



THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE
IN OUR PROCESS OF
GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION



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It is important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves. . . . It is important to tell our secrets too because it makes it easier that way to see where we have been in our lives and where we are going.

— Frederick Buechner

Unlike long-held assumptions in the church today, everyday anxieties and fears are necessary elements for the healthy development of a person's real self, although the process of growth and transformation is not always easy to recognize and manage. Without those anxieties and fears, people would not easily rediscover their real personality. And this is one of the reasons why improving our self-knowledge and self-understanding—even in our own secret stories of shame, inadequacy, and pain—is of great significance.

A well-meaning old friend once told me: "People do not need pain to learn, but such pain can sometimes make them reflect on who they really are. We will always experience pain and anxieties. It is part of being human in the present world. Even Christ faced this reality." How these words have impacted me deeply! I spent part of my elementary school years in a private Christian school, but my parents later enrolled me in a public school. In the process, my family moved around a couple of times. Despite the stress of a house move, my anxieties during my childhood were low. I remember my classmates used to associate my success in school in part to the fact that I had a very supportive family. Although I did not have many fears when I was a child, I used to have a particular fear—one of not being able to help people in need. This fear of not being helpful to someone was linked to an interesting situation that happened to me when I was seven years old. A tired and thirsty police officer who was walking by our house asked me for a glass of cold water. I told my mother about it. I heard her saying, "Not now,"

so I repeated those words to the police officer. A couple of seconds later my mother came with the cold glass of water, but regrettably, the police officer had left the house by that time. I genuinely felt ashamed when he departed because I wanted to help him but failed to do so. I should have paid more attention to what my mother really said. One day, while retelling this same episode, I realized how this experience allowed me to develop more empathy for people's needs and suffering.

As a pastor's son, I did not experience my teenage years in the same way my classmates did. During secondary school, for example, I observed firsthand how many of my classmates started struggling with vices, addictions, and dysfunctional relationships. While some of them came from broken families, I lived with both parents and two siblings. While others did not always have the opportunity to have breakfast, my mother used to prepare my favorite meal for me in the mornings—a toasted vegetarian sandwich with black coffee. While some classmates had to leave school because they could not afford the basic costs of their education, my parents sacrificed themselves through hard work in order that I could continue studying. These privileges, in part, created a sort of alienation between my classmates and me. Regrettably, things got more complicated after finishing high school.

After a tedious process, I was admitted to one of the four major public institutions of higher education in my country. Despite being a third-generation university student and having received long-standing support from my

parents, my university years were challenging and full of trials. For instance, the department in which I was enrolled was known as one of the places in the university with several students who had a left-wing and anti-religious mindset—students who tended to respond very critically both to the strong influence of the established church and the political status quo. Being a Protestant Christian among a large group of young adults where many opposed the Christian faith; or instead, tended to zealously embrace the state religion with low tolerance for religious diversity, was a counter-cultural and taxing task. I think this made several of my classmates and me unable to relate to each other easily. I remember one particular occasion during my class in humanities and philosophy when the professor gave a three-hour lecture about the influence of Christianity upon literature and politics in Latin-American societies —It stirred up a huge controversy. By the end of the class, only five out of forty students thought faith still mattered in our culture. Such situations affected both the overall group dynamics and our personal relationships. Being part of the religious minority was hard, yet I recognized it was also an opportunity to depend more on God. After a while, the library became a central place in my life. All the time I spent with some close friends at the library allowed me to focus on and achieve my goals. But in general, I was stressed out throughout all those years of trials and errors. Contrary to what I had thought, my deep sorrow did not happen while I was feeling temporarily overwhelmed by circumstances. Instead, it happened when I realized I must have been more aware of my inward transformation during those trials and errors.

Just a couple of weeks before finishing my undergraduate studies, a close friend and I discussed our need to accept the bitter truth: Low self-awareness can make us forget the importance—among other things—of accepting that there are things we cannot change, resting more in God, lamenting when things do not work, grieving our life's losses, and making more commitment to the process of change. I had spent my life focusing merely on my own sense of personal fulfillment without paying more attention to my inward and spiritual transformation. What I did not understand before was that such a lack of attention was also a significant source of my own struggles. Like offering a prayer without faith, I wanted the benefits of growth and transformation—but without paying the cost of it! ¡Ay Caramba! (Exclamatory phrase used in Spanish to denote surprise).

Two years after having graduated from university, I decided to read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for the second time since I had found this book very captivating when I first read it. The protagonist of the short story—Gregor Samsa—wakes up one day

in his bed to find himself transformed into a vermin. One of the interesting aspects of this story is that before his transformation, Gregor (like me) was living a normal life with an everyday routine. The narrative does not tell us why Gregor's transformation took place. The truth is that there are not many advantages of becoming a vermin in the real world; however, for Gregor, it seems that maturing psychologically was the benefit of his transformation despite his need to reformulate the relationship between his new body and mind. One key thing I learned from reading *Metamorphosis* this second time was that there is no such thing as a painless transformation. Instead, transformation usually comes at a high cost. By this time I was old enough to know that my own vulnerabilities and struggles were indeed opportunities to grow and develop a healthy self. This process of self-awareness played a crucial part of who I am today. In the end, I learned that the key to a healthy self is not about avoiding problems and risky situations, but instead creatively changing my attitudes towards those situations. This

new pattern allowed me to gain insight, to be a more authentic person, and to better embrace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the process of my inward transformation.

In closing, I would like to echo James F. Masterson's words in *The Search for the Real Self: Unmasking the Personality Disorders of our Age*: "The birthright of the real self is creativity: the ability to invent, to perceive old patterns in new relationships, or to rearrange old patterns in new ways. Everyone with a healthy real self has the potential for leading a creative life and dealing with problems and challenges in innovative ways" (Free Press Collier Macmillan, 1990, 208). When Masterson suggests that through creativity we can deal with our problems, he means that in order to discover our real self, we should do "something creative" with our old life patterns. The avoidance of dealing with our own everyday fears might modify our good patterns, damaging part of our true self. It is in the process of rediscovering our real self that we would be able to face our growing edges correctly. All of this requires a high level of self-awareness and self-understanding. What I learned the hard way was indeed simple: In the same way that enough pressure and heat can turn cheap forms of carbon into diamonds, everyday anxieties and fears test our personality in order that our real self can be discovered. Not all kinds and levels of anxiety, fear, and pain are helpful. But the pain one experiences during a process of transformation might be telling us that we are indeed growing and maturing. Although suffering will come when one experiences the pain of being transformed, I believe this is a good suffering. Nevertheless, when one suffers because we dismiss self-knowledge and ignore the Holy Spirit's transformative work on us, we will definitely experience the true pain. ✓

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