

GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF:

Trust Your Convictions,
Live Your Faith

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This book is a memoir. Some names, characteristics and locations have been changed, events have been compressed, and dialogue has been recreated.

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*This book is dedicated to my spouse, Tamara,
who is the most loving person that I know.*

*I also dedicate this book to all people who live abundantly
with their chosen faith as a primary source of navigation, and to
those who respect the faiths of others different than their own
as fully and equally true and viable for living.*

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PREFACE

Getting a hold of yourself is about learning how to let go of what other people say, including the old “should” you’re ready to leave behind. Instead, it’s time to rely on your convictions, especially when it comes to your concept of spirituality.

Trusting your convictions in the spiritual realm leads you to greater personal and emotional freedom, allowing more joy in your life.

You will realize that you have your beliefs, and others have theirs, yet all of us are capable of living out those beliefs without infringing upon one another. This results in more peace in your inner spiritual world, the ability to live in harmony with others and to dwell in the grace of the divine—however you define that.

While getting a hold of yourself won’t free you from daily frustrations or a divisive and partisan environment, it does provide you with important tools to self-soothe amid differing points of view. Differences don’t have to be divisive. They don’t have to become “a thing,” unless you choose so.

Getting a hold of yourself is about learning how to let go of what other people say, including the old “should” you’re ready to leave behind. Instead, it’s time to rely on your convictions, especially when it comes to your concept of spirituality.

We always have new choices to activate peace and harmony, even when the culture can lure us into frustration, anger, and anxiety. When you’re able to get a hold of yourself

(or, as some people call it, sovereignty over your mind, heart, and thoughts), it makes all the difference in the world. To be in self-sovereignty, where the greater self is in charge of all the other parts of you is to be in harmony with oneself and the world.

Why trust me? I, too, was once embroiled in my anger and anxiety. Especially in the arena of faith and belief. I've had deep roots in various faith traditions, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Baptist congregations, and lifelong exposure to humanist and atheist thought—quite a wide spectrum. What was right and what was wrong with those institutions? My judgments made me even more spiritually insecure and in need of more confidence.

After years of study, various spiritual practices, and finding a community to support you can provide even more than you're searching for. While working with spiritual mentors, I learned the value of community. Our own-rooted convictions can help us live a holistic life, but I've found that it's so much richer with a community.

INTRODUCTION

As a child, my mother whispered to me in one ear while my father murmured in the other. The religious part of my upbringing came from my mother; the non-religious came from my father. My mother was more assertive about teaching me to follow in her path while my father was more passive, allowing me to slide along, occasionally letting me know he didn't subscribe to my mother's belief system.

Looking back, I only belonged to a spiritual community by default. My upbringing told me that church was the right thing to do on Sunday mornings, which I attended for most of my life. Fortunately, I had just enough of my father's doubt and disbelief to realize there were more ways to spend my time when Sunday rolled around. Did I feel a level of guilt when I didn't show up at church? Yes. But it wasn't until I was well into my adulthood that my convictions began to evolve and come into full relief.

I realized I could trust my truths about religion and spirituality, let go of the guilt, and live my life on my terms. It took me about forty years, or the majority of my life, to "come to my senses" about my spiritual life. This is why I am writing this book. I don't want you to spend your life always trying, but ending up in circles.. You can begin the process right now, at this moment. I will teach you how to use the wisdom that is already inside yourself, and to trust your own convictions, living them as fully as possible.

I am an advocate of lifelong learning. I believe ongoing personal, professional, and spiritual development has no substitute and can take us further along on our path to wisdom. This book encourages deep engagement with various

traditions. It is a wonderful companion on your journey of faith.

How can I teach you about living your convictions of faith?

Who am I?

Back to mother and father's tug of war and clashing sides of the belief spectrum. Although I'd managed to pull myself out of those competing universes from time to time, I later realized both parents were sources of truth and the right principles for living. One was as equally valid as the other. I also recognized many perspectives in between, to the right and left of them. I ended up being a mixture of many sources of wisdom, even creating some of my own.

I now consider myself a spiritual humanist, meaning that spiritual practice and study are vital to me, yet so are the works of philosophers, poets, scientists, and musicians. I maintain a broad appreciation for the life of the mind and the soul, regarding both sacred and secular paths that enlighten me. Personal growth is valid and life-affirming to me. In my professional life, I am a Unitarian Universalist (UU) minister.

I understand there are many paths in a life of faith. Most are long and circuitous. These paths cover a lot of territory, determined by the sum of the seeker's knowledge, the intention of their practice, and a host of other factors. Within most paths of faith, however, some seem to have reached a pinnacle of wisdom and experience, and often serve as role models for others who follow in their footsteps.

A Typical Faith Journey or Detour

Many people who aspire to live a happy and fulfilling life are rooted in some sort of spiritual community. They grow up listening to sermons about what makes one a good person or

what does not. The characteristics of good people are typically based on a certain belief system, meaning a person can't be "good" unless they promise to adopt those beliefs. Additionally, the culture around them communicates other sets of standards regarding what "success" looks like. Together, these beliefs and standards are what many people strive for.

The problem is that when you buy into others' beliefs and standards, you set yourself up for failure, disappointment, guilt, and shame when you fall short. The church and synagogue are especially good at perpetuating beliefs and standards, and insisting we abide by them perfectly. But none of us can do it. None of us! We must learn how to put those beliefs and standards in perspective to get a hold of ourselves. Otherwise, you'll find yourself constantly making faith detours instead of moving forward on your journey.

Dante's Story

The following story illustrates the circuitous route of two people whom I encountered in a Christian congregation. I'd like to emphasize that while these two examples have a Christian orientation, my aim is broader. These experiences could happen to people of any faith or religious tradition. And they do.

Regarded as a person of deep and strong faith, Dante walked down the aisle one Sunday morning and confessed to feeling distant from God, far away from the spiritual contentment he once had known.¹ He wanted to

¹ All cases are composites or fictitious and have been used with permission.

rededicate his life to the faith of his youth and his deepest yearnings. After sharing this, the congregation chanted their “amends,” acknowledging that they understood what Dante had been experiencing, supporting his rededication to his faith. Everyone smiled, beaming with joy, as the minister thanked God for wanting to turn his life over to Christ.

Here was a man of thirty-five years who was anything but centered and in the depth of his faith. I was astonished. How could a person who was so involved in church (indeed a spiritual role model) feel he’d slipped so far that he needed to start over from scratch? For a minute, I thought this was a put-on. But unwilling to judge him, I went along with his wishes.

On another occasion, a close friend, Debra, had made the same confession. Again, I was baffled. What was I missing? These were people who appeared to be giants in their faith. Yet, before the congregation, they expressed feeling disconnected from God.

Later, I asked Debra about her public assertion. She told me she’d lost her close connection with God, feeling her life was purposeless and meaningless. She felt as if she’d been doing something wrong that needed correcting. By rededicating her life to the church and recommitting to pay more attention to her spiritual life, she intended to regain what she had lost. She wanted to feel hopeful and confident again that God loved her and that she was living faithfully to her core religious convictions.

For Debra, like other devout people of many faiths, regaining a sense of “putting God first” in her life would change how she felt. By following God’s commandments and trusting

him in all ways, this was a shorthanded way of living prayerfully, studying scripture, attending services regularly, and participating in a faith community.

After some reflection, Debra and Dante's decision began to make sense to me. Something essential to faith development was happening in people's lives that hadn't been explained in typical Sunday sermons during that period of my life. The simple "trust and believe" formula wasn't panning out. There's a middle ground that people encountered once they began living out their faith commitments (which wasn't mapped out). So, when people found themselves in uncharted terrain, they blamed their lack of faith instead of their lack of training in how to maneuver life using the implements of faith. Simply said, they were stuck.

Though I first recognized this interaction between faith and growth in a Christian congregation (at the time I was training to be a United Methodist minister), I have come to see this as a universal pattern that spans the breadth of many spiritual paths. I hear similar groans now amongst my UU ministerial colleagues and parishioners. I have read about such patterns of faith development in various journals and newspapers, and see the pattern taking place in popular art-house films. It is all around us, but few see it.

I sense that people are: subscribing to communal beliefs, trying to incorporate them into their lives, falling short (as we all do at times) then, feeling bad about themselves and starting over again, knowing it wasn't anyone's fault.

We're all doing what we've been taught is right. It's human nature to follow the path of those who go before us—until—we find another path that suits us better.

I believe that you, and people such as Debra and Dante, deserve better when it comes to their spiritual lives. Everyone ought to be able to trust their values and convictions, even when they differ from their culture, or the synagogue, mosque, or church. If your beliefs happen to coincide with what you've been taught, that is fine, too. Just remember to trust yourself when you feel bereft or on shaky and unfamiliar ground. Perhaps it is about going deeper into faith, meditation, contemplation, or spending more time doing what one loves.

Years later during my work as a hospice chaplain, I encountered another type of spiritual personality—someone who spoke with deep confidence about his or her life of faith. This is a different type of story from that of Debra and Dante—a story of deep knowledge, wisdom, and a relationship with the powers of the universe. This personality was unflappable, even in hard times.

While working on my doctoral dissertation, I came up with a phrase to describe people who'd built well-developed faith. I called them *faith exemplars*. Their faith exemplified, or epitomized, a life filled with spiritual practices, sustaining relationships, and a supportive community of faith. While I still believe that description is accurate, it is too narrow for today's times. We need a different term that speaks clearly about self-transformation.

Getting a hold of yourself speaks to a process. Those with exemplary faith have gotten a hold of themselves, living life based on their convictions and values. Their spiritual practices are part of their inner and outer world, and they belong to diverse communities (cherishing relationships with diverse people) that nourish their spirit.

This book is meant to help people who are searching for a well-rounded life but do not know how to achieve it. Like

Debra and Dante, we all can turn our lives around by learning to “exemplify” convictions and values held so dearly, without the negative feelings so often attached to the process. As you love yourself inside and out, be sure to be patient with yourself.

More on Who This Book was Written For

Although this book was written for persons of various religious and faith traditions, it is based on my Unitarian Universalist (UU) faith identity. As a Unitarian Universalist minister who has served in congregations, both large and small, I have observed many members and friends living a tentative spiritual life. They thoroughly enjoy participating in the faith community and often make astonishing contributions, but often are unable to articulate their faith identity or their place along the spectrum of faith.

Many Unitarian Universalists are quite adept at expressing what they dislike about the religion of their youth and why they departed that faith. Their stories come bursting out, along with the bad memories. Yet, when it comes to speaking with the same passion about their current faith convictions, spiritual theology, or life philosophy, they are rather reluctant or timid. There is nothing wrong with this, even if one has no firmly developed convictions. Yet, the deepest hope is that being more intentional and secure about your life of faith—whatever it may be—will help you articulate your own faith identity with more ease and assurance.

I’ve learned that becoming secure in your faith identity is a complicated process, one that is not necessarily presented on a Friday night or Sunday morning, although one may find glimpses of it there. Realistically, it is a continuous process that happens over time. The more you are committed to

getting a hold of yourself and the more intentional you are, the more natural it becomes. This process is akin to a “lifelong learner,” a person who commits themselves to ongoing growth, achievement, and well-being.

I have found that readers of this book will be millennials or at the top range of Generation Z. In 2020, this would be a twenty-four to thirty-seven year old. In 2025, this group will be twenty-eight to forty-two years old. Although many women will read this book, I’m finding that more men are seeking new paths after following traditional religion and looking for more inclusive fellowship.

Men, do you wish you were more confident, wise, and fulfilled in your life? Would you trust your instincts and walk into a crowded room knowing what you say is deeply profound? Even more important, are you able to trust your convictions, your values, and lean on your own experience? These are the components that make up who you are. If so, then I suggest getting a hold of yourself.

This means stop worrying and fretting. At this moment, you probably have the foundations of a great life, leaning on your principles and your faith as your cornerstone. How-ever, trusting those convictions, putting them into practice.

SECTION I - WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE SUSTAINING FAITH

This section explains what it means to possess faith and be capable of withstanding the very forces in life that often break down our hope and sense of progression, leaving us despondent and searching for answers.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINING FAITH

When we use the term *faith*, we are referring to a gift from the Spirit of Life, a gift to humanity that is developed through spiritual practices and ongoing relationships often formed in your family, religious or spiritual communities, and indeed, wherever you find yourself. This spiritual gift shapes the course of your life and guides you in yielding actively to a transcendent source whose presence and promises will bring hope to your life. This is our definition in the most general terms, describing what people aspire to in their spiritual journey. I believe that we are born with a survival instinct that we inherently trust to lead us forward. This nascent faith grows as we intentionally attend to the components of faith as we conceive them. You might consider such intention as a minimum requirement, or baseline of action, for a conscious, well-lived life.

But when we speak of a deep, sustaining faith, the emphasis shifts from *the knowledge of* faith to the *capacity to use* faith to meet life's ongoing challenges. People who possess this use their faith actively. For them, faith is more than a dormant set of beliefs and convictions. It is something that propels them forward and activates their desire to live fully each day. Such people intuitively know that the future is open-ended and full of mystery, surprise, and things they couldn't have anticipated. Yet they are confident that they will get through it, and, if nothing else, be able to withstand, or take on, finishing each day with productive outcomes.

An example can illuminate how faith can emerge over a brief period and begin taking hold in a person's life. A parishioner named Janice had gone through a difficult divorce, and two years later she came to see me. For her, losing her marriage, significant relationships, and most of her material possessions resulted in starting all over in many areas of her life, especially with her faith journey. At times, she felt she'd abandoned all she believed in by going through with the divorce. Her dream of being a devoted wife who answered the sacred call to married life, her obligation to teach her children lessons of faith, and most importantly, living out her most cherished spiritual values in a community of faith, meant, to her, that she was no longer living a meaningful life.

During our time together in pastoral counseling, I offered Janice a space to reflect upon how her faith may have sustained her over the previous two years following her divorce. It turned out that she was agnostic and had cultivated a practice of reading poetry in the morning online. She began remembering how her occasional yoga practice had put her in contact with her inner strength and kept her in touch with people she enjoyed seeing. Gradually, she began pulling together the various threads of faith that her identity had slipped below the radar but were still active. By the end of the sessions, she emerged with a resolution that, indeed, her faith life was still alive and sustaining her. Though her losses were real, and nothing could bring them back, Janice gradually regained her confidence in herself and began creating a new plan for her future. This would include reestablishing important relationships, starting new ones, and significantly, revising her self-image as a divorced woman. One with more life ahead of her than before. She was more confident than ever that her faith (agnosticism) was sufficient to guide her forward.

Like Janice, people who have a hold of themselves grow to know instinctively, by practicing spiritual disciplines, that they can trust the living spirit's promises and depend on sustenance from their faith community.

Several qualities contribute to this faith perspective:

- a positive outlook on life
- the ability to deal with the struggles of life
- maintaining a non-anxious presence
- and creating a future vision

Let us examine each of these in detail.

A Positive Outlook on Life

I particularly remember meeting a "faith giant" named John. Prior to entering the nursing home, the attending nurse and physician alerted me that the patient, John's mother, was fading quickly. I entered the room, hoping that someone from the family would be present so I could learn about the patient and offer appropriate pastoral care. But I hadn't prepared myself for the powerful force awaiting me in the room. The patient's son, John, was standing at the bedside looking at his mother. After I introduced myself and asked how he was holding up, he responded astounded with joy, "I'm doing fabulously!"

I was taken aback and asked him how he could be so enthusiastic in light of his mother's approaching death. He said, "Because I know God!" He went on to describe his faith journey with an amazing lack of reticence. He was not only positive, but he also radiated confidence that confirmed his faith stood at the center of his life and his mother's. While listening to John's testimony, I couldn't help but wonder if he

were in some form of deep denial by not acknowledging his mother's death. After more conversations, it emerged that his mother had, indeed, lived a long and fulfilling life, and through a slow grieving process he had accepted that her end time had come. He remained unwavering in his conviction that his faith would sustain him as he contemplated the meaning of his mother's death and his life ahead without her.

This positive outlook drives the faith-based attitude towards life that "God will work it out." It signals the deep-seated conviction that whatever happens, we can trust the spirit to guide the situation. People who have a hold of themselves approach life realistically and without the grandiose expectations that characterize many pie-in-the-sky faith paradigms. As scripture reminds us, "The rain falls on the just and unjust." There is no rhyme or reason for either occurrence, so it is wise to be prepared for either outcome.

Exemplary faith has a quality similar to the power of positive thinking, an outlook pioneered by Norman Vincent Peale. But mature faith, while hoping for the best, acknowledges a range of outcomes. Assuming a can-do attitude adds a touch of lightness to faith. We need not be deeply serious all the time to have extraordinary faith.

When I first began encountering examples of strong faith in the hospice setting, their positive outlook and sunny disposition were stunning and intriguing. Most other patients and families were subdued in their emotional expression and the prevailing atmosphere was quiet, low-key, with a rather severe undertone. After I spent more time there, it seemed that this limited range of feelings and mental dispositions had dampened the mood and outlook of the dying patients. This way of being was understandable. After all, many patients and families were simply not in the frame of mind for much more

than resignation or despair.

Dealing With the Vicissitudes of Life

In the story above, John's positive demeanor, even in the face of death, demonstrates another capacity that arises from sustaining faith: the ability to face life's difficulties head-on. M. Scott Peck's famous opening sentence from *The Road Less Traveled* is "Life is difficult." Once we realize this, he argues, that fact no longer matters. Harnessing the capacity to yield and depend on the gifts of transcendence is so needed when confronting death and dying. This means gathering the strength and trust to keep moving forward when uncertainty, despair, and possible gloomy outcomes litter the landscape of life.

Having sustained faith means knowing that life is made up of both joyous occasions and disheartening difficulties. For one thing, human decision-making is faulty, and many outcomes do not work out as planned. With an error in judgment here and there, the best plans may fall apart. Any half-hearted baseball fan knows that even the best hitters have a batting average under .300; indeed, managing three out of ten attempts to connect with the ball is considered excellent. In the life of faith, we hope for better than a .300 batting average, but we understand that the average may represent a best-case scenario. Exemplary faith prepares people to effectively manage their lives and personal affairs, even when the odds are low. A low batting average does not mean that God's gift of faith has failed us or that we have failed to live out our faith commitments. It only means that normal life has its ups and downs and we must continue to march on.

Immature faith often does not hold up under similar circumstances. You may recall the early days in your life of

faith, usually characterized by a decision to “wake up” from a former way of living or existing in the world. For example, a person encounters a Buddhist spiritual teacher and is prompted to explore what it means to become Buddhist. We might call this a “conversion experience.” Early on in this journey, the newly-minted Buddhist decides to follow the eightfold path and devote some time each day to meditation. She may incorporate reading scriptures from the Gita into her daily routine. As these changes become routine, life will gradually expand as she sees her daily experience through a new lens of Buddhist teachings. Over time, she will begin interpreting her life through this new faith. And with the help of her teacher, her faith shall grow and begin solving problems with her new spiritual knowledge.

This move to explore a new faith in itself represents a significant milestone. To get there, typically we’ve passed through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood—when we relied on life and faith experiences passed down from your parents, peers, and institutions, such as schools, houses of worship, and universities. As the faith theorist James Fowler makes clear, in these earlier stages of a faith journey, our concept of faith and meaning-making relies heavily on “External authority.” In the earlier stages of the faith journey, people may treat difficult life situations as existential crises that may deflate their faith all together, where their faith had always been seen as a protective shield against life’s circumstances. When things do go wrong, those with undeveloped faith are more likely to turn against, rather than turn within themselves and to others for strength. They may view themselves as bad people or being unworthy of that transcendent love. In contrast, exemplars understand the world is as it is, meaning that some things will not end in our

favor no matter how hard we pray, meditate, or trust in the divine. But that is the nature of life and not the result of our personal failings.

Faith increases as a result of an intentional life—from the inside out. I call it “Inside out” because, as Fowler notes, an “Internal locus of authority that predominates” in our world resides at this level of faith. In other words, we rely on our own sense of calm, assurance, and confidence, not necessarily attending to the events of the world. We can be steadfast in our beliefs and not weighed down by the world. For those in sovereignty and high spirits (no matter what is going on) their high vibration reverberates good things back to them. Those who are always complaining or in fear will encounter exactly that in the outside world. Though world events may prompt us to reexamine our core narrative, the foundation of exemplary faith stands strong because it originates from within us.

Non-anxious Presence

In pastoral counseling circles, the term *non-anxious presence* refers to a caregiver’s ability to remain calm amid volatile family systems. The purpose, says Rabbi Edwin Freidman in his seminal work, *Generation to Generation*, is “To take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being. It can be measured by the breadth of one’s repertoire of responses when confronted with crisis.” This manner of being is important because conflicts and crises are always looming, especially for individuals, families, and communities of faith where the constellation of personalities often induces anxiety. In anxious systems, homeostatic forces maintain anxiety by resisting change. When mature personalities emerge to resolve crises, less mature

personalities tend to resist such change, and instead, act to bring the system to a state of lower functioning to maintain balance.

For example, a client, Derrick, reported going home for a family reunion. Upon his arrival, an aunt who had been central to the family system became deathly ill. Many family members were upset over the aunt's inability to participate in reunion activities. Some lobbied to cancel the entire event to stay with her at the hospital. Derrick, like many of the others who had traveled several hundred miles to be at the reunion, recognized the importance of standing up to his family during this emotional meltdown. He chose to exert leadership. He reminded key family members of their collective triumphs in the past, and how God had helped them weather many storms. Eventually, the emotional climate of the family began to calm down (and function less anxiously) and the planned events went on. The family revised a schedule to make sure the aunt received proper care and attention.

Had Derrick not maintained a non-anxious presence in the midst of the family upheaval, more relational damage may have resulted. For example, I have seen families (who professed deep trust in God's benevolence) completely abandon their sense of religious community and spiritual practices in the face of hardship. Family members have turned against one another—even the children against their parents. Derrick's resolve to take responsibility for himself (his thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to those around him) enabled him to continue creating the narrative, or story of his faith, that he had previously chosen for himself. Moreover, his faith was "at the ready," capable of stimulating change within the family system at the moment it was needed.

People with mature, sustaining faith can expect to be

challenged to forgo their calm demeanor by characteristically anxious people—as Derrick was challenged by his family. There will always be situations that call us to take a stand as a result of our faith experience and to maintain our serenity. The person able to remain calm, stable, and endure life's challenges is more likely to develop mature faith.

Howard Thurman offers us a mindset to hold on to the inner calm needed throughout life: "Man's journey is hazardous because the world in which he lives is grounded in order and held intact by an inner and irresistible logic, by laws that, in one vast creative sweep, encompass the infinite variety of the universe and give life its stability, but at the same time make living anywhere, at any time, a dramatic risk for any particular unit of life." By adopting this way of seeing the world, we can be less anxious. That is, by acting "as if" Thurman's prescription is true, as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, we can try on this mindset for ourselves. You may ask, "Why would I want to adopt the practices of AA?" One, because it has proven to produce the desired results, and two, because many consider AA's practices a form of secular spirituality.

Future Vision

"Where there is no vision, the people perish, but happy is the one who heeds instruction." (Proverbs 29:18). A life without vision is likely to be unhappy, unfulfilling, and enmeshed in despair. With vision, with a goal in sight, the human animal is driven into the future. Vision is the fuel for pursuing our passion giving our lives meaning. In this sense, vision is that thing "hoped for" found at the core of faith when people have "taken a hold" of themselves.

A gold miner digging in the earth for a vein of gold

imagines himself digging and digging, and finally finding that sweet spot. Until he finds it, he is motivated by the vision of success. He envisions the joy that he'll have, the fame and fortune accompanying his feat, the pleasure that he'll feel, and of course, a more prosperous life. Each of these components engenders in the miner a vision of a better life, one filled with more purpose than his present situation. The faith journey is similar.

The spiritual practices and relationships that make up the faith process are similar, with each chisel of the rock being akin to a practice that strengthens our faith. We're not certain that we'll discover a nugget, but we continue as if we are determined. Those growing in the life of faith imagine themselves living better with a deep, resilient faith than without it. Therefore, they apply themselves daily to their tasks, while ensuring that their vision becomes a reality. Their vision is filled with images of realizing the holy promises of a life transformed.

Their vision is filled with images of realizing the holy promises of a life transformed.

Each of these qualities, like "fruits of the spirit," develops over time as a person makes their way through life. In many cases, these personality traits develop without direct, conscious effort. While individuals may consciously attend to their spiritual lives, they are not thinking "This will lead me to become an exemplar." They are merely following their own disciplined path or one that they inherited from others because that helps them accomplish the future they envision.