

FINDING YOUR  
**MORAL  
COMPASS**

**Transformative Principles  
to Guide You in Recovery and Life**



**CRAIG NAKKEN**

*Author of The Addictive Personality*

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**CRAIG NAKKEN**

**Hazelden®**

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### Editor's note

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*To my wife, Jane*

*All the words in all the books, and there are none to describe  
how much I love and appreciate these decades together.*



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	xi
Introduction: How I Came to Write This Book .....	1

## PART I—THE THEORY

<b>What Are Spiritual Principles? .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Positive Spiritual Principles .....	14
Negative Spiritual Principles .....	19
Spiritual Principles, Conscience, and Noise .....	21
Free Will .....	23
Principles before Personalities .....	26
<b>Spiritual Principles and the Human Heart:</b>	
<b>Our Drives for Pleasure, Power, and Meaning .....</b>	<b>29</b>
Instinct vs. Spirit .....	29
Choosing to Attach and Detach .....	32
Three Basic Drives: Pleasure, Power, and Meaning .....	33
Our Drive for Pleasure .....	35
Our Drive for Power .....	38
Our Drive for Meaning .....	42
The Interplay of Meaning and Power .....	45
Combining Our Drives into Spiritual Harmony .....	46
Power Struggles vs. Integrity .....	47
Spiritual Principles and the Brain .....	48
Personal Value Systems .....	52

## PART II—LIVING THE PRINCIPLES

<b>Spiritual Growth on a Continuum:</b>	
<b>41 Pairs of Spiritual Principles</b> .....	<b>57</b>
Judgmentalism—Openness.....	59
<i>Dave's Story</i>	
Unfairness—Fairness.....	64
<i>Heidi's Story</i>	
Refusal to Learn—Wisdom.....	68
<i>Aaron's Story</i>	
Willfulness—Willingness.....	73
<i>Daniel's Story</i>	
Perfectionism—Excellence.....	77
<i>Bertha's Story</i>	
Cynicism—Gratitude.....	82
<i>Jason's Story</i>	
Chaos—Discipline.....	85
<i>Hagar's Story</i>	
Separateness—Unity.....	89
<i>Becky's Story</i>	
Rugged Individualism—Relationship.....	93
<i>LuAnne's Story</i>	
Lies—Truth.....	97
<i>Spencer's Story</i>	
Inequality—Equality.....	102
<i>Canowicakte's Story</i>	
Apathy—Care.....	105
<i>Peter's Story</i>	

Shame—Guilt.....	109
<i>Leon's Story</i>	
Cowardice—Courage.....	114
<i>Mary and Jim's Story</i>	
Unmanaged Fear—Faith.....	118
<i>Marian's Story</i>	
Entitlement—Selflessness.....	122
<i>Mitchell's Story</i>	
Deceit—Integrity.....	126
<i>Val's Story</i>	
Unkindness—Grace.....	129
<i>Lotta's Story</i>	
Impatience—Patience.....	133
<i>Ted's Story</i>	
Self-Righteousness—Anonymity.....	137
<i>Xenia's Story</i>	
Disdain—Empathy.....	141
<i>Astrid's Story</i>	
Skepticism—Trust.....	144
<i>Helen's Story</i>	
Infidelity—Commitment.....	147
<i>Olivia's Story</i>	
Dishonor—Dignity.....	150
<i>Albert's Story</i>	
Greed—Charity.....	154
<i>Emilio's Story</i>	

Laziness—Perseverance.....	158
<i>Lewis's Story</i>	
Resistance—Acceptance.....	162
<i>Talma's Story</i>	
Resentment—Forgiveness.....	167
<i>Mikhail's Story</i>	
Control—Surrender.....	172
<i>Rashid's Story</i>	
Arrogance—Humility.....	177
<i>Herb's Story</i>	
Intolerance—Tolerance.....	181
<i>Luke's Story</i>	
Despair—Hope.....	186
<i>Gabrielle's Story</i>	
Indifference—Compassion.....	190
<i>Gladys and Hans's Story</i>	
Irresponsibility—Accountability.....	193
<i>Summer's Story</i>	
Hate—Love.....	197
<i>Paige's Story</i>	
Self-Centeredness—Service.....	201
<i>Ashley and Amy's Story</i>	
Disrespect—Respect.....	205
<i>Martin's Story</i>	
Ignorance—Awareness.....	208
<i>Annabelle's Story</i>	
Envy—Appreciation.....	212
<i>Barbara's Story</i>	

Unbridled Worry—Serenity .....	216
<i>Pauline's Story</i>	
Injustice—Justice .....	219
<i>Nelson's Story</i>	
Epilogue: Embracing Your Moral Development.....	223

## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Positive and Negative Spiritual Principles: Two Charts.....	228
Appendix B: Applying Positive Spiritual Principles in Your Daily Life.....	230
Appendix C: Applying Positive Spiritual Principles Worksheet.....	234
Appendix D: Using Positive Spiritual Principles to Help with Anger.....	236
Anger Worksheet: Applying Positive Spiritual Principles .....	237
Appendix E: Directing Our Energies toward Positive Spiritual Principles through Language.....	239
Exercises.....	242
About the Author.....	243



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I hope this book can help others, as all of the above people, and thousands more, have helped me.

# INTRODUCTION

## HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

*All moral conduct may be summed up in the rule:  
Avoid evil and do good.*

As a counselor for more than thirty-seven years, I've had a vantage point from which to watch the destructive and constructive forces inherent in all of us. I've watched good people become bad, but I've also witnessed the miracle of bad people becoming good. I was one of these.

This book was born out of a moment in my life some forty years ago; in 1970, I was a drug addict, a lost soul. The moment took place at night, for darkness and its shadows offered more solace than daylight. I had shot up a mixture of chemicals sold as cocaine mixed with a bit of heroin, but in reality I had no idea what traveled down the needle.

What I knew was that I was sick, having a bad reaction, sitting on a curb somewhere in the city, vomiting into the gutter. Images of my life, my family, what I had become, and the ugly things I had done haunted me. The angry, sad, drugged eyes of my mother, also an addict, haunted me. The look of defeat and disgust on the face of my father—a proud man, a veteran of World War II—haunted me as well. So did my sister's pleas for me to get help. All these images raced around endlessly in my head. I had become a source of pain and anguish for many, including myself.

After a while, I started wandering the streets in a manner befitting the lost soul I had become. I raged at the gods, *Why? Why is this happening to me? All I've ever wanted was just to be*

*good!* I can't remember how long I walked the streets ranting, getting sick, and then ranting some more.

But eventually a voice came to me that brought comfort and an answer to my questions. *The reason you are this way is because you are evil.*

There was a comforting truth in this. The faces started to fade away, the voices quieted, and a peace came over me. Yes, this was what I had become; I was evil. I did evil things—hurt the people I loved, stole things, dealt drugs. I had betrayed everything and everyone who was important to me. It all made sense; I just needed to accept what I had become.

Over the next few months, my attitudes and behavior matched this new insight. Evil people do evil things. I let the anger inside me grow. I let my ever-increasing desire for alcohol and drugs grow, too, until I was high almost all the time. As the anger and the fears beneath it grew, I sought out symbols of power to help cover up the growing powerlessness inside. I bought and carried guns.

I remember a trip to Wisconsin, where I bought a machine gun and a handgun from a biker. I had sewn a pocket into the back of my jeans for my small-caliber Beretta. All of this made sense and seemed right to me.

But still, from time to time, late at night, the moral issue of what I had become would revisit me. I wasn't able to find lasting comfort in being evil. Something inside me rebelled against it. So, about once every three or four weeks, I would go to bed with razor blades, cutting at my wrist, hoping to drain the evil from inside me—or end the life that by now had become unbearable. During these nights I found out how hard it is to become a murderer, even if what is to die is oneself. This was my life.

At the time I was living with my sister. We had both been kicked out of my parents' home. She had just had a beautiful daughter, Jennifer. Through her, my Higher Power found a way to reach me.

One day, my sister asked if I would watch over Jennifer while she went to the basement to do some laundry. I said, “Sure,” and downstairs she went. Soon after, Jennifer started to cry. The crying had nothing to do with me—she probably just wanted to be fed or changed—but her cries cut deep into me, and my shame started to flow. Like her tears that wouldn’t stop, wave after wave of shame engulfed me.

A few minutes later, my sister found me in front of Jennifer’s crib, on my knees, begging my three-month-old niece for forgiveness. Begging her to tell me what I had done to make her cry.

“What the hell is going on?” my sister asked.

In a moment of honesty—a spiritual moment born out of shame, desperation, and the tears of an innocent baby—I responded, “Kris, I think I have a drug problem.”

She looked at me and said, “Welcome to the real world!”

We talked. She called her social worker and got some names and phone numbers of treatment centers in our area. I reached someone at Pharm House Crisis Center, and they directed me to call their treatment center. They sounded very nice and set up an intake interview for me early the next week.

At the interview, we sat on pillows spread about the floor. Three or four nice people with very long hair (my hair was short, for when dealing drugs it seemed best to look as normal as possible) asked me questions about my drug use, my lifestyle, and my past. I offered no denial, just honest answers. No one mentioned anything about actually *quitting* drugs. In fact, being naïve, I thought that a drug treatment program would teach me how to control and manage my drug use.

At the end of the interview, they all thought I would be a good fit for their program. The only problem was that they had a waiting list, so I’d have to wait a couple of weeks to get in. I said this would be no problem.

I went home feeling good that I would finally get my drug

use under control. About a week later, Pharm House called, and off to treatment I went.

I felt safe there—safe for the first time in years. All the people at the center were good, decent folks who laughed and joked with each other and with us residents. It was here that I learned that even though I was doing evil things, the real problem was that I had an illness.

I remember the night my counselor sat me down and explained the illness I suffered from.

The counselor told me all I had to do was take responsibility for whom I had become—and, oh yes, stop taking drugs and drinking alcohol, which had been made clear by then.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I just stared at the ceiling, thinking. *Maybe I can get well! Am I evil, or just sick, or some weird combination of both?*

I ran away the next day.

After a week I returned. I was there briefly before I ran away again.

I went to my sister's apartment. She answered the door with Jennifer in her arms. When I asked to come in, she said, "No, Craig, you don't live here anymore. It isn't safe for Jennifer or me to have someone like you living with us."

For the next couple of months, I lived with addict friends using drugs until I decided, *The hell with being addicted!* I would give treatment a chance. I went back to the treatment center, but they wouldn't let me back in, either. Instead, they directed me to their outpatient program.

I started to go to the Sunday night outpatient group at the Pharm House Crisis Center. I stopped drinking and doing drugs. I asked my parents if I could live with them; they were willing to let me as long as I stayed clean and sober.

I remember seeing my father cry just twice in his life. The first time was because of my mother's addiction. The second time was the day I met him at a bowling alley to tell him I had

decided to go into treatment. This proud, tough man who had fought a war, had been part of the Army Air Forces, had been in two plane crashes, and had helped fly concentration camp survivors back to England for medical attention—this man cried when I told him I was going to drug treatment. Then he said, “Thank God! We thought you were dead.” Then he gave me a good fatherly lecture about how I needed to listen to these people, *whoever* they were, and do *whatever* they told me to do. I remember thinking, *What’s he crying about? I’m not that bad off.* I was five feet eleven and weighed 110 pounds.

It was in a carpeted room above Martha’s Antiques that I started to learn how to be a human being instead of the predator I had become. Here I met drunks and junkies who would become angels to each other. We were a sorry lot, but we had style!

There was Glenice, a strong, tough North Minneapolis lady whose favorite thing was to lie around in her bathrobe smoking marijuana. The problem was that the seeds would pop and burn holes in one robe after another. She realized she had a serious drug problem during one of these moments, so she went out and bought fireproof robes.

Then there was Vern, a St. Paul junkie, who became my best friend. Just months before joining the group, he had charged into the same crisis center with gun in hand, thrown his dope-sick girlfriend over his shoulder, and run out with her.

There was Kristin, who became my sponsor when it was announced one evening that we all needed to get sponsors. Years later, Kristin introduced me to Jane, who is now my wife of thirty-plus years.

There was Mary, a tall, thin, quiet, but strong woman from the plains of Minnesota. She had been a teacher in New Mexico. She told stories of driving home at night after a day of drinking and drug use, and hallucinating herds of elephants on the road. She told herself, *I don’t think elephants are native to*

*New Mexico. It must be a hallucination.* Then she would close her eyes and drive through the phantom herd.

Then there was our counselor and leader, John. He had waist-length hair and a stare that would send shivers up and down our spines. He was an interesting mix of care, dignity, integrity, and rage. He reminded me of those tough old sergeants in World War II movies: one moment swearing and kicking his soldiers' rear ends to get them out of their foxholes, the next moment wrapping his arms around one of his men, offering comfort and strength as every cell in the soldier's body shook with fear, sadness, and doubt.

This ragtag group of humanity saved my life and helped teach me how to be a human again. Collectively, we probably made one complete human among us all, but we were able to use that one to create many; to help each other face what we had become; and to remind each other that inside all of us were good, decent hearts. I have always loved these people, though we have gone our own ways and rarely see each other anymore.

Down the hall from the phone crisis room, we sat on the carpeted floor and "dealt with our shit." This was our Sunday night ritual year after year. The Crisis Center moved, but they gave us another carpeted room, and our ritual continued there.

Most of our growth happened outside of Sunday night group. We grew each other up while watching each other's backs. We cried together, screamed at each other, went to school and college together, nursed each other through illness and emotional struggles, and eventually turned into good people.

It was in these people's goodness, their comforting words, and their dignity that I could start to see and claim my own goodness. They taught me that good and evil have more to do with choice than anything else, that the greatest spiritual gift given to each of us is free will, and that addiction steals free will from us, while sobriety returns it.

Life was simple back then. Our task was to put together a day of sobriety, knowing that each day clean and sober was a gift, and a day's reprieve from the hell that waited not far away for all of us. Each day clean and sober held within it lessons and skills to be learned.

Eventually, John told us we needed to start going to Twelve Step groups, so we all started attending different self-help groups. It is here, in church basements, where everyone begins the evening by admitting guilt and being welcomed for it, that I've had the honor and privilege of watching countless people reclaim their lives.

Over time, the Pharm House group's influence started to fade, and the reflective and active atmosphere of Twelve Step meetings replaced it. Like creatures that left the seas and found a new existence on dry land, we left the carpeted floor of the crisis center and now sat in chairs. Instead of confronting and screaming at each other, we read to each other from books. We listened to each other put together and tell our own stories.

It was in these meetings that I first knowingly came in contact with the Spiritual Principles described in this book. We learned to place principles before personalities; we were to practice these principles in all our affairs. In order to do this, we had to know what these Spiritual Principles were. So we spent countless hours listening to people talk about how they brought Spiritual Principles to life through their actions and about the consequences they and others suffered when they failed to.

It was in these meeting rooms that I learned there is no failure in falling down, only in the refusal to get back up. That the simpler you keep your life, the richer and more complex it becomes. That discipline is not punishment, but a form of love. That good can come from bad. That bad can come from doing nothing. That living the right answer is far more important

than knowing the right answer. That knowing can get in the way of doing. That joy can be as simple as a good (or bad) cup of coffee, a store-bought cookie, and the return of an old friend who's been out using. That we don't need to understand in order to do the next right thing. That the next right thing can be as simple as just showing up.

I've written this book to help others see and understand their relationships with Spiritual Principles in a deeper manner—and, I hope, with more clarity. I make no claim to be right. I have no desire to convince. I just wish to share some of my ideas, thoughts, and excitement about Spiritual Principles.

In this book, I share with you my truths, my understandings of what it means to be spiritual. Truth needs no soldiers, no champions of its cause, for it was here before we were, and it will be here long after we are gone. Truth is here to offer us strength. It doesn't need our strength; it just needs us to listen. It finds more pleasure in our humility than in our arrogance.

We are imperfect; in fact, our imperfections are our map home. This is the main message I've learned in my own recovery and in my years as a counselor. By accepting and moving through our imperfections, we get closer and closer to what we've needed all along—more love, and the fellowship of each other.

This book is divided into two parts: theory and practice. In Part I, I lay out my theory of positive and negative principles and how they play out in the heart, mind, and brain. Part II consists of forty-one descriptions of each pair of positive and negative spiritual principles with a story illustrating each one. The charts in Appendix A show forty-one positive Spiritual Principles and their forty-one negative counterparts. Each pair creates a continuum within which we move back and forth, depending on our spiritual condition. In Appendices B through D are directions and worksheets using these charts to put these principles into action in your daily life.

PART I

---

# THE THEORY





# WHAT ARE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES?

---

THE COMPLEXITIES OF BEING HUMAN demand that we embrace some form of structure. This structure will help us organize our beliefs, and determine and declare what has value. The structure each of us chooses determines how we will live, what type of life we will have, and what type of person we will become.

But what will we organize around? What will provide direction for how we live?

For many, this structure comes from religion. For others, it comes from something similar but less formal: spirituality. Like religion, spirituality provides form for how we live.

In his book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz writes, “Spirituality is a lot like health. We all have health: we may have good or poor health, but it is something we can’t avoid having. The same is true of spirituality; every human being is a spiritual being. The question is not whether we have spirituality but whether the spirituality we have is a negative one that leads to isolation and self-destruction or one that is more positive and life-giving.”

Each one of us has a personal relationship with Spiritual Principles, whether we’re conscious of it or not. Our relationship with these Principles is, like all relationships, fluid and ever changing.

Simply put, Spiritual Principles hold within them Spirit,

that larger life force (Spirit = breath) that is the focus of all religions and all expressions of spirituality. Knowingly or unknowingly, all humans operate from them. Spiritual Principles are the most basic components of human existence and interaction.

These Spiritual Principles aren't vague abstractions. Nor are they set in stone or imposed from above. Instead, they are manifestations of Spirit that animate us—either consciously, by choice, or unconsciously, by instinct. They are real, living psychological forces that energize and inform our actions and decisions, for good and for bad.

Spiritual Principles are the seeds; we are the soil.

There are two types of Spiritual Principles: positive Spiritual Principles and negative spiritual principles. Both types are transformative, but one has the ability to help us heal wounds and become better, more complete individuals; the other has the ability to bring out the worst of who we are and tear us into pieces. To create a clear distinction between the two in this book, I have capitalized Spiritual Principles when referring to the positive principles, and lowercased the term when referring to the negative ones.

Spiritual Principles, being of the Spirit, are intangible. We cannot point to dignity or disrespect as entities that exist in and of themselves, but we can see and experience them in the actions of others or ourselves. We cannot possess them, but they can possess us.

The more intimate our relationship with positive Spiritual Principles, the more good we are capable of bringing to the world and to our own lives. The more intimate our relationship with negative spiritual principles, the more fear and cynicism will color our perceptions and the way we deal with others and ourselves.

When we speak of spiritual development, we are talking about deepening our relationships with positive Spiritual

Principles and lessening our desire to use, organize around, or become dependent on negative spiritual principles.

Spiritual Principles are natural laws, each with its own attributes, consequences, and effects. One does not have to believe in a natural law—such as gravity—to come under its influence. We are bound to it. The same is true with both positive Spiritual Principles and negative spiritual principles. If we fill our heart and life with respect, compassion, dignity, and so forth, we will have a better spiritual life. If we operate from these principles' negative counterparts, we will experience spiritual decay.

Each positive Spiritual Principle has a specific purpose, and it directs or guides us in a unique way. Think of each one as a different medicine in a medicine cabinet, with its own specific purpose and healing function. Negative spiritual principles have specific purposes and functions as well—but they act as poisons rather than medicines.

Positive Spiritual Principles hold the Divine within them. By the Divine, I simply mean that collective sense of decency and morality that lives deep inside most of us. It is that part of us that wants to respect others and be respected by others. The Divine part of us is good and moral; it guides each of us in a loving and caring direction. We experience the Divine when we leave the comfort of our home to spend an evening sitting with a sick friend. We find it when we spend hours pounding nails at a local Habitat for Humanity home. The Divine is also found in the collective conscience of people gathering in self-help groups to heal present and past wounds.

*The Divine always works to heal rather than to harm.* It pushes us to become better than we presently are. Because it requires us to change, however, we often resist its call.

Negative spiritual principles reflect the instinctual, animal side of our being. They focus not on serving, but on acquiring; not on community, but on putting ourselves first. The nature

of instinct is to make sure we get what we want and feel we deserve, to feed our egos. This part of us wants an illusory assurance of safety and fairness, and it wants to blame someone when things don't go our way. When we are sure that the world is unfair, that everyone is out to get us, or that the rightness of our cause is obvious, we've most likely turned to negative spiritual principles for the false comfort they offer. If we regularly operate from these negative spiritual principles, we deprive our spirits, minds, and intuitions of vital nourishment.

Our relationship with Spiritual Principles largely dictates how we perceive the world. Positive Spiritual Principles foster interconnectedness among the different parts, helping us see and make sense of the big picture. Negative spiritual principles focus on the parts and how these parts affect ourselves. When we operate from negative spiritual principles, we tend to oversimplify problems and solutions, and then back up these oversimplifications with arrogance and noise.

The following two charts show symbols for the forty-one positive Spiritual Principles and their corresponding negative principles. I created these charts and symbols to use in the applications of these principles in exercises that you'll find in Appendices B through D; you will also find these in charts in Appendix A for easy reference when you do the exercises.

## **Positive Spiritual Principles**

Positive Spiritual Principles represent the best of what it means to be human. The more we incorporate their intentions into our actions and lives, the more access we have to their enormous strengthening, regenerative, and transformative properties.

There is a collective dimension to positive Spiritual Principles. All positive Spiritual Principles encourage and support

## POSITIVE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

<b>GR</b> Gratitude	<b>S</b> Surrender	<b>T</b> Truth	<b>L</b> Love	<b>SL</b> Selflessness	<b>HU</b> Humility	
<b>FO</b> Forgiveness	<b>AP</b> Appreciation	<b>AC</b> Acceptance	<b>SV</b> Service	<b>O</b> Openness	<b>AW</b> Awareness	<b>F</b> Fairness
<b>DI</b> Dignity	<b>EM</b> Empathy	<b>GU</b> Guilt	<b>E</b> Equality	<b>P</b> Perseverance	<b>TL</b> Tolerance	<b>WI</b> Willingness
<b>D</b> Discipline	<b>EX</b> Excellence	<b>FA</b> Faith	<b>W</b> Wisdom	<b>J</b> Justice	<b>I</b> Integrity	<b>G</b> Grace
<b>SE</b> Serenity	<b>R</b> Respect	<b>HO</b> Hope	<b>RE</b> Relationship	<b>AN</b> Anonymity	<b>CA</b> Care	<b>C</b> Courage
<b>CO</b> Compassion	<b>TR</b> Trust	<b>CM</b> Commitment	<b>A</b> Accountability	<b>U</b> Unity	<b>CH</b> Charity	<b>PA</b> Patience

Positive Spiritual Principles, being of the Divine, release ethical power and have the ability to heal wounds when placed into action. It is in how we bring them together that our value system gets created.

## NEGATIVE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

Cynicism	Control	<b>Lies</b>	<b>Hate</b>	Entitlement	Arrogance	
Resentment	Envy	Resistance	Self-Centeredness	Judgmentalism	Ignorance	Unfairness
Dishonor	Disdain	Shame	Inequality	Laziness	Intolerance	Willfulness
Chaos	Perfectionism	Unmanaged Fear	Refusal to Learn	Injustice	Deceit	Unkindness
Unbridled Worry	Disrespect	Despair	Rugged Individualism	Self-Righteousness	Apathy	Cowardice
Indifference	Skepticism	Infidelity	Irresponsibility	Separateness	Greed	Impatience

each other; I think of them as family members of the Divine. For example, a week ago my nephew, his family, my wife, and I worked with others at a project called Feed My Starving Children. For a couple of hours, we put together meals for children and their parents who, because of conditions beyond their control, are in need of food. My nephew had volunteered as part of his confirmation commitment. We were with him because we love him and wanted to support his efforts to be a good young man. Two other volunteer groups were children helping out as part of birthday parties. For those two hours, many positive Spiritual Principles—selflessness, compassion, unity, service, and more—came together to help others. All of us were connected by a shared task and shared intentions. Plus, we had fun.

Positive Spiritual Principles remind us that there is a collective humanity that we are part of and need to sacrifice for. When we embrace and act from positive Spiritual Principles, we move beyond our self-centeredness, our desires, and our instinctive indifference to others. We become better at caring for and about the life we have been given.

Differences frighten our instinctual side, but they make our spiritual side curious. Instinct wants us to stay on the surface, to think one-dimensionally, to see differences more than commonalities, to stay separate from others. But positive Spiritual Principles, because of their depth, enable us to think and act three-dimensionally. Guided by these Principles, we learn how to weave pleasure, power, and meaning into a harmonic entity.

Positive Spiritual Principles have a unique energy, a unique rhythm. By acting in accordance with their essence, we release this spiritual energy, and for a brief time, it enriches our spirit.

When we practice a positive Spiritual Principle, we are called not only to act in accordance with it, but to work to *become* the Principle. This is the transformation we need to seek.

Surrender to a positive Spiritual Principle can occur two ways: through attitude and through action. We are called not just to act respectfully, but to *become* respectable; not just to act with dignity, but to *become* dignified. We work to be transformed into the essence of each Principle.

Becoming dignified doesn't occur through one action; this transformation only occurs through many actions that have dignity at their cores. Those two hours of putting meals together didn't make me a dignified person—but similar actions, taken regularly over a lifetime, may.

Unlike human beings, who are half animal, half Spirit, positive Spiritual Principles are pure Spirit. Their catch is that they need relationship in order to be brought to life. Morality only takes place within the context of relationships. We partner with positive Spiritual Principles; they need us to carry them into the light.

Through our actions and relationships, we activate and release the healing elements embedded within positive Spiritual Principles. Thus we become active representatives and representations of these Principles; thus we become moral beings.

The main by-products of practicing positive Spiritual Principles are more intimacy and love in our relationships with others, ourselves, and the Divine. But we will not know the full power and healing ability of these positive Spiritual Principles until we are able to achieve long-term relationships with them. For example, someone once told me about his relationship with his best friend: "Now that we're both in our sixties, I really see what a decent man Paul is. I've always liked him and thought highly of him, but it's only now, looking back at the layers and layers of good things he has done, the way he has carried himself, that I can see what a truly good man he is." The longer and closer our relationships with positive Spiritual Principles become, the more we see how important they are and how much good they can do for the world and

for us. And in practice, it is mainly in long-term relationships with positive Spiritual Principles that transformation occurs.

We cannot possess any positive Spiritual Principle. Trying to do so is like grasping water: The tighter we grab it, the quicker it rushes through our fingers and back from where it came. We must cup it, hold it gently, and then drink of it, so it can nourish and refresh us before it slips through our fingers and is gone. Then we must seek it again. (This is another beauty of positive Spiritual Principles: We must rediscover them over and over throughout our lives, experiencing them like the awesome beauty of one sunset after another.)

Our instinct fears vulnerability. But only through vulnerability can we be transformed by positive Spiritual Principles. The ethical power embedded within positive Spiritual Principles transforms instinctual fears into deeper relationships with others, the Divine, our communities, and ourselves. As we surrender the energies of our fears, and surrender ourselves to transformation, a new individual starts to emerge—a person with ethical strength and an increased capacity to be vulnerable.

Spiritual growth is much like learning math: Once you master algebra, you can solve a wide range of algebraic problems. But the next challenge and task is then to struggle with and master geometry. Then you can solve a wide range of geometric problems. Once you've mastered geometry, the next challenge is to struggle with and master calculus—and so on. The same holds true for spiritual growth: The deeper your relationships with positive Spiritual Principles are, the more able you are to handle and struggle with the complex problems life presents. You will also find more meaning within life's struggle, while knowing there is always more to be learned.

Positive Spiritual Principles are also challenges. They challenge us to become better than we are now. They challenge us to serve rather than to find others to serve us. They challenge

us to follow them and to live up to their standards in everything we do, in every moment of our lives.

We'll need to regularly stop and reflect on our relationship with each of these Principles and our relationship with them collectively. Many people do a daily inventory of how they are conducting themselves. Many go on retreats, often in places that have special meaning for them, to reflect on how they are conducting themselves.

## Negative Spiritual Principles

Negative spiritual principles keep us tied to and trusting in our instinctual, animal side. Collectively, they become our puffed-up ego pounding its chest and demanding that others yield to its desires. We often experience these principles as illusions of safety and comfort.

Here's an example: Someone states something as a fact, but we know or believe it to be false. We feel superior; we see this person as dumb; we think, *What a fool he is to believe that!* At that moment, we find some comfort, some internal joy, for we have stepped into the negative spiritual principles of self-righteousness and arrogance, which create powerful sensations for us. Instinct balks at investigation; it doesn't seek truth; it seeks control. Nevertheless, it has the power to comfort our frightened egos.

A common characteristic of negative spiritual principles is their ability to create a false, illusory sense of control. This is their siren song, and why (in part) they're so attractive.

Our attraction to negative spiritual principles is also based on fear, uncertainty, a feeling of powerlessness, or a painful emotion we don't want to feel. Our instinctual side hopes to distance us from these emotions through a sense of control. Yet we humans can genuinely control very little; we can

influence, but not control. Positive Spiritual Principles help us understand and accept this. Yet our instinctual side believes in, dreams of, and tries to wield unlimited control over people and situations. This is spiritual immaturity.

Negative spiritual principles do not offer us solutions—only the illusion of solutions. We make decisions but find no genuine solutions.

When operating from negative spiritual principles, we seek to dominate others or our problems rather than learn from them. Domination creates a momentary illusion of a solution, but it is a house of cards that will collapse in even the slightest breeze.

Instinct and negative spiritual principles reduce us to merely reacting to what is happening around us. Here's a common example: Our teenager hasn't come home yet, and it's an hour after her curfew. We're afraid. *Was there an accident? Is she out getting drunk? Why hasn't she called?* When she walks in a few minutes later, we look at our watch and yell at her for being irresponsible and inconsiderate. We tell her to go to her room and that she's grounded for a month.

Our fear for our child's safety has triggered our instinctual desire to control things. So we try to control the situation and our child—and, in the process, we embody the negative spiritual principles of judgmentalism and unkindness. In order to avoid the pain of our own guilt, we may then rely on another negative spiritual principle: shame. We say to ourselves, *If my child would just act right, I wouldn't have to scream at her.* But reactions are not solutions; they are just our instinctual attempts to deal with our fear and emotional pain. Negative spiritual principles thus disrupt our relationships with others, our communities, the Divine, and ourselves.

Like positive Spiritual Principles, negative spiritual principles have transformative powers. If we cling to or habitually rely on negative spiritual principles, they become character defects.

Eventually, we may turn into angry cynics who are afraid of anything that challenges us to give up our negativity. We may then slip into serious spiritual decay, developing a hardened heart and living a life of bitterness and broken relationships.

Knowing, naming, and identifying negative spiritual principles can help us become more attuned to them when we encounter them, both in others and (especially) in ourselves. For example, when we feel cynical and realize we are about to make a cynical remark, we can catch and recenter ourselves, using gratitude as our guiding positive Spiritual Principle.

## **Spiritual Principles, Conscience, and Noise**

The collective voice of positive Spiritual Principles is called our conscience—that inner sense of what is good and what impels us toward helpful actions. Conscience is there to help us master and redirect our fears, anger, and sadness. If we have no relationship with positive Spiritual Principles, living only by negative ones, we'll have no conscience. If we have underdeveloped relationships with positive Spiritual Principles, we will have an underdeveloped conscience.

Conscience is the voice of the Divine, speaking through our relationships with positive Spiritual Principles. It is a creative force seeking to create new perspectives and open us to new worlds.

In a class I taught some years ago, I listened to a man in a nice sport jacket and tie talk about how, a year earlier, he had been living in a cardboard box behind a bar. Each day he would wake up with the shakes. The owner of the bar would let him clean up the bar; in return, this man would get the booze he needed to keep the DTs away.

One day he walked into the Salvation Army to get a meal, as he had many times before, and as he sat down, a woman sat

down beside him. They ate quietly. When she was done, she stood up. But before she walked away, she looked down at him, and their eyes met. In her eyes he saw pure love. She said to him, "It's time for this to end. It's time for you to return home. Go talk to that man and he will help you. Do what he says." She pointed to one of the counselors.

He went to the counselor. They talked, and he moved in to the Salvation Army and began its addiction treatment program. Since then, he had stayed sober, working and living at the center. In the year since he encountered that woman, he never saw her again.

He explained to the class, "I had lost my conscience, my hope, my sense of purpose. That day, in that woman's eyes, I found a way out of that cardboard box and back to life. I had to become the care and love that I had seen in them. She was my conscience when I had none."

Was she real, or part of one of his many drunken hallucinations? Either way, in this man's eyes, it was conscience inviting him home. And he listened.

We need a conscience. It protects us from losing our sense of values and becoming distracted by the material things that surround us. It keeps us vital and spiritually alive. It guides us in our search for meaning. It is one of the things that make us human. In the words of Viktor Frankl, "Conscience could be defined as the intuitive capacity of man to find out the meaning of a situation."

Conscience usually speaks a quiet and subtle voice. Thus we must seek quiet places, or learn to quiet ourselves, or do both in order to hear its guidance.

Negative spiritual principles create noise, and noise makes it very hard—and often almost impossible—to sort out what positive Spiritual Principles call us to do. Noise can, and often does, drown out the voice of conscience. We may then respond instinctually, reacting to emotions such as fear and

sadness by seeking comfort, illusory safety, or even revenge. Reflections get replaced by opinions. Investigation gets replaced with contempt.

Sadly, negative spiritual principles are often promoted—and encouraged—as entertainment or truth. A good friend was invited onto a national daytime talk show; while she and the other guests were waiting in the green room to go on, they were instructed by the producer to interrupt each other if they disagreed, and to speak forcefully rather than thoughtfully. My friend was struck by how much the show promoted conflict, contention, and negative spiritual principles, and how it cast aside civility and positive Spiritual Principles. The program deliberately encouraged noise over dialogue.

Today, the more important an issue is, the less dialogue and the more noise there seems to be. Monologue seems to be drowning out dialogue and listening; extreme positions seem to be squeezing out wholesome and sensible positions in the middle; and listening, civility, and compromise are seen as naïve. Yet when we fill up our lives up with such noise and clutter, we drown out conscience, knowingly or unknowingly. Then we can lose touch with our spiritual centers, drift off course, and fall into spiritual decay.

## **Free Will**

The greatest spiritual gift we have is free will. As free individuals, we can choose to move beyond our instinctual responses.

If someone cuts us off in traffic, we may instinctively react with fear and anger at first. But because we have free will, we can choose to just drive on instead of clenching our fist and yelling angry words at the other driver.

Free will enables us to choose between positive Spiritual Principles and negative ones. It gives us freedom and choice,

but also responsibility—all core spiritual elements. As Viktor Frankl noted, “Man exists authentically only when he is not driven but, rather, responsible.” Our actions are not fate unveiling itself; they are the result of us making choices. It’s because of free will that we can do good or evil deeds.

Ayn Rand observed, “Man is a being with free will; therefore, each man is potentially good or evil, and it’s up to him and only him to decide which he wants to be.” To be free, to choose good, we must also be able to choose evil. In practice, most of us do both. The person who cheats on her taxes may also spend a day a week volunteering at a local homeless shelter.

No one is—or ever will be—entirely good or bad. Only the morally arrogant see themselves as above doing bad deeds—and arrogance is one of the darkest negative spiritual principles.

Our good and bad choices are almost always practical, not abstract. Your spouse goes shopping for a chair and spends more than twice the amount you had agreed upon. Your instinct urges you to yell and shame him, or to manipulate the situation to get him to let you buy the new computer you want. But instead, you talk with him about your fear of falling into debt. Acting out of compassion and patience, you offer to help him return the chair and shop for a different chair within the agreed-upon price range.

Through free will, we commit to our values or betray them. We choose who we are, what we stand for, and what we become.

Our instinctual side fears the bridle of conscience and hates the responsibility that comes with free will. This is why, when we act badly, we don’t want to be held responsible for our choices and actions. We use the negative spiritual principle of arrogance, or we see ourselves as a victim when clearly we are not. It is also why when we *want* to act badly, acting morally can feel like a tight collar and leash.

Because we have free will and the ability to choose both good and bad, practicing positive Spiritual Principles involves paying attention. Responsibility requires awareness. Awareness means paying attention to ourselves. It involves examining and questioning our motivations. Awareness thus makes the borders between our conscious and unconscious more fluid, allowing us to better understand our motives.

Awareness is not just an occasional practice. It's always valuable—and almost always necessary. Just because we choose to be moral today does not mean that we won't want to choose otherwise tomorrow. Thus we need ongoing awareness, vigilance, and accountability. We must be willing to continually inventory our motivations, desires, and inclinations. We may often need to stop to reflect on what we're thinking, feeling, and doing—or about to do. We may take a formal personal inventory of our conduct once a day or once a week, or go on retreats to reflect on our conduct over time. (Our instinctual side resists this self-examination, of course; it prefers to examine and judge others instead.)

To be good, we must choose to *do* good, over and over, in situation after situation. It's not a single definitive choice, but one that we make time and time again, within the messiness and difficulties of life. Action must always follow these spiritual choices; a decision without an action behind it is just a hope.

Awareness, responsibility, and free will: these form the trilogy of personal spiritual development.

Life sets events and options before us. When we run up against the unfairness of life, we will all be tempted to temporarily forget or ignore positive Spiritual Principles. Yet we must remember that we are not victims of life; we are co-creators of it.

A courageous woman whom I had the privilege of counseling was repeatedly raped by her brother as she grew up. She

joined a rape support group so as not to become a victim. “Yes, he had the power to abuse me, but he doesn’t have the power to make me a victim,” she said. She read everything she could find about Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, and others who had faced evil and chosen to wrap themselves in positive Spiritual Principles and their ethical healing powers, instead of in the illusory power of never-ending anger and hate. She chose morality over powerlessness.

We can fully and mindfully exercise our free will only when we have learned to clearly see our instinctual reactions and not get swept away by them. We can learn to slow down time by using positive Spiritual Principles such as patience, tolerance, awareness, and discipline. We then can make choices about what other positive Spiritual Principles to bring to the situation. Thus we can respond morally instead of merely reacting.

## **Principles before Personalities**

Because positive Spiritual Principles are purer spiritual entities than we are, *positive Spiritual Principles must lead us*. These Principles must come before our personalities. If they do not, spiritual chaos follows. Unless our instinct is guided, fear and desires will become the motivations behind our actions. The animal inside us must be domesticated.

During our lives, we all have to face days of deep and seemingly endless pain, which may come in the form of fear, dread, grief, loneliness, or despair. At times, all of us are forced to go to places we would never willingly go. It is at these times that we most need positive Spiritual Principles and the people who routinely live by them. These people are the angels who can offer guidance and lead us, step by step, out of the abyss. It is especially at these times that positive Spiritual Principles need to come before personalities.

Positive Spiritual Principles are wormholes into new and wondrous worlds. The more we study them and seek to know and understand them, the more they will define and transform us.

Our instinctual side will naturally resist, but we can calmly acknowledge this resistance and continue to follow the guidance of positive Spiritual Principles.

Over time, we will come to see that meaning and importance come not from leading, but from following these Principles. We are to be the host, the student. This is the essence of practical spirituality.



# SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES AND THE HUMAN HEART

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## Our Drives for Pleasure, Power, and Meaning

*When we understand that man is the only animal who must create meaning, who must open a wedge into neutral nature, we already understand the essence of love. Love is the problem of an animal who must find life, create a dialogue with nature in order to experience his own being.*

—Ernest Becker

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL DILEMMAS we face as humans is that we're half animal and half spirit. Because of our dual nature, we are imperfect beings; we are incomplete animals and incomplete spiritual beings.

### **Instinct vs. Spirit**

My cat was a better animal than I am because he didn't feel the tension of conscience. He was pure instinct. If a mouse ran into the room, there was no moral issue for him—just a chase and a meal.

Our animal instincts—for safety, food, sex, and sleep—

serve a very basic and beneficial purpose: They keep us alive, both individually and as a species. Because they are about self-preservation, these instincts create a natural narcissism that is part of all of us.

But we humans are much more than just our instincts. We also have our spiritual side, which needs to monitor, temper, and regularly override our animal instincts.

When we fail to recognize and monitor the instinctual side of our being, and when we give it free rein, we become dangerous to both others and ourselves. When this happens, we justify excess, selfishness, entitlement, and overconsumption.

Instinct operates largely from fear. It unconsciously drives us to wonder, *Where is there danger? Where is there safety?* We humans respond to this fear in many different ways. We work to deny it. We try to distance ourselves from it. We build empires, large and small, believing that safety and control can be found in them. We seek refuge from fear in trance states. We repress fear. We cling to naïve beliefs, hoping that our innocence will protect us. We attack others or work to defeat them. We try to transfer our fears onto others with blame and anger.

Our instincts are part of us, but they do not fully define us. As Teilhard de Chardin observed, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience.” Our spiritual side is part of the Divine—that collective, universal sense of decency and morality that lives deep inside all of us, and that will guide us toward love, care, and healing. This side of us realizes that we are much more than a separate self. Often, it asks that we sacrifice a piece of that self for the good of something much larger. When we act only from instinct, we ignore Spirit and the demands that positive Spiritual Principles make of us.

The easiest way for us to transcend the limits of our instincts—our ego—is to live according to positive Spiritual Principles and put them into practice in our everyday lives.

Positive Spiritual Principles are timeless. Respect, dignity, justice, equality, and others were worthy goals hundreds of years ago, and they will remain just as worthy hundreds of years from now.

Through these positive Spiritual Principles, we transcend and transform our instincts. Used as guides, these principles enable us to find and connect with humanity and the Divine. They also help us to be—and feel—less alone.

It isn't bad that we have instincts and animal desires. They're natural parts of us. What matters is what we do with them and the choices we make regarding them. Indeed, the fact that we can stand up to them, work with them, and detach from them is what makes us spiritual beings. By integrating yet rising above our instinctual desires, we discover meaning, create meaningful relationships, and live meaningful lives.

The natural tension between our instinctual and spiritual sides is quite valuable to us. It forces us to use our free will to make choices and to be responsible for those choices and their consequences.

When we move beyond our instinctual resistance and incorporate positive Spiritual Principles into our lives, we find ourselves able to do things we would have never believed we could do. As a client I worked with told me, "Through living by the vows my wife and I took when we got married, I became a better man than I could have ever dreamed of." Another client, now a loving grandmother, said, "When I found out I was pregnant at age sixteen, I knew nothing of how to be a mother. I cried and panicked for three days. Then I told myself I would do everything I could to avoid becoming another neglectful or abusive mother, like the other women in my family. I found a mother mentor who taught me how to be a good, loving mother. I vowed to stop the abuse and not pass it on. I knew I had been successful when my daughter graduated from college and found a respectful, wonderful man for her husband.

When she became pregnant, I cried tears of joy, not tears of fear and panic.”

## Choosing to Attach and Detach

As humans, we have the ability to attach to—or form relationships with—ideas, concepts, self, and others. But, just as we have the ability to *attach*, we also have the ability to *detach* from ideas, concepts, self, and others. This detachment is a uniquely human capability. Animals can’t detach from instinct, but, being half Spirit, we can.

Thus we have choices in every moment of our lives. We get to decide what path we will take, what positive Spiritual Principles or negative spiritual principles we will follow, what kind of person we will be, and what we will make of our lives.

However, this ability to detach is a double-edged sword. *We also have the ability to attach to or detach from our spiritual side.* Part of our work as human beings is to stay attached to positive Spiritual Principles, even when our instincts tempt us not to.

The dance of being human is often a dance of attachment and detachment. If our spouse says something that sparks fear in us, our fear may tell us to fight back, run, or play naïve. At the same time, however, our spiritual side asks us to let go of our reaction, to look past our fear, to listen to what our spouse is saying, and to connect with him mindfully and lovingly.

Detaching from our instincts causes our energy and perspective to shift. We disrupt the flow of energy to our ego and instinct, and can then consciously attach it to positive Spiritual Principles. This, in turn, helps us stay focused, work through our fears, and attain our goals.

Over time, we become whatever we most often attach to, and we don’t become what we detach from. If we work hard to

stay attached to the Principle of integrity, for example, over time we become a person of integrity. If we work to stay attached to the negative principle of cynicism, over time we become a cynic. If we learn to place positive Spiritual Principles before instinctual desire, we grow and mature.

We can consciously work to live more spiritual, moral lives. In order to do this, however, we need to understand three basic human drives.

### **Three Basic Drives: Pleasure, Power, and Meaning**

A *drive* is an emotional, physical, and/or spiritual desire strong enough to lead us to act in certain ways. In humans, these three basic drives are the drive for pleasure, the drive for power, and the drive for meaning. We need all three drives if we are to develop as spiritual beings.

Our first two drives—the drive for power and the drive for pleasure—are instinctual. We share these drives with other animals. The third drive—the drive for meaning—derives from our spiritual side. We all have these three drives, and our energy regularly moves from one to another as we go about our lives. How we weave these three drives together determines who we become and what type of life we put together.

Each drive gives us a different view of the world, a different sense of what holds importance, and a different energy. Let's look at how each drive affects our relationships with other people.

Through our drive for pleasure, we see that relationships can be sources of pleasurable feelings and fun. This drive draws us to people who make us feel good and urges us to avoid people around whom we feel bad.

Through our drive for power, we see relationships as hierarchical. This drive encourages us to seek people who support

our positions and views, who can help us climb up the social or professional ladder, or who offer us an opportunity to achieve or get something—money or status, for example. This drive also pushes us to control others.

Through our drive for meaning, we see relationships as essential to creating meaning in our lives and to accessing higher, healing truths. Our drive for meaning shows us that we all are incomplete, and that through meaningful and challenging relationships, we'll develop a deeper and more accurate view of life. Our drive for meaning opens us to be curious about who can help us, guide us, and teach us. It sees each person as having a unique and meaningful story that we can learn from.

These three drives usually don't get along very well. For starters, there is the issue of which drive will lead us. Typically, the drives push against each other, jockeying for position. Each one wants to dominate. Our instinctual drives for power and pleasure have an advantage because they come naturally and easily to us. Both of these drives are willing to avoid, sacrifice, or betray positive Spiritual Principles in order to get what they desire.

Here are a couple of common examples:

1. *On her way home from work, Emily stops at the local casino, throwing into the slot machines a few dollars that she can't afford to lose. In the process, she sacrifices some dignity and energy that would be better used to relate with her family. But that hour of gambling feels good and helps her forget the pressures of her day.*
2. *Jerome works many extra hours in order to get promoted in his company. In the process, he sacrifices meaningful connections with his family and friends. Though his wife complains about his long hours and says she'd rather have him around more, he tells himself that she'll sing a*

*different tune when he gets his promotion and the money that comes with it.*

Our drives for pleasure and power naturally attract us to negative spiritual principles such as greed, control, cynicism, and self-righteousness. The sensations they create—as well as the ones they spur us to chase after—can be very seductive.

It's not easy to put our drive for meaning in the lead. The other two drives naturally lead us to resist that effort. Sorting out what is meaningful and right frustrates our animal side, which desires immediate satisfaction and control. It also involves sacrificing some of our wants and desires in the pursuit of higher Spiritual Principles. Yet in order to compose a meaningful life, we need to put our drive for meaning in the lead position, because this is the part of us that understands, connects with, interacts with, and responds to positive Spiritual Principles. Our drive for meaning also understands the need for and the value of sacrifice and delayed gratification. This drive can help us keep tabs on our drive for pleasure—not by squelching it, but by promoting richness, sensuality, and fun in ways that nurture and restore us, while causing no harm. Our drive for meaning can also direct our drive for power to help us do good and make a positive difference in the world.

Paradoxically, when we put our drive for meaning in charge, our life becomes more pleasurable and more powerful because we create *ethical* power and *ethical* pleasure. Indeed, our drive for meaning would be powerless and joyless without the juice that comes from our drives for pleasure and power.

Let's take a closer look at each of these three drives.

### ***Our Drive for Pleasure***

Our drive for pleasure loves positive physical sensations: the smell of roses, the touch of a lover's embrace, the sound

of good music, the taste of good food, the feel of warm sunshine on our skin, the shade of a big tree on a summer day, the breeze on our face as we ride a bicycle, star-filled skies, rainbows, fine fabrics, a cozy evening fire.

These are good things. We need pleasure, and our drive for pleasure makes sure we get some. It always, however, makes us want *more*, and want it *now*. But *more* and *now* are a dangerous combination. If we focus on fulfilling these desires instead of moderating and guiding them, we get out of balance. We push ourselves deeper into our appetites and further away from the Divine. We chase sensations instead of doing the next right thing. We also make ourselves vulnerable to anything or anyone that promises to satisfy our appetites. And the more we try to satisfy our appetite at the expense of Spirit, the more Spirit longs to be set free.

Sometimes we misinterpret this spiritual longing as a desire for still more pleasurable sensations. We then risk falling into an orgy of consumption and self-indulgence.

Yet the pursuit of pleasure quickly becomes self-defeating. All pleasure is made up of sensations, and all sensations eventually fade away. Chasing pleasure for pleasure's sake is ultimately unsatisfying. You can experience pleasure for a moment, but its effects do not last, and you end up frustrated and disappointed.

Nevertheless, it is also through our drive for pleasure that we feel the joy, gratitude, love, and serenity that come from bringing positive Spiritual Principles to life. Our spiritual side wants pleasure for ourselves, but it also wants to add pleasure into the world. This is the essence of service to and for others. As we put our ego aside to help others in self-sacrificing ways, we let others know that someone cares, we let *ourselves* know we care, and we touch the best of what we are.

My friend Joe, who regularly volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, often speaks of the joy he gets from his efforts: "I

love driving by the homes we built months or years ago, seeing children playing on the lawns, and knowing that in some small way I was part of something good.” Such self-sacrifice for the good of others opens chambers in our hearts that hold deep, ancient love.

It’s easy to see how our drive for pleasure can get us in trouble when pleasure becomes a goal in and of itself, or when pleasure alone defines us. A second, less obvious danger is when we make suffering or self-sacrifice into a goal.

Neither pleasure nor pain should be a goal; these come as natural by-products of the choices we make and the lives we lead. The pure pursuit of pleasure—or pain—is a choice of self over spirit, personality over principle.

Our drive for pleasure seeks to protect us from pain, and that’s usually a good thing. But the drive for pleasure can also encourage us to try to avoid all pain, including necessary pain, such as grief at the loss of a friend, or the soreness that comes from a good workout, or the pain of healing from important surgery. Our drive for pleasure may also push us to avoid the minor discomfort that comes from meeting new people, learning new ideas and behaviors, and encountering unfamiliar cultures and situations. This knee-jerk avoidance can turn into spiritual indifference, inertia, or an unwillingness to change.

Practical spirituality requires that we accept necessary pain and suffering, allowing them to transform us into better people rather than better avoiders. Some suffering must not be avoided; some suffering we must directly walk into and embrace. For example, if we choose to love others, we will experience pain and sacrifice on a regular basis. And reaching a goal requires work—sometimes more than we feel like doing. A good education, for example, is achieved largely through hard work and an openness to new ideas.

Viktor Frankl described two types of suffering: *avoidable suffering*, which we can and should choose to avoid, and

*unavoidable suffering*, those tragedies and adversities that are placed irrevocably on our path. I would add another type of suffering: *chosen suffering*. Chosen suffering is suffering we need to embrace in order to fully develop as human, spiritual beings. Here are some examples: (1) You spend weekends studying at the library to attain your goal of getting a 4.0 grade-point average in college, even though your friends are partying and regularly invite you to join them. (2) You have both knees replaced so you can continue to go hiking with your grandchildren. (3) You put together an intervention for your drug-addicted brother, knowing he will be furious with you.

When we accept and face unavoidable suffering, we often feel incomplete and vulnerable. This is when we most need positive Spiritual Principles. They can help guide us through the pain. They can help us clarify what our anguish is about, what we are to learn from it, and what we need in order to heal. As a result, they can transform our pain.

### ***Our Drive for Power***

Power is about potential: our potential to do and be good, or to create misery for others and ourselves.

Power and our sense of self are intimately intertwined. When we are born, our first breath puts us on a journey to develop our potential into some form of power. But will we seek power based only on negative spiritual principles and our ability to dominate and create fear in others? Or will we choose ethical power, the power of positive Spiritual Principles?

Power, like pleasure, is inherently neither good nor bad. We can access and wield power based on our values and highest aspirations, or on our desires and fears. As Eric Hoffer explained in his book *The Passionate State of Mind*, "It is when power is wedded to chronic fear that it becomes for-

midable”—and, I would add, dangerous and easy to misuse. When power is guided by our fears and desires, we only generate suffering, not only for ourselves, but also for others, as we work to place our fears onto and into them.

Power needs to be contained within and guided by positive Spiritual Principles if it is to be transformed into its highest form, ethical power. Ethical power is sacred power. It can heal and transform individuals, groups, institutions, nations, and cultures. Yet ethical power is fundamentally humble; it doesn't seek status or prestige.

Our drive for power is closely tied to our survival. It makes us react quickly and intensely to any fear or perceived danger. Thus we need the guidance and leadership that positive Spiritual Principles can provide. Principles such as patience, tolerance, and humility slow down natural fear reactions, allowing us to respond wisely to situations instead of instinctively reacting to them.

Our drive for power seeks to protect us from dangers, both real and imagined. When this drive senses danger, it spurs us to put up defenses and isolate ourselves from whatever that danger may be. This drive is inherently selfish. It doesn't understand the concept of self-sacrifice, but it believes in sacrificing others. When we argue with our partner, it is our drive for power that demands that they admit they are wrong. At its worst, it may demand they admit their inherent wrongness as a person.

Our drive for power likes power that can be felt and seen, power we can wrap our hands around. It understands the sensations of *raw power* more than the concept of *ethical power*. It prefers the fist to the hug, the scream to the debate, the sword to peaceful compromise. It also likes noise, for noise makes it hard to hear the subtle voice and demands of conscience.

Without the guidance of positive Spiritual Principles, our drive for power can coax us into a “me vs. others” mentality,

and into disconnection from anything that doesn't satisfy our desire for more.

Influenced by our drive for power, we often see isolation as a solution. Think of a time when you were in a heated argument with someone close to you. Was there a soft—or loud—voice inside you that said, *I don't need this crap, I don't need this person, either. I'd be so much better off alone?* I joke with my wife that there are days when I want to trade her for a puppy, knowing that the next day I would mortgage everything to get her back. This is my drive for power offering up its standard, predictable response.

Our drive for power leads us to resist change because change is unpredictable. It causes us to see change as risky and thus fear it. In order to change, we must offer up some part of us; we must be willing to become different. Our beliefs and perspectives must be transformed. This doesn't make sense to our drive for power. It tells us that there is nothing wrong with us, that our beliefs and actions are proper and correct, and that there's no need for us to change. The world and others need to change, not us. They are what's wrong; we are what's right.

Spirituality asks us to always be ready and willing to sacrifice, to surrender our instinctual ego to higher principles and purposes. But blinded by our drive for power, we see no purpose higher than self-preservation, which means protecting our beliefs, our way of seeing and being in the world, our own personal status quo.

Our drive for power is thus primarily antirelationship. It is suspicious of all authentic, loving relationships because other people may challenge us or be unwilling to let us be in control.

The relationships our drive for power does find comforting are those in which the other person's beliefs, fears, and wants are exactly the same as ours. It leads us to think: *If you are the same as me, you are not a threat to me. We can be alone together,*

*connected through our shared mistrust, anger, and fears.* Ideas or people that our drive for power doesn't understand are thus seen as villains to be mistrusted, defended against, and, perhaps, attacked or destroyed. This drive then justifies its own self-centeredness by declaring and focusing on the perceived wrongness of others.

Our instinctual drive for power seduces us into finding some pleasure in the suffering of others. Bullies love to see their own fear transferred onto someone else's face. The abusive parent finds satisfaction when his child runs to his room crying, for now the anger and pain that live inside the parent live within the child as well. Terrorists take pleasure in watching news coverage of the massive suffering they have created. They feel satisfied when the hate they feel inside becomes a hatred directed back at them.

Our drive for power would have us believe in the fantasy that security lies in control. Left untethered, our drive for power can turn both others and ourselves into soulless objects to be manipulated, without regard for the consequences.

To our drive for power, right and wrong have little to do with truth, and everything to do with dominance and submission. Might makes right. If I have power over you, then I'm right and you are wrong—and now you have to carry the fear, not me.

To our drive for power, the people who have the most power naturally have the right to lead, the right to carry the banner of truth, and the right to dominate and (if necessary) humiliate others.

Alternatively, we may feel that we alone stand proudly and defiantly against the status quo, the powers that be, or the world. Yet our pride, defiance, and bravado are in fact thin veneers over dependent relationships with the negative spiritual principles of cynicism, intolerance, and unmanaged fear.

Fortunately, we can monitor ourselves and recognize when

we are operating (or tempted to operate) from our drive for power. Here are some warning signs: We have a strong desire to be in control or to be right. We want others to acknowledge that we are right. We generally mistrust others. We feel self-righteous. We want others to suffer. We feel like a victim and that others don't understand us. We're afraid most or all of the time. We find ourselves angry at most everything and everyone. We react to or feel annoyed by little things. We are full of resentment, seeing only our side of things.

By applying positive Spiritual Principles, we can discipline and domesticate our drive for power. Guided by them, we seek to *heal* wounds, not deepen them or pass them on to others. These Principles call us to *surrender*, not *submit*, to the care and love that Spirit holds. Through this surrender, we can turn our drive for power into a force of goodness. We can move beyond willfulness into willingness.

### ***Our Drive for Meaning***

Spirituality is about forming a loving partnership among of all three of our basic drives, with our drive for meaning in the lead.

We need the passion embedded in our drive for pleasure, and we need the perseverance and dedication that can be found in our drive for power. But both of these aspects of our humanness need to be led and mentored by our drive for meaning. When we place meaning before power and pleasure, we are able to transcend our instinctual selves, keep our ego in check, and put principles before personality.

We also experience a change in perspective. Negative spiritual principles create rigid perspectives; positive Spiritual Principles allow fluidity, creativity, openness, and curiosity.

As Rollo May observed, "Life comes from physical survival; but the good life comes from what we care about." Our

drive for meaning is what makes us care about things that hold Spirit. It helps us to enjoy the uncertainty of the question mark instead of seeing it as a threat. It seeks transformation instead of the status quo.

Our drive for meaning doesn't come from our instincts, but from our fears, our doubts, our agony, our suffering, and our incompleteness. Our drive for meaning creates in us a willingness to embrace our incompleteness, a desire to be transformed, and a longing to connect with something larger and more meaningful than ourselves. Through it, we respond to our own darkness with a desire to seek the light, and we respond to our character defects with a yearning to develop character.

Unlike all other animals, we humans don't just want relief from our current suffering; we want to *understand* our suffering and learn from it. Our journey into meaning starts when we begin to realize that we are in control of little, that we have few answers, that we often don't even know the right questions, and that we have—and always will have—much more to learn.

Our drive for meaning often turns us into spiritual pilgrims who search for the sacred. It keeps us seeking, discovering, and rediscovering ever deeper, more illuminating, and more healing truths. At the same time, it reminds us that our own understanding of truth will always be incomplete, and that anyone who claims they can give us the complete, absolute truth is focused on power instead of meaning.

Each of us must discover our own meaning and our own place in the world; others can't dictate these to us. Indeed, the drive for meaning takes no one standard form; it has a slightly different shape for each of us. Others can help us, but we must make our own discoveries, then share our stories of discovery with others.

Similarly, we cannot discover meaning for anyone else. We can offer our experience and guidance, but meaning can

never be handed from one person to another. It can't—and shouldn't—be forced or inflicted on others, either.

Our drive for meaning is multidimensional, not one-dimensional. Unlike our drives for power and pleasure, it can help us step back, reflect, and ask, *What am I to learn from this? Why is this happening to me? How can I be better because of this? How can I help make my community a better place because of this?* It also often guides us to ask, *What is the wisest and most caring way to act in this situation?* The quality of our spirituality comes from how we answer these and other, similar questions.

We do not start out seeking meaning as children. We start out wanting pleasure and safety. The pursuit of meaning comes later, as our parents, teachers, relatives, mentors, and friends lead us—and at times push us—toward it. We watch and interact with our families, and from these first interactions we learn a hierarchy of pleasure, power, and meaning—which comes first, which second, and which last. Some families are meaning-based, but many are power-based, and some are pleasure-based. Because of free will, however, each of us gets to create our own hierarchy of pleasure, power, and meaning when we reach adulthood.

In order to discover meaning, we must be willing to sacrifice homeostasis—our usual balance and our personal status quo. Our drive for meaning thus makes us willing to give up comfort and familiarity for the possibility of more meaning. We become interested in other people and their stories, other cultures, other religions, other ideas, other ways of being, and other ways of seeing the world.

The main hallmark of our drive for meaning is its capacity for inclusiveness. It brings to light the strength and beauty of diversity, the potential that lies within our differences, and the learning and sharing that these differences can provide. As my good friend Kathi says, "It's not the notes that make music beautiful; it's the spaces between them."

Our drive for meaning shows us that everything and everyone has something to teach us. Meaning is thus deeply inclusive, excluding only those forces that seek to do harm. Meaning always has room for those who seek it and are willing to work for it. All who need healing are welcome to feel its embrace.

Through meaning, we create intimacy and a reciprocal relationship with positive Spiritual Principles. As we validate these Principles through our actions, we in turn are validated: care begets care, respect begets respect, honesty begets honesty, love begets love.

## **The Interplay of Meaning and Power**

When something happens, meaning drives us to ask, *What is this about? What is the meaning within this?* It makes us curious; it makes us want to learn. It keeps us open to the world and to the Divine.

In contrast, power declares, *The meaning of this is . . .* Power makes pronouncements and judges things as true or not true; it finds comfort in finality and self-assuredness.

Our drive for power makes us believe in and seek control, while our drive for meaning allows us to accept that we can never have control, only limited influence, and sometimes no influence at all. Through power, we interpret fear as a loss of control, a crisis that demands that we seek and gain more control. Through meaning, however, we see fears as fragile veils to be pushed aside in order to strengthen our relationships with positive Spiritual Principles.

With our drive for power at the helm, we resist personal change, for we see ourselves as unflawed and complete. Through our drive for power, we believe that it's the world and others who are wrong. But through our drive for meaning, we

see ourselves as incomplete, continually evolving, and needing ongoing monitoring and managing. Our spiritual side has no shame about being incomplete. It understands that incompleteness is an element of being human. But through our drive for power, we experience shame and embarrassment when our incompleteness is exposed.

## **Combining Our Drives into Spiritual Harmony**

Living with all three of these drives can be maddening at times, especially if we have not resolved the issue of which drive will lead us. An internal debate develops, and we may feel conflicted, confused, anxious, regretful, or disconnected from the life we are trying to put together. This internal debate needs to be resolved in order for us not to feel separate from ourselves.

The vast majority of the time, our drive for meaning needs to lead and guide our other two basic drives. But the other drives do get—and need—to express themselves. For example, when we're on vacation, we need to have fun and indulge our drive for pleasure, but we still need to stay within our value system. When you're playing football with your nephews, it's okay to let out that competitive drive for power so you can beat their behinds, but even during these times you need your drive for meaning to guide, direct, and temper your emotions. This keeps you from tackling them so hard that you injure them, or calling them nasty names when they score.

Spiritual harmony is not the mere coexistence of instinct and Spirit. Spiritual harmony is created when instinct and Spirit combine to operate as one interdependent unit, like the voices of a choir or a smoothly functioning sports team. We see beyond our personal desires; ethical power gets released; and we know and experience ourselves as enough. In the process, feelings of loneliness disappear.



Although our three basic drives often struggle against each other, our drive for meaning recognizes that meaning is often found within that very struggle, as well as within life's other challenges. Thus our drive for meaning encourages us to step into, rather than avoid, these struggles and challenges.

The tension among our three drives, “the committee inside our heads,” is not only normal, but also helpful, because it creates essential energy. We can discipline this energy and channel it through our drive for meaning—our spiritual side—where we combine it with positive Spiritual Principles in order to do the next right thing. In doing so, we can create ethical power and ethical pleasure, the highest forms of power and pleasure we humans can create on our own.

## Power Struggles vs. Integrity

As we human beings interact, we will always have issues and problems to work through. When these appear, we may instinctively feel afraid. How we deal with this fear is of great

importance. If we send it over to instinct, we will react from our drive for pleasure and try to distance ourselves from whatever we see as the cause of the fear. We may also react from our drive for power and become either defensive or aggressive.

If both people in a conflict react from instinct, then this collision of instincts creates a power struggle in which each side seeks to dominate the other. One person may submit to the other; resentments may get created; one person may win and the other may lose; both may walk away in an emotional stalemate. In each such case, however, no genuine solutions are created. Solutions are never the outcome of power struggles. There may be decisions and temporary accommodations, but no solutions. In power struggles, each side abandons Spirit for instinct, hoping to win a point.

If instead, however, each person applies positive Spiritual Principles to the conflict, an entirely different dynamic emerges. Each person acknowledges that they and their way of viewing the issue are part of the problem. Each is willing to alter or sacrifice part of their view to resolve the conflict. Each also monitors themselves and their conduct throughout this process. Both sides put aside self-importance and the desire for victory and control in favor of creating a workable solution that both find satisfactory. Instead of struggling against each other, both people struggle to resolve the conflict together. This enables them to stay connected throughout the conflict, and to bring out the best of each other.

### **SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES AND THE BRAIN**

The triune (Greek, meaning "three-in-one") brain theory was developed by Paul MacLean, M.D. (1913–2007). MacLean was chief neuroscientist at the Laboratory of Brain Evolution and Behavior

at the National Institute of Mental Health from 1971 to 1985. While elements of this theory—especially the “reptilian brain” concept—have been challenged by more recent research, I present it here as a model I’ve found useful in exploring the interplay of positive Spiritual Principles and negative spiritual principles.

According to this theory, our brains are made up of three unique structures. Each serves a different function, each sees and interacts with the world in a unique way, and each structure has its own special kind of intelligence. How we interact with and view others depends on which structure dominates at any given moment.

These three parts of MacLean’s model of the brain are called the *reptilian brain* or the *R-complex*, the *limbic system*, and the *neocortex*. Think of them as operating like three interconnected biological computers. These three structures correspond closely to our three drives for power, pleasure, and meaning, respectively. The descriptions that follow are not meant so much to reflect current brain science, but more as my creative interpretations of MacLean’s triune model to give you a way to think about your brain’s role in processing positive and negative principles.

### THE REPTILIAN BRAIN

We can see this as a metaphor for the part of the brain concerned with survival and safety—the brain of fight, flee, or freeze. This is the part of us that makes us jump, in what is called the startle response, when we hear a loud noise or sense some danger.

Think of this part of our brain as very territorial and preverbal, so it mainly monitors and responds to tones and body language. It is concerned primarily with issues of safety.

The reptilian brain can take over the rest of the brain when it senses danger, whether real or perceived—and it often interprets fear, sadness, or a sense of powerlessness as danger. The reptilian

brain is easily frustrated. It also holds the potential for violence. This part of the brain does not look into the future. It is designed to deal only with what is right in front of us. *It also does not learn from past mistakes.* A reptilian brain is not relational, only instinctual. It sees relationships only in terms of mating. And because morality only takes place in the context of relationships, this part of our brain is basically amoral. It rebels against surrendering to moral standards. Instead, it operates in terms of power, domination, and submission.

The reptilian brain views conscience as a burden. Conscience speaks of values and relationships, and this part of our brain wants little to do with either. But it is attracted to power, status, and prestige, and it likes to chase after them.

When we suffer trauma, our reptilian brain kicks in. We may then look for people and institutions that we feel are powerful and in control, in the hope that they will protect us. We may also seek chemicals or behaviors that help *us* feel in control and powerful. We may hoard things or cling to beliefs in order to feel safe and secure.

People who operate primarily from their reptilian brains often use their power to push others into their own reptilian brains—their anger, their fears, and their reactivity—making those people easier to manipulate or dismiss.

### THE LIMBIC SYSTEM

In this model, the limbic system is called the *paleomammalian brain*—and, sometimes, the *mammal brain*. It is our pleasure center, as well as the seat of our senses, our emotions, and our desires for relationships with others. If someone yells “Fire!” the reptilian part of our brain may get us out of the building, but our limbic system may play a part in making us run back in for the child, pet, or photo album still inside.

Our emotional memories are stored in our limbic system; the stronger the emotions attached to a memory, the more clearly we remember it. For example, most of us in the United States can remember with great detail and emotion where we were on the morning of September 11, 2001. How many other Tuesday mornings in September of that year do you remember?

Picture your limbic system as sitting between your reptilian brain and your neocortex, monitoring information coming from both the external world (via our senses) and our internal world. It continually compares the information from these two sources of information to see if they match up. If the information is sensed as congruent, it is taken in, sent up, and processed through the neocortex. If the information does not match up, however, your reptilian brain is put in charge to protect us from perceived dangers.

Like the reptilian brain, we can think of this part of us as being more attracted to sensations than to abstract ideas, such as principles. However, our limbic system can work with our neocortex, where abstract thought is processed much more easily than in our reptilian brain. This allows our passions and our values to be combined into a powerful force, thanks to the third part of the triune brain, the neocortex.

### **THE NEOCORTEX**

Our thinking brain, the neocortex, makes up about five-sixths of our brain. It surrounds our limbic and reptilian brains—and, with proper training, it has the power to overrule them.

The neocortex deals with concepts, symbols, and language. It looks for patterns and likes relationships. It also likes to plan and to solve problems; it's the logical part of our brain. Our neocortex seeks to answer the question *Why?* It's the part of the brain that seeks meaning.

There's a special part of the neocortex that looks into the future and imagines alternatives. This part of our neocortex, the *prefrontal lobe*, asks, *What if?* It also creates options, knowing that in the long run, the more options a person, group, or community has, the better.

The prefrontal lobe works to guide, and at times control, the impulsive, instinctual parts of our brain. It often struggles with our reptilian brain because values, morals, and impulse controls only cramp the reptilian brain's style.

Our reptilian brain and limbic system are deeply attracted to sensations. But because our neocortex is even more attracted to finding meaning, it plays the key role in our ability to live according to positive Spiritual Principles, and to translate those principles into action. But our neocortex also needs the energies and passions found within the limbic system and reptilian brain in order to create a practical spirituality and a dedication to values.

How does our story end? These three brains, living within one mind, need to develop into a harmonious team, with positive Spiritual Principles coaching and guiding them through the trials and fears that life often generates.

## Personal Value Systems

Each of us has our own value system—our personal collection of relationships with negative spiritual principles and positive Spiritual Principles. This value system is a living, fluid entity that guides our decisions and actions.

A value conflict occurs when our instinctual side and our spiritual side, represented by different parts of our brain, look at a situation and have differing views on what is important about it and what to do about it.

It is natural to regularly have these conflicts. What is most

important is how we resolve them and which side we fall on—instinct or Spirit.

Most of us have two value systems: a spoken value system, the one we tell to others and ourselves (“I believe in this,” “These are principles I live by”), and a behavioral value system, the one we actually live by—the one reflected in our decisions and actions. Our behavioral value system is the truest mirror we can look into, and it’s what I mean when I use the term *personal value system*. Our behavioral value system reveals both the negative spiritual principles and the positive Spiritual Principles we live by.

Any personal value system naturally works to preserve itself and keep its systems in balance—in a state of homeostasis. This tendency toward balance is amoral; once a balance is established, it produces tension or anxiety when something upsets that balance. This tension can be intense, but more often it is subtle.

This tension encourages us to return to our normal balance. In this way, all change is resisted by the system, and our personal value system can hinder any change we want or need to make.

For example, let’s imagine that you spend all your free time on the Internet and very little with your family. You want to change, so you tell yourself, *No Internet once I get home from work*. You do well for the first week. Then you think, *Well, I can go on the Net once the kids go to sleep*. A week after that, you tell yourself, *The children are busy watching their favorite show*, so you go on the computer just for a little bit. Slowly, over a period of two months, you revert to your old habits—your value system’s old normal. The status quo of the system has won out.

This is why discipline is one of the most important positive Spiritual Principles: we may need to exercise it for months, or even years, to change an ingrained system of thought and action and to become the person we want to be.



PART II

# LIVING THE PRINCIPLES





# SPIRITUAL GROWTH ON A CONTINUUM

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## 41 Pairs of Spiritual Principles

EACH POSITIVE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE has its negative counterpart. Each pair is part of a continuum, with the negative spiritual principles at one end. Interestingly, however, each continuum has no positive endpoint, because positive Spiritual Principles are boundless, continuing on forever.

We find and create our moral compass as we move further in the direction of positive Spiritual Principles and lessen our dependence on (and corruption by) negative spiritual principles. Free will in the form of choices, exercised through action, moves us along these continua. Taken together, these continua create a map of our moral and spiritual journey.

The more we organize our lives around negative spiritual principles, the more fear and confusion they create, the more they will come to possess us, and the more likely we are to be tied to the material world and focused on possessing others and things. When we practice and repeat negative spiritual principles, they eventually harden and become character defects.

The beauty of all character defects, however, is that at the bottom of each is a door. If opened, this door will lead us back

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CRAIG M. NAKKEN, MSW, LCSW, LMFT is a family therapist, author, international lecturer, and trainer who specializes in recovery from addictions. Craig began his counseling career in 1972 at Pharm House in Minneapolis, where he worked with addicts who came in off the street. He served as Pharm House's director of outpatient treatment services from 1975 to 1977.

Craig was a senior counselor at Family Renewal Center in Minneapolis from 1977 to 1983, then a counselor in private practice until 1986, when he joined the Family Therapy Institute in St. Paul. Craig served as vice president at Family Therapy Institute until 1994. Since 1995, he has been in private practice in St. Paul.

Craig received his master's degree in social work from the University of Minnesota in 1985. He has trained counselors as an instructor at the Florida State Summer School on Addiction in Jacksonville, Florida (1989–2005), and at the Rutgers Summer School of Alcohol Studies in New Brunswick, New Jersey (1986–present).

Craig shares his knowledge and his message of hope in his books and talks. His first book, *The Addictive Personality: Roots, Rituals & Recovery*, was published in 1988 and is now in its second edition, with more than 500,000 copies in print. In 2000, Craig authored *Reclaim Your Family from Addiction: How Couples and Families Recover Love and Meaning*, a book and a set of workbooks that help families recover from the illness of addiction.

Craig has also created two DVDs, *Reclaim Your Family from Addiction* and *A Social Worker's Perspective on the Twelve Steps*, as well as workbooks for couples and families to help them in their healing. (All of these are available through Hazelden Foundation at [hazelden.org](http://hazelden.org).)

Craig's teaching and training have taken him to Norway, China, Denmark, Greece, Sweden, Australia, Iceland, Singapore, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Panama, and Russia, as well as across the United States. He presented at the first-ever Conference on Addictions in Beijing, China, in 2002; at the All Asian Conference on Addictions in Singapore in 2004; and at the World Forum Against Drugs in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2008.

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**Hazelden**, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

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Through published works, Hazelden extends the reach of hope, encouragement, help, and support to individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction and related issues.

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**F**or those of us in recovery, finding our moral and spiritual footing can be a struggle. The pursuit of drugs and alcohol has long driven our choices and actions, leaving the line between right and wrong blurred in the wake of addiction.

In *Finding Your Moral Compass*, best-selling author Craig Nakken gives readers—whether in recovery or simply looking for guidance—a model and the tools needed to make life decisions in the pursuit of good. He offers forty-one universally accepted principles, paired as positive and negative counterparts, that guide behavior. He then inspires us with one fundamental challenge: to take responsibility for being a force for good by applying these principles in our daily lives. He encourages us to show empathy, to be of service to others, and to choose to stop being an agent of harm.

When Nakken, a recovering addict, became clean and sober, he faced the “evil” inside himself. It was then that he found his own moral compass and decided to take responsibility for his actions using the Twelve Steps as his guide. He has taught hundreds in recovery to live by the principles of good, one day at a time.

Cover design: David Gilbert



**Craig Nakken** is the author of several Hazelden titles, including the perennial best seller *The Addictive Personality*. A popular public speaker and a highly respected private practice counselor, he has spent years working on the front lines in a number of treatment facilities.

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