Salvation workout: How I found the virtues

by Paula Huston in the April 8, 2008 issue

Lately I've been getting invitations to speak to youth about the virtues, so I've been trying to recall my own early training on the subject. I grew up in a Lutheran church, and much of who I am can be traced back to those second- and third-generation Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and German immigrants who left the Midwest for the orange groves and sunshine of Southern California. They were Christians who knew how to work, and they believed in using their skills to help people in need.

By the time I was in junior high, I was acting as a "big sister" to a shy and scrawny fourth-grader with drug addicts for parents. When I was in high school, our Luther League took Christmas presents to the projects, food to orphanages in Tijuana and hootenannies to folk-song-deprived rest homes. After the pastor urged me to train for a medical program in Honduras, I spent the summer giving inoculations in a village called Guinope.

What I learned about the virtues, I learned through doing, and through gleaning what it was people admired in fellow parishioners. In terms of any formal training on the subject, however, I remember almost nothing beyond a persistent emphasis on the importance of courage—particularly (no surprise in a congregation that annually celebrated Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the Castle Church door), the courage to resist those who would intervene in one's personal relationship with God.

Of course, we memorized the Ten Commandments and their meanings, but we understood them as historical no-no's, not especially applicable to young persons of the 1960s. We certainly did not look at the commandments in terms of the virtues they imply or in terms of how virtue builds Christian character. Though this ringing silence on the subject would have been typically Lutheran—as Luther saw it, the works of humankind appear attractive and good, but they are likely to be mortal sins—I suspect that my Sunday school teachers weren't holding back out of any Reformation-based fear of "works righteousness." Rather, they were buoyed by the

postwar surge of hope about human beings and their potential for good. Hitler and his legions had just been trampled; technology was conquering hunger and suffering; mass movements were fighting for and winning universal civil rights. There was work to be done, lots of it, and a formal study of the virtues could seem, during this euphoric, world-changing moment in history, a time-wasting enterprise or even a pious form of self-indulgence.

One night at a Luther League meeting we veered perilously close to the subject of the virtues in a session on Joseph Fletcher's situational ethics. Building on Paul Tillich's teaching that "the law of love is the ultimate law," Fletcher cited Augustine's invitation to "love and do what you will." This was heady stuff, and far more attractive than the dry thou-shalt-nots we'd studied in confirmation class. (What we were too young and full of ourselves to recognize was that Fletcher presupposed that one can't truly love unless one is virtuous.)

I liked this concept of loving my way through life, though I had to admit it was confusing. How was I supposed to apply it to, for example, what went on in the backseat of my boyfriend's Ford Fairlane? When I raised a tentative hand in hopes of finding out, I was told that situational ethics works because when we are saved by Christ we're also transformed—we become new creatures. What we do after this pivotal moment should be OK as long as we do it sincerely and lovingly.

Fortified by these cheerful thoughts, I bounded off into an early marriage, then young motherhood. However, though I couldn't admit it to myself or anyone else, being an adult was a lot tougher than I'd expected. Most of the time I was anxious or frustrated or filled with self-pity. And now that I was beyond the age of high school idealism, church didn't seem to help much anymore. I began to have bitterly skeptical thoughts about God. Then I met someone who seemed to understand all this. Falling back on what I thought I'd learned from situational ethics, I entered into a passionate affair that destroyed my marriage.

For some years afterward I lived in the bottom of a dark well—dark because the Lord wasn't in it, or at least I had no sense of his presence there. Eventually I came to see why. Mortal sin, as the Catholics call it, is mortal because it kills our relationship with God. The farther we travel along the road of self-pleasing, the farther from God we go. Though I'd never associated my hardening agnosticism with my failure to keep the commandment against adultery, the two were inextricably linked.

This desperate, lonely experience taught me something I needed to learn: the wages of sin are real. I saw that I was neither wise nor inherently good after all, despite being baptized and confirmed, and that I was perfectly capable of sinning on a spectacular level. This would not have been news to Luther or Augustine, but it is nevertheless news that can throw us into despair if we don't cling to God's offer of forgiveness, redemption and grace.

Eventually I remarried and went back to college, where I took a course on the history of ethics. I read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, and for the first time I heard about virtue and its relationship to character and about character's relationship to civil society. Despite the clear differences between the classical pagan and classical Christian perspectives, in neither case is it enough for humans to do what comes naturally. Instead humans become what they are meant to be through a slow, laborious process, and the only way to progress is to overcome what impedes moral and spiritual vision.

The biggest obstacle to clarity, according to Plato, is unrestrained passion and desire. Augustine's diagnosis is much the same: our tendency to devote ourselves to lesser gods such as ambition, sex, food or money—our human proclivity toward what he calls "disordered loves"—prevents our seeing straight. Socrates believed that to clear the vision we must first get to know ourselves, then take measures that foster change. Early Christianity, taking to heart Paul's injunction to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," followed a similar path. The austere and sometimes harsh disciplines adopted by third- and fourth-century desert dwellers were not for the most part forms of exotic masochism, as moderns are prone to think, but instead meant to help refocus the trajectory of their lives. The aim was "purity of heart," or a simple, childlike openness to God and others that was rooted in rocklike faith.

The notion that we have a major part to play in our own transformation was a tenet of Christian belief. There is a limit to what we can do with ourselves on our own (Pelagius gave too much of the job to us and not enough to God, according to the fifth-century Council of Carthage that declared him heretical), but in general humans are called to actively participate in the mysterious enterprise of being changed by way of grace into Christlike beings. We do this, according to the pre-Reformation church, by intentionally adopting spiritual disciplines and practices that force a confrontation with entrenched self-centeredness.

About the time I took the course in ethics I was introduced to the work of Dallas Willard, who has done much to reinterest Protestants in the preparation of the self for transformation. Willard's book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* gave me the impetus to try out some of the methods Christians once used in order to get to know themselves. I found that these experiments—silence, solitude, fasting—quickly revealed aspects of my character I'd conveniently overlooked.

It seemed that I was not brave or magnanimous or prudent or even honest after all. I worked too hard, talked too much, slept too few hours, ate more than I needed, competed in an outsized way, and tried to manage the affairs of those around me. This nervous zigzaggery through life didn't leave much time or energy for loving God with all my heart and soul and mind or my neighbor as myself.

Then I was invited to visit a monastery of Camaldolese Benedictine monks who live by the Rule of St. Benedict and the Brief Rule of St. Romuald, a tenth-century Italian known as the "father of reasonable hermits." The Camaldolese cherish a threefold charism: golden silence, the privilege of love or community, and martyrdom or evangelization. For the first time I was among people who were living out on a daily basis what Willard talked about in his book. It quickly became apparent that the monks were like any other people except that they had made deliberate choices about what they focused on and how they structured their lives—and this made all the difference.

I made many retreats to the hermitage over the next 15 years. Along the way I became a Catholic and then an oblate of the community—a lay member who promises to, as much as possible, make use of the same framework for life that the monks do: the Rule, frequent Eucharist, daily devotions, the incorporation of silence. The monks became exemplars for me, concrete instances of what can happen when people become single-pointed about God.

They also provided an intriguing study in communal relationships. Benedict was convinced that it is community life that forms us, and the contemporary Camaldolese still insist that the strongest impetus for change is to be found in the friction generated by living in close proximity. This, I thought, was hopeful news for me, for though the practices of silence and solitude had helped foster a new closeness and intensity in my relationship with God, I was still failing miserably when it came to my dealings with community.

For one thing, I was still doing a lot of resenting. I was prickly about people's demands on "my time," especially when they interrupted silence or prayer, and I was bugged by what seemed to be widespread spiritual sloppiness in folks who considered themselves religious. I was flirting with the worst kind of pride—pious pride—and I was certainly not loving others in the way the monks loved them or in the way Christ tells us we must if we are serious about following him.

How to become stronger, more inclined to do the loving, courageous, honest thing rather than the self-serving one? How to become less driven by ambition, more in tune with others, less arrogant? Once again, I found that early Christianity provides a beautifully worked-out, eminently sane approach to the problem of how to grow up morally and spiritually. From the classical world, early Christians borrowed and transformed the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. The following centuries of monastic experimentation gave them deep insights into humility, and into the great theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. They understood the Gospels to be saying that we are meant for great things—meant to live in imitation of Christ himself.

At the same time we are held back by what often amounts to nothing more than a buzzing horde of small, persistent habits. We are blocked by the ways we've gotten used to thinking about life. We are stifled in our growth by idiosyncratic behavior patterns that preclude the expansion of the heart. And these become our points of vulnerability to temptation and sin.

Reading about the cardinal and theological virtues led me to the rueful realization that they have no power to foster change unless they are actually practiced. And trying to practice the virtues revealed even more about the depth of my propensity to live crosswise to God and other people. It seemed plain to me that the more I was forced to face up to this—my stubborn tendency to center everything on the self—the more likely it was that God could soften my heart. It was hard to imagine me or anyone else making an honest effort to become just, for example, without becoming humbler in the process.

Why did it take me so long to find the virtues? I think it was because we live in a society no longer capable of giving them a home. Western culture has been deeply affected by the 19th-century Romantic belief that we are born naturally good and are ruined by society-inflicted moralizing. Freud helped convince us that "training up a child in the way he should go" means raising repressed, conventional automatons

instead of vibrant, creative individuals. And the social revolution of the 1960s, with its focus on eliminating moral hang-ups in service of self-expression, increased our aversion to the notion of moral exemplars.

Liberation certainly has had its benefits. The danger of moral scrupulosity has been pretty much eradicated. But we have also been walled off from the great adventure that was once Christianity—the deep struggle that comes with trying to be more like Christ who saved us. This is a struggle that young people are almost desperately longing to enter, whether or not they can put a name to their urge to be better.

In order to recapture the robust sense of moral purpose that once characterized the Christian way, we must discard contemporary notions about self-fulfillment. We must also take a hard look at our own particular church culture: Are we professing to believe in original sin but really operating on romantic notions about inherent goodness? Do we secretly believe that it’s more important to be “ourselves” than to imitate Christ? Do we automatically associate an education in the virtues with repressive authoritarianism?

When Christ promised that “you will know the truth and the truth shall set you free,” he was referring in part to the painful liberation—and attendant opportunity—that comes from grasping the truth about ourselves and then attempting, with the help of the God who loves us, to do something about it.