Richard J. Foster

I Have a Dream and a Hope...

For the Maturing of the Modern Spiritual Formation Movement
Dear Readers of Conversations,

In two recent Renovaré publications I shared some of my hopes and dreams for the modern spiritual formation movement. At times I was quite candid—you might even say blunt. But always I was writing from my heart about a vision for the future that I believe God will bring to pass as we embrace more and more the mystery of Christ within.

Knowing the purpose of Conversations and the theme of this particular issue, I asked the editors if they would like to include these thoughts with the other articles. They graciously said yes. Below, then, are my dream and my hope.

I dream of a day when spiritual formation has so saturated all who follow hard after Jesus that they become known to all as experts in how to live well:

- How to love one’s spouse well.
- How to raise children well.
- How to study well.
- How to face adversity well.
- How to run businesses and financial institutions well.
- How to form community life well.
- How to reach out to those on the margins well.
- How to die well.

I am thinking of ordinary folk who are not known for particular customs or manner of dress or rituals, but for a particular kind of life: a life that works...and works well. They are of all races and classes and kinds. They are in the churches, and they are outside of the churches, but they all are the Church, the people of God. Some self-identify as followers of Jesus; others, because of cultural or racial or family barriers, do not come out so publicly, but they follow hard after Jesus nonetheless.

Some are followers of “the Way” without fully knowing it, for the Light of Jesus does indeed shine into the darkness and does indeed enlighten every person coming into the world (John 1:5–9). This is the universal, saving Light of Jesus Christ, and those who turn and walk in the Light are given more Light and finally come to see it is the Jesus Way, the Jesus Truth, and the Jesus Life in which they are living.

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While denominational structures continue, their distinctions begin to blur and fade as the issue of living well takes center stage. Indeed, the various denominations themselves begin sharing their great treasures into life in such a way that other groups take on these vital convictions as their own.

- From the Baptists, we learn more fully about the stabilizing power of “soul competency.”
- From the Quakers, we begin stepping into simplicity of life.”
- From the Roman Catholics, we grow in our appreciation of a consistent “culture of life.”
- From Pentecostals, we experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit for all of life’s vicissitudes.
- From the Mennonites, we grow in our ability to be loving witnesses for peace in a war-torn world.
- From the Reformed, we broaden in our understanding of our “cultural mandate” to work for the transformation of society.
- And more.

These treasures of faith intertwine with one another to give us a wiser, fuller way of living.

Spiritual formation has so deepened in these folk that they are known for scrupulous honesty. Simply put, their word is as good as their bond. Speaking the truth is as natural to them as growing apples is to the apple tree. They are sought out in business circles because lying, deceiving, and cheating are simply not known among them. They can be trusted to do what is right. Always. Their honesty can be depended upon. Those in science seek these folk out since they are known not to cut corners in research methodology or embellish research findings.

The religious leaders of those who follow hard after Jesus are themselves much sought after because they have built a history of standing up for all people of all persuasions: Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, agnostics, even atheists. Having learned to live well, these folk are pursued as teachers and nursery care workers because they so
manifestly and indiscriminately love children. They are asked to be leaders in social service agencies because their reputations for administering justice for all people alike is legendary.

Community leaders begin to think of these followers of Jesus less and less as simply another cultural group with its own set of distinctive rituals, just as any other group has. Instead, they begin to think of them as the people who are genuinely good at living. The characteristics are hard to put into exact words. It’s their joy in all things good, true, and beautiful...their patience under trial and difficulty...their ability to love people completely, indiscriminately...their self-sacrifice for the good of others.

Frankly, these folk are a complete frustration to political leaders out to earn votes because their opinions and motivations simply are not controlled by self-interest. Anglos among them, for example, care more about immigration justice for Hispanics than they do matters of self-preservation. They all care passionately about those who are completely off the political radar screen: Native American peoples, the urban homeless, the Appalachian poor, the very young and the very old, and more.

These folk, having learned to live well, easily and freely “esteem others better than themselves” (Philippians 2:3). They have learned, deep down to the marrow in their bones, the freeing power of living without guile, day by day. They rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Neither selfish ambition nor conceit can be found among them. They have learned the life-giving power of building one another up, and they do so without hesitation. Indeed, they live lives of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

This, then, is my dream...and my hope. It is a vision for all who are pursuing spiritual formation: that they become so immersed in Christ, so saturated by his love, that they themselves reflect fully the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But for this hope to become reality, genuine substance of life and thought is needed today. What follows are my thoughts on ways for maturing the modern spiritual formation movement.

My concern is for us to think together about how we might help to bring the modern spiritual formation movement into a growing maturity. Some of us have been at this spiritual formation work for a while now, long enough to see quite a mixture of helpful and decidedly unhelpful things set forth. It is time to assess where we have come and to think together about the way forward.

The task of maturing the modern spiritual formation movement is complicated and will challenge our finest thinking and most creative energies. There are two reasons, at least, for the complication.

First, the continuing popularity of spiritual formation today has meant that all kinds of writing and speaking have now gone forth on the subject. Frankly—and I hate to say it in such a blunt matter—much that has gone out under the name of spiritual formation has been done by people who simply have not thought substantively on the subject, and (dare I mention it?) we have to wonder if they themselves have been spiritually formed to any substantial degree. Hence, a great deal of “Holy Baloney” is out there now, and the average person is going to despair quickly in attempting to distinguish the good from the bad.

Second, people in general and Americans in particular are a fickle lot, and they tire quickly. Many, in fact, are already going on to the next fad. And let’s be honest: How many of us can truly wrap our minds around the notion of a forty-year journey into the subterranean chambers of the soul? That was Moses’ experience of character formation in the Egyptian desert, you recall. Forty years! Are we not tempted to opt instead for a shortcut or two? Impatience is a primary spiritual problem in our day.

These things need not discourage us, however. The
human need—and longing—for substantive formation of heart and mind and body into Christlikeness is always before us. It is not going to go away. No doubt our work will now be more difficult with those who feel they have tried spiritual formation and it failed them, when all they really tried was some little “five steps to blessedness.”

Remember, we are not presenting people with any “program,” but with a life. We simply and powerfully introduce them into an ongoing, interactive relationship with Jesus, their ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. Apprenticed to Jesus, they will be able to go forward from faith to faith and from strength to strength.

Here now are a few things to keep in mind as we continue our efforts at maturing the modern spiritual formation movement.

1. We take the long view...always.

We think in terms of lifetimes and centuries. The soul will live forever. It is precious beyond imagining. Investing deeply in even a few folk will count for all eternity. Sure, many in today’s religious climate will go on to other, “more interesting” topics. We bless these folk and pray for their well-being and growth in grace. But there are plenty (vast numbers, in fact) who are committed to the long haul. They really want to be like Jesus with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. These are the ones we invest in. And, believe me, investing in these precious lives will take all the energy, all the time, all the prayer, and all the weeping, laughing, singing, and hoping we can possibly muster.

2. We refuse to think of spiritual formation in terms of various practices...ever.

In another era, those practices were things like “a quiet time” and Bible study of one sort or another. Today it is lectio divina and “journaling.” May I say it as clearly as possible: Christian spiritual formation has nothing essentially to do with such practices.

While many practices can be genuinely helpful in their place, they are not “it.” What is “it” is life—life with Jesus, interactive relationship with the great God of the universe, inner transformation into Christlikeness. Now, this reality can happen with lectio and with “journaling,” and it can happen without them. It can, and it does! The tendency today, unfortunately widespread, is to think of spiritual formation exclusively in terms of practices of one kind or another. Please, dear friend, do not to fall into this trap. It will produce only legalism and bondage, and it utterly defeats spiritual formation. Many of the familiar practices are useful, to be sure, and some more than others. But none is essential. We all are to walk with the living Christ and then “in humility regard others as better than [our]selves” (Philippians 2:3).

3. We engage in spiritual formation for the sake of the Church universal...always.

Sectarian reform movements that cement an eternal split become only ends in themselves. We work instead for the transformation of the whole Church. We love the Church, the people of God, in all her multifaceted expressions. Traditional. Contemporary. Liturgical. Charismatic. Emergent. Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant. Big church and little church, house church and crystal cathedral. We attempt no end run around the Church. God is with his people in all their waywardness and silliness, and so are we.

4. We do not center on curriculum-based solutions...ever.

Curricula of all sorts are important, but they come way down the line in formation work. Curriculum must always be subservient to ideas, and ideas must always be subservient to relationship. In The Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard (rightly, in my estimation) has a chapter entitled “A Curriculum for Christlikeness.” However, this is chapter 9 and comes after both a careful delineation of the unique qualities of the interactive relationship between Jesus and his apprentices, and a careful

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explication of the central ideas related to this life in the kingdom of God. Far too many people rush to the curriculum program of chapter 9 without establishing into their lives the foundations set forth so carefully in all that comes before. We must not leave out the curriculum work, but it never comes first, and it must never be central. Nor can it ever be a cookie-cutter curriculum. Unique, individualized people require unique, individualized curricula. Frankly, cookie-cutter curricula are very much like cookies: all sweetness with precious little nutrition.

5. We draw wisdom and insight from the ancient sources... always.

We reject the heresy of the contemporary. The people of God throughout history instruct us in the way eternal. Bible sources and post-Bible sources. We learn from Moses. We learn from Luther. We learn from Joseph of Arimathea. We learn from Catherine of Genoa. These are our teachers, our models, our inspiration. They have passed the test of time.

6. We do not aim at outward action... ever.

It is the renovation of the heart we are after. This inward work is much harder than mere outward conformity... and easier. Harder because we cannot see it, test it, control it. We cannot program the heart of another human being. We cannot program our own heart. But this is what makes it easier. God is the One who sees the heart. God is the One who tenderly programs the heart, always allowing time and space for our will to turn and respond to divine Love. We are working in conjunction with a greater Plan, a greater Planner. We are part of God's great Renovation project for human beings. And so we can work resting. We can labor under God's abiding grace.

7. We are keenly aware that true inward transformation will incline our hearts toward suffering humanity... always.

Deep suffering is found everywhere: among the down and out and the up and in. As our hearts are increasingly renovated, they will become increasingly tender toward the bruised and the broken, the helpless and the hopeless. We then will find ways to move outside our insulated bubbles of security.

Trevor Hudson, a South African pastor and writer, during the darkest period in his country's history of apartheid developed an eight-day experiential program designed to enable young South Africans to reflect upon the meaning of their faith and discipleship within the harsh and oppressive socio-political realities of their nation. Trevor calls this experience “The Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope.” Oh, may we find ways to come alongside suffering human beings and together walk the pilgrimage of pain and hope!

Friends, right now spiritual formation is popular and much sought after. This time will pass, and when it does, many will continue on. Not all will. Frankly, whether we are in the limelight or in obscurity is of no consequence whatever. Such matters are wood, hay, and stubble. We seek everlasting results; gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3:12). So, dear friends, live faithfully to the end. Be instant in season and out. Proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Walk cheerfully over the earth.

As I said... authentic transformation into full Christlikeness is my vision, my dream, and my lasting hope.

ENDNOTE

1 I am referring to the September 2006 Perspective and my November 2006 Heart-to-Heart newsletter.

About the Author:

Richard J. Foster is best known as an author. He has written six acclaimed books, including Celebration of Discipline, Streams of Living Water, and Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home. He is the editor of The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible. Richard is the founder of Renovare, an organization committed to working for the renewal of the Church of Jesus Christ in all her multifaceted expressions. Renovare holds regional and local conferences, bringing together Christians across denominational lines for renewal.