Living the Teachings - A new concept in Urantia study groups

by Larry Mullins

"HI ABITS WHICH FAVOR RELIGIOUS GROWTH embrace cultivated sensitivity to divine values, recognition of religious living in others, reflective meditation on cosmic meanings, worshipful problem solving, sharing one's spiritual life with one's fellows, avoidance of selfishness, refusal to presume on divine mercy, living as in the presence of God." (The Urantia Book, p. 1095)

Several years ago my wife, Joan, and I began meeting with a small group of kindred spirits to explore the process of more effectively living the teachings of Jesus as revealed in *The Urantia Book*. The commonality of such a group is simply a mutual desire for religious growth—and its mission is to support members in their efforts to actualize their spiritual potentials. As a member of this *Living the Teachings* group, after a year or so, I noticed that something was beginning to happen to me. I began to discover what seemed to be a new and unfathomable kind of love. I began to learn that if we understand and appreciate our spiritual brothers and sisters, we will actually learn to love them. I was to discover that this love will increase over time to a degree that I could have scarcely imagined before experiencing the group.

There are challenges in starting a group like this. A *Living the Teachings* group represents a unique design process, you must be very careful how you go about forming one. Therefore, I will offer you the knowledge we gained, and perhaps enable you to avoid some of the mistakes we made. There is no real model to follow, it is not like AA, nor like encounter or "psychological" confrontational groups. The purpose of a *Living the Teachings* group is simply to provide an autonomous, safe place where a small number of laypersons can share their spiritual experiences as they cultivate the improvement of their inner lives.

A PLACE OF GROWTH – NOT SELF-EXAMINATION

Living the Teachings meetings are predicated upon the premise that (unlike most psychological methods) our approach to self-mastery does *not* require continuous and repetitive self-examination. Living the Teachings methods are not an attempt to take the place of, nor improve upon, the spiritual techniques of introspective Twelve Step programs. What we are suggesting is an initiative toward further spiritual growth, one that lies beyond healing, something that has perhaps never before been tried on a large scale.

"The three apostles were shocked this afternoon when they realized that their Master's religion made no provision for spiritual self-examination. All religions before and after the times of Jesus, even Christianity, carefully provide for conscientious self-examination. But not so with the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' philosophy of life is without religious introspection. The carpenter's son never taught character building; he taught character growth, declaring that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. But Jesus said nothing which would proscribe self-analysis as a prevention of conceited egotism." (The Urantia Book, p.1583)

A *Living the Teachings* group is dedicated to nurturing individuals who are engaged in the process of striving to live at higher and higher levels of confidence and love. To this end, those of us in the group share our inner lives, and discuss our personal progress (or lack of progress) in achieving inner successes. There can be no self-appointed "experts" in such a group. We do not give advice unless it is asked for. We share as spiritual equals, and we are united by our goals—not by our beliefs. A *Living the Teachings* group is safe, loving, nurturing, and more spiritually progressive than any group process most of us have known. The key element is a singleness of purpose, that of helping one another define and reach higher and higher levels of living.

Get kindred spirits – and then close your group

Begin with a group that contains individuals with compatible spiritual values and goals, and who are willing to learn from one another. Establish a time frame of minimum commitment as a group, say six months or a year. Unless everyone agrees on adding a new member—maintain a closed group. You will discover that a trusting, sharing group suffers from casual drop-ins or curiosity seekers. We have discovered that seven or eight people is about maximum.

Your group will develop its own flavor, and begin to have a life of its own. This group dynamic and wisdom will establish its own "rules," so to speak.

Creating the process

The process the group engages in is the sharing of our inner lives. After a moment of silence and a prayer, we begin sharing what we have experienced in our spiritual lives during the previous week. We may talk about our failures or successes in living at our highest, our progress in prayer and meditation, or a troublesome problem. This group sharing is casual, there are no individual time limits. Sharing takes about an hour or so of our two hour meeting. We do not rush it.

The important thing is to make the ambiance of the meeting loving, safe, and fun. Our meetings have spiritual goals and use spiritual methods. We found it best to avoid much psychological theory. Guided meditations, which we use at the end of the meeting, are uplifting and fresh, using wholesome images and symbols to stimulate the creative imagination and facilitate spiritual communion.

We have a rule that we are not to interrupt anyone who is talking. This has required, at times, the use of a "talking stone" which is passed from member to member. Only the person with the stone can talk. Again—we do not offer advice after someone speaks unless it is specifically asked for. We do not critique the views of someone. "Cross talk" is not encouraged. (Cross talk is a give and take conversation that develops between two members while the rest look on.)

The principle here is that we are all spiritual equals.

We are experts in only one person's inner life, our own. Each individual must feel safe to speak without fear of a subtle, judgmental response. Of all the provisional "rules" we suggest, the "no advice or evaluation of our comments unless requested" is the most important. The rest of the structure of the meeting depends upon who is leading it. If you use a leader, alternate each week, unless a topic is carried forward and the group agrees to keep the same leader.

Problems and problem members

This kind of spiritual dialogue is not for everyone. Some people don't like to share their inner lives and are embarrassed to do so. Although we all have in common certain deep spiritual hungers and longings, most of us are conditioned to avoid discussion about them; it is virtually a "forbidden dialogue." For this reason, if there is not a good "fit" for a member with the group, it is better to let this individual go and perhaps form his or her own group along the lines they like. Limited, closed groups make membership precious, and each member of a group should wholeheartedly participate, or make room for someone else.

Great care must be taken in forming the initial group, because a difficult person can virtually paralyze progress. The root cause for such an individual's behavior may be a different agenda, and harbored competitiveness or dislike for another member, different values, and other similar factors. Expelling a member from a spiritual group can be very difficult. Group solidarity is based upon loyalty, fairness, tolerance, and love. However, there is such a thing as the tyranny of the minority, and it is relatively easy for someone who is less than sincere to take advantage of the group's broad latitude. So, better to choose members very carefully than to deal with a problem member later on.

Learning to love one another

"In physical life the senses tell of the existence of things; mind discovers the reality of meanings; but the spiritual experience reveals to the individual the true values of life.

"These high levels of human living are attained in the supreme love of God and in the unselfish love of man. If you love your fellow men, you must have discovered their values. Jesus loved men so much because he placed such a high value upon them. You can best discover values in your associates by discovering their motivation . . . If once you understand your neighbor, you will become tolerant, and this tolerance will grow into friendship and ripen into love." (p. 1098)

While I had understood the above statement in an intellectual way, before our group process I had not *experienced* it—at least not on the level that the group seemed to nurture. The group dynamic is a socialization of the concept of personal religious experience. The group dynamic works, provided the individuals who participate are kindred spirits—that is they share the same values.

Jesus' dynamic ideals as blueprints for discussion

It can be a very trying experience if you gather a group of six or seven people, and they complete their "sharing" with very brief statements. This experience is common in the early stages of the group's life. Therefore, it is wise to prepare several suggested discussion areas. We often turn to Jesus' cardinal features of the gospel:

"The Master on this occasion placed emphasis on the following five points as representing the cardinal features of the gospel of the kingdom:

1. The pre-eminence of the individual.
2. The will as the determining factor in man's experience.
3. Spiritual fellowship with God the Father.
4. The supreme satisfactions of the loving service of man.
5. The transcendency of the spiritual over the material in human personality.

This world has never seriously or sincerely or honestly tried out these dynamic ideas and divine ideals of Jesus' doctrine of the kingdom of heaven." (p. 1863)

Each of these cardinal features provides an abundant number of topics. Keep in mind that it is not the purpose of the group to discuss theory, but rather to share personal experience.

Without the help and support of our group, publishing my recent book, *The MetaValues Breakthrough* (Morgan James Publishing), would have been virtually impossible. My book is based on Jesus' five cardinal features of the Kingdom of Heaven. For the group itself generates dynamics that energize and define some mysterious "missing" factor for me; one that makes the journey on the "service trails" one of increasing joy and grace.

What we are learning – rewards of a Living the Teachings group

We are learning that the ultimate prize is somehow to be found within the mystery of personal peace. Not peace in the sense of a negative avoidance of conflict, but rather a dynamic kind of peace that signals the end of inhibition and tentativeness. For, although we started out many years ago in a quest for the tranquility, rest, and the healing power of God's peace—we did not reckon on the immense experience of love that lies beyond His peace.

Unconditional love is something we may learn a bit about (if we are fortunate) in how we love our parents. Then, we learn that the love for another person—outside of our family—is a greater love experience. Later, even this love experience will pale when we learn to love our children. Yet the most rewarding experiences happen when the love of God freely springs forth through us to bless other children of God. This ungoverned love becomes actualized—or real—for us to the degree we cooperate with its outward flow, and in proportion to our ability to share it with others. This is love that, indeed, lies too deep for words. ❑

Editor's Note: The Mullins will be presenting a workshop on "Living the Teachings" for the Heart of the Mountains retreat in August (see details on page 5).