

Spiritual Formation and Human Flourishing

Amanda Udis-Kessler, January 14, 2023

Every morning, we wake up with an incredible opportunity before us. Whatever else the day holds, we know we will have the chance to choose love over hatred, kindness over cruelty, generosity over selfishness and greed, hospitality and service over power-mongering, justice over unfairness, the truth over lies, egalitarianism over authoritarianism, democracy over fascism, and the well-being of all people over the privileging of a few.

Knowing that we have these opportunities, however, does not itself equip us to make good choices. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote, the line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart. We all struggle to do what is good, especially when doing so is difficult and even more so when we live in a society that rewards hatred, cruelty, greed, power-mongering over love, kindness, generosity, and service.

At some level, we know that making those good choices, however hard it is, makes life better for us, for other people, and for the planet. So, the question becomes how we can grow and heal, strengthen ourselves and our resolve, and build the ethical muscles we need to make good choices on a regular basis.

One answer to that question is to engage in spiritual formation practices, those activities that build our emotional and spiritual resilience, our tolerance for discomfort, and our disposition to choose the good more often than not. Such practices might include prayer, silent meditation, Scripture study (however broadly or narrowly defined), communal worship, and any other rituals that deepen our relationship with the mystery and our sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. Spiritual formation practices help us develop, experience, and live into what the Apostle Paul called the “fruit of the spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23a): “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Spiritual formation practices are good for us, no questions asked. They are also challenging for many of us, and some of us struggle mightily to keep at them. But spiritual formation has an additional benefit that often goes undiscussed: it can help us center human flourishing, both our own and that of other people. Spiritual formation practices can strengthen our commitment to our own well-being as well as our commitment to the well-being of people we know and even people we don't know, in the latter case particularly by strengthening our commitment to working for justice. In what follows, I'll say more about what I mean by flourishing and then return to the role of spiritual formation in helping us to flourish and to commit to the flourishing of others.

By flourishing, I mean getting to have a good life. A flourishing life is not free of pain or difficulties, but it is also filled with joy, satisfaction, accomplishment, and contribution to the well-being of others. In such a life, we experience abundance, delight, meaning, fullness, and wholeness; our joy and gratitude then lead us to work toward the same thriving for other people and for the planet. Flourishing humanity is humanity at its best, and we can take the fullest advantage of our human capabilities when we flourish.

So far, flourishing might sound so vague as to be meaningless, but in fact it is always tied to certain universal human attributes. We may not know every detail about every individual, but we do know certain things about what it means to be a person. We know, for example, that all people, as human beings, share certain characteristics and traits, capacities and needs. These attributes make us who we are as human beings. Our individual and cultural experiences with these attributes differ, but all of them describe all people to at least some degree. Here are seven of these attributes:

- We are embodied, physical beings.
- We are emotional, feelings-driven beings.
- We are relational beings who are both dependent on and interdependent with others.
- We are meaning-making beings who need to make sense of our experiences and our lives.
- We are agentic beings, which is to say that we have self-efficacy and the need to act on and have an impact on the world around us.
- We are moral beings, and sometimes immoral beings.
- We are spiritual beings, meaning that we can experience awe, reverence, wonder, and a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. Our spirituality can be tied to organized religion but it does not need to be.

Breaking out these attributes of humanity separately is, of course, artificial. We are always embodied *and* always emotional *and* always relational and so on. The reason to separate out each attribute is to understand how it is part of our humanity and what implications it has for our flourishing. As it turns out, we flourish (or don't flourish, or even suffer) as embodied beings, emotional beings, relational beings, and in the context of the other attributes listed above. Human flourishing is not abstract but comes down to how we are doing in light of these basic components of being human.

Once we bring the lofty language of flourishing down to the specifics of human attributes, we can identify concrete ways in which we can contribute to our own flourishing and to the flourishing of other people. As one of many possible examples, we cannot flourish as embodied beings without certain preconditions being in place. Specifically, we need:

- Access to basic survival resources: clothes, shelter, nutritious and safe food, clean water, clean air, sanitary environments
- Access to appropriate, comprehensive and affordable healthcare
- Physical safety: freedom from physical and sexual violence
- Emotional safety: freedom from trauma and protracted fear that can have a negative impact on our bodies over time
- Bodily autonomy: control over how we use our bodies and what happens to them

If we want to flourish, we need to take steps to make sure that these preconditions are in place for us and to work to change the situation if they are not in place. If we want others to flourish, the same is true: we must strive to build a society in which everyone has access to basic survival resources and healthcare, physical and emotional safety, and bodily autonomy. Human flourishing, it turns out, is a political matter – and I've only talked about preconditions for one kind of flourishing in the interests of space. Preconditions for flourishing as emotional, relational, meaning-making, and ethical beings (for example) are equally extensive.

Centering human well-being is difficult, particularly in societies with political and economic systems that do not prioritize the flourishing of every member of society. For us to keep our eyes on the prize of flourishing for all people – ourselves and others, those we know and those we don't – we need stamina, focus, basic trust in ourselves and our values, and joy for when things get difficult.

We have better access to these resources when we attend to our own well-being. When we take care of our bodies, our emotions, our relationships, our need for meaning, our self-efficacy, our morality, and our spirituality – and thus, when we love ourselves – we are better able to love our neighbors as ourselves. But even taking care of ourselves can be hard. Many of us – certainly LGBTQI people, but also women, poor people, members of Black/Indigenous/People of Color (BIPOC) communities, religious minorities, people with disabilities, and others – can struggle to prioritize our own flourishing if we have internalized messages about how inadequate we are, how immoral, how worthless. Because people are meaning-making beings, we must make sense of the world to survive. If, in our sense-making, we have come to understand ourselves as undeserving or incapable, or if the messages that we receive from others tell us we don't matter, it will be very difficult for us to take good care of ourselves consistently.

Here's where spiritual formation practices come in. These practices can help us make self-loving, resilient choices that support our own flourishing in all the ways suggested above as well as others. As we grow in faith and trust and come to know the deep truth that we are utterly beloved, we will want to take good care of ourselves and we will find more energy to do so. Spiritual formation practices involving community can be particularly helpful as we receive affirmation of our value from other people.

These practices can also help us develop the virtues we need to tend to the flourishing of others, enabling us to deepen our compassion, courage, generosity, hospitality, humility, and patience. This includes both taking care of people we know and working for the well-being of those we will never meet. As a concrete example of the latter case, those of us who are white in the U.S. will increase our ability to support BIPOC communities in their struggles against white supremacy when we have the resilience to:

- Tolerate discomfort;
- Be quiet, listen, and learn;
- Make sacrifices in which we offer our resources (including our time, money, talents, and energy); and
- Otherwise learn to live in solidarity with BIPOC communities and then actually do so.

The same could be said for heterosexual and cisgender people who choose to support LGBTQI communities, or for members of any other socially valued group that recognizes that their privilege and power – their flourishing, in fact – is tied to the devaluation and suffering of others. Our society teaches us to live in selfishness, not in solidarity. Spiritual formation processes can help us prepare to actually love others as we love ourselves by tending to their flourishing as we would tend to our own.

Every morning, we wake up with an incredible opportunity before us. Whatever else the day holds, we know we will have the chance to choose good over evil. What will we do with that opportunity today? Tomorrow? Every day after that? The invitation awaits. May we take up or deepen the spiritual formation practices that help us make good choices for our own flourishing and for the flourishing of others, day in and day out.