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Life Tasks: Integrating Psychological and Spiritual Growth

**What do you see when you
look in the mirror?**



Life Tasks

- A **life task** is something that we undertake for a lifetime.
- It is a **responsibility for growth that never ends** (until the day we die).
- Three life tasks (a) **Discovery**: hidden learning to aware learning (b) **Testing**: aware learning to aware knowing (c) **Story**: towards a coherent sense of self and finding a vocation.
- In youth we learn; in age we understand (Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach).

Foundation: Hidden Learning

- First thought; then language. We learn more than we can say or 'know we know'.
- What is learnt before words:

Robbie had a disturbed childhood. His father was a violent alcoholic; his mother was submissive, ineffectual, and a perpetual victim of the father's drunken rages. Robbie was slow to learn to speak, well after two years old, but he had learnt much about how families work.

- **Hidden learning HL** Different terms: Not Freud's unconscious, more like implicit learning from academic psych (Reber, 1996), tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), emotional or limbic learning (Ecker, et al., 2013), and the concept of *habitus* in the writings of Bourdieu (1977, etc.). How do we give voice to this 'speechless realm'?

Early Learning

- No 'blank slate' the Baby at birth (experience in womb, birth, etc.) Early learning because learnt feels true (but like any belief it can be wrong).
- This is **foundational leaning**, before it becomes articulate.
- Why is it so important? There are **implications**: It is learnt so it *feels true*, and because it remains unconscious it influences attitudes and behaviours over lifecycle.
- Can include lazy learning, trauma learning and unintegrated learning.
- **Positive hidden learning** through a sense of being loved, natural coping styles and healthy ways of behaving, leading to resilience and coping.

Sally

Sally was neglected as a child. Her mother was dependent on heroin. Eventually Family Services removed her and placed her in foster care at age 3. She was raised in a loving family but her early learning was "There is nothing important about my needs. I will not be protected. Eventually anyone I love will leave me." It is easy to see the emotional logic of such early lessons in life.

Task 1: *Discovery*

- The first challenge is to move from **hidden (or unaware) learning to aware learning**.
- This is **towards psychological insight** - a quality in which we all vary but hopefully improve with age and emotional maturity.
- This is natural – we **grow in self-awareness**. Life is a great teacher through intimate relationships, raising children, having honest friends, the experience of caring for and nurturing others. *Ageing helps* as we learn more about life and hopefully become wiser.
- But there is **no guarantee** this will happen.

Listening to Hidden Learning

This is surprising:

- HL wants to be heard, how do we give an opportunity to speak?
- **Message board:** What was the most important message from your father, mother, siblings?
- What is your **first memory**... (trajectory?)

- Best to try this with **sentence completion:**
“The most important thing I learnt as a child was ...”
(try 3-4 until something catches you)
- Psych professor S Africa: “You’re on your own, kid.”
Mine: “It is hard to get noticed.”

HL feels true

- What is **learnt *always feels true*** (can lead to dogmatism or false certainties) Unconscious so influential of attitudes and behaviours.
- When **inarticulate** there is **no narrative** and hence no possible **counter-narrative**.
- How do we find a way forward from what is unacknowledged, deeply held, often divisive, dysfunctional and even wrong?
- **Task 1: First awareness** of hidden learning (including spiritual learning).

Hidden Spiritual Learning 1

- SL is my term for **what we have *learned* about God** or the spiritual dimension, but we lack words to express.
- This is a purely functional definition (think about a signpost)
- HSL is one dimension of HL, same process, but about different things.
- **Attachment theory** is an example of HL, what we learn about relationships before words (secure, avoidant, expressive or disorganized).
- This HL has been applied in 'attachment to God' research, becoming about SL.

Discovering SL

What is your **first spiritual memory**?

Try some **sentence completions**:

- The most important thing I learnt as a child about God was ...
- What blocks me from spiritual growth is ...

Or more generally:

- I can live a fuller spiritual life if I ...
- **Exercise:** See yourself at age 5, put yourself in a church, initiate a dialogue with your 5 year old self. Be curious, no harsh judgments...

Hidden Spiritual Learning 2

- Sally became a Christian but could only believe in a punitive God, “I know I fall short, I feel so guilty. I am only worthy of punishment by God.” She learnt a lot about life before she was 3 years old, which has implications for her psychological and spiritual development.
- **Reflect:** Can you think of other implications for Sally’s SL? How would you respond to Sally in spiritual care?

Life Task 2: Testing

- Can critical thinking be a **problem**? For most tertiary educated people this function is on 'steroids'.
- University trains us to be rational and we accept this as a life task. The logic leads to being agnostic or atheist?
- Rational evaluation can 'paint strip away' **child experiences of transcendence and awe**.
- One difficulty is that we never take seriously our **hidden learning**, never become aware of our foundation (for example in infant oceanic experience or early sensing of spiritual transcendence). **There is no discovery**.
- But when we become aware of learning, WHAT NEXT?

Task 2: *Testing*

- Each of us has a **range of assumptions** about what is true. How do we test what we find?
- *Rational test*: logic and consistency?
- *Emotional test*: Question emotional reasoning.
- *Life experience test*: does this fit with what I have learnt through life experience?
- *Relational test*: If I act on this hidden learning will it make my relationships with others better? What about my relationship to myself and my self-care?
- *'Wicked problem' test*: Is there contractions that cannot be resolved?

From Aware to Knowing

- **Teresa** was a devout Roman Catholic who attended daily mass. She accepted the teaching of the church without question but often felt confused when priests disagreed with each other or a theologian challenged official teaching. Her spiritual learning was that she *must* accept authority without any question or residue of doubt.
- Or **Charles** was raised in a politically active family. At university he joined SCM group which he felt gave an example of activism in Christ and were committed to making a political difference. He became more self-aware through two years in Jungian analysis. He said, "I have found in prayer and meditation the energy to better devote myself to what is important."

Task 3: *Integration*

- This begins with growing self-awareness (usually in adolescence).
- Aware of one's self and personal values. Insight and integration leads to a **coherent sense of self**.
- The challenge is to **grow into psychological and spiritual maturity**.
- But the journey cannot end with awareness, must translate into **committed action**. This leads to a sense of a life **vocation**.

Story is the place of Integration

- As we look back on **life experiences**, we 'join the dots' by telling a story.
- **Frank** was wounded and suffered trauma as a soldier in Afghanistan. For a while he used alcohol to cope, and unfortunately lost his marriage and contact with his son. He began a process of recovery through AA. He then had a Christian experience and became active in his local church. He met Amanda and he started a new life with her.

New Story

- **Awareness and integration can never be the goal.** This would make self-growth into narcissism.
- We can **tell a new story** about ourselves making a difference. This brings a creative vision for what is possible. Story integrates our identity and call responding to God.
- **Exercise:** A one sentence personal mission statement.

Conclusion

- **Elie Wiesel**, Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, Nobel Laureate for literature, and author of 57 books including *Night* (1960). He advised, “Think higher, live deeper.” Hopefully the **Life Task model provides a guide**.
- *Hidden learning: The way we are wired for intimacy*, can be read as discovery of what is missing and developing an integrative life narrative (including spiritual fulfilment). Download from: Canberra Clinical and Forensic Psychology website, CAPS or bstevens@csu.edu.au