
DEVELOPING AFFECTIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

SARA SHISLER GOFF

Abstract

Christian community is centered on the practice of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The purpose of Christian community is, therefore, to be a place where people who seek to follow the teachings of Christ are taught the skills for being in loving relationships with one another. This article argues that by developing the skills of affective competence, faith leaders will be better able to maintain and model healthy relationships. These skills of affective competence can be developed through intentional spiritual practices.

What Is Affective Competence?

Affective competence is a term that has only recently been coined. More people are familiar with the term *emotional intelligence* (EQ), which was brought into the popular lexicon by Daniel Goleman in his 1996 book of the same name. Since then, Goleman has written several books on the concept of emotional intelligence, which he defines as “encompassing the abilities of self-awareness, self-management, motivation, empathy, and social skills.” According to Goleman, the purpose of developing EQ is to be successful—successful in the workplace, in leadership, in relationship. As one journalist recently said in an article in the Huffington Post, “To put it in colloquial terms, emotional intelligence (EQ) is like ‘street smarts,’ as opposed to ‘book smarts,’ and it’s what accounts for a great deal of one’s ability to navigate life effectively.”¹ In his own words, Goleman says that if one is emotionally intelligent, “you’re

¹ Carolyn Gregoire, “How Emotionally Intelligent Are You? Here’s How to Tell,” *The Huffington Post*, last modified 1/23/14, accessed 6/22/14, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/05/are-you-emotionally-intel_n_4371920.html.

confident, good at working toward your goals, adaptable and flexible. You recover quickly from stress and you're resilient... life goes much more smoothly if you have good emotional intelligence."² Emotional intelligence is an important skill for clergy and lay leaders of Christian communities to have. However, awareness of emotions and integration of the messages they give, play a larger and deeper role in relational and spiritual well-being of pastoral leaders than simply helping them to be better managers.³ "Street smarts" is more than being able to manage emotions effectively in order to increase chances of success. Affective competence is important for developing the capacity and skills for being in loving relationships, which is a significant purpose of Christian community.

Most would agree that good pastoral leadership requires intellectual and behavioral competence, both of which are emphasized during ministerial training. However, comparable emphasis is not placed on emotional or affective competence, which can play an equal if not a more significant role in how leaders interact with others, their ability to minister to others, and their ability to sustain the sometimes difficult and challenging work of ministry. I propose that faith leaders need to develop the skills of what Dr. William Kondrath has termed *affective competence*⁴ through intentional spiritual practices, because affective competence goes beyond intellectual awareness of one's own and others' emotional intelligence. Rather, affective competence values emotions on par with cognition and behavior; it seeks to incorporate the messages emotions give to persons in terms of spiritual self-understanding and self-expression, in ways that lead to healthy and whole relationships with self, others, and God.

Through intentional spiritual practices, faith leaders can become more affectively competent. Some of the practices introduced here will be familiar, traditional spiritual practices

² Gregoire, accessed 6/22/14.

³ The terms *emotions* and *feelings* will be used interchangeably in this article.

⁴ William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2008), 77.

that Christians have engaged in for centuries to deepen their life of faith. Some will be new concepts, but their grounding will be similar to the purpose behind traditional spiritual practices. These practices can help faith leaders deepen and enhance their ability to be affectively competent, which matters for pastoral leadership.⁵ Being affectively competent includes being able to practice the skills of emotional intelligence while valuing feelings as much as thoughts and behaviors, and recognizing that emotions have a spiritual element. Clergy and lay leaders responsible for the spiritual formation and development of the members of their communities can model and teach these spiritual practices to their congregations, drawing special attention to the development of affective competence as a desired skill for Christian leadership.

Affective Competence versus Emotional Intelligence

The main difference between emotional intelligence and affective competence is that emotional intelligence places a higher value on cognition as opposed to affect. EQ focuses on what one thinks about emotions and what one does with the information emotions give. The theory of emotional intelligence and the social and emotional learning programs—SEL—that are used to teach emotional intelligence still focus on what people think about how they feel, rather than focusing on feelings and thoughts on the same level.

In contrast, affective competence shifts the focus from cognition to the emotions themselves. It values the dimension of knowing and learning that comes through feelings as much as intellectual abilities to reason and comprehend. The Rev. Dr. William M. Kondrath is the leading scholar in the work of affective competence.⁶

⁵ This article focuses on the importance of the development of affective competence in Christian leaders, but all people can benefit from developing affective competence for similar reasons and by similar methods given in this article.

⁶ Other than the work of the Oasis School of Human Resources, I have found no other works pertaining to *affective competence* as such. Based in

Kondrath defines *affective competence* as “the ability or power to integrate the affective dimension into our behavior, especially in the service of bringing about transformation or change.”⁷ According to Kondrath, “Because our reasoning skills are finely honed, we often rely on them to the exclusion or impairment of affective abilities.”⁸ Affective competence is the ability to understand and then apply the messages that emotions convey. The abilities to be in relationships, understand and appreciate differences, learn new things, and experience transformation are all enhanced when people are able to practice affective competence. Further, affective competence may encompass similar skills as EQ; its significance is that it emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of feelings.

Three main skills are involved with affective competence: self-awareness, self-management, and motivation and empathy. First, affective competence includes the ability to become consciously self-aware when one is experiencing a particular emotion, even and especially before one speaks or acts on it. “This is the hardest skill to acquire.”⁹ Second, affective competence includes the ability to choose how to express emotions and integrate the messages the emotions are conveying—self-management.

The affectively competent person will have the skills for discerning and understanding those messages. The

England, Oasis is a “peer-based learning organization inspiring and developing twenty-first century relationships for meaningful, responsible and sustainable action.” Oasis defines *affective competence* this way: “Affective competence begins with the capacity of the individual to be able to identify, take responsibility for and accept emotions of all kinds, along with the accompanying ability to redirect emotional states with awareness. It means enjoying and expressing positive emotions as well as noticing when these are clouded by distress to the extent that we need to take time out to release it.” See “affective competence” at <http://www.oasishumanrelations.org.uk/resources/glossary/affective-competence>, accessed 6/22/14.

⁷ Kondrath, 77.

⁸ Kondrath, 77.

⁹ Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), xv.

“Feelings as Messengers” Chart in Kondrath’s *God’s Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* helps when making decisions about how to behave when emotional, so one can achieve goals without damaging other people. “The purpose of any emotional episode is to help us quickly achieve our objectives, whether to draw people to comfort us, scare off a perpetrator, or some other of thousands of goals. The best emotional episodes do no harm to and cause no problems for those with whom we are engaged.”¹⁰

Third, practicing affective competence includes being aware of motivation and empathy. This means being able to “carefully use the information you acquire about how others are feeling. Sometimes that means asking the person about the emotion you have spotted, acknowledging how he or she is feeling, or re-calibrating your own reactions in light of what you have recognized. Your response will depend on who the other person is and the history of your relationship with that person.”¹¹

Most importantly, affective competence is the practice of spiritually integrating emotional intelligence within a theological framework. Affective competence takes the skills of emotional intelligence further, recognizing that attention to and integration of emotions helps people recognize the interconnectedness of all things, including connection with God. Affective competence also recognizes that human beings cultivate relationships for their own sake as opposed to profiting in transactional relations. Affective competence promotes a specific commitment to being in healthy, loving relationship with other people—the heart of Christian faith and communion.

Emotions and Affective Competence

It is hard to overestimate the importance of emotions in our lives. Emotions motivate all the important choices we make, and they can override what most psychologists have

¹⁰ Ekman, xxi.

¹¹ Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Bethesda, Md.: The Alban Institute, 1994), xvi.

rather simple-mindedly considered the more powerful fundamental motives that drive our lives: hunger, sex, and the will to survive.¹²

Being affectively competent includes understanding how emotions work and understanding the processes that human brains, bodies, and spirits undergo when people experience an emotion. An important part of affective competence is understanding the “how” and “why” of emotions when persons practice awareness and integration. An emotion or a feeling is a set of sensations that human beings experience and are often, but not always, aware of. Emotions are a process, “a particular kind of automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, in which we sense that something important to our welfare is occurring, and a set of physiological changes and emotional behaviors begins to deal with the situation.”¹³ An emotional episode can be brief, lasting only a few seconds, or it can last much longer. However, if it lasts for hours, it is a mood, not an emotion.¹⁴ “Emotions determine the quality of our lives. They occur in every relationship we care about—in the workplace, and our friendships, in dealings with family members, and in our most intimate relationships.”¹⁵ Our emotions give messages about what a person might need in any given situation. In responding to these messages, someone might act in ways that he or she thinks are realistic and appropriate, but emotions can also lead us to act in ways someone might later regret.¹⁶

Human nature has not made it easy for people to achieve conscious awareness of their emotions in the first moments in which they arise, let alone be conscious of the automatic appraisals that generate emotions. In fact, “it is nearly impossible for most people to ever become aware of the automatic appraisal processes that initiate an emotional

¹² Ekman, xxi.

¹³ Ekman, 13.

¹⁴ Ekman, 234.

¹⁵ Ekman, xvii.

¹⁶ Ekman, xvii.

episode.”¹⁷ Emotions can and often do begin so quickly that the conscious self does not participate or even register what triggers an emotional response at any given moment; the response is preparing the self to deal with important events without thinking about responsive action. Changes happen in parts of the brain that mobilize the body to deal with whatever has set off the emotion, by initiating “changes in our automatic nervous system, which regulates our heart rate, breathing, sweating, and many other bodily changes, preparing us for different actions. Emotions also send out signals, changes in our expressions, face, voice, and bodily posture.”¹⁸ People do not have control over these signals and changes; they simply happen.

In an emergency, a high-speed response can save one’s life, but it can also cause real damage if and when one overreacts. “We don’t have much control over what we become emotional about, but it is possible, though not easy, to make some changes in what triggers our emotions and how we behave when we are emotional.”¹⁹ Through hard work, people can develop *impulse awareness*—“becoming aware of an emotion-driven impulse before actions are taken.”²⁰ Most people are usually aware when they are feeling an emotion, but the level of awareness and the time and energy spent reflecting on that emotion, the cause of that emotion, and the messages that emotion convey can vary.²¹ Impulse awareness includes becoming aware of being emotional once the emotion has begun and the initial appraisal process is complete. “Once we become conscious that we are in the grip of emotion, we can reappraise the situation.”²²

It is important to acknowledge and recognize all emotions, even the more difficult and unpleasant ones. Some emotions are uncomfortable, like anger, sadness, and

¹⁷ Ekman, 237.

¹⁸ Ekman, 20.

¹⁹ Ekman, xviii.

²⁰ Ekman, 237.

²¹ Ekman, 76.

²² Ekman, 234.

fear, but “every emotion has a good purpose and exists within the psyche to prompt us toward wholeness.”²³ So-called negative or uncomfortable emotions can motivate one to explore and illuminate the stimulus that causes them and the messages they bring. When one feels shame, anger, or sadness, moving further into the depths of those feelings to find the core experience and message within them can help a person better understand why she or he is feeling those emotions and what to do with them. What matters most is the interpretation of the message that feelings give. Once people are more skilled in recognizing their emotions, they have more behavioral skills, choices, and practices to employ, helping them decide how best to act on those emotions. Emotions can awaken persons to a process of discovery. They can “move us toward intrapersonal and interpersonal compassion.”²⁴

Triggers/Change

We are born with genetic determinates and predispositions. As we develop, we are influenced by our circumstances and the people that surround us. We adopt responsive strategies that help us survive and progress. Along the way, some of these conditioned habits of mind, emotion, and behavior become helpful, and some become harmful. Some are our virtues, and some are our sins.²⁵

Paul Ekman discusses nonverbal behavior, encompassing facial expressions and gestures in *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*. Ekman explains that emotional triggers are learned, either in long-term or short-term ways. Some of them are inherited products of evolution; others are learned experiences from individual lives. Once an emotional response has been triggered, one can consciously realize that

²³ Karen McClintock, *Shame-Less Lives, Grace-Full Congregations* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2012), 6.

²⁴ McClintock, 18.

²⁵ Renee Miller, *Strength for the Journey: A Guide to Spiritual Practice* (New York: Morehouse, 2011), 5–6.

one need not continue to be emotional even though the emotion itself persists. Awareness, in this respect, provides greater freedom because it offers a wider range of choices for conscious responses to emotional states.

Human brains are wired to establish emotional triggers so that persons can learn from their experiences and quicken their reaction times. When an emotional trigger becomes established, new connections are also established among a group of cells in the brain.²⁶ Further, that connection then becomes permanent. “However, we can learn to interrupt the connection between those cell assemblies and our emotional behavior.”²⁷ The trigger will still set off the established cell assembly, but one can interrupt the connection between the cell assembly and emotional behavior through practice. One may experience the emotion of being afraid but can choose not to act as if he or she is afraid. One can also learn to break the connection between the trigger and those cell assemblies so the emotion is not triggered. The cell assembly will always remain, however, and the potential to reconnect the trigger will always be there. During times of stress, it is possible that the trigger will again become active, but under normal circumstances, the connection can remain broken.²⁸

The goal is not to turn off emotions. Ekman claims that even if we could “turn off our emotions completely for a time, that might make matters worse, for the people around us might think we are detached, or worse, inhuman.”²⁹ He goes on to say:

To experience our emotions, to care about what happens while behaving in a way that we and others do not consider to be too emotional, can sometimes be extremely difficult. And some people have just the opposite problem: they feel the emotions, they care, but they do not express them in the way others expect, or they do not express them at all; people

²⁶ Ekman, 43.

²⁷ Ekman, 39.

²⁸ Ekman, 43–44.

²⁹ Ekman, 43.

think they are overcontrolled. We don't choose how we look and sound or what we are impelled to do and say when we are emotional any more than we choose when to become emotional. But we can learn to moderate emotional behavior we would regret afterward, to inhibit or subdue our expressions, to prevent or temper our actions or words. We can also learn not to be overcontrolled, appearing unemotional, if that is our problem. It would be even better still if we could learn how to choose the way we feel and choose how to express our emotions so that we could express our emotions constructively.³⁰

What Ekman describes as "constructive emotional behavior" is akin to what Kondrath describes as affective competence. Ekman describes constructive behavior this way: "Our emotions must be in the right amount, proportional to the event that called them forth; they must be expressed at the right time, in a way that is appropriate to the emotional trigger and the circumstances in which it occurred; and they must be expressed in the right way, any way that does no harm."³¹

If one is to change what one becomes emotional about, then each person must know why he or she becomes emotional in the first place. A person must be aware of what triggers each emotion.³² To change these triggers, "The first step is to identify the hot emotional triggers that lead us to act in ways we subsequently regret. We also need to be able to identify whether a particular trigger is going to resist change or be more easily weakened."³³ Success is not guaranteed, though if people can become more attentive and aware of emotions as they are experienced, there is a possibility of behaving emotionally in constructive ways.³⁴ Of course, as Ekman says, human brains will resist this information in the heat of the moment, so people need to

³⁰ Ekman, 52–53.

³¹ Ekman, 53.

³² Ekman, xviii.

³³ Ekman, xix.

³⁴ Ekman, xix.

practice reminding themselves that when they become emotional, they will find it harder to bring into awareness other information that might counterbalance the stimulus that is causing the emotional response. This process is what it means to practice developing affective competence.

The second step for weakening a trigger is to keep track of how often a particular feeling occurs. Then, if possible, the third step is to avoid situations that trigger this emotion. If this avoidance is not possible, one can reflect on the situation and try to determine if this triggered emotion is appropriate to the corresponding stimulus. If one cannot determine whether the emotion is an appropriate response to the stimulus, one can seek psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, and/or meditation training, which will be discussed in more detail later in the article.³⁵ Awareness of response to emotions, understanding their messages, and when necessary, weakening unhelpful triggers are all part of practicing affective competence.

Ultimately, emotions are a gift from God. When ignored or devalued, human beings eliminate part of the experience of what it means to be fully alive. Emotions play a role in what people think and how they act regardless of whether they attend to them or not. Not paying attention to emotions can make relationships with others, including relationship with God, more difficult, full of tension and strife, and less authentic. Unawareness and inauthenticity make it much more difficult to practice spiritual disciplines and to grow into the image and likeness of God; these spiritual obstacles deter living in the divine life, which is primarily characterized as love in communion with others. Repressed or suppressed emotions block progression in the spiritual journey. In addition, affective incompetence can be extremely detrimental to one's ability to lead and nurture others in discipleship.

³⁵ Ekman, 48–49.

Pastoral Leadership and Affective Competence

A faith leader's capacity to be aware of his or her automatic response to emotions, and in conscious control of emotional responses, affects the well-being of the entire faith community.³⁶ In other words, a leader's ability to manage a healthy response to feelings makes an impact on others. "Rather than reacting to the reactivity of others, leaders with self-composure and self-awareness both exhibit and elicit a more thoughtful response."³⁷ When people claim their feelings and act with humility and courage, they can act assertively without denying their own needs.³⁸ "Equally important is leaders' awareness of their own emotional processes—to the ways in which they are working out their own broken attachments and unresolved losses."³⁹

A particularly Christian desire for growth and affective competence is theologically grounded in a call to follow Christ and be transformed into his likeness. "Church leaders first are followers, always responsive to God's call, presence, and empowerment through the spirit... the call to follow is the call to change."⁴⁰ Faith leaders lead by example, developing their own affective competence as they practice teaching others the way of Christ. "People with a good deal of inner pain and a deep sense of unworthiness frequently find their way to faith communities. Many of those enter congregational leadership in an unconscious search for personal and relational healing."⁴¹ Part of Christian discipleship is making that search for healing and relationship a conscious search.

Becoming more responsive to others' emotional processes is an important function of leadership.⁴² Faith

³⁶ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2006), 1.

³⁷ Steinke, 1.

³⁸ Henri J. Nouwen, *The Dance of Life: Weaving Sorrows and Blessing into One Joyful Step* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ava Maria Press, 2005), 156.

³⁹ Kenneth J. McFayden, *Strategic Leadership for a Change: Facing Our Losses, Finding Our Future* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2009), 42.

⁴⁰ McFayden, 6–7.

⁴¹ McFayden, 6.

⁴² McFayden, 60.

leaders must maintain healthy relationships with each other and with members of the congregation, not only so they can be effective in their ministry, but so that they themselves and those they serve may grow toward healing and wholeness. “Leaders themselves must be healthy if they are to nurture the health and well-being of a congregation—healthy as individuals; healthy in their patterns of relating to others; healthy in their awareness of what they can and cannot do alone; and healthy in managing their own anxieties in the face of change, loss, and grief.”⁴³

Over the course of evolution, human brains have evolved to be caring and to need care—to such an extent that they are impaired if the experience of being nurtured is lacking.⁴⁴ We need to care for others (and be cared for by others) in order to be spiritually whole. As faith leaders teach the practices of affective competence in their congregations, their communities become places where the importance of feelings is recognized and the spiritual practices of loving one another in relationship are deepened. In his work *Strategic Leadership for Change*, Kenneth McFayden says:

Leadership requires love: love for the congregation, for members and other leaders, and for neighbors near and far, and for God. Leaders participate in a web of caring relationship. Therefore, attention to relationships is a core function of strategic leadership. Leaders without love for each of these are less able to serve, at least in the tradition of the servant ministry of Jesus Christ. Leaders with love for each will be followed for a long time.⁴⁵

Many clergy and lay leaders are well practiced in integrating their emotional expressions with the situations and events they encounter, and their relationships and ministry are better for it. By recognizing the power in the skills of affective competence that they already possess and practice, and by more intentionally seeking to gain and/or

⁴³ McFayden, 60.

⁴⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 19.

⁴⁵ McFayden, 98–99.

strengthen their affective skills through intentional spiritual practices, faith leaders will see increased benefits within themselves. This will happen as they come to understand and appreciate their own emotions even more, and it will lead to improved personal and public relationships including with those with whom they minister. A substantially positive effect on their ministry will result as they model and teach these spiritual practices for developing and improving affective competence in their communities. Then more people will begin to recognize and integrate their emotions and the resulting messages for their self-understanding and relationships. Teaching ways to improve affective competence through spiritual practices, clergy and lay leaders provide space in their communities to name, claim, honor, and when necessary, release feelings as an important part of what it means to be a whole person created in the image of God. In short, practicing affective competence in faith communities is a way to practice loving one another.

Why Practice Affective Competence in Church?

Ostensibly, Christian communities are obvious sites in which affective competence should be fruitfully developed for at least two reasons. First, they are places where people espouse a commitment to loving one another as they love themselves. Second, the teachings and preaching of most churches support the effort to engage in loving relationships, individually and communally, amongst people and with God. However, while loving relationships are the goal, many experiences of interpersonal relationships within the Christian community are not characterized by love, but by the full range of negative emotions and experience that can encompass fallible human relationships. In other words, just because Christians want to be in loving relationships with God, themselves, and their neighbors, it does not mean they have been taught the skills and been given the support needed to practice living out these loving relationships.

Other than in psychotherapy, where else in society are people encouraged to learn and practice these skills? Because the church's calling is to incarnate the love of God in the

world, it seeks to bring that love into the broken places in human lives and more fully in society. In order to be able to bring God's love into those broken places, the church must have received and accepted that love in itself.

By teaching and practicing affective competence, the church has an opportunity to show that it has something special to offer people—a place to name and express their feelings in healthy and safe ways—in a time when many are wondering what purpose and relevance the church has for their lives. The church can be a place to hold people in their grief, to stand up and fight injustice from their anger, to celebrate with them in their joy, and to lead them into a sense of peace. The practice of helping people to name and understand what it is they are feeling and to be with them while they feel it is a sacred and holy act. The church can help people to know that it is healthy to feel sadness, anger, confusion, and even doubt. Not only can the church help people better understand what they are feeling, why they are feeling that, and why they are acting the way they are acting, but the church can teach people to engage in spiritual practices to integrate their thoughts, feelings, and actions to form a more whole and healthy life.

The church has the power and the opportunity to name the holiness of the feelings—the depth of relationship that they signify, the connection to something greater, the power of love in people's lives. Churches that practice affective competence can offer the experience of being welcomed into a community where a person's entire self is invited in—including grief, anger, doubt, confusion, apathy, and despair. For churches to become known as the places where people can go when they are at their worst, finding solace and space there, would be a huge gift to offer and an example of a community incarnating God's love.

Developing Affective Competence through Spiritual Practice

We are... created in the image of God. Each of us is like a seed that contains great potential to fully become the person God intends us to become. The

Spirit is given to help us evolve. As spiritual beings, we activate and affirm this Spirit through the sacraments, faith, devotion, and spiritual practice. Living through us, the Spirit becomes more and more part of our consciousness.⁴⁶

Spiritual practices are the things people do intentionally to strengthen and enliven their relationship with God, others, the world, and the self. Together with God's grace, these practices produce the fruit of redemption.⁴⁷ In her small book on spiritual practices, priest, poet, and writer Renee Miller says, "One of the reasons for doing spiritual practice at all is to help us connect what occurs in our lives with the reality of God's love in all the activities of our life. The dualism that is so prevalent in our culture and in our own lives all too often keeps activity separate from God."⁴⁸ What makes something a spiritual practice is doing it with the intention of placing the self in the love and presence of God. It is not merely an activity of personal development, but it inspires human awe and deepens understanding.⁴⁹ Spiritual practices have the effect of opening all of the self—body, mind, and soul—to growth and transformation through encounter with the Spirit.^{50, 51}

What follows is a brief introduction to several spiritual practices that can develop affective competence.

The Spiritual Practice of Conversion

In Christian thought, conversion has been considered less a spiritual practice and more a singular event in the life

⁴⁶ Miller, 5–6.

⁴⁷ Miller, 7.

⁴⁸ Miller, 90–91.

⁴⁹ Miller, 90.

⁵⁰ Miller, 91.

⁵¹ Just like anything experienced over and over again, our emotions become habitual. We are constantly learning new emotional behavior throughout our lifetime, and it is possible to unlearn, not just manage, our acquired emotional responses. With practice, Ekman says, moderating our emotional behavior becomes easier over time. This takes concentration, understanding, and intentionality—all skills of affective competence that are developed through practice.

of discipleship. When one experiences conversion, one makes a decision to follow Christ. However, continually being open to the process of conversion can be a lifelong spiritual practice. “Life is always ready to be our teacher, if only we are ready to learn. Most of us look forward to learning new things because God has given us a spirit of curiosity and we enjoy satisfying that curiosity.”⁵² People always can be converted to new understandings and new ways of thinking, which are necessary for learning new skills, such as skills of affective competence. Neuroscientists are discovering that human beings have the power literally to change the structure of the brain by how they think. Neural pathways in human brains grow larger with repetitive thinking. “When you expand the hopeful and positive neuronal structures in your brains, you diminish the flow of negativity, anxiety, and self-doubt.”⁵³ Renee Miller notes that the translation of verse 3 of Psalm 23 is usually God “leads me in paths of righteousness” or “leads me in right paths.” A more literal translation would say God “leads me in right oxcart ruts.” “This wise psalmist asks us to notice the ‘ruts’ we are in because those ruts make a difference!”⁵⁴ Both negative and positive thinking can create these ruts in human brains. Converting the self toward more positive thinking can literally and figuratively make more room in the brain for the Holy Spirit.

The Spiritual Practice of Discernment

Just as people must discern which thoughts and actions are aligned with spiritual health, they must also discern if their feelings are indicating messages that are aligned with their spiritual understanding of themselves. As feelings help people know what they want and need, emotional discernment better equips them to know what God wants and needs for and from them. “Practicing discernment means attending to what is truly important—and really

⁵² Miller, 89.

⁵³ McClintock, 167.

⁵⁴ McClintock, 167.

real—in ourselves and in the world.”⁵⁵ Through individual reflection and conversations with others, the spiritual practice of discernment invites people to pay attention to daily experiences and what they stir in them.⁵⁶ They can then reflect on what they have noticed, “sorting and sifting in order to understand what is leading to greater life and love and what is not.”⁵⁷ In order to understand what feelings are telling people, they must discern their meaning. Then they can “take loving action on what they have learned” and integrate a healthy understanding of feelings into actions, which is what affective competence requires. The only way that Christians know what to do and how to be in the world is through the process of discernment. Feelings provide valuable information for this process. “When done faithfully, discernment draws us closer to God, opening our hearts in ways that lead us to make more loving choices for ourselves and for our world.”⁵⁸

The Spiritual Practice of Attention/Awareness/Mindfulness

Emotions often begin without immediate conscious awareness. “In order for us to be able to moderate our emotional behavior, to choose what we say or do, we have to be able to know when we have become or, better still, are becoming emotional.”⁵⁹ By cultivating the ability to become aware of emotions early on, “we may be better able to deal with people in a variety of situations and to manage our own emotional responses to their feelings.”⁶⁰ Practicing awareness includes noticing and reading our personal feelings as well as others’ feelings. Increased awareness of personal feelings “increases the chances that we will know what we need or want.”⁶¹ As a person becomes increasingly

⁵⁵ Dorothy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl, eds. *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: Upper Room Books, 2010), 37.

⁵⁶ Bass and Briehl, 41.

⁵⁷ Bass and Briehl, 41.

⁵⁸ Bass and Briehl, 41.

⁵⁹ Ekman, 74.

⁶⁰ Ekman, xx.

⁶¹ Kondrath, 13.

capable of expressing her or his wants and needs clearly, others are more likely to respond in ways that are helpful. This awareness has the effect of “enhancing our relationships and the work we might engage together.”⁶²

Practicing awareness of emotions allows people to put the brakes on their emotional behavior and take a step back during the midst of feeling an emotion so they can determine what choice they want to exercise about their response. Ekman says, “This is more than being conscious of how we are feeling, it is another, more advanced, difficult to describe, form of consciousness.”⁶³ This choice is affective competence. It is similar to what the Buddhist thinkers call mindfulness. When people are mindful and aware of an emotion when it occurs, they can make the conscious choice to act on it, or simply observe, notice, and be aware of it. “If you can become aware that an emotion has begun to drive your behavior, you can consciously consider whether your emotional reaction is appropriate to the situation you are in, and, if it is, whether your reaction is at the right intensity and manifesting itself in the most constructive way.”⁶⁴

As mentioned earlier, emotions also generate a unique pattern of sensations in the body. Practicing awareness of emotions also includes awareness of bodily sensations. “Learning about the sensations, the bodily feelings that distinguished teaching motion, should also help to focus our *attentiveness*. Normally, we are consciously aware of the sensations, but we don’t focus on them or use them as signals to alert us to be attentive to our emotional states.”⁶⁵

Ekman says, “Most people are rarely so attentive to their emotional feelings, but such attentiveness is possible to achieve.” He believes “that we can develop the ability to be *attentive* so it will become a habit, a standard part of our lives. When that happens, we will feel more in touch, and better

⁶² Kondrath, 13.

⁶³ Ekman, 73.

⁶⁴ Ekman, 238.

⁶⁵ Ekman, 75–76.

able to regulate our emotional life.”⁶⁶ Experts in spirituality and psychology talk about the essential need for mindfulness, awareness, and attention in creating positive brain pathways.⁶⁷ The practice of attention as a spiritual practice helps to “take greater control of our minds and channel our destructive impulses creatively.”⁶⁸ Judy Cannato in *Radical Amazement* says, “If we do not cultivate attentive awareness we will miss the divine presence springing forth all around us in unrestrained beauty and power.”⁶⁹ When persons practice attentiveness, awareness, and mindfulness, they practice identifying emotional triggers, allowing them to take steps to weaken them. The goal is not to be devoid of emotion, but instead to have more choice with regard to how people will respond to and enact these emotions.⁷⁰

The Spiritual Practice of Active Listening

The ability to listen well is one of the most important skills for developing and maintaining healthy relationships. To develop affective competence, it is important to listen for others’ emotions. One can gain information about how a person is feeling by noticing facial expressions, body language, and most importantly, voice. The spiritual practice of active listening involves paying special attention to things like voice inflection and asking questions to confirm the understanding of what one heard, rather than making assumptions. “It is important to remember that emotional signals do not tell us their source.”⁷¹ The emotion signals given off by other persons often determine how one interprets what they say and do. Another person’s emotional expression can trigger one’s own emotional response, and

⁶⁶ Ekman, 75.

⁶⁷ McClintock, 170.

⁶⁸ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 84.

⁶⁹ June Cannato, *Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and Other Wonders of the Universe* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Sorin Books, 2006), 594, Kindle.

⁷⁰ Ekman, 75.

⁷¹ Ekman, 56.

that “in turn colors our interpretation of what the person is saying, what we think are that person’s motives, attitudes, and intentions.”⁷² Practicing affective competence means resisting the temptation to jump to conclusions and instead considering alternative reasons other than the reason one most suspects for the purpose of the emotion shown.⁷³

Active listening as a spiritual practice includes inviting people to name and share what they are feeling; this listening can be a powerful experience. Offering people a space to express their emotions and then helping them to sit with their feelings is a loving and holy thing to do. The faith leader’s responsibility here is not to fix the person’s feelings or even the situation. The goal is to honor the feelings and gain more understanding from their messages. The experience of this sharing, in and of itself, is a way to love one another. Practicing affective competence in this way is a spiritual practice.

The Spiritual Practice of Respecting the Dignity of Every Human Being

In the baptismal covenant, Christians commit to “respecting the dignity of every human being.”⁷⁴ They commit to living out this practice “with God’s help.”⁷⁵ In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus brings the “compassionate message of scripture to the fore by giving a more stringently empathetic twist to an ancient text.”⁷⁶ He says, “You have heard how it was said; you must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”⁷⁷ Jesus encouraged his followers to offer kindness and love, especially where there was little hope of any return.⁷⁸ Being affectively competent requires the self-knowledge that “we use our own feelings as

⁷² Ekman, 54.

⁷³ Ekman, 57.

⁷⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 305.

⁷⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 305.

⁷⁶ Karen Armstrong, 55.

⁷⁷ Matt. 5:43–44 NRSV (New York: Harper One, 1989), 945.

⁷⁸ Armstrong, 55.

a guide to our behavior with others. If we treat ourselves harshly, this is the way we are likely to be treated by other people.⁷⁹ People simply want to be known, understood, and valued for who they are. They want their feelings to be acknowledged and heard.⁸⁰

The spiritual practice of respecting the dignity of every human being extends to one's own self. It is important for faith leaders to practice compassion with their personal feelings.

The simple truth is that it is impossible to act as a healer for others if you are hiding from your own fears and have not learned how to bring compassion to yourself. Be gentle with yourself, and others will sense the graciousness in you. Be unforgiving of your own fear, (or anger, or sadness), and others will experience an edge of judgment and impatience in you. So physician, heal thyself. Make it clear to others that you are working with your own fear and vulnerability....⁸¹

Recognizing that one's own feelings are as normal and valid as everyone else's is important for the faith leader to do. Like every other person, faith leaders deserve compassion, joy, respect, and care.⁸² Accepting this truth is as important for modeling how to care for one's self as in caring for others. At the heart of the spiritual practice of respecting the dignity of every human being is the love and care that leaders have, as followers of Christ, for all people.

The Spiritual Practices of Confession, Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

Faith communities are places of redemption. For those who have experienced broken relationships, who are hurting, who struggle with questions of trust and safety, "congregations may provide people with a base of security in

⁷⁹ Armstrong, 77.

⁸⁰ Stephanie Spellers, *The Practice of Radical Welcome* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 143.

⁸¹ Spellers, 143.

⁸² Armstrong, 77.

which they experience healing from past wounds and develop healthier patterns of attachment to others.”⁸³ Churches are places where the spiritual practices of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are a foundational part of communal life together. These rites and rituals can be full of emotions for people who experience them. When emotions involved in these rites of the church are acknowledged, substantive healing and wholeness can result.

These spiritual practices include making space for one another’s healing. Churches are called to be communities of grace, growth, and learning. No one is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. In relationships with one another, it is nearly impossible to avoid pain, tension, or conflict.

When we hurt someone, guilt is the reminder that a course correction is needed... When we acknowledge our mistakes and are sincere in our repentance, we are likely to be forgiven. The goal of guilt, repentance, and forgiveness is a restored relationship. Usually, when the relationship is restored, we also repair the damage inside ourselves. With humility, we face our guilt and address it, which makes us more loving people.⁸⁴

The unique contribution of people of faith is the ability to heal shame with grace.⁸⁵ Christians believe that the balm of grace can sooth anything. By practicing the rites of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and engaging with them as part of the Christian spiritual practices, Christians can offer God’s healing balm to a hurting world.

The Spiritual Practice of Truth Telling

Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”⁸⁶ Through the spiritual practice of truth telling, the affective skills of transparent and truthful

⁸³ McFayden, 38.

⁸⁴ McClintock, 21.

⁸⁵ McClintock, 162.

⁸⁶ John 8:32 NRSV (New York: Harper One, 1989), 1047.

communication are developed. Faith leaders can model and invite open and honest conversation when they “encourage people to articulate their hopes, dreams, concerns, and fears for the congregation (and themselves.)”⁸⁷ This spiritual practice of truth telling helps to create a “holding environment” where people can “experience the relaxation, freedom and challenge necessary to continue engaging” with their feelings.⁸⁸ Faith leaders develop relationships with people, establishing trust and connection, and creating space that is safe for the exploration of feelings and the discernment of right action.

“Christian practices are given to Christian people so that we might become lights and yeast—beacons and agents of God’s justice, mercy, and love for all.”⁸⁹ In a community where the spiritual practice of truth telling is enacted, relationships are enhanced and deepened, and people will have a greater understanding of each other. As people share with one another and allow themselves to be vulnerable with one another, trust will grow. Through these relationships of trust and understanding, people will be more likely to experience personal growth and transformation. Together the community will be able to engage more effectively in the mission of God in the world.

As people become more comfortable and competent individually and as a faith community in expressing feelings congruently and reading the feelings of others, they will make better decisions and get more of their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs met. The lack of knowledge about how feelings work and the fact that we have been socially conditioned to avoid feelings prevents us from bringing about needed changes as loving communities.⁹⁰

The Spiritual Practice of Prayer/Meditation/Reflection

The spiritual practices of prayer and meditation can provide a context for literally sitting with feelings. When one

⁸⁷ McFayden, 94.

⁸⁸ Spellers, 142.

⁸⁹ Bass and Briehl, 15.

⁹⁰ Bass and Briehl, 20.

sits gently with one's feelings in the practice of prayer, meditation, or conscious reflection, healing occurs.⁹¹ Prayer and meditation allow one to pause and be still, opening the self to listen and/or talk to God.⁹² A person can engage with God emotionally, bringing emotional concerns before God.

Prayer and meditation can occur in many different ways. The Ignatian *examen* is a particular form of prayer, used by Christians for centuries, that "invites us to stop each day and notice what is leading us toward greater life and love and what is blocking our way."⁹³ This simple way of praying has three parts that can be particularly focused on examining how one is feeling. At the end of the day, one can ask, For what moment today do I feel most grateful? and When did I feel most alive today? Then one can offer a prayer of thanksgiving for those feelings and moments, "noticing that God is always present in any encounter that deepens love and enriches life," including feelings.⁹⁴ Next, one can ask, For what moment today am I least grateful? and When did I most feel life draining out of me? As one brings into focus these moments and feelings from the day, one can take note of how one felt and reacted in the previous moment and then in the present moment. One may feel the need to ask for forgiveness for those situations where the response to emotions was not the most helpful or loving. Finally, one can reflect on what one noticed while praying. "What feelings arose? How are these connected to specific experiences of the day? What patterns are emerging over time in your reflections? Which experiences make you feel more alive, and which exhaust and deaden your spirit?"⁹⁵

Research has shown that the practice of meditation can help improve emotional life.⁹⁶ The practices of daily prayer and meditation have been shown to expand the pathways in

⁹¹ Spellers, 144.

⁹² Bass and Briehl, 44.

⁹³ Bass and Briehl, 45.

⁹⁴ Bass and Briehl, 45.

⁹⁵ Bass and Briehl, 45.

⁹⁶ Ekman, 238.

the brain for peace, awe, and contentment.⁹⁷ Part of developing affective competence is becoming more skilled in how to deal with emotions, analyzing and understanding what has happened once an emotional episode is over.⁹⁸ When people do this work in a calm, prayerful, and reflective state, they can learn information about what might have triggered their emotional response and lessen future emotional triggers.⁹⁹ Reflecting on the awareness that one is cultivating in prayer and meditation deepens understanding and helps one to see the patterns in and significance of emotional experiences.

The Spiritual Practice of Writing/Journaling

The spiritual practice of writing connects people with their deepest feelings and emotions. The goal of writing or journaling as a spiritual practice is not to produce a product, but rather to drop down into the well of one's being as deeply as possible. When one journeys down into the deep well of the self and grapples with all of the feelings found there, "our identity and the integration of our identity with God's image of us, occurs."¹⁰⁰ Other than in psychotherapy or other forms of psychological introspection, few other opportunities or places are available for people to do this work. One such opportunity is through the spiritual practice of writing or keeping a journal.

When we write, we find ourselves going deeper down into what we're thinking and feeling, rather than merely recording what is bubbling at the surface. We begin to see that there are other situations, other encounters, other reactions and responses that have been a part of the current circumstances about which we are writing. Those other strands require not only a benevolent glance, but a studied reflection in order to complete the writing we have begun.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ McClintock, 170.

⁹⁸ Ekman, 238.

⁹⁹ Ekman, 238.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, 96.

¹⁰¹ Miller, 95.

When writing as a spiritual practice, one can begin writing what one is feeling and then allow the self to be still and wait for God's felt presence, as in centering prayer, to help deepen the meditation. "Words will begin to form in us, or feelings, will be released in us. As we notice the words or feelings, we simply have a conversation with them and write out our conversation as it is taking place, as a way to capture what our unconscious might be trying to say to us." The act of writing is a physical and tangible way to keep focused, as well as provide an account of one's experience for further reflection later.¹⁰² The intentional spiritual practice of writing "places our conversation in the presence of God where we are able to continually ask for a deeper and more enlightened understanding of what we are learning about ourselves."¹⁰³

The Spiritual Practice of Service to Others

The Christian faith is impossible to live in isolation; all are called to be in loving relationship in community. "While prayer quiets us in order to hear God's voice, serving others often carries us to places where we encounter God in the gritty realities of the world."¹⁰⁴ When we serve others, we are invited to become aware of where, as Fredrick Buechner famously said, "your deepest gladness and the world's deepest hunger meet."¹⁰⁵ In order to know where this place is, one must certainly be aware of one's feelings of joy and gladness! Affective competence includes the skills for identifying where and how these feelings of joy and peace are brought to life as people engage their talents and passions for ministry in service to their brothers and sisters.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Miller, 103–104.

¹⁰³ Miller, 103–104.

¹⁰⁴ Bass and Briehl, 45.

¹⁰⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper One, 1993), 95.

¹⁰⁶ Bass and Briehl, 45.

“At the heart of Christian faith is the conviction that our life with God and our life with others are one life.”¹⁰⁷ In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that when one clothes one’s naked brother or feeds one’s hungry sister, one cares for Christ himself. The spiritual practice of serving others is how Christians incarnate the call of Jesus to love God with all the heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The Spiritual Practice of Living in Community

“The path [to our callings] is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company,” writes the Quaker educator Parker Palmer. ‘Finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.’ We need other people to help us discern our callings, Parker continues, because ‘the destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner Teacher [God] may call us.’¹⁰⁸

The Christian call to community is a call “to be with others in a truthful and life-giving way—sharing time and place, worry and support, trust and meaning is a fundamental need of every human being, from the dependency of early childhood through every stage of life.”¹⁰⁹ When Christians practice living in community with one another and intentionally focus on developing affective competence among faith leaders and among all members of the community, they become equipped with the skills to “know and claim the power we have, commit ourselves to engage the pain of the world, and then to manage the process by which we are transformed from passive onlookers to sent peoples—apostles.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Bass and Briehl, 73.

¹⁰⁸ Bass and Briehl, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Bass and Briehl, 14.

¹¹⁰ Mead, 41.

In his classic work, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman said that the emotional dynamics that are present in families of origin will also appear in congregations. He states: “The one nonfamily emotional system that comes closest to a personal family’s intensity is a church or synagogue, in part because it is made up of families, and in part because so much of the force of religion is realized within the family.”¹¹¹ If people remain unconscious of feelings and emotions, they will be drawn into the emotions of the congregational system in ways that are unhelpful and unhealthy. Developing affective competence means that people practice recognizing the dynamics at work in congregations as they live together in community.¹¹²

“Congregations are transformed into more just, more compassionate communities of reconciliation not by individuals acting on their own, but in and through mutual, vibrant, growth-inspiring relationships.”¹¹³ I have argued that healthy and loving relationships are central to a life of following Christ and to being a community of Christians together. Part of the role of clergy and lay leaders is to foster relationships of openness, trust, accountability, and love in the communities they lead. In human brokenness, there will always be some level of disconnect between the values and beliefs espoused and the ability to live out those values in relationships. However, through modeling and teaching spiritual practices with a focus on developing affective competence, leaders in the church can help minimize this disconnect and even bridge the gap.

The way people structure life together in the Christian community must reflect the importance Christians place on relationships with neighbors. They can do this by participating in intentional spiritual practices together as a community, and holding each other accountable as they hold

¹¹¹ Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 546–47, Kindle.

¹¹² McClintock, 41.

¹¹³ Kondrath, xxiii.

each other in love—to develop affective competence and love one another as Christ loves all people.

Conclusion

Churches are undergoing a time of great change, and new ways of being and doing things in the church are emerging. Christian leaders have an opportunity to refocus this common life together on the work of teaching one another the skills of affective competence by engaging together in the spiritual practices outlined above. This intentional shift toward identifying and understanding feelings might seem simple to some and overwhelming to others. It will be immensely important and fruitful work for those with the willingness and courage to engage in it. The church has the unique position and the special calling to teach its members how to be affectively competent, not only for the benefit of their members and communities, but for the benefit of the entire world. There is no situation on Earth that would not be greatly improved if more people were able to recognize, understand, and integrate the messages their feelings tell them. And there may be no greater witness to the life and love of God at work in the world than through healthy and loving communities full of mutual and fruitful relationships. The church has a unique calling to serve as a resource and a place where people can learn about and practice becoming more affectively competent, ultimately benefiting their lives individually and all lives together communally.

Sara Shisler Goff is a Doctor of Ministry Candidate at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.