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DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness  
Spiritual Formation



**SESSION 2**

Who Needs Transformation?

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# Who Needs Transformation?

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**The Human Predicament**

**Longing for the Light**

**The Sound of Crashing Idols**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand the human predicament of being unholy and unhappy, lost yet longing for the Light
- describe some of the signs of the longing and searching heart as expressed in some contemporary modern and postmodern religious and secular ideologies
- own your own sense of alienation and longing in the past and present
- write an incisive two-minute paper on the human need for transformation
- apply your learning to a ministry setting by identifying fruitful preaching resources from the learning activities of this session

# Who Needs Transformation?

## INTRODUCTION



### JUST FOR FUN: POP QUIZ

Which of the following is the most reproduced piece of art in the last 20 years?

- A. Mona Lisa
- B. Warhol's Last Supper
- C. Beatle's poster
- D. The Scream

Answer: *The Scream*.

Edvard Munch of Norway painted *The Scream* in 1893. At its first exhibit in Berlin, the critics found it uncivilized, barbaric, insane, and even subhuman. The critics and the public drove *The Scream* into abandoned obscurity. It was out of joint with the times.

It is not out of joint with our times. In recent years that painting has decorated more T-shirts, posters, note pads, calendars, night-lights, beer bottles, mouse pads, and coffee mugs than any other piece of art. Michael Parke-Taylor, the curator of the gallery in Toronto that houses a major Munch exhibit, claims that *The Scream* stands as the "image of modern man—totally stressed out and angst-ridden."

## THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT



### NOTES

Something has gone wrong with the human enterprise. Haunted by emptiness and meaninglessness, harassed by guilt and remorse, dogged by shame and depression, we stumble painfully through the darkness. Our writers and filmmakers say it—and we all know about it from experience. Consider the following statements:

We are aliens from our home. . . Modern man is no longer merely an exile. He has forgotten his home and has no hope of a promised land (British theologian, Michael Green, *New Life, New Lifestyle* [Multnomah, 1984], 17).

Nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable . . . Death awaits these things like a cement floor awaits a dropping light bulb (novelist Saul Bellow, *Herzog* [Viking], 289-90).

Jesus wouldn't want me for a sunbeam (rock star, Curt Cobain, shortly before he killed himself).

How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses? (Stanley Kunitz, poet, "The Layers" [W.W. Norton], 2000).

I live in the desert like a pelican, in a ruin like a screech owl, I stay awake, lamenting like a lone bird on a roof (Ps. 102:6-7, JB).

Humanity without God is a seed upon the wind . . . In the grip of [the wind] . . . what is a seed—no more than a particle of dust, a nameless nothing (Howard Thurman, clergyman, *Reflecting God* [Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2000], 11).

I'm for anything that will get you through the night, be it prayer, pills, or a bottle of Jack Daniels (Frank Sinatra, deceased singer, *Reflecting God*, 14).

Life's a long headache in a noisy street (Allen Ginsburg, poet, *Howl*).

Do people in your life express these kinds of sentiments? How do these views affect the way they live their lives? In what ways do you share these views?

## LONGING FOR THE LIGHT



### NOTES

“I must break through this deadness . . . at times this . . . crushes the very soul.” Fridtjof Nansen, Norwegian explorer, penned these words in his ship’s log. Many expeditions to reach the North Pole by sea had ended with ice-bound ships and frozen sailors, but Nansen had studied the ocean currents. He believed the best thing to do was trust the current of the Arctic Ocean. Therefore, in the summer of 1893, he set his ship, the *Fram*, adrift in the ocean current.

His goal was to drift to the Pole and beyond it, coming out on the other side into the sun sparkled Pacific. But soon the *Fram* was locked into frozen solidarity with millions of acres of ice in the polar ice cap. He sat there all winter. Then came a short spring and summer that thawed almost nothing. Winter found him with deck, riggings, and rudder frozen in uselessness. In the middle of that second dark Arctic winter he wrote: “Life seems as dark as the winter night outside; there is sunlight upon no other part of it except the past and the far, far distant future. . . I must break through this deadness.”

Nansen could remember the sunlight, and he hoped to see it again in a future too far distant to be of much help in a six-month polar night. After two years, the soul-crushed Nansen tried to “break through the deadness” by leaving his ship.

With one companion he set out to walk to the North Pole. Fat chance. The jagged, icy terrain pounded them into submission. The two took refuge in a shell of a cave and shivered through the third winter eating polar bear meat and remembering the sunshine and hoping to feel it again in some distant future. *Adapted from Reflecting God, 5-6.*

Fridtjof’s story has a happy ending. After three years of frozen oneness with the polar ice cap, he was rescued and he went home. Imagine his feelings on a spring morning when he roused from a nightmare of the frigid Arctic and realized that a shaft of May sunlight had slipped through a half-opened curtain and nudged him awake by shining in his face.

Think what he experienced when he opened his window to be greeted by a May morning ablaze with sunlit beauty, dancing daffodils, nodding tulips, and dew-freshened rosebuds bathing in the golden ambiance of the sun. Fridtjof had broken through the deadness. The sun was no longer hidden in some far distant future, but a present blessing that provoked a dance of gratitude and joy.


**NOTES**

Men and women come in many hues of black, white, and brown. They dress in styles ranging from tiara to baseball cap worn backward. They follow different vocations from sailors like Nansen to preachers like Billy Graham. They speak a thousand different languages and dialects when they order coffee or correct their children.

But the hungers of the heart are all inscribed on our inner being in the same languages, the same style, and the same flavors and colors. Our Creator, who beckons us to wholeness and holiness, engraves them there. Our hearts long for wholeness, holiness, peace, forgiveness, and assurance we belong.

From time to time we glimpse the light, the very Light of God. At such times we spiritually discern that there is a relationship with God that promises fulfillments that we have only dreamed of. We savor the hungers of our heart for a precious moment. But although the wise man's words from Prov. 4:23, "Keep thy heart with all diligence" (KJV), hover in our spirit, the vision is soon gone.

Intrusions like overtime, Monday Night Football, ceramics class, family quarrels, soccer practice, and church committee meetings yank us back into a world as busy as a beehive and as stressful as a bomb squad's to do list. The heart hungers on, longing for the Light. Like the memory of a guilty romance, our neglect of the spiritual Light nags our troubled soul.

A season of discontent can be the doorway to a deeper relationship with God. If you are asking, "Is this all there is? Is spiritual formation simply more things to add to my overwhelming life?"

The challenge is to move through this study in a prayerful way. Listen to your heart. Listen to God. Breathe deeply and trust the invitation to explore. Spiritual formation is not something to add to life. To truly be formed by God is to let your life change. This can be difficult. Idols might need to fall.

### **BEWARE OF FALLING IDOLS**

"When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away" (Isa. 57:13). These words are challenging the very ideas (aka idols) some of us have based our lives upon. While calling ourselves Christians we have functionally served other gods.

All of us have had our sense of security threatened when jobs are downsized, terrorists attack, family members move away, and church traditions change. The anger toward others we often express in these times is an indication we sense our lives are being threatened.


**NOTES**

Falling idols crash all around us. It's not that we haven't hoped—we used to do that. It's not like we haven't searched. We wore ourselves out chasing dreams, phantasms, and phony messiahs. We often desire the quick fix for relational, financial, and spiritual problems.

Some of the idols common to the world seep into our way of thinking. We can recognize some idols that have at one time been embraced in our lives and were found wanting. Modernity has already crowned and impeached the old set of idols:

- Materialism—grab all the things you can.
- Hedonism—life is an end in itself and pleasure is preferable to pain.
- Narcissism—it's all about me!
- Scientism—the scientific method and its technology is my shepherd, I shall not want—I hope.
- Reason—the human mind can think its way to happiness.

We held coronation galas when these messiahs slouched into the modern Bethlehem. We hailed these world views as our redeemers. The view of modernity was radical optimism in humanity. The common proclamations of leaders in different arenas were the freedom of human beings.

Human beings were declared to be free from the supernatural, free to fashion their own self, free to conquer nature through science, free to produce an always-growing economy. All this sprang from faith in the religion of human progress. This faith in human progress was found to be displaced. The idols were exposed as impotent saviors, every one of them. A pile of money, nonstop pleasure, self-centered living, and science and technology still left that big hole in our heart empty and aching.

Oh, there are still tribes of greedy grabbers, pleasure hounds, egomaniacs, and science and technology worshippers. But they are old-fashioned, out of tune with the times. The idols of modernity—materialism, hedonism, narcissism, scientism, and reason—became the establishment against which postmodern searchers have rebelled.

## THE POSTMODERN SEARCH FOR MEANING

From *Stanley Kauffman*, *The New Republic*, Aug 30, 1999, 24. The inhabitants of the 21st century are done with mere rationality and empty tradition. They seek something beyond the natural, above the rational, something mysterious


**NOTES**

and beyond their control. “Our age . . . makes the materialism of the past look picayune. People crave something larger in concepts than the data of this world, something mysterious, ambiguous, nonmaterial.”

Rita McClain’s pilgrimage speaks for the culture. Her spiritual search started in a Pentecostal church in Iowa, but the guilt was too heavy there. She packed her spiritual bags and moved to a mainline Protestant congregation, but it was too shallow. She rejected all organized religion and spent years seeking peace in nature, mainly hiking in the mountains and meditating in the desert. A painful divorce moved her to scout her inner landscape again. This expedition led her into Unity (a blend of Christian Science, Hinduism, and pop psychology). From there she journeyed into Native American spirituality and then to bowing before the Buddha. *From Newsweek, Nov. 28, 1994, 53.* If you visited her home, you would find a truly postmodern altar. Currently it sports “an angel statute, a small bottle of ‘sacred water’ blessed at a women’s vigil, a crystal ball, a pyramid, a small brass image of Buddha sitting on a brass leaf, a votive candle, a Hebrew prayer, a tiny Native American basket from the 1850s, and a picture of her ‘most sacred place,’ a madrone tree near her home.”

Meet New York psychotherapist Nancy Santo Pietro. She has, it seems, all but abandoned her practice of traditional psychotherapy in favor of *feng shui* (wind and water in Chinese). *Feng shui* helps her patients find jobs, lovers, and other good things.

*From Stanley Grenz, What Christians Really Believe and Why. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1998, 2.* To cure relationship problems Santo Pietro counsels: “hang a pink *shui* crystal on a nine-inch red string in your relationship corner.”

*From Macleans Jan 1, 1996, 23.* Then there is Cara Seeger of Victoria, BC. She doesn’t go very many days without a magical ceremony of Wicca. She reads tarot cards, immerses herself in Taoism, and practices Buddhism. Like an echo of our pluralistic culture she says, “I believe all attempts of mankind and womankind to reach the divine are valid.”

Part of the postmodern search is the fever for chasing angels. *Time* magazine reports that Harvard Divinity School has a course on angels. Boston College has two. Recently, five of the top ten best-sellers among religious books, according to *Publishers Weekly*, were about angels. Even network television is aflutter with angels.

Eastern religions have seeped into the culture through songs and literature. Right and left people are turning to pre-Christian paganism such as traditional African religion and Druid practices. Much of it is subrational, id-level religion.


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Gut-level religion shows up in Christian circles too. Some believe the barking, laughing, roaring, and giving birth in the spirit of practitioners of the Toronto Blessing and its split-offs are in this category. The postmodern spiritual vacuum fuels even the UFO craze. Postmodern gurus, rebelling against vacuous secularism, seem to teach four doctrines.

- Salvation will come from within you—not from some God or Savior up there. Books like *The Celestine Prophecy*, films like *The Color Purple*, and songs like Mariah Carey’s “Hero” teach this. *From Grenz*, 73. *Best American Poetry 2000*, *New York: Scribners, 2000*, 62-63.
- God is in everything and everything in the universe is connected—and thus good. As Agnes Sanford, a charismatic Episcopalian missionary, preached, “God is actually in the flowers and the growing grass and all the little, chirping, singing things. He made everything out of himself and then put a part of himself into everything.” Poet Lyn Emmanuel declares that “all is connected in the great seethe of seeing and being.” She declares that she is part of every “dog and hairpin,” of “sailors in undershirts” and “waitresses in Dacron,” of “junkyards” and “umbrellas.” The Bible declares that God is separate from, distinct from His creation.
- We are virtual gods, evolving toward divinity as taught by a host of swamis and New Age scribes.
- Our destiny is to escape conscious personhood. We will rise above the strife and suffering of this life only when we lose personal consciousness and become absorbed into Nirvana, the great impersonal over soul of the universe. Then our personal identity will get lost like a drop of water flicked into the ocean.

After wringing the juice out of secularism, materialism, and scientism our culture booted them out along with traditional Christianity that they saw as modernity’s lackey. Now the god-rush is on; grabbing for gurus, chasing angels, signing up for New Age seminars, gasping for UFOs the cultural search for spirituality pants on. Spirituality, any spirituality will do, it seems. But more and more there is disappointment and despair as one after another of the new idols crash like a dropping light bulb on a cement floor.

*From Rollo May, The Cry for Myth (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 16.* In these days of confused and frantic longing for God, gods, some god, any god, despair has a dark undertow. When their idol washes away like a sand castle at high tide, some turn cynical. Others hop quickly to another myth.

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The crash of idols sends some people retreating within to create a safe world of their own the way Deborah did in Hannah Green's autobiographical novel, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Others "flock to psychotherapists or their substitutes, to drugs or cults to get help in holding themselves together." The Vancouver Sun, Oct. 20, 1994, B4, cited by Grenz.

The experiment of the human race as *homo autonomus* has failed. Humans are not autonomous and adding new experiences to our lives will not resolve the God-given spiritual hunger. The despair is so dark that some lose the will to go on. Right now the leading cause of death among North American teens is not AIDS, not drugs, not gang violence, not car crashes, but suicide.

Three 18-year-old boys drove a 1987 Plymouth across Canada. Their journey ended in a garage at the Mini Storage in Vancouver, BC. They closed the garage door with the engine running, put an album by Kurt Cobain's band Nirvana in the cassette player, and died in minutes. They left a 60-page suicide journal titled "The Last Trip." On the last page they wrote: "We have lived our lives and this life is not for us—goodbye." When idols fall, people who trusted in them may go down with them.

## THE SOUND OF CRASHING IDOLS



### NOTES

In the modern period (Renaissance until the late 20th century), people chased a cluster of messiahs. Though some had intrinsic value, they all turned out to be poor saviors. We have big words for these false saviors who still seduce many. Consider the fallen idols of modernity.

*Materialism:* The greed for things, money, and possessions. Those who grabbed a pile of money now know that riches do not heal the soul.

*Narcissism:* Self-centeredness. Selfish living never made anyone happy for more than a week.

*Hedonism:* Living for physical pleasure. Constant pleasure (gluttony, sex, drugs) ends in boredom and has awful consequences.

*Scientism:* Making science the be-all and end-all of life. As good as science and technology, have been they do not satisfy the hunger for God.

*Reason:* The belief that reality is logical. If it makes sense, do it. This fails to comprehend the spiritual that is sometimes above rationality.

*New Age Searching:* Eastern religions, New Age seminars, pre-Christian paganism, angel mania, id-level Christianity, UFO and conspiracy cults, etc.

The sound of crashing idols can be jarring, violent, and disturbing. Nonetheless the sound is also one of hope. It is the sound of an opportunity for those of us who have been sometimes unknowingly clutching on to an idol to let go and turn more fully to God. It also is the sound of change. When the idols are crashing, followers of Christ can be ready to speak into the vacuum the hope of the gospel.

### CLOSING THOUGHT

Augustine, the blatant sinner turned saint, left this prayer in his *Confessions*. Make it your own today. "Too late I loved you, O Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! Too late I loved you . . . You called and shouted and burst my deafness. You flashed, shone and scattered my blindness. I . . . pant for you. I taste and hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for your peace . . . Lord, have pity on me . . . I hide not my wounds; you are the Physician, I the sick . . . all my hope is . . . in your exceeding great mercy."

## APPLICATION



### NOTES

(Choose three)

1. Read the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Write a short reflection paper on your findings.
2. Memorize 2 Corinthians 3:18.
3. From the book, *Reflecting God*, read chapters 2 and 3. Also, check out pages 15-22 of the *Reflecting God Workbook*.
4. The human race today is unholy and unhappy, lost and longing. Think about what you have read in this session. Write a reflection paper entitled, "Who Needs Transformation, Anyway?"
5. Review the quotes from the section, "The Human Predicament." Do people in your life express these kinds of sentiments? How do these views affect the way they live their lives? In what ways do you share these views?

Using a news source (magazines, internet, newspapers) search for articles/statements that represent one of these views. Try to think of a spark of hope that responds to the statement you have chosen (Bible verse, a Christian doctrine, or an inspirational quote). Share your findings with your mentor.

6. Review the list of fallen idols in the section, "The Sound of Crashing Idols." Look in the newspaper or recall a news telecast and search your own experience and observations for examples of each. Share your findings with your mentor.

### JOURNALING

*Note:* Throughout your work in this module, it is suggested you keep a journal. This is an important tool in the study of spiritual formation. Journaling is a tool to help you slow down in your studies and listen to your heart, soul, mind, and most importantly to God.

- In your spiritual life journal respond to, If I were going to use two of the anecdotes, quotations, or ideas from this session in a sermon I would select . . .
- Record your reflections about new things you learned in this session. Do you know someone who is chasing a fallen idol? Write a one-sentence prayer for him or her.

**NOTES****SUGGESTED READING**

- Wesley Tracy, et. al, "What Do You Say to a Hungry Heart?" *The Hunger of Your Heart*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and Christian Holiness Partnership, 1997), 10-15.
- Wesley Tracy, et. al, *Reflecting God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and Christian Holiness Partnership, 2000), 11-17.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Workbook*, 15-22.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Leader's Guide*, 7-9.

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. Humankind is lost, unhappy, and unholy, angst-ridden yet searching for the Light—often in all the wrong places.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. There is a hunger in the heart for meaning in every soul.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. Postmodern searchers affirmed their hope in the idols of modernity—materialism, hedonism, narcissism, scientism, and reason.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. Right and left people are turning to pre-Christian paganism such as traditional African religion and Druid practices.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. The experiment of the human race as *homo autonomus* has succeeded.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. The human race today is unholy and unhappy, lost and longing.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. The hungers of the heart are all inscribed on our inner being. Our Creator, who beckons us to wholeness and holiness, engraves them there.
  - A. True
  - B. False
8. Hedonism is the belief that the human mind can think its way to happiness.
  - A. True
  - B. False

**NOTES**

9. Salvation will come from within you—not from some God or Savior up there.
- A. True
  - B. False
10. Which of the following is the most reproduced piece of art in the last 20 years?
- A. *Mona Lisa*
  - B. *Warhol's Last Supper*
  - C. Beatle's poster
  - D. *The Scream*
11. Modernity has already crowned and impeached the old following set of idols \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Materialism, Hedonism, Narcissism, Scientism, Reason
  - B. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islam
  - C. Salvation, Sanctification, Justification, Regeneration
  - D. civil law, liturgical law, covenant law
12. One of the following is **not** an example of new age thought \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. God is in everything and everything in the universe is connected—and thus good
  - B. we are virtual gods, evolving to divinity
  - C. the belief that reality is logical
  - D. our destiny is to escape conscious personhood
13. The Human predicament is \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. something has gone wrong with the human enterprise
  - B. our destiny over which we are powerless
  - C. life is an end in itself and pleasure is preferable to pain

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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Be prepared to share and discuss the three choices you made in the Application section of this session with your mentor.