

*Five Transformative Values
to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*



THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE



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PEEK**



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RICH VILLODAS



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Foreword by Pete Scazzero

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an imprint of Random House, a division of
Penguin Random House LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Villodas, Rich, author.

Title: The deeply formed life : five transformative values to
root us in the way of Jesus / Rich Villodas.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs, Colorado : WaterBrook, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020010606 | ISBN 9780525654384 (hardcover) | ISBN
9780525654391 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Christianity. | Christian life. | Spiritual formation.
Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .V55 2020 | DDC 248.4—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020010606>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

First Edition

Interior book design by Elizabeth A. D. Eno

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For Rosie.
Your love has deeply formed me.

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Contemplative Rhythms
for an Exhausted Life

In 1901, an American doctor named John Harvey Girdner coined the term *Newyorkitis* to describe an illness that had symptoms including edginess, quick movements, and impulsiveness. At the time, he said it was “a disease which affects a large percentage of the inhabitants of Manhattan Island.”¹ As a native New Yorker, I can’t help but laugh and also gasp at these words. I laugh because Girdner is describing a world long gone: a world without the internet, high-speed cars, and other technological advances that inform everything we do. I gasp, however, because if *Newyorkitis* is what Girdner observed more than one hundred years ago, where does that leave us today?

Girdner saw something in 1901 that captured the dangerous pace at which we often unwittingly live. Our world hasn’t slowed down. Our world continues on, faster and busier, and we are reminded that our souls were not created for the kind of speed to which we have grown accustomed. Thus, we are a people who are out of

rhythm, a people with too much to do and not enough time to do it. This illness is no longer a New York phenomenon—it has infected people around the world. And I see it every day.

Recently on a Saturday morning, I was walking through my neighborhood, and as I neared my apartment building an older man frantically shouted across the street, “Are you Jewish?” He waved his hands at me as if he had been stranded on a deserted island and I was his ticket back to civilization. He repeated again as he drew closer, “Are you Jewish?” This was a strange question, but it occurred to me I had been growing out my beard, so that might explain the question.

I responded a bit too loudly for an early Saturday morning, “No, I’m Puerto Rican.”

“Okay, great,” he said as he tried to catch his breath, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I need your help. I have to get my ninety-year-old mother downstairs.”

It was a slow morning for me, so with curiosity I followed him into his apartment building. When we got to the elevator, he pointed at the buttons while distractedly looking in the other direction. “Press six, please,” he said—another strange moment, but I willingly did so. On the ride up, we exchanged names and then awkwardly stared at the numbers. His breathing was heavy and labored. I looked at him from the corner of my eye to see him talking under his breath.

We took the elevator up six stories. Then as he was about to step into his small apartment he shouted, “Ma, Rich is here.”

His mother shouted back with irritation, “Who’s Rich?” (This was quite a New York moment.)

I stepped in and saw a frail, well-dressed elderly woman grasping her walker. She had on a large pearl necklace and heels that looked a bit too big for her. With exasperation, she grumbled things like, “I’m so busy,” “There’s never enough time,” and “How am I going to finish everything?”

Soon I found out that this mom-and-son duo were heading to the local synagogue but that he couldn’t press the elevator button due to Sabbath prohibitions. All he wanted me to do was press the elevator button—nothing more, nothing less.

I look back at that moment and chuckle. But what struck me most in this whole encounter was that this elderly woman was stressed out because of the fullness of her life. Here she was, overwhelmed, on the Sabbath, of all days, with too much to do at ninety years of age.

Newyorkitis is alive and well.

DANGEROUSLY DEPLETED

Our lives can easily take us to the brink of burnout. The pace we live at is often destructive. The lack of margin is debilitating. We are worn out. In all of this, the problem before us is not just the frenetic pace we live at but what gets pushed out from our lives as a result; that is, *life with God*. Educator and activist Parker Palmer makes a compelling case that burnout typically does not come about because we’ve given so much of ourselves that we have nothing left. He tells us, “It merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place.”²

What would it look like to live at a different pace?

What if there were a rhythm of life that could instead enable us to deeply connect with God, a lifestyle not dominated by hurry and exhaustion but by margin and joy? As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be. We desperately need a spirituality that roots us in a different way.

As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be.

No matter our walks of life or professions, our struggle is all too real: single parents trying to find just a moment of oasis from the incessant bickering of children, doctors caught in the unending pressures of life-and-death choices, and pastors over-functioning to the point of breakdown. There are schoolteachers whose work never really ends, sleep-deprived students floundering through exams, immigrant small-business owners struggling to make ends meet, and therapists and social workers overwhelmed with the bottomless crises they need to resolve daily. The pace of our lives can be brutal.

Without denying these realities, we are invited to a different way of being in the world. The late Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama wrote a book titled *Three-Mile-an-Hour God*.³ Dr. Koyama was trying to convey that if we want to connect with God, we'd be wise to travel at God's speed. God has all the time in the world,

and as a result he is not in a rush. Thus, Koyama's claim that God travels at three miles an hour is not an arbitrary figure. On average, humans walk at this pace. And it's in just such ambling, unhurried, and leisurely moments that we often encounter God. N. T. Wright similarly affirmed, "It is only when we slow down our lives that we can catch up to God."⁴ This is the paradox of contemplative rhythms.

Now, don't get me wrong; I'm not advocating that we go back to dial-up internet service and take boats instead of airplanes to our destinations. Speed has helped remake our world in ways that are wonderful and liberating. But speed has also caused our connections with God and others to be incredibly superficial. There's a severe lack of depth in our lives and communities because we have allowed ourselves to be swept up by a world under the influence of addictive speed. And as philosopher Dallas Willard famously said, "Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day."⁵

In the face of this crisis of speed, distraction, and superficial spirituality, there is a way that has been tried and tested through the centuries. It's a way that has marked my life from the time I became a Christian as a young adult. It's the way of the monastic, contemplative life. We live in a time when we must learn from the monastery. We desperately need a way of thinking and living that isn't captive to the powers of efficiency, speed, and performance. We need a way of living according to a different understanding of time and space. We need the treasures of monastic imagination.

A MONASTIC IMAGINATION

Before you dismiss this notion as an old, irrelevant idea from the Dark Ages, let me attempt to reveal the monastic approach as an important correction to our way of life and faith. As pastor Ken Shigematsu stated, “Every one of us has a monk or nun ‘embryo’ inside of us.”⁶ Deep in our souls, we crave space with God that is defined by silence, stillness, and solitude.

My first experience of this kind of monastic spirituality was in college, and it forever changed me. As a student at Nyack College in Rockland County, New York, I was required to take a personal spiritual-formation class my senior year. Part of the class was to go on a weekend retreat at a Franciscan monastery. During the weekend, the students were placed in different parts of the grounds for about eight hours to just “be with God.” In my case, I was told to remain on the platform of an outdoor chapel, with no Bible, only a journal. My assignment was to remain in solitude and write about the experience. This was one of the most challenging and exhilarating days of my life.

I would close my eyes and listen to the beautiful sounds of birds chirping and then in the next moment stare into the ground and see a colony of ants working diligently. In the stillness of the moment, every part of creation somehow connected me to God.

I’d look out into the empty rows of wooden chairs, wondering about my future life of preaching. I’d fix my gaze on the statue of baby Jesus being tenderly held by Joseph at the center of the platform. As I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, I imagined God holding me in

that tender embrace. There were moments of delightful contemplation when I heard words of God's grace spoken deep within my heart. I journaled many pages of prayers, fears, and requests, and when I got tired of writing, I just stared out into the monastery grounds.

Now, I don't want you to get the idea that it was all heavenly; it wasn't. There were also times of sheer boredom and dread, when I was disinterested and wanted to be somewhere else. I mean, after just an hour of solitude and silence, I was ready to go home. But I was stuck there. To break up the monotony, I'd jog in place, do push-ups, and (not sure I should confess this) take power naps on the sturdy Eucharist table.

Yet something happened in me that day. From that moment, the appetite of my soul was awakened. Upon returning to my college campus, I found myself sneaking off to the library or to quiet spaces to pray, as if I were doing something illicit. Something was planted in me, and I knew I needed to follow this path more intentionally.

Some five years later, I joined the New Life Fellowship pastoral staff. I was reintroduced to the riches of monasticism, as this church had been drawing from this tradition for a long time. In my years on staff, I have had the privilege of spending many hours in prayer at monasteries and in study with monks. What I've learned has reinforced the truth that unless we live with an intentional commitment to slow down, we have no hope for a quality of life that allows Jesus to form us into his image.

Monastic spirituality means slowing our lives down to be with God. In a world that operates at a frenetic pace and with the addiction of achievement, slowing down

brings us to a place of centeredness and stillness before God. It gives us the opportunity to be present to God throughout the day.

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

This concept of being present to God throughout the day was popularized by a man named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a seventeenth-century Carmelite monk who wrote a famous book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The concept of the book is straightforward. In every activity in which you are engaged, remember that God is present and offer your heart to him in prayer. If you're washing the dishes, writing a paper, or watching the Mets play (Lord, please help my Mets), we are to be present to God. Simple enough, right? Well, in my life and in the lives of people I have spoken to about this, being present to God is one of the most difficult things to do.

As I reflected on Brother Lawrence's life, it struck me that I sometimes forget that he lived in a unique setting. His ability to "practice the presence of God," difficult as it might have been, was still more attainable because of the structure and rhythm of his life. When followers of Jesus try to implement the practice of the presence of God in the way of Brother Lawrence, without the structure and rhythm of his life, it can easily lead to perpetual disappointment and disconnection.

The problem, as I see it, is that we forget he lived in a monastery, which ought to give us some insight (and relief) into his life situation. There were fixed hours of

prayer he observed. He prayed in community and in solitude. His entire life was ordered in a way that was conducive to communion with God. Now you might be thinking, *That's fine, but I don't live in a monastery.* Neither do I. Nevertheless, I have discovered that any effort given to ordering my life around rhythms of silence, solitude, and prayer has significantly enriched my life.

For many Christians, the word *monastic* carries cultural baggage and theological misunderstandings. Consequently, far too many people dismiss the gifts and culture offered by this tradition. As we consider the historical and biblical aspects of monasticism, hopefully we will be open to applying this approach to our full and busy lives.

MONASTIC MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE

The monastic life is rooted in the pages of Scripture. The word *monk* comes from the Greek word *monachos*, which means “solitary.” Monastic life is ordered by a value and urgency to be united with God in prayer. Although there is much more to monastic life (such as vows of poverty and celibacy), I’d like to highlight the monastic distinctives of prayer, silence, and solitude.

When searching for theological grounds for monastic practice, the Bible is replete with examples of people who lived a life shaped by solitude, silence, and a slowed-down spirituality. Let me offer brief sketches of Moses, David, Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

Moses: a man of the desert. While early on he had been molded in the ways of Egypt, he was gripped by the op-

pression of the Jewish people and tragically took matters into his own hands. In a moment of justice-fueled anger, he murdered an Egyptian and fled into the desert.

During his forty years in this place, he lived an existence marked by silence and solitude. Think for a moment of what it might have been like for Moses on a given day: no Wi-Fi, no car, and no crowds. Every day, Moses dwelled for hours in silence while watching over his flocks.

We don't have anything in Scripture that gives detail to his spiritual practices, but it's not a coincidence that God chose to reveal himself to Moses in the silent context of a burning bush.

David: a man after God's own heart who was shaped in monasticism. Much of the psalms that David wrote sprouted from a place of silence and solitude. David was a man of contemplation, a man of silence. In one psalm, he wrote, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (27:4).

David's life as a young man was one of stillness. Certainly, his younger years were also marked by sheepshearing, songwriting, and fighting giants, lions, and bears. But even in the chaos and unpredictable life he lived, he guarded the stillness to prioritize God's presence.

The songs he wrote and music he played flowed from a context of monastic rhythm. David wrote psalms about quieting his soul (see 131:2), making his soul "wait in silence" (62:5), and being still and knowing that God is God (see 46:10). Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible, and it is one that emerges from the depths of contempla-

tion and reflection.

Mary: a young woman formed by contemplative pondering and deep reflection. When the angel Gabriel offered her good news from God, Mary “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

Mary was one who beheld the Lord in stillness and solitude. She listened to the Word of God carefully and intently, allowing herself to be formed by it. She entered into meditation, pondering the sheer absurdity of the angel’s message and marveling at the astonishing invitation therein. She was one given to depth of thought, opening her entire being—physically and spiritually—to the God who graciously came.

John the Baptist: a solitary prophet who spent much of his life in the wilderness. He was a man given to prayer, solitude, and silence (and some strange eating habits). John cultivated life with God in the wilderness, and it was out of that place that he offered prophetic and powerful words of God’s heart to prepare the way of the Lord for a people who had gone astray.

Jesus: Son of God, Son of Man—he cannot be truthfully understood apart from his deep commitment to a monastic kind of life. Jesus was regularly active in preaching, healing, casting out demons, and far more, but his life would be self-contradicting apart from the long hours spent with the Father in silence and solitude. One could make a strong case that the fully human Jesus was able to live the life he did because of the constant time and energy put into being with the Father in prayer.

In the gospel of Luke, after Jesus was baptized, the voice of the Father broke through the sky, and Jesus received a word of affirmation: “You are my beloved Son;

with you I am well pleased” (3:22). Immediately following this scene, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the Evil One. Alone and in the setting of the desert, Jesus encountered Satan and refused to be identified by anything other than the affirmation of the Father.

It was after this grueling battle that Jesus returned to civilization and recited, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (4:18). Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus conveys the power of God, and then he returns to be in communion with the God from whom that power flows.

MONASTICISM IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

Beyond the testimony of Scripture, monastic spirituality has marked the story of the early Christian church. In the first and second century after the resurrection of Jesus, men and women would flee to the desert to be with God for a variety of reasons. The early desert fathers and mothers were people who felt a strong call to prayer, solitude, silence, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines. It’s hard to truly know who was the first to establish this way of following Jesus, but for our purposes here, one of the most noteworthy explanations of the remarkable surge of monasticism came as a result of Christian faith losing its distinctiveness and radical call.

For the first few centuries, Christianity was a marginalized and persecuted religion. The book of Acts describes the resistance and cost one experienced for being a follower of Jesus and claiming him Lord of the world. De-

spite the unrelenting danger of confessing Jesus as God and King, Christianity spread like wildfire.

Christians were people on the edges of society, proclaiming the radical message of the kingdom of God, serving the poor, healing the sick, and subverting the way of the empire. But something shifted in the cultural landscape in the fourth century, leaving devout Christians with an important decision on how they would live.

On the eve of a battle in the early part of the century, Constantine (who would become emperor of Rome) claimed to have had a revelation. In the revelation, Constantine said he was instructed to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. Church historian Justo González explained: “Constantine ordered that his soldiers should use on their shield and on their standard or *labarum* a symbol that looked like the superimposition of the Greek letters chi and rho. Since these are the first two letters of the name, ‘Christ,’ this *labarum* could well have been a Christian symbol.”⁷

Having done so, Constantine achieved victory over his enemies and in turn transformed the way the empire related to Christians. In a sweeping turn of events, Christianity went from persecuted religion to friend of the empire. In light of this significant shift, new questions on faith and discipleship arose.

For many Christians, a different kind of crisis of faith surfaced. González further wrote, “The narrow gate of which Jesus had spoken had become so wide that countless multitudes were hurrying through it—many seeming to do so only in pursuit of privilege and position, without caring to delve too deeply into the meaning of Christian baptism and life under the cross.”⁸ In other words, Chris-

tianity had experienced a drastic cultural shift whereby people purported to enter into life with God and the church not by renunciation of the ways of the world system but by appropriating it through political and cultural power.

It was in this context that men and women decided to take up their cross and go into the desert. No longer was there a significant price to pay to follow Jesus. No longer was there a clear and powerful delineation between Christianity and conformity to the political ways of the world. In order to resist the temptations of worldly power, men and women went into the desert to maintain a cross-shaped life that would be marked by prayer, renunciation, and formative spiritual practices.

The genesis of monastic life in a post-Constantine world in the fourth century serves as a powerful reminder for us today. In short, the way of worldly power, values, and priorities can easily take precedence in our lives, with Christianity being either complicit in the perpetuation of the world system or irrelevant in the social landscape.

The desert fathers, mothers, and later monastics remind us that the way of following Jesus requires a steadfast refusal to get caught up in the pace, power, and priorities of the world around us. We are called to have our lives shaped by a different kind of power, pace, and priorities, offered to us by God.

LEAVING THE WORLD

In the same way of these early monastics, we are invited to leave the world, along with its enticements and false

messages of assurance. The deeply formed life is one that takes seriously the call of renunciation. We are regularly being formed by the pace, noise, and values of the surrounding world. Yet to be deeply formed is to regularly come back to a different rhythm—a rhythm marked by communion, reflection, and a life-giving pace that enables us to offer our presence to the present moment. But living at this pace means we need to leave the world. This is the paradox of following Jesus. It's only when we leave the world that we can truly be at home in it.

Theologian and poet Thomas Merton once wrote, “Solitude is to be preserved, not as a luxury but as a necessity: not for ‘perfection’ so much as for simple ‘survival’ in the life God has given you.”⁹ Contemplative rhythms enable us to leave the world in order to not only survive but thrive in it. Let me show you how this has been working out in my own life.

This is the paradox of following Jesus. It's only when we leave the world that we can truly be at home in it.

On a recent personal retreat during my sabbatical, I took some time to be with God in silent prayer. Prior to the retreat, I decided to fast for nearly four months from all social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). As I deleted the apps from my phone, I was already starting to feel anxious. I began to think, *What's going on in the world? What are people saying about me? What bit of information am I missing? Did the Knicks trade for Kevin Du-*



rant? Yes, earth-shattering questions. These thoughts bombarded me for many minutes, revealing my addictive behavior. So in place of the constant flow of information, images, and folly that's found on social media, I decided to cultivate silence in prayer.

I had four days to myself, and at the start of my retreat, I took thirty minutes to close my eyes and be with God. The purpose of this time was not to get anything out of it but simply to be still—to do nothing, say nothing, and just be in God's presence. As I closed my eyes, I began to think about the impact of my ministry, as well as the identity that I have built before others. I saw the ways that I insidiously live according to the value system of the world.

The world says, "Show yourself. Prove your worth. Make a name. Build a platform." I began to think, *Who am I apart from the retweets and likes? Why am I so enamored and preoccupied with the quantity of voices approving and affirming me? How can I say that my identity is grounded in God's love when I give most of my attention to approval of people I've never even met?*

In my time of silent prayer those questions were answered, but it was in the form of an invitation to leave these questions behind for something altogether different. In this extended period of silence and in my absence from social media, I was disappearing from the world. I was finding myself in another dimension of reality, unaware of what was being spoken of me, whether good or bad, or whether anything was being said about me at all. In a very real sense, I was leaving the world and the grip it had on me. But I was not leaving for good. For a disciple, to leave the world is to enter back into it from an-

other door: the door of God's love and acceptance, the door of God's way of being. This is how, in the leaving, I found myself arriving at home.

Isn't this what you yearn for? Aren't you tired of living at a pace that blurs out beauty, peace, or joy? Don't you want to be at home? The speed we live at does violence against our souls. The inner and outer distractions minimize the capacity for us to see God's activity around and within us.

I sometimes imagine a scenario in which someone is locked inside of a supermarket and dies of starvation. Can you imagine? You might say this is impossible. Yet in our spiritual lives, this happens every day. Whether we know it or not, we are locked inside the supermarket of God's abundant life and love. It's all available to us. Even so, people are spiritually starving. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The inner and outer distractions minimize the capacity for us to see God's activity around and within us.

God is committed to our transformation. He is not in the business of simply improving our lives; he wants to infuse them with his life. Every day, he moves toward us in love, reaching, seeking, and pleading with us to pay attention. This is the essence of contemplative rhythms—the goal of monastic life. We have to open ourselves to God's way of being; that is, we have to leave but enter back in through another way. Like the apostle Paul said,

we are invited to “live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, MSG).

But how do we practically flesh this out? In the next chapter, I will explore four indispensable practices that can ground our lives in this slower, more intentional way of contemplative rhythms.