

Thrive

Creating a Thriving Spiritual Life Week Two

Thrive - Introduction Part 2

The Basic Principle

The foundational principle of this course, as I mentioned last week, is that we are made in the image of God, the Creator. I want to explore the implications of that principle in greater depth. Our traditional view of human nature is, in fact, quite different from the view that emerged in the first 400 years of Christianity. That view was in flux and fluid, but the anthropology, the view of humanity, was largely positive because, according to the beginning of Genesis, we are created in God's image, and it was "good, very good".

Then came Augustine of Hippo, an amazing theologian. He developed the theory of "Original Sin" - the fall of Adam and Eve, meant God's image in us was irreversibly marred and broken. At the same time, Constantine came to power, vanquished his foes under the sign of the cross, and made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. The Church's adoption of imperial power hierarchies, and the view that salvation came only through the Church, further deepened the notion of humanity's fallen nature.

But the belief that human nature was basically good, was kept alive in the thriving communities of the desert monks. The monastic communities view of "'Good old sin'...exposes the vast difference between their worldview and our own" view, rooted in Augustine and Empire. (*The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris, p. 127)

Kathleen Norris, in *The Cloister Walk*, writes, "*These days, when someone commits an atrocity, we tend to sigh and say, 'That's human nature.'* But our attitude would seem wrong-headed to the desert monks, who understood human beings to be part of the creation that God called good, special in that they are made in the image of God. Sin, then, is an aberration, not natural to us at all. This is why Gregory of Nyssa speaks so often of '(returning) to the grace of that image which was established in you from the beginning.' Gregory, in fact, saw it as our lifelong task to find out what part of the divine image God has chosen to reveal in us. Like the other early monks, he suggests that we can best do this by realistically determining how God has made us – what our primary faults and temptations are, as well as our gifts – not that we might better 'know ourselves,' or in modern parlance, 'feel good about ourselves,' but in order that we might become instruments of divine grace for other people, and eventually return to God."

What we are doing in this course called “Thrive,” is returning to the grace of God’s image established in us from the beginning. *“The goal of the monks was to know themselves as they truly were, warts and all, and to be able to call it ‘good,’ not in order to excuse bad behavior but to accept the self without delusions.”* (The Cloister Walk, p. 128) What we will find, by doing our Morning Pages and the practices and tasks, is the delusions we’ve been living under. We will find they are somebody else’s idea of who we are supposed to be. We will find the ways God’s image in us has been covered over by the desires and assumptions of our families and cultures. We will begin to find *“what part of the divine image God has chosen to reveal in us.”*

From this basic principle - created in the image of God; declared good, very good; and called Beloved Sons and Daughters of God instead of wretched sinners – comes a set of Basic Principles, adapted from Julia Cameron.

The Basic Principles

The “Basic Principles” are what Julia Cameron refers to as “Spiritual Chiropractic”. Through these spiritual practices and exercises, we align ourselves with Spirit, with the Creator, the creative energy of life itself. I love the way Julia Cameron describes this: *“If we think of the universe as a vast electrical sea in which we are immersed and from which we are formed, opening to our creativity changes us from something bobbing in that sea to a more fully functioning, more conscious, more cooperative part of that ecosystem. The God of creativity is in our midst, and so creativity is an experience of mystical union.”* In this course we are seeking to forge a creative alliance, soul-to-soul, life-artist-to-life-artist, creator-to-creator, with the Great Creator. In this course we seek to remove the blocks that prevent the flow of Life in us, as us, and live more deeply into who we have been created to be.

1. *Creativity is the natural order of life.* Life is energy: pure creative energy. It is not just for artists; it is for every soul.
2. *There is an underlying, in-dwelling creative force infusing all of life.* This includes us. One term for this in-dwelling creative force is the Holy Spirit.
3. *When we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the Creator’s creativity within us and our lives.*
4. *We are, ourselves, loving creations.* Beloved sons and daughters of God. And we, in turn, are meant to continue that creativity by being lovingly creative ourselves.
5. *Creativity is God’s gift to us. Using our creativity, shaped by love, is our gift back to God.* Creativity, of course, can be used negatively in destructive, self-centered ways. Discernment is called for here. Almost every advancement - in science, culture, art, and music - was experienced initially in a negative way. Ken Wilbur’s well-known phrase comes in handy here: Transcend and Include. New creative insights transcend what went before, but somehow include those insights. This is certainly true of psychological development.
6. *The refusal to be creative is self-will.* It is counter to our true nature. Even despair can, at times, be a refusal to be creative.
7. *When we open ourselves to exploring our creativity, we open ourselves to God: good orderly direction, the Source of life, the flow of abundant life: Thrive!*
8. *As we open our creative channel to the Creator, many gentle but powerful changes are to be expected.* Life will change, sometimes in unexpected ways. Relationships will

change, because when you change, relationships change. Many speak of serendipitous events happening, things fall into place, way opens.

9. *It is safe to open ourselves up to greater and greater creativity.* This is not to say there is little or no risk involved when it comes to living more fully into our soul's creativity! Creativity calls for risk. But our soul is safe. In my own experience of taking risks to support my self by my art, it was not always lucrative! But there is a liquidity – a word I use to describe the flow of loving, creative energy in my life – a liquidity to my soul, my life, that I would not change.
10. *Our creative dreams and yearnings come from a divine source.* Yes, we must discern those desires, to get down to the root desires. But as we move toward our dreams, we move toward our divinity.

Are there questions or comments regarding the Basic Principles?

The Basic Practices

1) Morning Pages

To restore our creativity we need to find it, and we find it through an apparently pointless process: Morning Pages. The Morning Pages are 1-3 pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness, where you simply pour out on the page whatever crosses your mind and heart. “Oh, God, another morning. I have NOTHING to say! I need to wash the curtains. Did I send that email to my boss? Blah, blah, blah...” Morning pages are also known as “brain drain”, just get it all out onto the paper.

Since everyone has different handwriting, don't worry about the exact number of pages – let me show you my journal. This is NOT normal handwriting! It is so tiny! What I write in half a page, may take you 3 pages because your writing is bigger than mine!

But here's the point: It's not *how much* we write, but *that* we write! We are asked to simply dump what is in our heart and mind, and *don't edit it*. Nobody will read this. And we will not read back through our morning pages for at least 8 weeks. It's a practice for the present moment, to *empty out* and see what is going on inside of us. It's not art, or good writing. Nothing is too petty, silly, inane, mean-spirited, spiteful, insipid, stupid, boring, brilliant, true, trite, grandiose, insufferable, or weird – just write it down, get it out! Why?

- 1) To move it through you. It helps us get unstuck.
- 2) To find and see what's in you, what's been laid upon you, what you grew up with, and how it still operates in you. We become more conscious of thoughts and feelings, our delusions and our true sense of self.
- 3) To get some distance on it. So you can be objective about it, make choices about it.
- 4) So it won't hook you; to become more free.

There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages, which helps free us from expectations that it's supposed to be inspirational, brilliant, profound, or poetic! The only wrong way to do the Morning Pages is if we *don't* do them. ***The Morning Pages are the primary practice of creative recovery.*** Let me say that again. ***The Morning Pages are the primary practice of***

creative recovery. Julia Cameron puts it this way: “We are victims of our own internalized perfectionist, a nasty internal and eternal critic, the Censor, who resides in our (left) brain and keeps up a constant stream of subversive remarks that are often disguised as the truth.” Here’s the most important thing. *We can, and often do, equate this inner critic with the voice of God. It is not.* In fact, it is more appropriate to equate the inner critic with what the church calls Satan, “The Accuser”, because that’s all the inner critic does: accuse!

This is something to remember throughout this course: *our Censor’s negative opinions are not the truth.* This takes practice. By spilling out of bed and straight onto the page every morning, we learn to *evade* the Censor. Because there is no wrong way to write the Morning Pages, the Censor’s opinions don’t count. Let the Censor rattle on, and it will! Just keep our hand moving across the page. Write down the Censor’s thoughts if you want. And then notice how it loves to aim for our jugular! Make no mistake: the Censor is out to get us, just like the Accuser was out to get Job in the Bible. *The point is to stop taking the Censor as the voice of reason, and learn to hear it for the blocking device that it is.* The Censor keeps us from thriving. Morning Pages will help us do this!

Another reason for the Morning Pages is they help you know the material your working with, and what’s working on you, in order to give a firmer foundation to your hope for change.

Morning Pages are non-negotiable. Never skip, or skimp, on Morning Pages. Our mood doesn’t matter. The rotten things our Censor, our Accuser, says doesn’t matter. Morning Pages teach us that our *mood* doesn’t really matter. Some of the best creative work gets done on the days when we feel that everything we’re doing is just plain junk. The Morning Pages teach us to stop judging and just let ourselves write. So what if we’re tired, crabby, distracted, stressed? Our creative soul, our inner artist, is a child and it needs to be fed. Morning Pages feed our creative souls. If you only do one thing in this course, let it be The Morning Pages!

We write Morning Pages to “get to the other side”, pun intended. To get to the other side of our fear, our negativity, our moods, and especially beyond reach of the Censor, the Accuser.

Morning Pages had a profound impact on me. When I first started painting, I would paint only if I was “feeling” creative, if I was “in the mood.” But suddenly I realized what good painters do. *They paint.* They don’t wait for inspiration. They show up at the canvas and start painting and then inspiration comes. So that’s what I did, and it made a world of difference. The Censor got silenced. Even if I made a “mistake”, often those mistakes led to a new technique, or the painting went in a new and more authentic direction. The Morning Pages teach our logical, rational brain to step aside and let the creative, artistic, child-brain play. The Morning Pages provide us with a spiritual, high-speed internet connection with the Creator within. I say this with conviction. The Morning Pages is not just a writing exercise, it is a *spiritual practice*, it is a *form of prayer*.

So buy a journal, a spiral ring notebook, grab loose sheets of paper. Just do them.

2) The Creative Soul Date

The Morning Pages are a way of *sending* – we are notifying ourselves and the Universe of our dreams, dissatisfactions, hopes. The Creative Soul Date, is a way of *receiving* - opening

ourselves to insight, inspiration, guidance. A Creative Soul Date is a once-a-week, 1-2 hour block of time, committed to nurturing our creativity. Planned in advance, we do it with just ourselves and our creative soul. Our souls needs to be taken out, pampered, listened to, played with. Go to a great junk store, a thrift shop, read a book of poetry or a biography of a person you admire, a hike in the mountains, see an old movie, watch a documentary, go online and look at artwork, visit a company that is doing amazing work.

Spending time with our creative souls, the artistic child within, is essential for nurturing that part of us that has been under the thumb of the Censor for all these years. If we find ourselves resisting taking ourselves on a Creative Soul Date, and we probably will, recognize it as a *fear of intimacy – self-intimacy*. This is a chance to get to know yourself, and who God has created you to be. In order to have a real relationship with our creative soul, we must take the time and care to cultivate it. Our creativity will use this time to confront us, to confide in us, to bond with us, and to plan for a more thriving life – Thrive!

3) Check-In

At the end of each week, you'll do a Check-In with yourself, or with another person. The questions will be a little different each week. Please write your responses in a journal, and if you have a partner, share what you wrote, as much as you feel comfortable, with them. The Check-In gives you a journal, a record, of your creative soul journey, something to return to for learning and encouragement.

Course Outline

Week 1: Safety, Support, and Community
Week 2: Identity and Creativity
Week 3: A Sense of Self and Use of Power
Week 4: Integrity and Authenticity
Week 5: Possibility and Potential
Week 6: Abundance and Divine Resource
Week 7: A Sense of Connection and Flow
Week 8: Strength and Resiliency
Week 9: Compassion and Enthusiasm
Week 10: Self-Protection and Self-Care
Week 11: Autonomy and Acceptance
Week 12: Faith and Trust

The Contract

I, _____, understand that I am undertaking an intensive, guided encounter with my own creativity. I commit myself to the twelve-week duration of the course. I, _____, commit to weekly reading the course's material, daily Morning Pages, a weekly Creative Soul Date, and the fulfillment of each week's tasks.

I, _____, further understand that this course will raise issues and emotions for me to deal with. I, _____, commit myself to excellent self-care – adequate sleep, diet, exercise, and pampering – for the duration of the course.

(signature)

(date)