experience with God.”

In a real sense, this story captures for me what spiritual formation is all about. Spiritual formation is about asking and answering the following questions:

- How can my life be formed and transformed so that—no matter what happens to me, or what circumstances I find myself in—I grow to become a person with the inner life and disposition of an Anna Helene?
- How can I develop ways of thinking and being that will steer me steadily toward this goal?
- What are practices and habits of mind, soul, body, and social relationships that can shape me toward that end?

Behind this Book

This book grew out of a course on spiritual formation that I have been teaching at a Christian university every semester for the past decade. In many ways, this book follows the same path as the course itself. The goal of this book (as in my class) is to take you on a journey to explore what spiritual formation is and how it unfolds, with the ultimate aim of setting you on your own path toward genuine, personal spiritual transformation.

Quite a number of great books on spiritual formation have been written (I will be pointing some of them out as we go along), so why write another one? There are primarily three reasons.

First, some books are very detailed about spiritual formation, and so it's easy to miss the forest for all the trees. Other books talk about spiritual formation in more general ways. This book tries to steer a course between those two.

Second, the aim of this book is to give you all the tools that you need—biblical, scientific, and practical—in order to develop your own pathway for spiritual growth. I hope to make clear what are the essentials to put yourself on a trajectory of spiritual development that fits who you are.

The third reason for writing this book is to bring recent findings of brain research¹ as well as social science research into conversation with spiritual formation. These fields have uncovered some significant insights about human transformation, which could be useful in our own

1. Brain research actually goes by a bewildering number of names: neuroscience, neuropsychology, neurobiology, etc. I will generally use the term “neuroscience” as a blanket term relating to the study of the brain and how it functions. My apologies in advance to specialists in this field who would want more nuancing of terms.

spiritual transformation. These two fields of research deal with the following questions:

- What are the natural, normal change processes that take place in our mind and body?
- How do our thoughts affect the structure of our brain?
- How do our actions and interactions with others affect us physically—our brain structure and our body composition?
- What are the effects of our thoughts and our emotions on our brain and body chemistry?
- Have brain research and social science research discovered mechanisms of how we function that could help lead to genuine and lasting change in us—mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually?

The answers to these and other questions that these fields of science have uncovered also hold significant insights for how we change spiritually. If God has made us a unity of body, soul, and spirit—then the insights about how we change in one dimension may very well apply in the other dimensions. An openness to learn from them helps us cooperate with how God made us, rather than working against how God made us.

Roadmap

We will begin our journey into spiritual formation by first clarifying what spirituality and spiritual formation are—and what they are not. We will explore contemporary understandings of spirituality and compare it with a biblical understanding.

Part 1 of the book will lay out the biblical foundations of spiritual formation. We will look at key texts from the Bible that speak to the goal, purpose, dynamics, and process of spiritual formation.

Part 2 will then explore the scientific foundations of spiritual formation. Here is where we will look at how current neurobiological research can inform and support us in the spiritual transformation process.

Part 3 looks at the various dimensions of the human person—our heart, our mind, our body, our soul, and our relationships—and explores the transformation process in each of these dimensions. Understanding the dynamics of transformation in each of these areas will go a long way toward helping us experience transformation.

Part 4, the final section of the book, will seek to be very practical, drawing from all that we discussed earlier. Here we will connect what we discovered about the social-scientific foundations of spiritual formation to our understanding of how habits develop. We will also sketch out how to develop a pathway for your own spiritual growth that is tailored to who you are and where you find yourself on your spiritual journey right now.

Just a couple notes before we start: First, I will be using the New International Version 2011 translation throughout the book. If I cite another version, I will let you know.

Second, throughout the book, footnotes will include additional information and additional resources that you can use to follow up on what I have mentioned in the main text. If you don't like footnotes, you can happily skip over them without missing anything substantial.

With that out of the way, let's begin.

SAMPLE