

...come unto me, hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you... Isaiah 55:3

Covenant

LESSON XI: A Search for God: Spiritual Growth In Small Groups *by Herbert Bruce Puryear*

Background

In 1931, a small group of people gathered around Edgar Cayce to seek a series of readings for spiritual development. To their surprise the source of the readings directed the participants in the group to apply in their everyday lives the information that was given, and then to return with a report on their personal experiences regarding these applications. Every member was to make a contribution and the source indicated that the work would be less universally applicable if any one of them failed to contribute.

Out of this project came a series of 131 readings and two books, based both upon these readings and upon the group's experience in applying their teachings. In looking at the work of that first group retrospectively, the readings indicated that there was little, if any, information available to the seeking student that was as well prepared as these books. It was suggested that *A Search for God*, Book I and Book II, might become textbooks for coming generations. Today over 700 groups of varying numbers meet regularly in every state, in nine Canadian provinces and in 22 foreign countries.

Why Work in a Group?

A favorite story is one about a long-time group member whose friend called on him at his home on the night he had gone out to his study group meeting. The member's young daughter answered the door. When the friend asked, "Is your father here?" she replied in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "No, he has gone to search for God." At this point, the child reported later, a most extraordinary expression came over the face of the caller. We may sympathize with the surprise of the visitor; however, on another level, isn't this the quest which all of us should be about?

After all, if God is Love, we may redefine our "search for God" as "learning how to love." The ultimate agenda of all humankind is to *live* the great commandments—to love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves. Learning how to love is the top priority for every soul.

It has been said, "He travels fastest who travels alone." This may be true in many fields of human endeavor; however, when the goal is learning how to love, it follows that such can be done only in relationship with others.

There are a number of excellent reasons for the effectiveness of work in small groups. One is *motivational*. All of us may discover when we start on a new activity that our consistency, per-

sistency, and interest are strengthened and enhanced by the encouragement, support, and interest of others involved in the same activity. When our interest flags, their encouragement spurs us on; and, in turn, when their motivation is low, we can encourage them.

Another reason for work in a group is the *stability* and *balance* such a group may bring to our thoughts and actions. We may, at times, become overenthusiastic about a new book or a new activity or a new experience. When we are dealing with a very complex area of study, in sharing with others we may see the wisdom of a more moderate and balanced attitude.

As we begin to study and reflect upon the difficult concepts involved in spiritual unfoldment, we may find that our own way of reading or thinking is quite idiosyncratic. If we share our reflections with others, we discover that there are ways to view certain issues other than our own initial response. As we listen to another person's perspective, we grow in the ability not only to appreciate the point of view of others but also to establish a more modest evaluation of our own ideas. We gain both as we listen and also as we give of ourselves to others. In sharing the burdens we carry, they grow lighter and we find ourselves strengthened by the response and encouragement of the group, some of whom may have dealt effectively with similar situations.

As soon as we read something of a spiritual nature there can develop a discrepancy between what we *know* and what we are able or willing to *apply*. If this discrepancy grows, a serious condition of *spiritual inflation* may develop. We may have a dream that we were a high priestess in the healing temples of prehistoric Egypt or we may receive a psychic reading in which we are told that we are an old soul now being prepared for a great work and that this will be our last incarnation. A group may mellow us through these critical situations into a greater *application* of spiritual principles in our daily lives so that we don't lose sight of our purpose.

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The group may help us with a *sense of humor* about ourselves. In a work so serious as soul development, we need to learn not to take ourselves too seriously. The group may help us see that some experiences, which appear so great or so tragic, can be occasions to laugh at ourselves when we view them from a different perspective.

A most important way in which the group enhances growth is through mutual *prayer support*. In groups who not only meet and pray together once a week but also pray for each other daily, there is given an energy, support, and protection that cannot even be properly evaluated in ordinary terms.

Learning in Small Groups

The readings say that we learn by comparison. This process is especially enhanced in the sharing of viewpoints and experiences in a small group. As we listen to another, it is not that we should agree or disagree or try to discover who is "right," but rather, that as we genuinely permit ourselves a different perspective as offered by another person, there may be a quickening to growth within ourselves.

There have been several developments that have pointed to the effectiveness of small group work. With the rise of interest in psychoanalysis, great emphasis was placed on the psychotherapist/patient relationship, in which it was thought that a highly trained professional was necessary for individual growth. However, this was very expensive in time and money and in many situations where there was a shortage of therapists, a compromise was made in which one therapist would meet with several patients. To the surprise of the profession it was discovered that many people were helped more in such groups than in individual therapy. Then it was discovered that many times it was not even necessary for the professional to be present for the work of the group to be effective. Personal growth may be more enhanced by the dynamics of interaction in a peer group than in the more traditional therapist/patient model. Thus work in small groups became for many the “treatment of choice” rather than an economic compromise.

During the same period, another discovery was being made. It was found that *content* was easily learned when there was no *emotional* resistance to it. Then it was discovered that small peer groups were most effective in dealing with emotional resistances to learning.

Although the A.R.E. Study Group is neither a therapy group nor an academic learning group, these principles about the effectiveness of the small group to enhance growth are very relevant.

Processes

Although we call them *study groups*, they are not focused on study for intellectual growth per se. They might better be called groups for the study, meditation, and application of learning how to love.

There are actually three major aspects of growth with which the group deals. One is study and reflection upon the content of the lesson itself. This provides an understanding of spiritual law, of universal law, and of basic premises from which to reason. Second is meditation, which is quickened and focused by the use of an affirmation related to the spiritual laws or premises given in the lesson. Third is the setting of the intent to make the information more applicable, by designing a *discipline*, which may be agreed upon by the group or selected personally by each individual. This is a statement and a commitment to make the insights gained applicable in a very specific way in the personal life of the individual during the ensuing week.

As an example of this growth process, Lesson 1 of *A Search for God* is entitled “Cooperation.” Here we learn that cooperation involves an attitude about our relationship to universal law (or to God). We come to understand the need to place ourselves in accordance with universal principles. In the meditation, an affirmation is used to awaken the spirit and a desire to live in accord with the law. As we dwell upon this in our meditations with the imaginative forces of the mind, we may quicken a true and authentic motivation to be more cooperative. Then we may take a new spirit into our relationship with others.

We may not be able to love a certain person, but we may discover that we can be more cooperative. That is Lesson 1. Later, as we study “Patience” (Lesson 7), we discover that we can develop more patience with that person. By the time we reach “Love” (Lesson 12), our attitude toward that relationship has changed so much that we discover we can indeed love that person.

Procedures

Typically, a group meets once a week in the home of a member of the group. A group optimally consists of six to ten members. The first few minutes may be used to exchange greetings and then discuss the business that the group may be conducting as a project. Then there may be a sharing of more personal experiences, such as dreams or meditation experiences. This should take no longer than half an hour. Then for an hour the group focuses on reading and discussing the *A Search for God* text. The group may read the whole chapter and then return to the beginning and discuss the text, paragraph by paragraph. A month or longer may be spent on each chapter.

The purpose of discussing each chapter and paragraph is for clarification and perspective, not to come to some agreement about what is the right or wrong meaning. If a problem arises as to right or wrong regarding a certain issue, it shows the group has lost sight of the purpose of the discussion.

At the end of the hour, the group may take a break before beginning the meditation and prayer period. Meditation may consist of an extended period of quiet during which each member of the group focuses silently on the affirmation related to the chapter being studied. Following this period of attunement, it is appropriate for the group to pray in turn for one another and then for those individuals about whom the group is especially concerned.

Getting Started

There are several ways in which study groups may be joined. The Study Group Department at Virginia Beach forwards requests to the appropriate Regional Study Group Coordinator. These coordinators keep lists of active study groups throughout your Region, and they will connect you with a group in your area. If you are interested in starting your own group, the coordinator will provide you with the materials to guide you through this simple process. Those who are unable to attend a group may want to try out one of the Internet study groups.

Every year there are hundreds of A.R.E.-sponsored lectures and workshops across the country, at which there is always information available about study group activity in that area. By attending one of these programs, the interested individual may make contacts, get information, and purchase books related to the Study Group program. If there are several people who are interested in forming a group, it may be possible for them to invite an experienced person to visit with them for a few sessions to help them get started. However, many effective groups have had their beginning with two or three interested people getting together, acquiring the Study Group material, and beginning on their own.

Composition of the Group

Individuals will be most comfortable in the group if they are familiar with and interested in the Edgar Cayce story. This is not a requirement, but it provides some foundation in common upon which to build together. The individual members of the group may be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, non-denominational, or seekers who are non-professing in any religion. Some may be students of comparative religions. Others may have been challenged by the implications of per-

sonal experiences or of scientific research about ESP. The group may be enriched rather than divided by such diverse backgrounds.

Remember, the spirit of the group is *learning how to love* and the principle is *learning by comparison* rather than finding out who has the right answer. All who are seekers will find that *the true spirit* of their own respective backgrounds and the spirit of the information being studied are compatible. The information is universal in nature.

Some who come are disappointed when they find the group failing to be in full agreement with their own viewpoints. Or, they find the group failing to measure up to their expectations in terms of some criterion of social, financial, or intellectual status. Such a response misses the point of the group, because these criteria fail to reflect the essential purpose of the group, which owes its oneness to shared *ideals*, not similar *ideas*.

In every group there is always one difficult, not to say impossible, person! Not everyone in the group is in agreement on who this impossible person is. To be sure, each of us as an individual may be that impossible person to some member of the group. Rather than being a weakness of group work, this gets us close to the very heart of the purpose of such groups. As we seek to grow, praying together weekly and praying for each other daily, and as we grow personally in all of the dimensions with which the lessons deal, we come in time truly to love and appreciate that person with whom we initially were having the most difficulty.

In the process of learning how to love this difficult person in the group, we find the group has been a laboratory in which we have experimented and learned about relationships. We discover these lessons have generalized into our lives in such a way that we are now dealing more effectively with other “difficult” people, in our families, on our jobs, and in other relationships.

The major theme of interest that draws people together in such groups may be the realization that there is more to us and to the meaning of life than we see in our present physical manifestations and circumstances. This awareness sometimes comes to people through the study of an array of subjects. Thus, it may be tempting, in beginning group work, to try to entertain the respective interests of each member of the group. There may even be some debate over the direction and format of the group. There is, of course, a place for considering any of these topics of interest.

However, there is *also* a time and place for working very specifically with the *A Search for God* material. In working deeply with this material, a surprising result may be found. Such work may come to constitute a *hub* around which *all* of these other areas of interest may both be more deeply understood and be made more applicable in each individual’s daily life.

The Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit

The basic premise of the Search for God group, growing as it has out of the psychic work of Edgar Cayce, is that it is the *fruits* of the spirit which are to be sought and, with the growth of such, we have the optimum context in which the *gifts* of the spirit may manifest. As we develop fruits of patience, long-suffering, kindness, and brotherly love, we build a foundation for the appropriate expression of prophecy, healing, and other gifts. If the *expression* of these gifts

precedes the development of the fruits, there may be imbalances, distortions, and ego involvements that lead to the manifestation of just the opposite of what is promised. (The student of this should make a very thorough study of I Corinthians 12 and 13.)

There will develop a new sense of direction in life, a sense of purpose guided by a clear commitment to ideals.

In every deeply spiritual teaching, it is understood that character development should precede psychic development. Groups such as these will attract some who already have a measure of psychic development. In the process of growth and attunement, others will develop psychic abilities.

It may be tempting for the group to focus upon such individuals and to divert their attention away from the lessons. Such a diversion may have the result of being detrimental not only to the group but also to the individual concerned as well. If such a group remains focused on the lessons, it provides the best possible environment for the individual with such experiences to grow. However, by focusing on that individual's abilities, the needed growth opportunity for that individual, as well as the supporting community that would make continued growth possible, might be lost.

Promises

In our growth in the group we will find that we have a new and broader hope in the meaningfulness of life. This, in turn, leads to renewed motivation and the consequent energy that accompanies motivation. There will develop a new sense of direction in life, a sense of purpose guided by a clear commitment to ideals.

A growing sense of ideals and purposes clarifies the decisions that we must make in both the major and the everyday dimensions of our lives. As we seek to grow, we discover that that which stands in the way is ourselves. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and they are us." As we come to a growing awareness of the many dimensions of our own being, we gain both a deeper acceptance of our weaknesses and a more humble and thankful appreciation of our strengths. We find that the weaknesses and shortcomings we have may be, with the thrust of a new spirit, turned into strengths.

As we come to understand spiritual laws through our study of the lessons, grow in attunement to the spirit through meditation, and experience improved relationships with others through daily application, we come to see that beyond all of this is the living force, the Spirit, acting in our lives and bringing about a transformation which no ego-oriented self-improvement program could ever even begin to offer.