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## Introduction: Good, Better, Best

IN HIS BOOK *Better*, surgeon Atul Gawande asks what it takes to improve performance. True stories from the world of medicine illustrate the hard-driving diligence, amazing ingenuity, and ethical integrity that underlie best practices and life-saving innovations. His take-home lessons apply as well to musicians, athletes, and saints-in-the-making as to doctors, nurses, and medical administrators.

Improvement is possible. It will not happen without desire, conscious intention, and hard work. Many people will be “low performers,” fewer still “awful,” most in a murky area I’ll call “good.” To be “better” requires something saints have always known: self-awareness with a willingness to evaluate one’s own performance. In *Souls at Work* I offer you assistance in the formation of your own interior vessel, in moving from “good” toward “better.”

Doctor Gawande’s experience reveals an interesting relationship between the breakaway, top-performing hospitals and doctors, and the improvement of the many more well-intentioned, well-trained, trying-hard players under the “good” hump of the performance bell curve. The superstars’ success is *needed* to spur improvement for everyone in the system. If the bar is not set as high as someone so far has managed to reach, everyone suffers from diminution of expectations, and overall performance drops to lower and lower levels.

Far from intimidating, or shaming, their fellows, the surgeons with great track records, the hospitals that cut superbug infection rates to seemingly impossible lows, the cystic fibrosis treatment center whose patients have double the average life expectancy inspire significant improvements everywhere in the field. Performance improves when someone says “best” is possible. *Souls at Work* is about that movement from good to better to best; from child/beginner to youth/struggler to adult/master; from one- to two- to three-dimensional freedom.

## *Souls at Work*

The spiritual life, unlike the mile run, or the masterworks of Bach, cannot be approached as a skill set or as a mountain to conquer. Because it is woven of your own *being*, practiced in and through your own unique life tasks, pursued for goods no metric can measure, it is difficult to speak of spiritual “improvement” as we speak of performance improvement in other physical and temporal endeavors. What I believe can be improved—with spiritual direction, with conscious attention and effort, with a creative approach—is your capacity for the fullest possible realization of your own humanity, and thus of the space for Christ-within-you.

Growth in the soul’s capacity for Christ is increased by sorrow, pain, longing, unrequited love, powerlessness. But these are not means for us to use upon ourselves. There are other means, though, by which you can participate in the opening and deepening of your capacity for Christ. To interest yourself in—literally, to enter *into the essence of*—wonders of Creation, the dynamics of your own struggles, forms others have created to embody their responses to the essential questions you face as you grow: these are means I hope to help you practice using more consciously. You can look *at* things in curiosity when they attract your attention. More, though, you can look *through* things studiously and be transformed by deliberately *placing your interest in* what they have to teach you of God and His ways, of Christ and His way in you.

The saints set the bar for virtue and holiness. They are the “positive shape” we want to emulate and re-present in our own lives. In *Souls at Work* you have a fellow “saint wannabe” coaching your life-crafting and opening a conversation about what it means to grow up, to become free, to be realized, and to practice being you. I’ve created a workbook that won’t really be complete until *you* write it in *your* life. You might wonder, “Where are the ‘spiritual’ things? Isn’t it enough to study theology and the lives of the saints, compare ourselves to Christ, receive the sacraments, avoid sin, and pine for heaven?”

*Souls at Work*, in its way, goes *beyond* those excellent practices, but in the opposite direction. “Beyond” is not only “toward heaven” but also “toward the rootedness of things in deep, earthy reality.” Your humanity—mind, emotions, body, will, senses, desires, needs, and actions—is the natural form upon which the supernatural life of

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Christ takes shape. The three steps—be present to reality, engage the tensions that reality presents, and enter new forms with responsive attentiveness—could be practiced in any area of work or study. The focus here is upon realities, tensions, and forms from the book written in *my* life. I hope that my set of practice exercises will help you learn to find your own “material” everywhere you look, and to share that with others on this journey toward greater interior freedom.





# 1 – Write This Book, Please!

## *What Was the Question?*

WE LIVE IN A WORLD bloated with answers. Like diners at an all-you-can-eat buffet, we are coaxed to pile on more remedies, solutions, tips-and-techniques, and third helpings of expert advice. Dessert, if we can force down a bit more, is soft-serve extruded from a 24/7 media machine. The trouble with this superabundance of provision? There's no place in the scheme for hunger—no time to ask the questions.

The purpose of this book is simple: to pose questions only you can answer. These questions will help you participate in the formation of your own soul and of the souls of your children, friends, or students. Consider and answer them for yourself to rekindle the hunger that makes learning a joyful feast. In the process, discover what it means to be fully human, fully free.

Souls at work are souls engaged in the struggle of their own becoming—expanding their own freedom by the exercise of free will, working out the reality of salvation in awe and trembling. They grow—by fits and starts, by discipline and detour—as they explore, stake out, and inhabit the territory of their own being. The subject of this book is You—the free human person who stands at the unique intersection of a particular set of realities. Freedom is a glorious place in which to stand, but you will be tempted to move toward the bondage of less demanding positions.

One of these is the “natural” man, left to his own devices for good or ill, unmolded by the imposition of the will of others upon him. He exists largely outside the social structures of community. Resistant to all authority but his own, he may be at peace with the world or a dire threat to it. At the opposite extreme stands the “contrived” man. Whether shaped to fit a machine's operation, his own favorite image of himself, the demands of a slave driver, or a perfectly homogenous

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community, he has confined his being to a shape imposed upon him by conscious, external constraint. He may be content with the lot he has chosen or doomed to impotent resentment of it.

In the center stands the free human person—you, the subject of this book. Constrained by truth and virtue, thus capable of living in true community, and not enslaved to external forces, thus free to be fully realized as a unique, unrepeatable human being—the free person is a channel of God’s grace into the world. The forces arrayed against you are formidable. At every point in your journey toward eternity, Satan seeks to unmake you—to negate you, to keep you ignorant and impotent. Yet, in Christ you can do all things! In Sabbath rest you rediscover your own humanity, and in working out your salvation you recover yourself—your intellect and fruitfulness. Coming into your own you become capable of the life-giving gift of self, which only a truly free person can bestow. No wonder the enemy of your soul wants to stop your formation, limit your capacity to transmit grace into the world, and crush your desire to be fully and gloriously yourself!

Many people want to reform the world based on some new idea of what a human being is and what he needs. Fewer people are interested in re-forming themselves into living examples of such an idea—struggling to represent in living flesh the ideals they espouse. Even the Catholic “idea of the human person” can become a mental construct toward which we expend the energies of reform while avoiding the need to become a full realization of that idea. When Blessed Pope John Paul II taught that the world needs the recapitulation of the human person, he didn’t mean for us merely to make new institutions based on our Right Idea; rather, he meant for us to become, ourselves, *that person* within the context of our own lives. The work of this becoming is the most intensely personal, individual work you can do. As such, it has the greatest power to affect the world unto good—if you will accept the challenge.

Shall we change the social structures—the Church, the schools, the social service machinery, the medical systems, the businesses—for the better? Sure, sure, but first consider one question:

*How does the fullest possible realization of your own being contribute to the restoration of the world?*

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I hope to help you find your own answer to that question by posing many others.

### *Write This Book, Please!*

*Souls at Work* chapters can be taken in any order you like. Each one will make a great group study among friends, or for you alone with your journal, with its companion Questions (see Appendix B: The Questionnaire). The sections each take a different approach, so you might want to start by sampling from each of the three. In *Frames* there are wonders presented for your contemplation, to help you recover a teachable spirit. In *Tensions* you'll find paradoxes posed to draw you out of complacency and into the struggle of forming your own response. In *Forms* you and I wander through twelve man-made forms noticing the many ways in which form embodies mind, experience, values, and truth.

Each of the three main sections opens with a proposal that is a distillation of its central message. I hope you will hold that proposal up to the light of your own past experience and of the experience of reading what follows in each section. So, you could begin this book anywhere and benefit from the juxtaposition of your thoughts and mine about whatever topics interest you most—the iron-sharpening-iron effect of thinking *with* another person. To that end, each chapter stands alone and lends itself to dabbling. On the other hand, you could follow along from start to finish, and, for that approach, the Table of Contents is your roadmap. Whichever way you choose, please begin by reading “What is freedom, anyway?” below.

In writing this book, I've tried to imagine how I might take a classroom of willing, interested students through these ideas. My task was to impose order upon a collection of thoughts so as to facilitate the communication not only of a thesis or argument but also of a structure capable of further growth in my readers. Ideally, this would be a conversation between us and with all our friends who are vitally interested in the coming of the kingdom of God into the world. This book is the closest I could come to making space and time for that conversation to occur this side of eternity. I would dearly love to hear your responses and your answers and to watch as you grow and rock the world!

## *Souls at Work*

### *What Is Freedom, Anyway?*

There are many kinds of work we might do in a lifetime, but one of these is accomplished *in* and *through* every other. This book is about the work of becoming free—of cultivating one’s own (and thus, others’) interior freedom. Both unique (each person’s struggle will be different) and universal (*every* person is called to human freedom), the task of entering into the glorious freedom of the children of God is the work of a lifetime. Because this work is linked to your conception of freedom itself—and of theology, work, leisure, personhood, addiction, education, spirituality, creativity, and more—every gain you make in clarifying these ideas is a movement toward freedom.

A proposal is a way of posing a thought for consideration. It invites you to an encounter with an idea that should have some effect upon you, should cause a response within you—a feeling, a reaction, a discomfort even. You first appropriate the idea intellectually, and then you allow yourself the space to notice how it affects or moves you. Then you need to formulate a response to the thought. If you merely *understand* the text, you have not fully digested the proposal. If you allow it to probe your own being and cause an emotional response, you now have a two-dimensional, head-and-heart grasp of what has been said. If you then articulate what it is you feel—what resonates with you, or bothers you, or challenges you, or affirms you in this statement—then you have a three-dimensional encounter with reality that begins to form you in freedom.

Freedom, Father Luigi Giussani has said, is “correspondence to all the factors of reality.” In this book, I distill and present to your mind some realities that have affected me and helped to form my own freedom. My hope is that, by practicing this “method” of working upon what you read here, you will increase your capacity *for* all of reality, and thus, for freedom. Learning to enter this struggle—to apprehend, to be affected, then to respond—is the work of cultivating your own freedom. Saint Teresa of Avila teaches these same three steps as a path of prayer—1) you understand your spiritual reading intellectually, then 2) you become present to the affective response of your heart, considering the material in the presence

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of Christ, and 3) (a crucial step) you make and carry out a resolution that embodies both and engages your free will. Fulton Sheen said, “Free will is a gift, but freedom is a conquest.” You create your freedom by every act of freedom.

### *Respond, Create Your Freedom!*

In the context of prayer, your response might be, for instance, telling someone you are sorry, giving a donation to charity, praying for a particular intention, or abstaining from alcohol. Each one of these responses is your own way of taking what you have understood, combining your “head” knowledge with the way this material moves you emotionally, and creating a “new thing”: a form, action, or gesture that embodies both—truly carrying out into the world what you possess within your own being.

In the context of this book, your response might be to write down what you sense is the key “take-home” message in each essay. You might go further and create a re-presentation: restate it to a friend in your own words as well as you can; draw a picture or diagram that will remind you of the idea you encountered; journal about the idea and your interior responses to it. Maybe this essay has reminded you of something you need to do, or of a dream you’ve forgotten to pursue, or of a friend who was just speaking of these ideas. Your response might be to do that thing, to take the first step toward realizing your dream, or to call that friend to discuss the ideas together. When I read, I sometimes respond by writing a brief précis or outline of the material for my own note-keeping and reference. Perhaps there is a quote to send to a particular person, or a thank-you letter to be written to the author, or an online forum where I may discuss the book with others. The response is not onerous “homework” but rather an overflow of my encounter with this particular idea, book, or author.

We often understand, intellectually, the meaning of the words presented to us. Such reading can be helpful in the exercise of the intellectual faculties, but we are aiming here for the deeper formation of interior freedom. If your reading is to be truly “educational,” authentically forming your inner being in correspondence with the

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goal of freedom, then you must take more time to mull over, ponder, contemplate, and be affected by what you have read. This practice can certainly help you develop a more complete “knowing”—linking, as it does, the intellectual faculties with all the resources of the “emotional intelligence” and of self-awareness. In order to cultivate interior freedom, however, another step is necessary: the response.

There is a discomfort in not knowing what to do; in having to wait for an idea to gel into a doable resolution; in finding out that your emotions aren’t in complete unity with your intellect; in having a great big idea that you can only carry out in a tiny, symbolic way. It is exactly this discomfort I mean when I say “struggle” or “work” or “bear the tension.” This process will result in an act of freedom, and that act may seem so lame that it’s hardly worth doing. There is a gap between what you can *imagine* doing and what you can *actually* accomplish. Until you act, you aren’t humbled by the reality that it takes real time and practice and effort to fully appropriate a new concept. Without the response, whatever it is, your education in freedom is incomplete. Freedom will remain an intellectual construct for you, and the world of “trees walking” might be all you can see. (Do you remember the blind man in Scripture whose first, partial cure left him in this condition?) Until you create a free act in response to an encounter with reality (an idea, a person, a fact), it hasn’t “had its way” with you, hasn’t formed in you a greater capacity for freedom.

Reading and discussing ideas with friends is a great path to true learning, for this very reason. The response is built into the learning situation. Friends stimulate us in our efforts to put into words a *response* to something we encounter together. If you don’t have a discussion group, grab a journal and write out your responses to share in conversations with friends later. You’ll never have to sit through a boring conversation again!

### *The Reality Paradox*

What prepares you to receive Reality? Reality itself. It sounds like an impossible, circular dilemma—like getting your first job with no work experience. But the real world is also a training ground. Just as

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there are on-the-job training programs for inexperienced employees, every encounter with Reality has the potential both to cause you to hunger for more of it and to enable you to get more from your next encounter.

Far from being an inevitable result of living in the real world, rich appropriation of Reality, or deeply moving encounter with the Real, is every day less likely for someone who lacks this hunger. The words of Scripture seem so unfair: “To him who has, more will be given. From him who has not, everything he has will be taken away” (Luke 19:26).

In this context, these words finally make good sense. He who has little, or no, capacity for wonder, for bearing tensions, for realizing form within his own being will have no way to grasp and retain the marvels of Creation, the depths of truth, or the mystery of his fellow man. He who, tasting and seeing that Reality is good, hungers for more, seeks it out and digs into it, builds the skills needed to fully appropriate it, and allows his own being to be profoundly formed in correspondence with it will receive an overflowing abundance through the kaleidoscope of forms that mediate God’s presence to him.

Does it still sound unfair that so much more will be given to one who has much already? If you are tempted to renounce this abundance, or to pride yourself on needing so much less to be satisfied, recall that this is a holy hunger that draws you to your own destiny. You won’t be doing anyone any favors to say, at the overflowing banquet table of the Lord, “None for me, please. A crumb of bread will do.” He who *is* that all-sufficient crumb seeks to cultivate your appetite for more. You can only *be* who you are, but you are called to greater and greater correspondence with Reality—to freedom.

For you to receive more, nothing is taken away from others. The wealth all around you is available to all and is limitless in supply. Your location, circumstances, interests, and life span limit your exposure to Reality, but you’ll have eternity to fill in the gaps in your “education”! Christ—the single Word through which all Reality is made accessible to lowly human beings—has made Himself as small as the smallest human capacity to receive being. As His being grows up in you, your own capacity for Reality grows.

## *Souls at Work*

### *Notes on Growing Up— One final, optional, preparation for reading this book*

*In the course of many conversations I've had and talks I've given based on the ideas in *Souls at Work*, an overarching theme has emerged as a larger context for the engagement of persons in the work of cultivating interior freedom. The movement toward freedom happens within the context of the natural process of growing from childhood to maturity. To some extent, then, it "just happens" as naturally as the growth of a plant. Too much self-analysis can be like uprooting tiny seedlings every day to see how they're coming along—destructive! Not enough self-awareness, however, can stunt your growth. At some point, it becomes unnatural for new growth not to occur. In other words, the "effortless, natural growth process" is a good metaphor for your own growth if that process is continuous and you do not stagnate. And if your growth in maturity does continue, then, at some point, you will enter a phase in which hard work and struggle are necessary factors in the process.*

*There are three "models" for—three ways of thinking about—the process of growing up that I want to consider. Two, I think, are destructive, or at least problematic. One is the foundation for the thoughts in this book. You may or may not want to see into the "back story" or "underlying matrix" from which *Souls at Work* draws strength and coherence. I present it because it has to do with the structure of this book, of the human person, and of freedom itself. Does it surprise you to think of freedom as having a structure, or form? This concept will be more familiar to artists and architects, perhaps. When an idea is realized, we say it "takes form." As it grows more and more fully realized, we say it "grows in dimensionality." When you "create your own freedom," you create a work of art—a sphere of response-ability that is your own particular realization of the gift of, the idea of, freedom. The external manifestation of interior freedom—in your choices and actions—becomes, over time, the work of art we call your life. What "freedom" really accomplishes is the realization of "You."*

*Let's look at the two problematic growth models I mentioned and see why they are inadequate for the task of your formation, your realization. I call one the "plant" model, and I have already indicated its major flaw: there is no place for self-awareness, cooperation with God,*



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*or strengthening of the will. Plants grow, even become fruitful, but they do not become free. Persons expecting to “just grow effortlessly” all their lives are locked into a sort of hyper-child thought system that retards growth. At the other extreme, the “product” model tends toward a hyper-adult mentality in which the person is objectivized, or rationalized, into an inert abstraction. Either way, growth and life are stifled, along with freedom, personhood, and creativity. In our day, the product model seems dominant. We’ve bought into the idea of continuous linear progress toward a goal (as if a “saint,” an “adult,” or a “graduate” were a final product generated by a series of value-adding steps along a factory conveyor belt called time).*

*This model leads to a reductionist ideal of a human person as something that is perfected by being “finished.” True growth, however, operates in more of a spiral, or in a three-steps-forward, two-steps-back pattern. We can denote a “child” stage, but we err when we seek to escape childhood, leaving behind its simplicity and dependence. Everyone knows about the uncomfortable self-consciousness and struggle that come with “adolescence,” but fewer people understand the delight made possible by learning to reenter this youthful stage at will. Some see “adulthood” as the pot of leisure, possessions, and self-will (or even of holiness) at the end of a rainbow, and they aim straight for it with little regard for the value of the journey itself in the soul’s formation. Others avoid maturity at all costs, perceiving in it only a wall of limitation, or a doorway to a meaningless death.*

*These models, at best, show a person as a “line”—a two-dimensional accumulation over time, tensed toward the end of a short life. At worst, both give us a person who is a “point”—a powerless child or a powerless object without the capacity to wield itself. The model that corresponds to freedom (the “personal” or “global” model) gives us a three-dimensional person, growing up in all aspects of being at once—an expanding sphere with an eternal trajectory. Your dimensions are vast and glorious—so huge is your self, God alone can bear it! As you grow up, He welcomes you into the mansion that is You, realized fully within His being. As you “become free,” you grow more and more fully able to inhabit the structure of your own being—a territory veiled in mystery and beckoning with promise. Your own mind can’t begin to comprehend the You that He holds: You-the-child, You-the-youth, You-the-*

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*adult, You-in-every-moment-of-life, You-constantly-renewing, You-the-ripple-of-effects, You-the-beautiful-soul. He holds and helps to integrate all the reality-that-is-You into a harmonious unity—a work of art. You cooperate—co-create this freedom-to-fully-inhabit-self—by becoming a conscious, willing participant in the process.*

*As you live, move, and have being in Him, you move more and more freely within this wholeness that is signified by the word You, or I. You are becoming more “integrated,” “whole,” with access to the particular freedoms associated with all three stages, or dimensions, of being. The Holy Spirit teaches the soul this full freedom of movement—sometimes seeming to move away (thus drawing her forward as she thirsts, longs for His presence) and sometimes drawing near to embrace (thus comforting and contenting her in heavenly rest).*

*Look for notes on growing up after each section’s proposal. Skip them if they get in your way. You are writing this book, after all, by the way you encounter and respond to it. This book is an invitation to become a soul at work—a person who is consciously growing up in Christ and who daily becomes more whole, more authentic, and more joyful as a result.*