

St. Paul's Counseling Ministry
Key to Living, January 2008
A Key for Living your "Resolutions"

In my first column, "A Key to Peaceful Relationships", I suggested that living in the spirit of the Peace Prayer of St. Francis helps us to create peace in each of the various relationships in our lives. One line of that prayer is especially powerful: "O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be understood as to understand", or "Seek first to understand, and then to be understood."

In this column I will be exploring one's relationships within one's self. We each regularly experience inner battles or tensions. One part of us pulls in one direction, another part in a different direction. We are tempted to try to get rid of one side, yet this never works and the battle goes on.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 7, describes his version of one of these inner battles. He then asks who will deliver him and exclaims "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Paul is led through this struggle to the insight he describes in chapter 8, verse 28: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." Notice, he says ***all things!*** Even these inner battles!

Many of us are used to making lofty New Year's Resolutions. Often we are aware of changes we really do need to make; we may even seek God's guidance and begin with a **willingness** to cooperate with God's grace. Yet very quickly we find ourselves **willfully** pushing to keep those resolutions on our own power, failing within a few days, and then giving up in disgust with ourselves. Or making yet another resolution and starting the battle all over again!

Some of those changes may include:

- "I'd like to be more faithful to daily prayer."
- "I want to develop a regular exercise program for health."
- "I need to learn how to eat more wisely and help my body find its healthy weight."
- "I want to decrease the stresses related to how I use my time, including how much time I spend with technology".
- "I need to get my spending under control, and I would like to share more with the poor."

Notice that there is a part of you that says an immediate "yes" to one of these changes, and another part which very quickly says either "NO!" or "yes, but...". Siding with the part that says "yes" and opposing the other side rarely helps. As we begin to seek first to understand all sides of the conflict, we often experience a calming of the storm. ***Especially*** if we seek to listen ***with God***.

One method for this inner listening is called Inner Relationship Focusing, developed by Ann Weiser Cornell (www.focusingresources.com). I have developed my own version which I call Focusing Prayer. The method is simple in design, though many people find they initially need some guidance through it, and some people develop focusing relationships with others to help them.

The essential steps of Focusing Prayer are:

1. bring your awareness to the reality of God's compassionate Presence in, with, and around you. (Psalm 139; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16, 20). Become aware that your whole being is held in that Presence. Let your awareness move down through your arms and hands, your legs and feet; then notice the support of what you are sitting on, maybe even letting it symbolize God's support. Let your awareness move down through the middle part of your body: your throat, chest, stomach and belly areas. You are beginning to create a safe space for "spending time with" those two parts of you which seem unable to work together to make changes.
2. Now, instead of trying to **make** something happen, choose an attitude of Compassionate Presence with God, and invite the sides or parts to take turns letting you sense them, listen to them, understand them. Then, one part at a time, take some time to feel it in your body, begin to describe what you notice, gently say "hello" to it as you would a friend, and settle down with it to keep it company with "interested curiosity". Seek first to understand it from its point of view. When you sense that it feels understood, turn to the other part and seek to understand it. When it seems time to stop, thank each part of you for what it helped you to understand, and offer to return at another time to listen some more. As with our outer relationships, this kind of listening goes more smoothly when we take as much time as is needed, maybe over several "visits".
3. If initially there seems to be no peace or agreement between the two sides, breathe and relax. A wonderful prayer to repeat is "Holy Spirit, help me to hold what I can not now heal." If God is the one inviting you to make these changes, God will work the transformation as you bring your **willing** presence to God and to your inner life.

Once you sense a relatively unified "yes" to one of these changes, you can develop specific strategies (e.g "I will start each day with 15 minutes of prayer time." or "I will walk for 20 minutes, 4 evenings each week." or "I will set a timer so I stop after 30 minutes of computer time.") and take action one day at a time, entrusting yourself to God.

May we appreciate frequently in this New Year how God is working **all things** for good for us!

God's peace,

Mary Ann Holtz