

Layers and the role of attachment in mental and social-emotional processing IV: The quest for a consistent life story

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Introduction

This article is a sequel to the previous articles in this series. In Part I, I noted that our mental and social-emotional processing of experiences is characterized by a hierarchy of layers, and how the development of these processing abilities is strongly relationally determined. I also paid attention to the significance of the stepwise, alternating development of the right and left hemispheres of the brain as part of this developmental process. And to the crucial role of synchronization and interpersonal attunement in this.

Part II illustrated the consequences this has for our growth into a full and adult being, and for recovery from painful experiences that could otherwise seriously hinder such growth. A good understanding of the hierarchical layering in our mental and social-emotional processing of experiences can be of great help when we want to stimulate this recovery and growth.

Part III presented another example of application of the model from Part I, addressing attachment pain and our natural reactions to it, that often lead to addictions and the like. We saw that the layered, attachment-oriented model yields the insights that we need to help people find healing for their attachment pain and freedom from addictions.

This Part IV will zoom in on one particular aspect that is at the foundation of mental and social-emotional processing. That aspect is that we are always and continuously on the lookout to create *a consistent story of what life is all about*. And, as I discovered in the course of writing this series, from looking back on a long history of working with many counselees and reading a lot of literature, we do this on all of the three layers, outlined in Part I. The form, in which these *'life stories'* are recorded and processed, varies over the layers, though.

Most – if not all – psychopathology and social-emotional difficulties can be regarded as difficulties in creating an overall consistent *life story*. Therefore, some insight into this theme will be of great help in assisting people who have difficulties in these areas.

Life stories and layers

First I need to clarify what I mean by a life story here. My Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary says of the word 'story': "(1) *history*; (2a) *an account of incidents or events*; (2b) *a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in question*; ..." As life unfolds and we encounter and experience a lot of facts, incidents, events and situations, it would soon grow to be too complex for our little minds. So, we somehow need to create an overarching 'story' that makes sense of all these experiences, and by which we can assess new *facts, incidents, events* and *situations*. This allows us to learn from the previous ones and use experience gained so far to better cope with new situations, facts, incidents or events. This learning process – in a healthy individual – is the essence and heart of growing in maturity.

The most obvious, clear and explicit we see the stories emerge at Layer III – the layer of reflection and coordination between left and right hemispheres. This is where we think back on things that happened, and consciously try to make sense of them. To create our own story on this layer, we use a variety of building blocks: besides our own experiences we may draw from stories we heard from our parents (or what we actually saw in their lives ourselves), stories from or about our ancestors, stories on famous heroes,

¹ Part I: www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment.pdf ; Part II: www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment-2.pdf ; Part III: www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment-3.pdf ; the most actual version of this document, Part IV: www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment-4.pdf . Dutch  edition: www.12accede.nl/gelaagdheid-4.pdf .

fairy tales, all kind of fiction we read or saw (in reality or, for example, on TV). The stories we create at Layer III are often verbally explicit – we could write them down, informally or more formally in the form of an autobiography, we can evaluate them, make conscious additions where needed or as we gain more information or insight, etc.

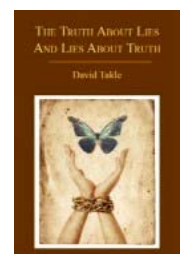
Life stories at Layer II are often a little less verbally explicit. Fortunately, in many cases (though not always, as in many cases of dissociation) there is some form of open communication inside between Layers II and III, as both take place within the cortex and are somehow at least partly open to conscious thought. So, though stories at Layer II are build up less consciously, and a little less verbally explicit, they still are largely open to conscious evaluation and (re-)processing. We can for example think: “now, why did I do that?” and so re-assess the reason (the background story behind it) that led us to some conscious Layer II decision.

Layer I does not possess any verbal processing abilities. Life stories at Layer I are stored and processed directly in more experiential form – mainly in the form of emotions and feelings associated with situations. They are very closely tied to what we currently experience and earlier have experienced in our bodies. A very light scent in the air can make us re-experience a significant event – either good or bad – on this layer. Another aspect is that the formation of *stories* at Layer I begins far before we have any verbal skills. These are reasons why Layer I stories are so pervasive in their influence in our lives. As noted in previous parts of this series, Layer I determines the majority of our reactions to all the situations that we encounter from moment to moment every day. In a way, one could say that our Layer I stories are the most foundational ones, even as they are not expressed in words, and thus not ‘stories’ in that more narrow sense.

At each layer, stories are formed on the basis of our experiences. As David Takle describes in more detail,² the process from situation to story involves two important stages where often errors are introduced. The first is perception. We experience and perceive the situation in a subjective way, which is coloured by our earlier experiences and by our own personality. Secondly, we interpret what we perceive – giving meaning and significance to it, again based on our earlier experiences, the information we have, and on our own personality and skills. In a situation where somebody bursts out in anger one person may become afraid or timid, feel helpless and withdraw, while another in the same situation may stand up to the angry person and force him or her to calm down. The way this situation is experienced, evaluated and processed into the life story, will be accordingly different. As is obvious in this example, even ordinary things like the size of one’s body may be of influence.

The well known development psychologist John Bowlby, not yet distinguishing between the three layers, spoke of *life scripts*, *internal working models* or *schema’s* when referring to what I call *internal life stories* or simply *stories* here. He observed that these *life scripts* or *schema’s* are largely formed on the basis of our early life experiences – especially those in the realm of attachment. Bowlby’s terms were later adopted and studied in more depth in Transactional Analysis³ (*life scripts*) and Schema-therapy⁴ (*schema’s* or *schemata*), respectively. Both acknowledge the large role of early life experiences in the formation of these largely sub-conscious but highly influential *life scripts* or *schema’s*, as well as the fact that indeed a large part of them is not directly consciously addressable.

As observed by Bowlby and many others since, these *life stories*, *life scripts* or *schema’s* are very persistent. All new experiences are interpreted in the context of the existing life story. Details that do not fit are easily left unnoticed or left out / forgotten and those details that confirm the existing story are stored as confirmation and undergirding of our main *life story*. To give a crude but clear example: I have known a woman who grew up with a rude and sexually abusive father. Her *life script* came to say that all men are evil, cruel bastards. Whenever she met any evil in a man, this confirmed her story – her inner voice said: ‘see,



² David Takle, *The Truth About Lies And Lies About Truth*, Shepherd's House, Pasadena CA, USA, 2008; ISBN 0 9674357 9 4 (for info about this book see: www.kingdomformation.org/book.php?b=truth).

³ Transactional Analysis was developed by Eric Berne (and Thomas A. Harris and others) in the late '50-s and early '60-s. For more information, see: André H. Roosma, 'Inner Parent, Adult and Inner Child: A brief review of Transactional Analysis in a Biblical Pastoral context', *Accede!* web-document (www.12accede.org/transactional-analysis.html), August 2009 (Dutch original: March 2007), and the references therein (esp. the ones in Note 1.).

⁴ Schema-therapy (also: Schema-focused therapy (SFT), Schematherapy, or Schema therapy) is a cognitive-behavioral therapy integrating influences of Object Relations theory and Gestalt, developed by Jeffrey Young in the early '90-s. See: Jeffrey Young, Janet Klosko, *Reinventing Your Life – The Breakthrough Program to End Negative Behavior... And Feel Great Again* (see www.schematherapy.com/id202.htm), Plume Books / Penguin, New York, 1994; ISBN 978-0452272040; and the Schematherapy website: www.schematherapy.com/id29.htm. Schema-therapy is best known for its application to treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder.

I told you: they are all evil!' Any kindness of a man she related to the gifts her father gave her to 'make it up to her' after an episode of abuse, so she expected that all these acts of kindness were only to cover up something bad. In that way, she could maintain her theme that 'all men are evil'. One could say that she even came to 'attract the evil in men' to prove her point and to justify her pent-up anger. This may go so far that such a woman may challenge a kind man till he does something that she can label as evil.⁵ The immense power beneath this dynamic is that to change one's life story on a point that was once incorporated to protect the self against a life-threatening experience feels as opening oneself voluntarily up to the most gruesome life-threat again. It's like setting yourself up as a sitting duck in front of an evil enemy's big canon.

If I'm certain that my younger sibling is a complete idiot, there is almost no limit to the evidence I can accumulate to prove my case.

David Takle

in: *The Truth About Lies And Lies About Truth*, see note 2.

Life stories and mental, emotional and relational health

We continuously live from the life stories we have formed inside our heads, at each of the three layers as outlined before. Our life stories determine our minute-to-minute behaviour and our life to a far greater extent than our will or our conscious decisions. So, it is important to have a closer look at them.

It has been demonstrated that the internal life stories as described briefly above (at all three layers) are at the root of the measure of a person's mental, emotional and relational health in everyday life. Some health promoting aspects of stories are:⁶


- a sense of safety / being 'at home' in this world;
- a sense of connection;
- a sense of freeness of (respectful) personal expression;
- a sense of personal significance, adequacy and value as a person;
- a sense of personal skilfulness (Erik Erikson spoke of industry).

Another important aspect of health-promoting life stories is their openness and realism.⁷ The aspects in the above list are conducive for the development of such openness and realism.⁸

Internal life stories are largely formed on the basis of *life experiences*. At Layer I actual *life experiences* are almost the sole source.⁹ Each *life experience* is attempted to fit into the existing life story. If it does not exactly fit, the existing story may be adapted or extended a little to accommodate the new experience. In this way, our life story slowly grows. (In one of the next sections I dig deeper into the case where our existing life story cannot be adequately adapted to a new experience – e.g. when that experience is too inconsistent with our existing life story or with our value as a human being, as may be the case in abuse by a caretaker or in other life threatening situations.)

How *very early* the formation of Layer I *experiential life stories* can start and how far-reaching their influence goes, was illustrated to me some time ago, as a remark by Dr E. James Wilder, in combination with some articles I had read previously, made me realize that the unborn baby in its *very first days* of existence already starts to accumulate experiences when attaching itself to the wall of the womb (the first connecting endeavour!). When the first cells that later grow into the placenta are met by a uterus membrane of an emotionally well-prepared and welcoming mother, they receive different chemical 'markers' than when the mother feels anxious or when she is resistant against pregnancy. These earliest experiences can lead to

⁵ People may go to great lengths to unconsciously 'prove' the validity of their *life story*. Eric Berne observes in his book *Games people play* (see note 3) that this may lead to the most gruesome slander and even to murder.

⁶ Note the parallel with some of Erik Erikson's developmental phases and associated crises, and the 'Five to Thrive' set of prerequisites to *thriving* of the *Life Model* of E. James Wilder et al. See also note 3 in Part I of this series (www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment.pdf .

⁷ By 'realism' I mean being open to the whole truth of all that is, including the spiritual dimension of God Almighty. In his book *The Truth About Lies And Lies About Truth* (Shepherd's House, Pasadena CA, USA, 2008; ISBN 0 9674357 9 4), David Takle thoroughly investigates the extent to which we are guided by *lies* – life stories that contain elements of irreality or falsehood –, and demonstrates how truth – in fact: what I mean by true realism – is essential for spiritual growth and emotional and mental healing and recovery. Spiritual and psycho-social pathology – whether recognized as such or not – is build on *life stories* (Takle names them *beliefs*, a terminology that may be confusing) that contain *lies*, is the major tenet of Takle's findings.

⁸ Note that a truly Biblical Christian view will promote all of these aspects.

⁹ This is why children will live up to the living example of their parents (i.e. will be guided by a story that is formed by this example), more than their words or teachings.

the first, most primitive 'sense' of being welcome and of connecting efforts being appreciated, or of being un-welcome and of connecting efforts being thwarted. It is currently hypothesized that these early experiences – if they are not 'good' – contribute to the root of psychiatric 'illnesses' like schizophrenia and several others.¹⁰


At Layer III our internal life stories are – amongst others – largely influenced by family-stories. These also -subconsciously- influence the internal stories at the other layers. An example that will make this clear: If grandpa is proud of the naughty pranks and practical jokes he undertook as a little boy and still can laugh about himself when making a mistake, that contributes to a totally different internal story as when grandpa cannot laugh about anything and his past – let alone 'less favourable' parts of it – are clearly not to be talked about. The latter soil will be better suited to the development of internal shame, worry and perfectionism, while the former is more conducive to an easy-going lifestyle and a corresponding *life story*.


In this section I also need to say something on the spiritual influences on *life stories*. Both God and the adversary can have an immense influence on them, if we allow them to. The Bible tells us that God is pure and only good. He has only the very best in mind for us.¹¹ When we follow His advices, we will live and thrive, even amidst difficult circumstances and suffering. But the adversary or satan is there too, and he is the embodiment of the lie. Right from the very beginning – Genesis 3 –, the adversary tried to slip in elements of deception about God and His goals and about Eve and Adam themselves.¹² What he – largely implicitly – communicated was that God was not good; that He had a hidden and evil agenda and so Eve and Adam better take their fate in their own hands, and this was also possible, as it would be possible for them to become gods themselves by going against what God had said to them. As Eve and Adam bought into this deceptive lie, they found out that they thereby had lost their most valuable innocence and intimacy with God and each other. I see this same pattern repeated time and again. When people buy in to satanic lies, they become deceived and their life story takes a turn for the worse. Fortunately, the opposite is also true: when we start to have faith in God **YHWH** Almighty¹³ and His Son, Jesus the Messiah, and appreciate His great love for us in any situation, our life story changes for the better on that issue.

Inconsistency in or between life stories: a major marker of trauma

When we grow up with relatively few experiences that challenge our life story so far, consistency within our life stories at the three layers and/or consistency between the stories at different layers may not be a big issue. However, this is hardly ever the case. In this world characterized by brokenness, most of us do experience challenging situations – situations that are not consistent with our life story so far. These situations will show up in our imaginary autobiography as moments where some change in our life story became necessary. Big changes like this will often lead to inconsistencies in our life stories or between those at different layers. As an example of the latter, after an angry outburst of a so far rather calm parent, we may have felt more fear at Layer I than at the higher layers, and consequently, our Layer I life story may have incorporated more anxiety or distrust towards authority figures' anger than the stories at Layers II and III. Consciously, we may think we are not afraid of people, while at the same time confrontations with assertive authority figures may make us sweat (a sign of Layer I fear).


We need a consistent story (i.e. set of stories) to feel safe and to make life manageable and enduring. Inconsistencies (I also talk about *disconnections*) in the stories at each layer or between the stories of different layers, create tension. Too much of this tension makes life unmanageable and miserable both for ourselves and – via our behaviour – also for those around us. So, being able to create a consistent story – or integrate seemingly conflicting stories – amidst sometimes adverse circumstances is a prerequisite to mental and social-emotional health.¹⁴

¹⁰ See e.g.: Terence Dowling, 'Talks in St. Mary's Cathedral', Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986 (online available at www.adelphos.de/Downloads/life.pdf .

And: David Hartman & Diane Zimmeroff, Memory Access to our Earliest Influences, *Journal of Heart-Centered Therapies*, 2002, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 3-63 ([www.heartcenteredtherapies.org/go/docs/Journal 5-2 Memory.pdf](http://www.heartcenteredtherapies.org/go/docs/Journal%20Memory.pdf) .

¹¹ As Jeremiah 29: 11 says: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith **YHWH**, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you hope in your latter end."

¹² For a further elaboration on this, see chapter 3 – 'The Destructive Nature of Deception' in: David Takle, *The Truth About Lies And Lies About Truth*, Shepherd's House, Pasadena CA, USA, 2008; ISBN 0 9674357 9 4.

¹³ For a deeper study of the relevance of God's holy Name **YHWH** in this context, see: André H. Roosma, *The holy Name of the God Who was there, Who is there and Who will be there*, **Accede!** webdocument, July 2009 (www.12accede.org/Gods_holy_Name.pdf ; also available in Dutch).

¹⁴ Object Relations theory recognizes a psychological defense/survival mechanism known as *splitting*. It occurs in

As stated above, another prerequisite of these stories, in order that they promote mental and social-emotional health, is that they allow us a safe place and a significant role in the world around us.

These two things are the reason why trauma can hit us so deeply and profoundly. **Characteristic of a situation that we perceive as traumatic is that it does not fit and cannot be made to fit our stories so far (at least at any one of the three layers), or it can only do so by eliminating a safe place and/or a significant role for us in the world around us.** This latter part is why so many people testify that a trauma (or a series of traumatic events) has sort of 'killed' them or robbed them of any and all hope and joy in living. It is also the reason why 'trauma' is not limited to situations of extreme abuse or maltreatment, or threat of such extreme abuse/maltreatment. Also a gradually degrading situation may have the same traumatizing effect, when it eliminates all hope for a safe and significant place and role for us (the situation seems not consistent with a life story full of hope). For someone brought up in one specific (national, regional or family) culture, even a drastic change of culture may have traumatizing effects by its upsetting or revolutionizing of the life stories and schema's at one or more layers.

Another way to look at the reason why trauma can be so devastating is that traumatic events **exceed our brain's emotional processing capacity.** Capacity for dealing with adverse circumstances needs to be build up, step by step (and then will be limited still). For this task we need a safe attachment relation with someone with a good capacity. He or she will help us not to be overwhelmed by events, but stay connected with a source of meaning, joy and peace. This is vital. When such a safe and secure attachment figure is not available, or did we learn through earlier experiences that such a person is mostly not available (and so, developed a story – especially at Layer I – in which such a figure is missing), then the experienced helplessness (having to face the situation on your own with too little capacity) will make the experience traumatic. We cannot find a resolution that way...

Looking for / re-gaining consistency and meaning

Inconsistencies in or between our life stories create an inner tension. Therefore we try to solve these inconsistencies by adapting our life stories a little or by re-interpreting the facts or experiences that cause this inconsistency. If no other option seems available, we do it by negating facts or experiences that do not fit.

When we experience something as shocking, it mostly is because it is in tension (i.e. inconsistent) with our present life story so far. We try to explain and give meaning to what happens, to place it in the context of our life story. We try to answer questions like: What happened here? Why did it happen? (meaning as comprehensibility), and: What has this experience given me? (meaning as personal significance). In the end we want to live in an orderly world, where we are able to predict and somehow 'control' what will happen next – at least to some degree. If necessary, we will adapt or extend our story to fit the new experience. All of this is also applied to traumatic experiences – experiences that were hard to fit into our story so far. As an example: A child may feel relief when – after some conscious or unconscious pondering – it has finally reached a conclusion of how daddy's or mommy's 'strange acts' (e.g. of sexual abuse, or leaving the family, or simply a coarse reaction) were its own fault, after all, because "he probably wouldn't have done it if I had only behaved a bit better in this or that", or "it's because I am bad anyway; I do not deserve goodness from my mom or dad; I had better not been born". By blaming it on him- or herself, he or she gains some control over the situation again and restores consistency once more.

As a last resort, when fitting our story to the new experience appears impossible or only possible at too large a cost to one's personal integrity, someone may discard an experience altogether, as if it never happened (i.e. dissociate oneself from it; which often is a precursor to more severe forms of dissociation that can be seen as an endeavour to **dissociate** – keep separate – what cannot be **associated** – kept together –, into multiple parallel *life stories*, each of which are at least internally consistent¹⁵).

small children when they are faced with experiences, circumstances or events that are hard to be integrated into one story. A small child cannot keep two or more contradictory feelings or thoughts in its yet immature awareness at a time. When e.g. a parent arouses conflicting inner feelings in a child by sometimes being perceived as good (loving, gratifying, caring) and at other times as bad (frustrating, depriving, abusing), such a child may use splitting to separate these aspects in order to maintain its fragile personality structure. Only later in its development the child realizes that the 'bad parent' and the 'good parent' are really the same person and integrates the two. Trauma can hinder or even prevent this developmental task of integration. Trauma in early life often leads to an over-reliance on splitting, in order to manage incompatible or intolerable feelings. In secular psychology this is seen as the number one root cause for borderline pathology. When someone is not able to integrate the good and bad images of both self and others, such a person will rely more on splitting and black and white thinking as a way of organizing information. This developmental task of integration exemplifies what I call the quest for a consistent life story.

¹⁵ Note that because of this background, dissociation has been classified as 'survival behaviour'. It is nothing more or

Our desire to create meaning and come up with a consistent story behind all experiences is very strong. However, the conclusions that people reach about the dynamics of cause and effect may not always be realistic (very often they are not!). In this way, traumatic experiences often lead to elements of unreality (*lies*) in people's stories, and thereby to long lasting cognitive (Layer II/III) or sub-conscious (Layer I) errors leading to behaviour that is characterized by socio- or psychopathology.

However, our desire to adapt our story to make it consistent with a traumatic experience is also a reason why sometimes a traumatic experience, certainly if followed-up well, can actually make people stronger or 'richer' in any sense. I have seen many people become more humble and more open to listen to others' stories, or more appreciative of the value of life and connection (with adapted priorities and values), after they had gone through some very difficult experience themselves. I discovered that in the majority of these cases an unrealistic denial of trauma's was replaced by an acceptance that 'shit happens' and the development of what theologian and trauma-counselor Téo van der Weele aptly names *a theology of suffering* – a necessity for any trauma-counselor, he says.

Because of our quest for consistency and meaning, part of proper processing of (past) trauma's often is to be well-informed about them and about the circumstances surrounding them happening. Often, this may involve asking – again: consciously or unconsciously – such questions like: "was it really *my* fault?", "why did he really do that?" and "where were You, God, in that situation?" All the answers to these questions will lead to a review of the changes that were made to the personal life story, and to a more truthful reconstruction of that life story itself. By re-writing our current notions about the past, we re-write our present and future.¹⁶

Attachment, story-making and attunement

As noted before, Bowlby already observed that our stories originate mainly in our early life experiences with attachment. Good attachment, as discussed in Part I of this series, is crucial to a good foundation for our stories – at each layer. Insecure attachment goes hand in hand with stories that are full of error, anxiety and pain. But there is even more. Secure attachment also stimulates creativity and good connections with the outside world, which in turn both stimulate good and healthy story-making abilities.

John Bowlby already observed that parental attunement¹⁷ to the little child plays a vital role in the formation of secure attachment. More recently, these observations were affirmed by neurological research by scientists like Allan N. Schore. Attunement also plays a very significant role in the formation, evaluation and editing of life stories, especially at Layer I. If a child regularly has access, e.g. via proper visually mediated attunement, to a more mature brain, it's chances to come up with a constructive life story are increased dramatically. In this sense, attunement can take the form of information-extension and of co-authorship. This does underline, however, that the enormous power of attunement (a co-author could ruin your story altogether!) demonstrates our vulnerability and hence our need for safety/security of attachment.

Assistance in the creation of consistent life stories


As new experiences come in all the time, we all need to review and edit our life stories continuously. As part of growing in maturity, we may also need to review our life stories and align them more with God, and with the way He looks at situations. The whole issue of pastoral care or psychotherapy can thus be re-phrased to assisting a person in editing his or her life story towards a healthier one.¹⁸


An important aspect of this assistance is to give the person room to tell his or her story and, while telling, discover it more deeply, and get more deeply in touch with it. Important aspects are listening and attuning ourselves emotionally, standing next to the person in empathic attunement, helping the person search for

less than that a child may have one compartment of consciousness where daddy is sweet and caring and a separate one where that same man is a monster that brutally uses and abuses for his own gratification. The two experiences simply cannot be fitted into one consistent (child's) story...

¹⁶ This focus on 'editing' or 're-writing' one's story from a more realistic standpoint is a major quality of *Narrative Therapy* as developed by Michael White, David Epston and others.

See e.g.: M. White and D. Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, WW Norton & Co, New York, 1990.

One of the first articles I ever read on *Narrative therapy* and still one of my favourite ones is: Frank Baird, 'A Narrative Context for Conversations with Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse', *Progress – Family Systems Research and Therapy*, Volume 5, Phillips Graduate Institute, Encino CA, USA, 1996, p. 51-71; reproduced here on the **Accede!** website (www.12accede.org/FrankBaird_NarrativeSurvivor_Progress_PGI.pdf .

¹⁷ See Part I of this series (www.12accede.org/layers_and_attachment.pdf .

¹⁸ Note that this comes close to the major tenet of *Narrative Therapy* – see also note 16.

family stories, address specifics in the family culture, etc. The central role of listening is that it serves as a means of allowing for both self-expression and story-creation or -explicitation.

From *Narrative Therapy* I also learned that we can help one another in surfacing or creating alternative stories. And that it can also be important to 'externalize' (dis-own what had been drawn into self from outside) what does not belong inside, such as an erroneously/unrightfully 'owned' responsibility for what others have done wrong.

It deserves to be stressed that in this process, a person needs good role-models (and not just the outside; also the verbal and nonverbal interaction), as well as people who really stand next to the person in empathic attunement.

I often – sadly – observe that victims/survivors of violence or abuse often 'entertain' themselves with stories (e.g. TV-series, video's) of similar violence, abuse, human evil and distrust; stories that are in line with their own main story; not with stories that contradict or help to change/repair it for the better. Worry and distrust are thus engrained even deeper into their souls, especially at Layer I. We do better by watching consciously what we watch for entertainment ('watch what you watch')... By watching more uplifting stories of gentle belonging and the like, we help our brain open itself to, receive and prepare for a better, more healthy lifestyle.

A special, and often hard case: editing Layer I life stories

It appears that our behaviours are particularly led by our Layer I life stories. Yet, because these Layer I life stories are subcortical – and hence not directly addressable by conscious thought – they are often considered to be very hard to be corrected, if they are already recognized at all!¹⁹

For decades, both Christian counsellors and pastors, and cognitive psychotherapists have tried to correct or edit these Layer I life stories by addressing the will and by engaging the conscious mind. Most of these endeavours have failed dramatically. It is almost impossible to address or correct Layer I life stories via conscious – cortical – thought or the conscious will. It is like trying to repair a car's engine from inside the cabin (via the glove compartment or so), without opening the hood.

More recently, better informed scientists have tried to connect Layers I and II and/or I and III, and thereby tried to make Layer I cortically addressable. The group of patients or counselees for whom this was tried most fervently is those, suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder – a condition rooted in severe early trauma. One of the scientists working with this group a lot is Peter Fonagy. He and others had discovered that these people suffered greatly in the area of thinking about emotions – both their own and those of others. This concept was called *mentalizing* and soon this lack of *mentalizing ability* was taken up as the focus point of therapy. Mentalizing became seen as a bridge between the Layer I emotions and life stories, and conscious thinking processes at Layers II and/or III that could be influenced. If a traumatized person suffering from BPD symptomatology could learn to mentalize consciously, he or she could then implicitly change some of the subconscious Layer I life stories. Today this is seen by many in mainstream mental health care in the Netherlands as one of the most promising routes to help these people (Schema therapy is seen as another). Pretty soon, by disappointing results, ways were sought to address the unconscious Layer I life stories more directly. Some therapists, seeing the shortcoming of western cognitive approaches on this matter, advocate *mindfulness* for this purpose – a technique, rooted in eastern religions – as a supplement to a form of either Mentalizing or Schema therapy. As a Christian I cannot endorse or advocate such a route.

Fortunately, there is a third route, one that is both Biblically and psychologically sound and effective, to edit and correct Layer I life stories. As we saw before, Layer I life stories are formed by experiences. As Alfred Adler already noted in the 19th century, we often need *corrective experiences* to change our deepest guiding life stories. So, this third route would be to seek (and this can be a Layer II and/or III endeavour!) new experiences that will communicate to our deep brain parts what they need to change our Layer I life stories for the better.²⁰ If it appears, for example, from her behaviour that a person's Layer I life story says that in every situation, in the end, she will be all alone and left to herself, a powerful positive experience with the presence of loving others in a healthy community may bring change to that story.

However, in practice this often appears difficult to arrange. All the subconscious anticipation may be geared to circumvent and/or thwart this new experience, since it is so alien to the existing worldview/story. The woman with the story of utter aloneness may subconsciously do things that will keep others at

¹⁹ See the section on 'Layer I. life stories and the Biblical notion of the *flesh*', in the sequel, for a further note on this.

²⁰ See the earlier remark on 'watch what you watch' and improving instead of further deteriorating our own relational and emotional health.

bay or that will frustrate good willing helpers, to prevent them confusing her existing Layer I life story. Sometimes a long and gradual process is the best that is attainable. I have heard E. James Wilder talk about someone like that with a great distrust against other people to whom her counselors first gave a dog.²¹ The quiet 'faithfulness' of the dog, over a couple of years, then became a springboard to allow also a few trusted people to come a little closer. In such a way, a gradual breakdown of Layer I defence mechanisms was achieved, finally yielding a review and editing of underlying Layer I life stories. An often faster and even more drastic and more effective version of this approach, building on the intensity of God's loving presence, I will discuss in the section after the next two. First now something on two confusions I regularly encounter.

Layer I life stories and the Biblical notion of the *flesh*

I note that a lot of Christians easily confuse Layer I *life story* or *schema* elements with the Biblical concept of the *flesh* (Greek: σαρξ - *sarx*). The common element can be that both are accustomed to function in separation from God. They both can feel as a force that keeps us away from what we spiritually want. As an example: we may want to forgive someone who once abused us, but we feel anxiety and repulsion, maybe also anger, every time we are confronted with that person, because our Layer I story still says he or she is scary. It then seems to us that there is a force in us that resists the forgiveness that we consciously may want to give. Too easily some may say that this force is our flesh that resists the way of God and that we have to 'kill' it and just have to pull through by our will. As it will be clear, this battle will then endure endlessly, because our basic brain – the seat of our Layer I *life stories* – cannot be 'killed' like this. Because of the stress on 'good Christian (outside) behaviour' (as opposed to having a clean heart) in many 'Christian' circles, the rift between head (what we know consciously) and heart (what we really live from; including our Layer I *life stories*) is often so wide in Western Christianity. We then blame our body and emotions for this struggle (confusing them with the flesh, and similarly confusing 'spiritual' with our conscious mind), estranging ourselves even further from a vital part of ourselves...

However, there is a clear and big distinction between our *flesh* and a Layer I *life story*, even though both may at times seem opposed to what we spiritually want. For the *flesh* – a kind of false self, living in enmity against God and alienation from God – it is *characteristic* to go against God; the flesh must therefore radically be left behind ('killed' says Paul), by surrendering ourselves to God and deciding to live in union with Him (cf. John 15). A Layer I *life story* or *schema*, on the other hand, can be changed/edited to be more aligned with God's vision and to be more in open communion with God. The Holy Spirit is highly involved in this process – a process of Christian formation. This process has also been likened to evangelism in the sense of 'preaching the good news of Jesus – Immanuel; God with us – to all parts of our souls' (also the Layer I parts that still need to be 'christened'!).

Religious teachings and tension in or between inner life stories

Another issue that needs to be addressed here, is the role of other religious teachings in alleviating or increasing tension within or between our inner life stories at different layers.

Though it has been established that Christians generally experience less tension because they share in God's peace, sometimes Christians may experience more tension, because their inner worldview (based on their experiences in this broken world) is at odds (inconsistent) with the worldview of the Kingdom of God. This specially may happen in Christians who have experienced trauma before they knew Christ Jesus personally. There are even people who lost their feeble faith in God, because their experiences seemed to contradict what the Bible tells us about God. Believing thus seemed to cause more inner tension than rejecting God. This stresses the vital importance of preaching a gospel of *grace*!

It is good, to see that our experiences are acquired in a broken world that is at odds with God's purposes. In the Bible I see examples where people re-interpret their experiences, based on how they know God, in order to (re-)align their lives and their personal interpretation of experience with God's ways. Knowing how God can mourn over what goes against His purposes can be a vital ingredient in that (cf. how Jesus wept over Jerusalem that killed the prophets). His presence with us amidst adversity and grief – current or past – can be a comfort beyond understanding, as we will see in the next sections.

What does not do much good in alleviating inner tension, is to create enmity in Layers II and III on the one hand, against Layer I on the other. This often is the result of a teaching that confuses Layer I resistance with the flesh, and tells people to pull through by their will. Some good-meaning pastoral workers may have pushed 'forgiveness by the will' against signs of Layer I anger, or 'declarations of faith' against

²¹ Source: E. James Wilder, ...

Layer I fear. Sometimes a strong religious tendency urges people who experience resistance in their Layer I, to fight this all the more fiercely by taking a tough stand against it at the conscious Layer II/III. Obviously, this only increases the tension with their actual experiences at Layer I. At Layer I these people may then come to feel so painfully lonely and unsupported that they start to do 'strange things' (as observed by their 'religious' Layers II and III), such as self injury, dissociation, or a flight into addictions (if these roads are all blocked by 'religiosity' even a physical flight into *conversion disorder* – where the body 'takes the pain' – may be used as a last resort). A more graceful and understanding attitude towards their inner fear or pain or anger or whatever it is at Layer I, is much more helpful in this case. It can be so good, when we look upon the abundant grace of God and find in Him a way to reunite the layers, even when that seems to take a little more time than trying a 'religious shortcut'. This may involve asking such questions like 'why would there be such anger/fear/pain/... in my subconscious Layer I story?' The fact that Layer I stories are not verbal, does not mean they cannot or need not be 'heard' or 'listened to'; certainly they need this and with Jesus' help, they can! I see him do it (compare how He dealt with Mary, the sister of Martha when others accused her behavior on rational grounds, and how He wept with her – Luke 10:38-42; and John 11:1-44; 12:1-12). He certainly is more than ready to listen to and acknowledge our pain, sorrow, and unjust suffering and feel the pain, fear and anger with us! And the acknowledgement that we experience as soothing at the other layers when we are listened to, can be as soothing or even more soothing here! Then, in unity, the person can start to receive healing in all layers simultaneously.

A magnificent example of this can be found in Psalm 27. In the first part of this Psalm, David is describing a 'high' experience of intimacy with God and about the protection he experiences from God. The next part seems written by a different David, full of anxiety that God will forsake him. Until, in verse 10, he discovers (and acknowledges to his inner Layer I) that, indeed he had reason to fear being forsaken in the time when his parents still were his significant attachment figures (we know that when the prophet Samuel came to anoint one of David's father's sons, David's father put them all in a row before the prophet – all, except David, who was left out in the field with the sheep; a very clear sign of 'being forsaken' indeed!). That acknowledgement to his Layer I experience, then created the necessary peace to accept the rest of verse 10: that God is different and would definitely not forsake him. After that, his praise continues with increased 'depth' of experience (including Layer I), and with a prayer to be further taught by God (*at all layers*).

In stead of anger at his old-experience based Layer I fear, there was understanding and a gentle, fatherly 'education' that *acknowledged the validity of the old Layer I story* ('take care, you'll be forsaken again!') against the background of the *old experience*, and helped to remember other, new *experiences* ('language' that his Layer I could 'understand') that God was different, and would *not* forsake him!

The solution to becoming more 'Christian' in our behaviour is not to address the will to pull through against our heart (including our Layer I *life stories*, confused with the *flesh*), but a *change in* our heart and *in* our Layer I *life stories*. So, let us now have a look at how such a change can indeed be stimulated.

The presence of God / Jesus in our life stories

... **Jesus, the Author
and Perfecter
of our faith; ...**

from Hebrews 12: 1-3

(Greek: αρχηγος - Author, Pioneer, Originator, Leader)

(Greek: τελειωτης - Perfecter, Finisher)

(Greek: πιστις - faith, belief, conviction(s), trust)

True spiritual, mental, emotional and relational health needs internal consistency of the whole set of our life stories. But there is more. Apart from internal consistency, it is also if not even more vital that our life stories are in line with God's reality. If our life stories contain elements that are not in tune with God's reality, there will be tension with our very life goal and all true reality around us! Working with a life story that is inconsistent with reality – *as objectively seen by God only* – is like joining a game with a deviant set of rules. It will lead to tension with all of the environment and maybe even to exclusion.

Only God can provide us with the ultimate basis for realism and renewal. We absolutely need consistency with God and with Who He is, and we can be certain of His support in this. God knows that trust is a key issue here, and that it does not come easy when you have experienced trauma and adversities. As the above verse from the letter to the Hebrews says, He is at the beginning of our trust towards Him and He will lead and support us to the finish. In a separate document I have studied the Name and Identity of God. Essential in His character is that He reveals Himself as the Great and Unchanging One *Being Present with us*. God's Old Testament holy Name **YHWH** as well as Jesus' name **Immanuel** (literally: *God with us*) both reflect this notion very clearly. Any good and healthy worldview, internal story or

schema will need to start from that. However, most of our stories contain elements that are at odds with the presence of God with us. We may have encountered numerous situations in which we did not perceive God's presence with us; perhaps even situations that led us to conclude that He was definitely not present with us. So, we need to make ourselves familiar with the – so far less familiar – fact that God is indeed lovingly, actively present with us. This process has been called the *Immanuel process*.

There is so much to learn on this from the Bible. All through the Bible we encounter recommendations on how to do this. In the Old Testament, Israel is continuously commended to recognize and appreciate God's presence with them. Recognizing God's active presence and appreciating His presence are two important foundation stones. Appreciation for whatever we may have experienced as positive from God may be used as a 'pump' to stimulate further growth in perceiving His presence.

Another foundation stone, which we also encounter in God's dealings with Israel, is to remember and celebrate one's experiences with God's active presence. All the erected stones, re-named places, villages and towns, the yearly festivals, yes even the weekly Shabbath are milestones and act as amplifiers in remembering and celebrating God's presence with us. Fathers were taught to tell and re-tell the stories of God's active presence with them and pass them on to their children by that repeated telling of the stories (neurologically, there is indeed power in the repetition!). Children were taught to ask for those stories. Telling is remembering and remembering is telling. The same counts for celebrating, especially when it is done in joyful fellowship and cosy togetherness, like it was done in the festivals. Our nervous system is such that what is learned by repeated celebration in joyful fellowship is learned best.

In celebrating God's presence with us, we also celebrate His grace and love as demonstrated and manifested most vividly in Jesus' great atoning work. This has two sides: Only by receiving God's love and grace can we grow spiritually in maturity and become who we are meant to be. Only by His love and kindness in us and through us, can we reach that fullness of love that will be unattainable to the human soul on its own.

Another thing we do when we celebrate God's presence with us, is that we also celebrate God's loving reign and God's Kingdom. That implies that we subject ourselves to His will, and to His advice on our lives. As part of it, we will search for what will be wholesome and pleasing to Him (cf. Romans 11:33 – 12:3 as opposed to Romans 1: 16-32; cf. also Romans 15:16; Colossians 1: 9-14; even in the secular world – e.g. in Seligman's 'positive psychology' – it is understood that a life devoted to worthy goals and lived from values as 'good servanthood' and benevolence will in the end be more rewarding than the fame and riches of greed²²).

Healing by consciously involving the presence of God/Jesus in our life stories

God is the ultimate Source of corrective experiences that will change our Layer I stories directly! Many Christian counsellors have recognized and acknowledged that we need God's active presence on a daily, or rather moment-by-moment basis, in order to heal and grow in spiritual maturity. This has led to various prayer counseling approaches where the presence of God is acknowledged as central. It also led for example Leanne Payne and others²³ to advice what they describe as 'practising the presence of God' –

The People of God – this all-inclusive community of loving persons – are seen in the New Testament as "God's household, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in which the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22, niv). Even the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity beyond human history is portrayed: "Now the dwelling of God is with human beings, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev. 21:3, niv).

Jan Johnson,

Studies in The With-God Life [see note 23], p.50.

²² Recent English research at the university of Warwick demonstrated that even a simple psychotherapeutic course of £ 800 could make people more happy than a sum of money of £ 25 000. The scientists concluded that psychotherapy is 32 times more effective than money in enhancing people's well-being. From this, we should draw conclusions for our fervent search for growth in income (both personally and politically/nationally), the scientists say.

Source: Christopher J. Boyce & Alex M. Wood, 'Money or mental health: the cost of alleviating psychological distress with monetary compensation versus psychological therapy', *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, Nov. 2009.

²³ See, e.g.:

Leanne Payne, *Real Presence – the glory of Christ with us and within us*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids (MI, USA), 1995 (original version: 1979).

Leanne Payne, *The Healing Presence*, Crossway Books, Wheaton (IL, USA) / Baker Book House, Grand Rapids (MI, USA), 1989/1995.

growing in awareness of God's active presence with us, by communing with Him. This includes sharing with God what we think and our questions and appreciation, as well as listening to what God communicates to us through His Spirit in our hearts. Several other authors have suggested similar things. They all recognize the importance of incorporating appreciation/worship towards God and education on the character of God – including stimulating wonder about Him and His character (cf. Psalm 27:4 – “One thing have I desired of **YHWH**, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of **YHWH** all the days of my life, **to behold the beauty of YHWH**, and **to enquire** in His temple”).²⁴

In the middle of page 5 we talked about a main characteristic of trauma being that we are faced with a difficult situation with too little processing capacity on our own. The experience is too intense, too nasty, too inconsistent with our life story so far, to be processed well. Right because this is the core issue why we experience something as traumatic, the experience of God / Jesus with us, can mean so much for us here. His capacity is enormous! He has the overview and sees how there is life after the experience. Note in addition that Jesus Himself was not traumatized by the enormous suffering He experienced. That had to do, the Bible teaches, that He looked beyond the deep suffering that people inflicted on Him. He saw the great joy that His suffering would prepare for Himself, for God the Father and for millions of people (cf. Hebrews 12:2 (ASV) “looking unto Jesus the Author and Perfecter of [our] faith, **Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross**, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”).


“I refuse to accept the lie Satan has thrust upon so many of God's people today: that the Lord has stopped speaking to his people.”

David Wilkerson

Daily Devotional blog: Ever-Present Help, 4 Dec. 2009.

The Immanuel approach

The above is practically implemented by the **Immanuel approach** to pastoral counselling, as developed by Karl D. Lehman & Charlotte E.T. Lehman and further (from Shepherd's House) by E.James Wilder, Ed Khouri and Chris & Jen Coursey.²⁵ It therefore deserves some special attention here.

Jan Johnson, *Studies in The With-God Life – Exploring The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*; HarperSanFrancisco, 2005 (downloadable at: www.renovarekorea.com/documents/studies_in_the_with-god_life.pdf .

Jan Johnson, *Listening to God*, NavPress, Colorado Springs (USA), 1998.

²⁴ I am thinking here also of some songs by the much appreciated worship leader Brian Doerksen, who a.o. sings towards God (much in line with Isaiah 55:1-3):

*My soul is yearning for Your living stream
My heart is aching for You
All that I long for is found in Your heart
You are everything I need*

*You are the thirst You are the stream
You are the hunger living deep inside of me
You are the food that satisfies
You are provision for the journey of our lives
You are everything You are.
You are everything YOU ARE!*

²⁵ The official term ‘Immanuel Intervention’ is the intellectual property of Karl D. Lehman & Charlotte E.T. Lehman. See e.g. Karl D. Lehman & Charlotte E.T. Lehman, ‘Immanuel, Emotional Healing, and Capacity: Part One’, Enhanced Manuscript of lecture available on DVD/VHS by the same title, from October 2005 seminar in Bolingbrook IL, USA, 8 July 2005 (rev. 14 Oct. 2006), available at www.kclehman.com.

Karl D. Lehman & Charlotte E.T. Lehman, ‘Immanuel, Emotional Healing, and Capacity: Part Two’, Enhanced Manuscript of lecture available on DVD/VHS by the same title, from October 2005 seminar in Bolingbrook IL, USA, 14 Sep 2005 (rev. 25 Oct 06), available at www.kclehman.com.

Karl D. Lehman, “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, & The God Who is With Us” Part I: A Psychiatrist's Journey – A Brief Introduction to the Immanuel Approach’, web-article, 5 Oct 2007 (rev. 24 Jun 2008) at www.kclehman.com.

Karl D. Lehman, ‘Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and The God Who is With Us, Part V: The Immanuel Approach, Revisited’, web-article, 2 Nov. 2007 (rev. 26 Sep. 2009), at www.kclehman.com.

See also the following websites: www.lifemodel.org, www.thrivetoday.org and www.thrivingrecovery.org.

The essence of **Immanuel** – *God being with us* – in recovery and Christian formation is recognized widely.

E.g. Jan Johnson (in *Studies in The With-God Life* – see note 23, p.49) speaks of “*the Immanuel Principle of life*”. ‘Practicing the presence of Jesus’ is a central key element in the teachings of Leanne Payne at her Pastoral Care Ministry (PCM) Schools. Dutch trauma-counselor and international trainer Téo van der Weele sees the blessing with the presence of Jesus as a most vital element of pastoral care to traumatized people in his *Helping by Blessing* (also: *Powerful Peace*) approach (cf. his book *From Shame to Peace – Counselling and caring for the sexually abused*, Monarch, Crowborough (GB), 1995 / Importantia, Dordrecht (NL), 2001; ISBN 90-5719-038-9; more info via www.isarpac.org (Int'l) and www.zegenendhelfen.nl (Dutch)). Similarly, Dutch pastoral counselor/ trainer Corrie Sleebos independently recognized the power of **Immanuel** in pastoral counseling – see her Dutch web-article: ‘Immanuel, God verbindt zich met mij en ik verbind mij met de ander’ (Immanuel, God connects to me, and I connect to the other), at the National Pastoral Ministries part of the site of the Dutch association of Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches (<http://lspb.vpe.nl/documents/ImmanuelGodverbindtzich.pdf>).

Some key elements characterize this approach and the associated *Immanuel lifestyle*:

- Acknowledging, and then familiarizing ourselves with **the active presence of God with us**, possibly starting by connecting with former life episodes when we experienced something of His presence. According Karl Lehman himself, the approach “**Identifies the first, most important, number one priority item on the agenda as being with God.**”²⁶
- **The need for brain-training** (with someone who has the skills already), like **learning the skill** to re-experience one episode and take the consciousness of God being present with us, and some of the atmosphere, with us to another episode; thus connecting various experiences and integrating our life stories to one consistent whole.²⁷
- **Growing in joyful appreciation** for God’s active presence with us – either concretely experienced or consciously or intuitively derived from the fruits of His presence.
- The importance of **belonging** – including a relational heart-attitude where others are welcomed and not seen as problems.
- A need to have our **Relational Circuits** – a part of our brain involved in relationships and the enjoyment of those – **up and running** in order to be able to perceive the presence of God with us.
- The good effect of **telling others the stories** about one’s experiences with **the healing and transforming power of experiencing God’s presence with us**.
- The helper’s or facilitator’s **role** being that of **host**, more than that of therapist.

This approach starts by finding and remembering (going back in memory to) a time when we experienced God close to us – either an episode in or after which we felt He somehow was present (e.g. by the outcome) or when we really had a meaningful interaction with God. By remembering that with warm appreciation (the Bible talks about worship from a glad and thankful heart), we become more open to hear or perceive what God may want to communicate to us. Thereby, the past experience of God’s closeness becomes present experience of God’s presence once again. From that experienced closeness we can prayerfully explore other episodes, as God directs us to them. As intimacy and joyful communion with God increases, God may take us to re-visit episodes we formerly experienced as traumatic, as we previously – alone – were unable to integrate them in our life stories in a meaningful way. Now however, we can interact with God and ask Him to show us His soothing presence with us in that situation. The perceived and appreciated presence of God – God the Father or Jesus, *Immanuel* – makes all the difference in a situation. In this way, more and more of our experience will be aligned with God’s presence with us and with His goals for our life.

The concept of *belonging* plays a central role in the approach. God **YHWH** is a God of belonging. In all that we do and say we either stimulate or reject belonging – both for ourselves and for each other. The Christian community can play a vital role in modelling and in stimulating each other in receiving and perceiving God’s presence with us.

Crucial in the *Immanuel approach* is that the facilitator, counselor or pastoral worker serves mainly as a host(ess) providing hospitality, providing room one might say, for the counselee to interact with God. The metaphor comes up, where someone opens his or her house for the counselee and an international (travelling) consultant who is asked to come in for help. As a by-product, in doing so, (s)he also sets an important example of *belonging*.

Another important observation made by Lehman, Wilder, Khouri and Coursey in the formulation of the *Immanuel approach* is that the *relational circuits* – a part of our brain involved in relationships and the enjoyment of those – need to be ‘on’ (i.e. ‘up and running’) in order to be able to perceive the presence of God with us and engage in interaction with Him. When they are off, our self-reflection, attunement and mindsight abilities are suspended or seriously impaired, if not totally paralyzed. The authors incorporate a test to check whether our *relational circuits* are indeed ‘on’ and some exercises to get them ‘on’ when they are not.²⁸

the journey of transformation toward Christ-likeness is not impossible but actually quite realistic. The key is connecting with God, which helps us live an eternal kind of life here and now. Such connecting not only changes us but brings us that oneness with God described in Scripture. Without it, we are only half-alive.

Jan Johnson

in the website intro to her book: *Invitation to the Jesus Life*, on www.janjohnson.org/invitation_to_the_jesus_life.html

²⁶ K.D. Lehman, “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, & The God Who is With Us” Part I: A Psychiatrist’s Journey – A Brief Introduction to the Immanuel Approach’, web-article, 5 Oct 2007 (rev. 24 June 2008), at www.kclehman.com.

²⁷ Note that this skill is related to the skill of *Object Constancy* as acknowledged in Bowlbian development psychology as well as in *Object Relations* theory.

²⁸ More on this at www.lifemodel.org, www.thrivetoday.org and www.thrivingrecovery.org.

As we have seen in the previous articles in this series, processing of life events and experiences takes place in a hierarchical way, with each layer starting with the interpersonal side, where processing starts by copying the processing in a more mature brain of an attachment figure who is attuned to our mental and emotional state. As the core aspect of trauma is a lack of capacity to process the event or experience into a consistent life story, due to the absence of such an attachment figure, it is a unique feature of the *Immanuel approach* that we let Jesus be this ultimate Attachment Figure, Who is there with us, attuned to us, bearing our burden with us and for us. Therefore, a very unique feature of the *Immanuel approach* is that our actual experience with the active presence of Jesus in and through any trauma will dissolve the deepest painful aspect of the trauma at every cell, at every layer of our 3x2 layered hierarchical brain/processing model. A more profound healing and recovery process cannot be found...

The *Immanuel approach* is much in line with that of *Spiritual* (or: *Christian*) *Formation* (described by Dallas Willard and many others), the major tenets of which are summarized by David Takle as follows:²⁹

“Put briefly, some of the more important aspects of Christian Formation are:

- Learning to discern the voice of God
- Developing a conversational prayer life (instead of one-way prayers)
- Building a genuine relationship with God through interacting with him
- Rearranging our lives to make time and space for this relationship
- Learning to engage with the Spirit of God as a personal Mentor, allowing him to reveal our flaws as well as our new identity and his way of seeing us and our lives

This is the soil in which new life can take root and grow. Engagement with a Holy God is the only true source of life-giving transformation. This is not a cognitive achievement, or a carefully followed ethical system, but an authentic, experiential relationship.

Finally, we are not meant to learn this on our own. We must make this journey with others. We need to learn from those who have gone before us, who have built or are building this kind of relationship with God. We can then share our joys and frustrations with them and engage with God together as a community.

"May He give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better ... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you ..." (Eph.1:17-18 NIV)"

Or, under *Christian Formation* on the Life Model website (www.lifemodel.org/topic.php?rn=8):

“(O)ur main task is to learn how to engage with the Spirit of God in ways that are life-changing, so that we become more and more prepared to live out of the new heart that God gave us, and less and less out of our old life patterns and values. It’s a bit like trying to grow apples. If we tried to manufacture apples by assembling a pile of organic material and attempting to rearrange the molecules to make apples, we would find the process frustrating and the goal impossible. But if we plant the right kind of tree, water and fertilize the ground, and protect the tree against invading insects and disease, the apples will form quite well without our having any idea how the tree is able to do such a thing. So also with spiritual growth. If we learn to abide in the vine, we will discover that we can bear fruit that is qualitatively better than anything we could produce by direct effort.”

Much more information on the *Immanuel Approach* and related issues is available from the author of this article or from the following websites: www.kclehman.com, www.lifemodel.org, www.thrivingrecovery.org and www.thrivetoday.org (in Dutch: www.immanuel-pastoraat.nl (opening: end of 2009), www.stichting-promise.nl and www.12accede.nl). For (international) training opportunities in the *Immanuel approach* one may also visit these sites. In the Dutch speaking world (especially the Netherlands and Flemish speaking Belgium), the author of this article is available for training and advice.

²⁹ David Takle, ‘Introduction to Christian Formation’, on www.kingdomformation.org/article.php?a=formation_intro.

Summary and conclusions

On each of the layers of our brain and processing model, we form *stories*, *internal working models* or *schema's* based on our personality and our life experiences. We are in a quest for consistency in and amongst them, because we need consistency for healthy living and growth in maturity. Trauma can pose a serious threat to these stories, and to the consistency that is needed. Cognitive approaches fail at addressing the inconsistencies at the lowest layer, and the inconsistencies between the lowest layer and the higher layers. Some opposition to, or unfamiliarity with, God's ways that may be inherent in some lowest layer stories should be clearly discerned from what the Bible calls *the flesh* – a state of enmity against God, of the human heart. The latter should be renounced, while the former needs new experiences with God, to be and live in harmony with Him.

The active presence of God with us, made possible through Jesus and by His Holy Spirit, is the Source beyond comparison for re-aligning our stories at every layer. The *Immanuel approach* to pastoral counseling is an excellent way to help people receive and experience God's healing presence with them. It is a great relief to find out that God wants to be actively and attuned present with us in any situation, and help us to integrate each situation into a consistent life story that will also be consistent with our greater life goal, thus also healing trauma memories. This renewed story will also be in line with our new, Christ-like identity. All of this will help us greatly in our growth towards our goal, and set us free to live more from that new identity or 'from the heart that Jesus gave us', as E. James Wilder phrases it so succinctly.

More information or suggestions


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