

Candlemaking:

The Art and Craft of Spiritual Formation

By Linda Hines Geiser*

It is evident that there is flowing throughout contemporary society an emptiness of spirit, a lack of meaning, an insidious apathy. Rapid-paced technology, materialism, racism, sexism and moral confusion all contribute to the current malaise. For many, life is out of control. Homelessness has become more than an external reality. It is an internal spiritual condition. The church is not exempt from this state of affairs. Having "accepted" Christ and joined the church, many persons settle into a complacent mediocrity. They are left wondering if that is all there is. Don't whisper it too loudly, but there have even been a few church leaders known to succumb to this crippling disease.

The spiritual journey, held in the grip of such a contagion, is disabled and paralyzed, shrinking up into death. The process

*Linda Hines Geiser graduated from Ashland Seminary in 1994 with a Master of Arts degree in spiritual formation. She and her husband Charles formerly worked for Mennonite Central Committee in several Latin American countries. She is currently finishing the Master of Divinity degree at Ashland.

of inner growth begins to resemble a spiritualized version of a walk along the all-American, rise-to-the top, look out for number one, consumer path. Nourished by spiritual junk food and cheap entertainment, it leads directly into a hollow vacuum. This is a far cry from the vision Christ offers of new life, living water and abundant joy.

How can the chains of apathy be loosened? What are the tools that will gently pry them open and ultimately cast them to the ground? The search for meaning and the pain of emptiness may, in fact, be the vehicles through which freedom will come. God is calling the human spirit precisely through such disillusionment, into a relationship characterized by depth, transformation, and inner at-homeness. The challenge is to find ways for people to make the connection. A new look at spiritual formation may shed some light on the path through this barren wasteland.

Called to be Transformed

The process of spiritual formation is about being transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is growth, movement and change. The word process suggests procedure, methods and particular steps employed to reach a desired goal. In spiritual formation this process progresses beyond concrete analysis into mystery and leads to transformation.

All parts of the human being are gathered up into Christ, integrated and made holy. For what reason? So that we may love as Christ loves and be one with each other as He is one with the Father. Then the world will know that God is, God loves and God rejoices in creation, bringing all to completion in Christ.

As humans we are whole persons. Together the combination of body, spirit (mind/heart), and soul create a unified being. These parts are separate yet not separate, distinct yet not distinct. An intimate connection exists between them. They are not like a stack of books bound together by a cord. Nor are they pieces of a puzzle held in place with glue. The connection is deeper and more pervasive. The essence of each is a part of the others. What is the intangible unifying force that binds them? Isn't it none other than the mystery of God?

By virtue of being human every person carries wounds. They may be wounds of personal sinfulness or wounds left by the sinfulness of others. The wounding may center in body, spirit or soul. Wherever it is located, the others are affected as well. Wounding in one produces felt consequences in the others. They may not be destroyed, but are certainly bent. The soul especially seems to absorb the wounding at a very deep level. It is the ultimate place of woundedness, the keeper of all the

secrets.

Spiritual formation is about the healing of this woundedness. As relationship with Christ becomes more intimate, prayer deepens, healing increases and one experiences newness of life. There is a freedom to truly be. Lazarus is being unbound by the silent word of Christ spoken within the soul, as well as through the cooperation of those accompanying one on the journey. Lazarus could not unbind himself. Neither can we. We can only be still in consenting silence, listen to the Word and allow sisters and brothers to be God's chosen vehicles of the unbinding action.

The graveclothes wrapped around our souls conceal the wounds. Woundedness and fear construct walls and barriers of protection, keeping others, and even God, at a distance. The tender yet persistent love of God consistently taps on the door, waiting for an invitation to enter. What is the key that will unlock the door and allow God the Healer to enter? It is prayer, prayer of the quiet, waiting, receptive heart. This is the core of spiritual transformation.

In stillness and silence body, spirit and soul rest in God. In such rest one's entire being is offered to God, consenting to the Divine action within. God knows intimately the cracks and crevices of each soul, and will administer what is needed in a fashion appropriate to the individual. It

is a process that takes time, patience and perseverance. Growth and healing usually occur in small doses, sometimes the size of a thimble. It is not without pain, confusion or even darkness. The entire process is enveloped by the mystery of God. It is essential to acknowledge, embrace and live in that Mystery by faith.

The silent and vocal cries of those in the church pew are calling for deeper meaning and an end to the hollowness that plagues them. How can living in the mystery by faith become more real? How can connection with God and others on the way be fostered? New ways to teach about prayer and spiritual formation are desperately needed. Most people are visual learners, finding it helpful to connect an image with experience. Creative images which clearly illustrate the process are necessary tools.

One such image is that of the art of candlemaking. Many likenesses to the process of spiritual formation arise from within this craft. The formation of a candle corresponds to the formation of a soul. It must be stated that there are limitations in any analogy. The hope is that this particular one may open vistas of clearer understanding in regards to the spiritual journey each of us is called to travel.

The Process

There are certain elements necessary in candlemaking. Most essential are the wick, the frame, the wax, the dipping process and a skilled person who knows the craft. An examination of each of these can produce a suggested correlation with the spiritual life.

The wick is made of multiple strands of cotton thread woven into a strong, single braid. The three strands of the braid are clearly seen, even in the smallest wick. The braided form of the wick offers the needed strength to withstand the rigors of the process, for "A threefold cord is not quickly broken (Eccl. 4:12b)."

What does this threefold braid represent in the spiritual realm? Immediately, the threeness and oneness of the Trinity come to mind. The mystery and beauty of Trinitarian love reside at the core of the universe. Humanity was created out of this love, in the image of God who is Three in One. The braid is also suggestive, therefore, of the threefold being of humanity as seen in body, spirit and soul. Woven together they create the unified essence of personhood.

The wick is strung on a wooden frame. At the top and bottom of the frame are small wire hooks. The wick is looped up and over, down and under until the frame is filled with the continuous thread. The frame holds the wick in place and provides structure as

well as space for the candle to grow. It offers stability and enables many candles to be dipped at once. The stringing of the wick must be done with the right amount of tension, neither too slack nor too tight. If strung with too much slack the wax will not evenly coat the wick. The candles formed will be extremely misshapen. Some may be bent, rounded, even stuck together. The straight form necessary for a lovely candle and clean burning is lost. Such candles are not good for anything, but to be melted back into the remaining wax in the vat. Conversely, if the wick is too tight the danger arises of slipping off the wire hooks. The entire group of candles may unravel and be damaged beyond repair. In either case, the process is aborted.

This illustrates the need for balance in our spiritual lives. Extremes are dangerous. Too little self-discipline results in sloppy living. We lose sight of the goal, entangled in things that hinder progress. Our lives become bent, rounded, enmeshed and out of focus. On the other side, too much discipline is destructive as well. Unrealistic demands and expectations imposed by self and/or others often create overwhelming stress. Such persons are in danger of careening off into space. If they do, the effect will be felt by those around them. As with the candles, the damage inflicted may be irreparable.

The precise tension of the wick also

suggests an internal, spiritual balance. It is the kind of balance needed for the body/spirit/soul to remain quiet and still in prayer. When strung correctly the wick is immobile. The "just-rightness" of its position ensures such stillness.

How does one promote an atmosphere of stillness in prayer? Begin with the body. Although a quiet body does not guarantee a quiet spirit, it certainly enhances the possibility. The silence of tongue, the closing of eyes, the stillness of the entire physical organism will lead to stillness of the mind and emotions as well. Quietness makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to work freely in the soul. The wick, hooked both above and below to secure its position on the frame, is an appropriate and helpful reminder of the necessity for stillness in prayer.

A single candle is not alone. Its wick is connected to the frame and to the remaining wick stretched on the same frame. The same wick runs through all the candles. In essence, they are one. Although each person must travel their own spiritual journey, none is truly alone. The frame is representative of the structure of communal support offered in the church. The church is to be a place where people experience safety, sustenance and space to grow. Such support for the journey may be offered in a variety of ways. Prayer groups, Sunday school, group and personal direction, and

fellowship meals all provide a sense of community. Communal worship is an integral part of the supportive network. Singing, prayer, preaching, laying on of hands, communion and footwashing bind persons to each other and to God, for it is in the Body that Christ is made manifest as a very real Presence.

Before the dipping process begins attention must be given to the wax. The type of candles referred to here are made from 100% beeswax. Worker bees eat large quantities of honey which they form into a waxy substance on their bodies. From this wax the bees make the honeycomb with its many cells for storing eggs or honey. Beeswax is obtained from the honeycomb by first extracting the honey, then melting the comb in boiling water. The wax rises to the surface and is melted again to remove impurities. Because the honey cannot be completely extracted, its delightful aroma remains in the wax.

For best results in candlemaking the wax must be kept around 160 degrees. The force of heat can melt, purify and burn off blemishes from many substances. Too much heat can be totally destructive. The wax needs to be very hot, but not boiling. The intent is not to destroy the wick, but to prepare it to receive even more wax.

The liquid wax is hot and sweetly scented in its purity. It symbolizes the God who is Love. The purity of God's love

is reflected in the singleness of His purpose. He longs for us to be transformed, to experience in our human being-ness His presence and nature. Such love is undiluted, absolute, genuine and clear. It is untainted by any corrupt element.

The heat of beeswax is indicative of the intensity of God's loving desire. The immense strength therein is such that it was moved to manifest itself in the ultimate self-giving of Christ. It is passion in the truest sense of the word. God is always seeking and searching, yearning and aching to give Himself. Divine Energy is another way to describe the hotness of the wax. The Energy that created the universe sustains life in all its forms, from the planets whirling in space to the ant invading the picnic basket. Bodies maintain their structure and souls are formed anew in this Energy. God's very presence is the source of this Energy. It is the same intense, passionate Energy that raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11).

With the wick firmly in place on the frame and the wax at the right temperature, the dipping process is ready to begin. The nature of the wick is such that it contains within itself tiny pockets of air. The first dip into the hot wax is extremely important. The wick must remain in long enough for the air to be pushed out. The wax needs to permeate the wick. If the wick is removed too soon air will remain trapped

inside, and later in the process, as the candle takes shape, blemishes will appear.

A constant, alternating rhythm begins. Dipping, drying, dipping, drying. Immersion in the hot, fragrant wax coats the wick ever so slowly. The wick goes in where it is hot. With care it is lifted straight up. As it is removed from the vat, most of the hot wax drips off. That which remains on the wick becomes a permanent part of the new candle.

The frame is hung, preferably in a cool place, in order for the wax to solidify. The amount of time required for cooling and drying depends a great deal on the weather. A warm, humid day will obviously slow down the solidifying process.

A balance of in and out is established. The developing candle must not remain in the hot wax too long. If it does, the heat will cause the already solidified wax to melt. The process then becomes counterproductive and destroys that which had previously been built up. Dipping the wick into the hot wax is like immersing oneself in God's loving presence through quiet, centered prayer. The soul/spirit/body remain steady and still. The warmth of God's love permeates one's entire being.

Just as the wick contains air pockets, so, too, do our souls. The wounds of sin, many of which cannot be articulated reside deep within. God's love moves through and beyond awareness to push out the air

bubbles, healing the wounds. We may sense the "pop" of that bubble in our everyday existence in some form. Then again, we may not. The important thing is to embrace faith, faith in the mysterious working of God's Spirit in the depth of our being. Faith, even when irritability, laziness and greed arise. Faith when darkness seems greater than light, when brokenness and sorrow overpower wholeness and joy. Faith that God does indeed know what He is doing.

The wick is brought out of the wax and most of it drips off. As the soul comes out of the holy space of quiet prayer and much of the intense Presence of God will be left behind, dripping off the soul as wax off the candle. But some remains and is absorbed. The soul is in the process of healing, growth and transformation. This is not to say that the person leaves the Presence of God, or that God leaves the person. God is continually present. In prayer, however, the contact is more direct, face-to-face and intimate.

The time for cooling, drying and solidifying takes much longer than the dipping. That is similar to the realities of everyday life. The call of our responsibilities allows time for the touch of God to settle in our souls. The change taking place within begins to manifest itself without. When external circumstances are like a warm, humid day, the integration of God's healing touch may require more time and patience.

Slowly, the inner and outer realities move closer together and God becomes present to the world in and through us.

The candle grows in size and beauty. The soul is united more and more to God at deep, unfathomable levels. There is continual movement in the soul to live out of a freed, healed reality. Initially the change may be imperceptible. As healing increases, the change becomes noticeable. When the candle nears completion, one dip effects a significant change. So, too, in the soul's formational process. A growing awareness of and sensitivity to the working of God in one's life and the lives of others foments deepening conformity to the likeness of Christ. Increasingly our attention is directed Godward on a continual basis. This facilitates growth and transformative union.

The candlemaker is key to the entire process. She/he must have learned the art, not solely through reading but through experience. The best way to learn is by apprenticeship, for there one is exposed to the expertise of the master. Through experience the candlemaker learns the subtleties of the art. For example, the right amount of tension when stringing the wick on the frame and the exact time a candle can remain in the wax before it begins to melt.

Patience, perseverance and skill must be cultivated by the candlemaker. The process may become tedious, repeating the same procedures over and over again. Even

strength and gentleness are needed, for candlemaking is a process that calls for a tender yet sure touch. Sensitivity to the most conducive environment, flexibility and a sense of good timing are all necessary for the skilled craftsperson.

There is also, and perhaps most importantly, a kind of wisdom that arises out of participation in such a process. It is a wisdom that grows from knowing the elements so well that any little divergence is keenly felt. Appropriate action is automatically taken to correct any problem. The candlemaker knows beyond thinking, and may know so well that she/he finds it difficult to articulate what is known. That is why in learning the art it is best to be face-to-face with the candlemaker in order to observe as well as listen.

In spiritual formation, who is the candlemaker? Ultimately God is the Candlemaker. God draws souls to himself, meets us in prayer and in life's circumstances, and continually works to bring us to completion in Himself. God's patience, perseverance and wisdom are immeasurable.

God also chooses to work through persons who have been formed through their own dipping and drying process. They are able by God's grace to be present to others who are also on the way. Perhaps they can be called God's apprentices in the art of soulmaking although they are apprentices, these persons must never abandon the process

of their own soulmaking. It would be disastrous.

The Goal

The candlemaker's task is nearing completion. What remains is to cut the candles from the frame, snip the wick that holds them together, place them where they are most needed and light the wick. The candles, which for so long have been united, are now separated. If not, they cannot be lit. A candle may be lovely to look at, but its ultimate purpose is to bring light. Even though they no longer need to be connected in the same manner, the candles maintain the same essence, for the wick has not changed.

In the spiritual journey there comes a point where we are each alone. No one else can truly experience what we are called to experience. No one can come face-to-face with God for us. We must do it alone. Even though there is an essential unity, oneness and connectedness among those on the journey, there is also a call to rugged individualism.

Candles come in a variety of sizes with differing purposes. All of them go through the same formative process. All will burn, but not all in the same place. In wisdom the candlemaker discerns what types are needed where and sets out to provide for that need. So, too, God has placed within

each of us a call to become who we are intended to be. It is written on the very core of our being. Each is to be transformed and to be a source of light. The specific purposes and settings will differ. One must trust in the wisdom of the Candlemaker and be attentive to the call arising from within and from without.

When the candle is fully formed, cut from the frame, standing alone, it is ready to be lit. The candlemaker knows when that moment arrives. So also God knows when we are ready to be a flame. We become Light from the spark of the One who is Fire. This is the essence of transformative union. God and the soul are one. The candle is still a candle. The soul is still a soul. God is still God. The human being does not lose her/his humanness; personality is not obliterated. Rather, it is made both whole and holy.

As the candle burns, the wick begins to curve. It bends to make way for the new wick being exposed due to the burning. The tip of the wick eventually burns itself out and is no longer in the flame. Perhaps this speaks of an attitude of gracious humility. The soul is only concerned with the flame of God's light. It will continually move out of the way in order for the flame to burn even more brightly.

In the actual spiritual journey, the process of becoming a fully formed candle, burning with the flame of God is probably

cyclical in nature. We must experience the dipping and drying, the heat and coolness over and over again. It is a continual pattern of increasing insight, awareness, repentance, humility and trust in God's mercy.

What is the task of the wick, of ourselves? It is to surrender to the process. What else can the wick do but give itself completely? It trusts in the wisdom of the candlemaker who sees the completed form even before it is begun, knows exactly what is needed to reach that goal and guides the process with a tender, confident hand. We are called to simply rest in God, the infinite Candlemaker, who creates lights of beauty beyond imagining.

Hopefully, the usefulness of an image such as candlemaking to illustrate the process of spiritual formation is obvious. Not only do examples stimulate interest, but they are easily remembered. The intangible becomes a bit more tangible. By pointing to a reality beyond themselves, images and examples offer encouragement to persevere on the spiritual journey. Healing and transformation into Christ-likeness can replace the chaos and emptiness so common in both the inner and outer worlds. Possibilities of developing creative tools to communicate the truths of spiritual formation are endless. Now is the time for the church to respond. The need is obvious. The invitation is open. The challenge remains.

SEMINARY NEWS AND NEEDS

Our Korean Doctor of Ministry program, in its third year of operation, is attracting more and more Korean church leaders to the Ashland campus for intensive courses. Also a newly established cycle of counseling courses leading toward advanced Ohio Licensure (LPCC) has met with great interest. Therefore, ATS is pleased to make the following official announcement:

Ashland Theological Seminary, a conservative evangelical seminary, with 600 students invites resumes from individuals for the following two tenured track positions that will be available for 1995-96.

Requirements include: Ph.D. or equivalent, commitment to evangelical faith and life, & pastoral experience.

Biblical Studies/Biblical Languages: Candidate should possess strong teaching skills in Greek and Hebrew and OT or NT. Position will involve teaching on both Masters and D.Min. level. Candidates must be fluent in Korean and familiar with Korean culture.

Pastoral Counseling: Candidate should possess biblically-based counseling skills, ministry experience, and strong teaching skills. Position will involve teaching in state approved counseling program for LPC and LPCC.

Resumes should be sent by April 1, 1995 to: Dr. Frederick J. Finks, ATS, 910 Center St., Ashland, OH 44805.