

Cultivating an Inner Life

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For most people, life encompasses external things such as events, activities, people, and possessions. But another life exists for us that is inward and reflective. This inner life is what we experience when we are alone. For some, this life is rich and deep, and these people seek solitude in order to experience the wealth of their inner abundance. For others, their inner life is shallow or non-existent, because they don't know what an inner life is or how to cultivate one.

It's difficult to describe an inner life, but I will give it my best try. An inner life is our relationship with ourselves. It includes how we relate to ourselves, how we talk to ourselves, and how we spend time with ourselves. It's what we do to nurture our souls. It isn't what we think about ourselves as much as how we treat ourselves based on what we believe. An inner life is a series of experiences we have with our own being or soul. These experiences include moments of positive self-regard, exploration of one's internal makeup, self-discovery, contemplation, or conscious acts of being present with oneself.

When we have an inner life, we are more comfortable with ourselves, so much so that we enjoy our own company. I'm not saying we become reclusive, but we learn to regard ourselves with the same love and interest as the other people in our lives. Self-interest propels us to learn about and appreciate our uniqueness, rather than despise it. It manifests as a healthy curiosity and fascination toward ourselves. Over time, we come to know and value ourselves. This pursuit translates into an ever-deepening relationship we have with ourselves, characterized by a genuine desire to nurture the spirit within us.

Starting with Self-Love

When we extend compassion to ourselves, we are more likely to nurture our inner life, our relationship with ourselves. We make a mistake when we think we have to like ourselves to start our journey. If that were the case, most of us would never start. Instead, we must start with compassion, the same compassion we would give someone who doesn't appear to fit in.

With grace-filled kindness, we invite ourselves into our inner circle of friends as someone deserving of equal attention and worth. We need to learn to love and accept ourselves because withholding love stunts our emotional and spiritual growth.

Finding the power to love ourselves rarely comes from within. We discover this power by looking to God and allowing Him to love us. It is His unconditional love for us that frees us to love ourselves unconditionally. An effective prayer would be, "God, help me to experience Your love so I can love myself as deeply as You love me."

We invest ourselves in what we value, so if we don't love ourselves, we won't invest any energy into cultivating an inner life. We'll neglect or abandon our inner needs and fail to nurture our souls. Without an inner life, we will look for happiness and fulfillment in external things. When external things fail us, we will have no inner well from which to draw strength or sustenance. When we have an inner life, we can draw from our core from which springs an outflow of God's graces, such as peace and joy. God isn't outside of us where we climb a mountain to find Him. Rather, we dig a well inside ourselves and find Him when we dig deep enough. The Bible says He is not far from any of us (Acts 17:27). It's within this inner life that we often encounter God.

Knowing Ourselves

After we have learned to love and accept ourselves, the next step is to learn to be present to ourselves. This means we are consciously attentive toward our thoughts and feelings, without judgment or trying to "fix" them. We choose to enjoy our being outside of labels or performance. My therapist used to encourage me to be always curious and to channel my curiosity toward exploring my inner landscape. In those days, exploration of my inner self brought up panic and paralyzing fear. I was certain that what lurked inside me was monstrous and terrifying. After many forays into that dark place, I discovered that the things I feared were vapors without substance. They dissolved when I faced them head-on. Later, when I wondered why that inner

realm was always dark, God explained that it was dark because I hadn't invited Him there. When I did so, light illuminated that inner place for the first time. Afterward, God and I could explore the visible terrain together.

It's not easy to admit we don't have an inner life. We fear looking inside and finding nothing. Most of us don't know our own souls or the importance of knowing them. Our souls are beautiful beyond words, having a richness, depth, and mystery that rival a nebula in space. If we beheld our souls in their true magnificence, we would respond with awe and treasure them more.

The Basis for a Relationship with God

An inner life is the seat from which we can experience joy and peace that are not attached to externals. More importantly, it's the seat from which we can have a relationship with God. Our relationship with God is experienced between our spirit and His. God interacts with us within the realm of this inner life. These spiritual experiences and events comprise our personal history with God, a real relationship marked by meaningful interactions and deepening intimacy.

I suggest making time for solitude where you learn to be with yourself and to know yourself. Invite God to show you what He sees. Invite His love to touch the areas you are unable to love and to illuminate those areas that are in shadow. Allow God to ease your fears and ask Him to help you to cultivate a relationship with yourself and with Him.

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