

James Dickson's  
*Twelve Powerful Words Needed for Spiritual Fulfillment*



**A Personal Reflection**

by

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## Introduction

While on retreat at Easton Mountain last year, I met with James Dickson, who offered me a new way of living. After a couple of years of introspection, I began to grasp the depth to which I had been dishonest, even fraudulent, about the way I had been living. My presuppositions about my vocation as a Catholic priest brought to a head the realization that I could not continue along the path I was on.

I left active ministry in 2010 only to find that I was not equipped to deal with the workplace realities of the present world. It had been 37 years since I had had a job outside of the church and it was a real eye-opener to realize that with multiple degrees in biology, theology and history, as well as decades of experience in working with people, programs, projects, administration, education, and facilities that, lacking the pieces of paper giving me “official” credentials, I was unable to find a decent job. **But more than that I slowly began to realize that the world was not the issue, it was I.** My attitude and unfinished emotional business were standing in the way of my experience of true freedom.

My personal life also played a part in my leaving ministry. As a gay man I grew tired of the “closet”, the church’s attitude toward sexuality, and wanted simply to be myself without apology and without fear. Yet coming out was only the first step. I had to face my own self in the process, how I came across to others as one hungry for intimacy, yet pushing it away. Dickson saw this in me when we first met several years ago. He tried to help me with powerful questions and I came up with just as powerful answers, rooted in a solidified mindset that had honed my brain power and weakened my heart. He was baffled with the way in which I could logically counter his arguments. I was expertly resistant to letting my heart speak.

I had lost faith, that is, trust, in myself, in others and in God. I allowed my fear and victimhood to control me and in doing so developed a sophisticated and yet doomed method of manipulating my reality by the power of thought alone. I have since discovered the bankruptcy of the head and I am gradually opening up to my heart’s voice. I am now more consciously placing my mind under its power so that I can hear more deeply the call to integrity and faith.

So when Dickson offered me his ***Twelve Powerful Words Needed for Spiritual Fulfillment*** I jumped at the chance to reflect deeply on each word and to write my reflections down in my blog at [www.parisecoaching.com](http://www.parisecoaching.com). I continue to use these words as a regular meditation that “fine tunes” my spirit and keeps me on a clear and narrow path.

The artwork throughout is mine; I hope it enhances your experience. ***Here is my story:***



## James Dickson's Advice...in his own words

*The twelve words are originally by Alan Cohen. I put it into a narrative to help explain the meaning of some of the words -- though I may have made matters worse. I tinkered around, and had to stop. Here is my viewpoint.*

### **TWELVE POWERFUL WORDS NEEDED FOR SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT**

*Know that you are always at **CHOICE** (1); to believe that you didn't have a choice is a lie. Believe in the lie, and you begin to not take responsibility for your actions. And soon, you lose your life.*

*Master the skill of taking appropriate **ACTION** (2).*

*You begin to develop a trust in your skill when your actions bring you towards **BALANCE** (3).*

*Watch for and prepare for correct **CYCLES** (4) before stopping or starting any part of 'the vision you have been holding.'*

*Once the cycle starts (like a surfer taking a wave towards the beach), 'Trust the **PROCESS** (5)' (quote by author unknown) and take with you the only currency you have in this world, which is your **INTEGRITY** (6). Integrity is a testament to the basic need that each of us must be whole and complete. "Those that proclaim they have integrity do not. Holding integrity is like holding a heart beat (similar to holding your breath). It can't be done while you are alive." (~ Dickson)*

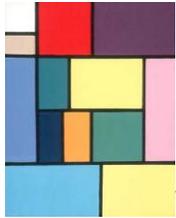
*A level of integrity is needed before one can provide transformational healing to others through the power of **COMPASSION** (7).*

*Let go of all **EXPECTATION** (8). All of it. Every bit of it. Once you let go of it, you aren't there yet. Try again to let go of your expectations. What you expect your life to be, how you expect to be treated, the inalienable rights you expect to have and exercise. You could spend a lot of time here.*

*Finally, you **SURRENDER** (9). Sometimes because you just can't go another step. Sometimes because you have tried every other way possible and they didn't work. When you get here, do nothing. Be present.*

With **PRESENCE** (10) Attend instead to this spontaneous and arising moment. What happens will exceed all your expectations, always. The mind is completely incapable of holding the quality of fulfillment we derive from a single experiential moment.

When we live by these words, the ultimate end is a world of **UNITY** (11). To know this as truth, is to know true **FAITH** (12).



## Word 1: **Choice**

**As you've read, I've been doing a lot of soul-searching** (see my previous blog posts: A Reluctant Fraud and Coming Out from the Darkness of Denial). Most of it has revealed the inner war between my heart and my head. I've depended on my rational brain to give me accurate information about my life, but it has failed me. Instead my head has tended to make up elaborate stories that incite negative emotions within me such as judgment, fear, resentment, and sorrow.

**The joy is that I've discovered that I silenced my heart long ago.** I muffled my heart's attempts at helping me understand myself. Even though my heart had wished on many occasions to ignore my brain, it often lost the battle. I now realize that I can no longer live without first listening to my heart. It has got to have the primary and louder voice over against what my head tries to say.

**With the help of James Dickson, I've been seeking a radical heart-healing.** He's offered me twelve words to live by and I will share them here. Dickson calls them the **Twelve Powerful Words Needed for Spiritual Fulfillment**. These words are gleaned from Alan Cohen's many books, the most famous of which is *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

The first word is **CHOICE**. How many times I've said to myself: ***I don't have a choice***. Over time these words became like heavy anvils of cast iron tied around my neck.

**As a child I must have absorbed subconsciously the scarcity perspective my parents lived by.** They came into this perspective honestly. They grew up without parents, sufficient food and clothing, and quit school at 14 in order to work at menial jobs. I was often privy to their conversations about what they couldn't afford and I believed we were just days or dollars away from the deprivation they had endured during the Great Depression. They would remind us of the "starving children in Italy" whenever we complained about a meal we didn't particularly

enjoy. *When I finally went to Italy in 1970 I discovered that most Italians had been living very well indeed, better than we did!*

**Our job as second-generation Americans children was to move forward a step or two in attaining the American dream.** I also came to believe that I had to do this by myself. I was myself afraid to ask for what I wanted for fear it would cost them too much money. It got to the point where I convinced myself that I didn't really have wants. My mantra was to "make do" and thus be the good boy my parents would love. *I now know this whole world-view was my choice in the end, a great excuse for feeling like a victim and for any failures I might experience along the way.*

**I made a lot of decisions based on scarcity of choice and justified myself by twisting the truth.** For example I believed that commuted to college for four years to save my parents money, but actually I wanted to avoid possible bullying in dorms. Lack of money was my excuse for not dating but it was really because I feared my lack of attraction to females. I attended a lot of church activities in college but it was really because I didn't have the hope of a normal social life. I thought I willingly went into a life of celibacy but it was really because I feared coming out of the closet. I became a priest because I had a vision for Catholic ministry but it was really because I also thought I could change the church.

**The more I lied to myself about the choices I felt forced into, the more I believed the lies and the less responsibility I took for my actions.** Any unhappiness I experienced was almost always "their fault" or because I wasn't perfect, and therefore "my shame". I especially blamed God and church authorities because I embraced the illusion that they could change my situation in order to make me happy. I always had excuses. The world I created for four decades was a small, dark box with no escape where I had either to be *right and perfect for the moment* or *wrong and defective*.

**Now I realize that I had choices and I chose to believe that I didn't.** I do not castigate myself for lying about this but rather am redeeming myself by choosing to live a different way. **I now check in to determine if I'm blaming anyone or anything for the way I feel and take responsibility for every small and large decision I make. *It's the only way going forward.***



## **Words 2 and 3: Action and Balance**

**I run hot and cold regarding when it comes to taking action.** Sometimes I'm impulsive and do what is expedient. Other times I'm paralyzed with fear, ruminating over a myriad of possible outcomes. Presently I am trying to quiet down the brain and let my heart have a bolder voice. I ask, "*What is my heart's desire in this moment?*" AND I am trying not to be attached to outcomes.

**I do recall a moment or two when my heart's desires and the actions I took were in accord.** It was 2001 when I renovated and restored the church of which I was pastor. My goal was to fix the fabric of a building whose systems and internal structure was falling apart. I also wanted to restore the beauty that had been removed during previous and unfortunate attempts at modernizing a 1920 Bavarian-style stucco structure.

**I found an architect with the right temperament for me.** As we disassembled the church bit by bit we discovered major systems that needed updating or replacing. It seemed he confronted me with major action decisions every week. I hemmed and hawed at the thought of spending yet another \$50,000 on something that no one would actually see. But after sleeping on it I was able to listen to my heart and make the quick decisions that actually saved money in the long run. Within nine months the million dollar renovation was complete.

**I just wish I had the same confidence in taking action for myself!** Over the last 30 years I had been viewing my life as stuck in a rut, a *fait accompli*. I felt that diocesan priesthood was truly the "graveyard of talent" and felt increasingly trapped by the routine of parish ministry and denial by diocesan authorities. I experienced a deepening conflict between the life I was handed and the life I wanted. And so I floated along as if in suspended animation. Except for tasks that energized me, such as restoring St. Andrew's, I began to force meaning and value out of my work. I resented whatever inconvenienced me...hardly a good attitude for one who is supposed to serve.

**I left parish ministry three years ago but that didn't change me internally.** I still fought within myself with a cynical spirit and a deadened heart. I didn't know what to do next. I was totally out of balance due to decision and actions I had taken years ago.

**Seeing my desire for an entirely new outlook, James Dickson advised me to master the skill of taking *appropriate* ACTION.** Then I would begin to develop a trust in my skills when my actions brought me towards BALANCE. It meant stopping my thoughts in their tracks and learning to listen to my heart once again.

**So what had been keeping me out of balance? What had invited in my saboteurs time and time again? The major inappropriate action I had adopted and nurtured as a child was to objectify people.** If someone did not fit into my world view, or if they threatened me in some way I began to look at them as things rather than persons, and I needed to create mental constructs about them to protect me. It was much easier to control them in my mind if they fit into neat little categories and boxes.

**The more I boxed in people, the more I also had to justify myself for taking such drastic action.** Objectivity became my best friend. I used my 24 years of formal education to find factual evidence whenever I had to justify being right. I further justified my approach by using the Catholic Church's "objective truths" on which it based its teachings and practices. I viewed myself as a defender of the authentic faith...seeking status and validation.

**But being highly empathic I also experienced the discomfort and pain I incited in others, especially those whom I thought I was helping to be more effective members of an ideal church community.** No matter how kind or gentle I thought I was I was also being intellectually intimidating. This added to my emotional and spiritual imbalance since I couldn't figure out how to correct this impression.

**I have discounted many of my previous decisions and actions as being suspect, as coming from somewhat dysfunctional and even selfish motives.** My new plan is to focus more on "appropriate" than "action." I will need to double check to determine if I'm objectifying the people I encounter who make me uncomfortable.

**All of this has caused me to listen more carefully with my heart to what those close to me are trying to say without filtering it through my defensive brain.** It takes a lot of effort and will eventually result in a new balance among my neuropathways and emotional landscape. In the meantime I wait for the next *appropriate* action to take.



## **Words 4 and 5: *Cycles and Process***

**I continue to reflect on the conflict that has brewed for many years between my head and my heart.** Today I'm dealing with the fourth and fifth words **Cycles** and **Process** which have to do with the way I choose to recognize and work out the priorities of my life.

**My priorities usually are task-oriented.** I normally tackle these tasks as if I'm building a wall. I metaphorically dig a foundation, lay bricks one by one, and continue one step at a time until I

complete the “wall”. In the process I am very intense and use up a lot of energy. But I’m finding this paradigm is no longer useful. This linear kind of working often leads to dead ends and is exhausting, though often carries its own kind of fulfillment. **I end up valuing my life more by what I do than who I am and do not pay enough attention to the life cycles that invite me into a deeper experience.**

**What are these life cycles?** They are like surfing. Surfers search for waves out by the horizon. When a juicy one approaches they mount the wave just as it crests and ride the “sweet spot” until they can ride no more. Then the wave crashes on the beach and they wait for another wave. I have found that jumping onto cycles as they roll into my life can be kind of exciting...as long as I don’t get side-tracked by linear thinking.

**For most of my life I’ve shied away from cycles for two reasons.** The first is that I often don’t recognize them until they’ve passed me by. The second is that they scare the wits out of me. Cycles are complex and impossible to control. They are full of variables that challenge my presuppositions. I remind myself that the whole point is not to control the wave but to ride it and be ready for the surprises it holds.

**As I look back I see how my linear thinking and acting gave me an illusion of protection from the vagaries of life cycles.** I went from 16 years of science and math to 8 years of philosophy and theology without missing a beat. The fact that I missed experiencing much of my adolescence and young adulthood seemed immaterial at the time. My linear thinking kept me on track intellectually, but slowly killed my heart’s receptivity. It cancelled out many opportunities for me to grow as a person. I got used to doing everything possible NOT to ride the wave.

**Most of my ministry was trying to make an illusion come alive.** I wanted to believe that the church after the Second Vatican Council was moving along with me in a straight line. I therefore ignored the many cycles that were coming and going in the church, believing them to be immaterial to my way of integrating faith and ministry. I didn’t pick up the signals, both liberal and conservative, that I ought to change my perspective. I was in denial for many years that Vatican II had been totally reinterpreted and now I was out of step with reality.

**There’s no way of knowing what would have happened if my brain and heart were wired differently or if I had ridden life cycles at their crest rather than persisting in linear thinking.** I suspect I would have been more spontaneous, with greater flexibility and less attachment to outcomes. I may have discovered earlier that life cycles would involve me in a different kind of process, only not as neat and tidy as building a brick wall and very often having no clear end in sight.

**It’s not too late for me, or anyone, to start fresh!** I’ve put down the mortar and bricks and am letting go of the least helpful aspects of linear thinking. I’m waiting for the waves to come and wash over me and will catch a few along the way and ride their crests. Now I have a perspective of expectation, of infinite possibility, rather than dead ends. And I’m kind of

excited about what will happen if I let go and enjoy the view from the top of the wave. I'm actually happy that I don't know the outcome and can't control it.



## Word 6: Integrity

**I always thought I was a person of integrity...that is until I examined the many ways in which I wriggled out of taking responsibility and blamed others for my disappointments in life.** I refused to believe I had choices. I used my own brand of logic, my background in history, and my knowledge of theology and spirituality to justify myself.

**Integrity, as James Dickson says, is a testament to the basic need that each of us must be whole and complete.** He advised me to watch for and prepare for correct cycles in my life before stopping or starting any part of my vision. *“Once the cycle starts trust the process and take with you the only currency you have in this world, which is your integrity.”*

**As I've sought integrity in my own life I've also wondered if integrity might have become an old-fashioned concept.** We don't have to go far to see examples in Congress and in the higher echelons of business and religion. When American graduate students were asked about cheating in college, half to two-thirds admitted to copying someone else's work or outright fraud in tests or papers. I still can't get used to the way in which many of my colleagues in coaching resort to *infomercials* and *bait and switch* approaches to sell their services.

**I'm probably being judgmental and hypersensitive.** Or maybe I'm just out of step with the way things are done today. Or perhaps I wish more from my fellow humans and am expecting too much.

**It could also be my “Judge Judy” syndrome.** That judgment seat is always a comfy place for me to sit. Any perspective where I can feel ethically or intellectually superior to others has been always been a trap for me. It speaks of my lack of integrity.

**Dickson says, “Those that proclaim they have integrity do not. Holding integrity is like holding a heart beat (similar to holding your breath). It can't be done while you are alive.”** I take from his words that integrity is not something I can ever own or possess, even for a nanosecond. It is not something I can achieve by sheer will. It is a quality that, if I do have it, I cannot see within me. Once I think I do possess integrity I automatically forfeit it. Pride undoes any hint of real integrity.

**So if I understand Dickson integrity is like currency.** It's what I have to spend in my interactions with myself and others as I ride the crest of the life cycle I'm supposed to be on. This is the process that leads to the next wave. It's all so immediate; there's no room for second-guessing or for a do-over. In this moment I am compelled to ask: *Am I bringing forth consciously the totality of who I am without prejudgment, ready to do the next right thing?*

**The really difficult piece is listening to my heart where integrity resides.** My brain-habits based in logic and academics may soothe my ego short-term. They may provide exit strategies out of uncomfortable situations.

**No, I need a pure heart, open to my own brokenness and unmet expectations, humbled by my pride and self-sabotaging, and receptive and open the universal vibration of what already is. So if asked I must say that I do not have integrity. I simply am in my totality, in this moment, without attachment to outcome or knowledge of the next step...and with the faith that that's the way it's supposed to be. Period.**



## **Word 7: Compassion**

**Every day I wake up believing I was sent into the world with a mission of healing and change.** Along with many of you I sense that we humans have been painting ourselves into a corner and are in need of a totally new way of living. Economic, technological, environmental, political, and social issues have taken on lives of their own and have taken a toll on our lives. And it's all moving at an alarmingly accelerated pace, out of our control. Developments that once took centuries now are occurring in months and we're constantly playing catch-up.

**I need something that will bring me spiritual fulfillment in this new world.** That radical concept is a **compassion** that transforms and heals. Compassion literally means "to feel with." In practical terms it is my understanding or empathy for the suffering of others that will motivate me to help.

**I witness compassion daily and usually unconsciously, and yet I run away from it.** When I pass by a homeless person on the streets of Boston asking for money my first response is to nod and walk on, for fear the cash will go to a substance addiction. It's not that I'm reluctant to buy them a meal if they really want food, but I often don't have the time or the extra cash. Then almost immediately thereafter I feel a pain in my heart because I wish I had made a different choice. Like frowning versus smiling, it takes more muscle and mental effort **not** to be compassionate.

**But I also realize that not all of what I call compassion is equivalent.** Simply feeling sorry for others or having empathy for their plight does little to help them. For example, the media knows that a good story and the emotions it produces can make us feel more connected to the kind of “community” that the media wish to create. But then they beat a good story to death with repetitious updates, too much detail, intrusive interviewing, or unhelpful follow-ups. Haven’t many of us adopted this style of reporting our comings and goings in the social media? While all of this may engender feelings of compassion, it’s usually at a safe distance and often leads to empathy overload.

**Aside from warm feelings, the kind of compassion our world needs must be transformational and healing.** The means by which we practice this form of compassion is by our integrity. *How can I know I am integrated enough?* The point is I cannot know. I approach life either with integrity or not, either by being whole in the moment or not. All the empathy I might have for others means nothing if it is not intimately flowing from my integrity, my wholeness as a *human-being-in-action*.

**Integrity enables me to listen to my heart for the cues I need that lead me to take the next right compassionate step.** It has nothing to do with the warm feeling in helping others or even its outcome. It has to do with taking the ***appropriate action***. I yearn that compassion might be motivated by integrity become second-nature in me, moving me to act automatically, without my calculating out how much I will be inconvenienced. It’s got to be the right thing to do *for no other reason than it is the right thing to do **now***.

***How do I get there?*** I think it starts with self-awareness. I’ve found that the person with whom I am most cruel, heartless, and impatient is me. *And why do I give myself such a hard time?* I used to think it was a high ethical stance, or because I was socially a square peg forcing myself to fit into a round hole, or due to the dysfunction in my family of origin and my highly sensitive nature. I used to think I was hard on myself for some complicated or unknowable reason.

**But now I’ve stripped away former analyses, excuses, and justifications. *I now know that I am not compassionate with myself whenever I feel like I don’t matter.*** It’s up to me to accept the choice I have to value and appreciate my unique, atypical self, fully and openly. I need to give myself at least the same understanding and love I so readily wish to give to others. It is the beginning of truly transformative and healing compassion that will emanate from my life and touch others. Thus my life purpose will be fulfilled. *What about yours?*



## **Word 8: *Expectation***

**I really enjoyed math and science because of the formulae and equations. *If this...then that.***

I loved having my expectations fulfilled whenever I plugged in the correct numbers or molecular structure to get a single, definite, and absolute answer at the end of the equation. *“If this...then that.”*

I was drilled and trained for 16 years in school to think this way, which piggy-backed onto what I learned at home. For example if I cried as an infant, then my mother would feed me. If I threw a toddler tantrum, then my parents would pay attention to me. If I earned good grades in school, then I would receive validation and praise. If I fell in love, then I would enjoy intimacy and comfort. My parents also taught the kind of ethics based on *“If this...then that.”* We believed that if we were good and kind to others, they would be good and kind to us.

**I discovered in my past professional life that there are serious limits to *“if this...then that”* thinking.** I used to believe that if I followed a given formula for behavior, if I kept the rules, taught the dogma, kept away from political intrigue, was candid and thoughtful, and fulfilled others’ needs then I would be rewarded with opportunities to further my skills and service. Not so much!

**My mentor James Dickson recently gave me some tough marching orders:** *“Let go of all Expectation. All of it. Every bit of it. Once you let go of it, you aren't there yet. Try again to let go of your expectations. What you expect your life to be, how you expect to be treated, the inalienable rights you expect to have and exercise. You could spend a lot of time here.”*

Expectation is the enemy of integrity and compassion. **I am spending a lot of time with this challenge as I rework my entire foundation for living.**

**Now I feel as if am free-floating with nothing to grab onto.** I have no external formulae to follow, no numbers to insert, no familiar “molecular structure” to my life. I need to let go the *“if this...then that”* perspective, to live in the moment and for the moment, without carrying around stories of how my life “should” be. I have to fight the seduction of assumptions concerning my place in the world and the kind of influence I think I ought to have.

**This line of thinking has spawned further clarity.** I have begun to recognize the difference between expectation and dreams, desires and hopes. Without dreams I would despair. Without desires I would flounder aimlessly. Without hope I would go into a catatonic state, refusing to risk love and life. And I now know that expectation serves no good purpose.

**Dreams, desires and hopes open my mind and heart to possibilities, to “what might be”.** They defy the “*if this...then that*” perspective. **Expectation, on the other hand, closes my mind and heart as it proclaims “what should be” in the world I create for myself.** It traps me into thinking that there are formulae for life or predictable consequences for all actions. *In fact, expectation causes me to retreat into a narcissistic, status-driven, controlling, objectifying, judging, and resentful little life, where I go into auto-pilot to manipulate people and events to fulfill my dreams, desires, and hopes.*

**It is an illusion to think that life is ever going “my way.”** As I let go of expectation Life invites me to live on its own terms and to discover the real dreams, desires and hopes that lay deep within my heart and have yet to emerge in to my consciousness. **So I ask you dear readers: How has expectation entrapped you?**



## **Word 9: Surrender**

**Surrender constantly calls to me like a bright sunny winter’s day.** It asks me gently to let go of whatever I’m grasping at the moment, just as I long for spring in the midst of January’s snowfall. No spirituality worth its name, including twelve-step recovery programs, fails to name surrender as a key ingredient.

**In surrender we let go of giving into the temptation at hand.** But that doesn’t mean we give up. When I surrender I acknowledge that I’ve done the best I can. Now it’s time to stop and reflect and wait for whatever shall next arrive. Surrender is not a half-way friend. It asks for radical (to the root) pulling up and letting go. It cannot have strings attached, otherwise I’m tempted in my tricky passive-aggression to fight back, acting as if I have given in but secretly arming myself with the firepower to deliver a counter blow.

**My specialty is in coaching men, particularly highly sensitive men.** I suspect both men and women have a difficult time in our culture coming to grips with surrender but go about it in different ways. It seems to me that women generally have a larger capacity to surrender when they find it necessary, than men do. They have also been coerced, sometimes violently, by male-dominated situations to buckle under. But I think women also recognize that life is a series of battles and each battle requires somewhat different tactics. Some are fought quickly with a clear result. Others battles require surrender...for the moment. These are useful for wearing down the opposition and ultimately prevailing. I’ve seen this time and again in marriages.

**Men tend approach their battles differently.** Our society teaches them, if they are to be “real men”, to view surrender as defeat rather than as a possible tactic. Thus when faced with the possibility of surrender, I suspect that many men fight to the end as the only honorable option. When forced to back down and give in, even as a tactic toward ultimate victory, many men simply become angry and depressed. They would prefer to fall on their swords.

**In my personal and professional lives, I have attempted various avenues to achieve my goals.** I often came up against impenetrable road blocks in the form of authority figures and power plays, the equivalent of the kid on the field who owned the only ball and bat. In these cases I rarely surrendered and did not give in. **Instead I gave up, feeling defeated, angry, shamed, isolated, rejected, and/or resentful.**

James Dickson, in his *ninth powerful word needed for spiritual fulfillment* writes: “Finally, you surrender. Sometimes because you just can't go another step. Sometimes because you have tried every other way possible and they didn't work. When you get here, do nothing. Be present.” I find this last bit the most difficult for me. **How do I do nothing and be present to the surrender, to the emptiness of not having or getting what I wanted?** This includes being totally present to my unfulfilled expectations, to my need for self-compassion, and a renewal of hope for integrity.

**Interior surrender to what life is offering me in this moment seems impossible to an action-oriented guy like me. I worry that I'm wasting time and watching opportunities evaporate. Yet I must let go of outcomes and allow my heart to settle into this empty moment, to feel deeply the desolation, fear, anxiety, and the real sensation that life is passing me by. And then to watch what happens next!**



## **Word 10: Presence**

**One of my vivid memories of grade school was the daily attendance roll.** As the home room teacher called out our names we responded “present.” Showing up for school was half the battle back then. Parents of absent kids who had not first informed the principal received a swift phone call to ascertain why Johnny or Jennie was not at their designated desks. Since my mother let us stay home only if we had a fever or a stomach bug, I was able to count my absences in grade school on one hand.

**College was an eye-opener regarding attendance.** The classes were huge and students came and went during some of the more boring lectures. There were times I left so I could catch the

earlier bus back home. In seminary grad school attendance at everything was closely scrutinized by the all-seeing eyes of resident professors who were to vote on my ordination.

**After ordination I was excited to be present at priest gatherings.** This enthusiasm soon waned as I realized that the fraternity among priests in a large diocese was a fiction. It was also a tremendous waste of my time to sit through unproductive and unfocused meetings where my opinion could not be heard. I also didn't see the value in "face-time" as did those clergy who had a natural gift for maneuvering among connections for advancement.

**I soon replaced my desire to be present with being absent, especially since it wouldn't be noticed.** In fact being absent became a pleasurable habit, a way to beat a system that, in my opinion, was increasingly ineffective. And it offered me the opportunity to spend time in my pursuits.

**My tendency to be absent from institutional functions morphed into an unwillingness to be present *in the moment*.** Life in the parish had become a series of routine tasks that grew tedious over time. I increasingly checked-out emotionally from the work I had to do.

**The problem was that I wanted to accomplish something.** I wanted to see results. By the turn of the century Catholic parish ministry in the Boston area became the last place where one could see growth and development, unless it was regarding a building program. Thus I focused many years on my scholarship, writing, preaching, painting, and hoping to use my skills one day in a wider context. The *present moment* had become a conduit to the future. It felt empty. It promised an illusory fulfillment that would never materialize.

**It's not that I didn't try to be present in the moment.** On retreats and sometimes in prayer I would have profound spiritual experiences. But most of the time, being present plunged me into an inner darkness, a chasm of emptiness where I was never enough. I often dissolved into tears in a kind of ready-to-wear depression.

James Dickson in his tenth ***powerful word needed for spiritual fulfillment*** told me to attend to the spontaneous and arising moments of surrender in the present moment whenever they appear. *"What happens will exceed all your expectations, always. The mind is completely incapable of holding the quality of fulfillment we derive from a single experiential moment."*

**I've come to realize that I had created my own world of hopes and dreams in my mind and generally discounted the world in which I lived.** That's one reason why I stayed in the priesthood so long; I kept trying to fit into an illusion. By grasping onto my expectations I've not been truly present in the moment I've been given.

**I now know I need to replace the adrenalin rush of *what could be* with the rush of life and love that comes from the real world of *what is*.** It's a difficult habit to break because that dark chasm keeps getting in the way. **When I am present to life in this moment I can listen to my heart's priorities and be enough in that moment. Presence reveals abundance.**



## Word 11: *Unity*

The next concept Dickson offers as the *eleventh Powerful Word Needed for Spiritual Fulfillment: Unity*. A primary goal in my life has always been to experience a world of unity, oneness, completion, and harmony. This hunger for unity has motivated me in just about everything. My desire to become a priest was prompted by this central idea. I saw in the teachings of Jesus the ultimate call to unity among all people and with God. I thought I would make it happen through parish ministry, constantly trying to realize this ideal.

**The real issue ended up being much more finite and, at the same time, infinitely less manageable than what I expected.** Unity must begin with me. I am the most important focus for unity and also the biggest obstacle to unity. The work I did in ministry was easy compared with the work I need to do within myself. Paradoxically I yearn to be one with everyone but build defensive walls to protect me from those who make me feel uncomfortable.

**I find myself constantly in the perspective of being *pitted against*.** That's another way of saying I've got *attitude*....a lot of it. I don't show it because I learned long ago to make nice as much as possible, but at a moment's notice I can have attitude.

**Here's a juicy example with details of how my mind works.** Just today I parked at the gym and next to me a young lady got out of her red car and walked to the next-door courthouse for business. I noticed my reaction:

1. Disdain: *how dare she park in a private lot?*
2. Anger: *why should she get away with this?*
3. Judgment: *she should be called to task for this.*
4. Wonder: *why am I upset?*
5. Truth 1: *it's something that I've done and might do again.*
6. Lying: *I can never get away with that kind of behavior!*
7. Truth 2: *The fact is I do sometimes bend rules and get away with it.*
8. Saboteur: *I feel "less than", ashamed, and a victim.*
9. Truth 2: *she's no different than I am, and I'm no different than she.*
10. Self-talk: *"Let it go and rise to your higher self; send both you and her peace and good will and have a giggle over how you make your life difficult and put blocks to unity and inner tranquility."*
11. Resolution: *write about it!*

**I hope this sounds familiar because frankly, I don't like feeling as if I'm the only one in the world who can be so petty.** Yet embedded in this inner conversation is the fact that I sabotage

unity by my own thoughts and actions. I end up living with a lack of ease and openness and therefore of peace and mindfulness.

**Unity comes at a high personal price.** To achieve unity I have to give up control and expectation of how the other is “supposed” to act. I counteract a lifetime of unconscious conditioning.

***Where do I find the strength to do this?*** Strangely I will find it by being more aware and appreciative of the limitations, weaknesses, and fragility of those around me. As I open my empathy and intuition I might perceive how similar I am to all humanity. So it is that our weaknesses and our personal suffering bring us the oneness we seek, the realization that we are in this life together and that there are no qualitative differences among us. Each person’s greatest strength, and therefore a true motivation to love, is acceptance of being as flawed as the next person.



## **Word 12: Faith**

**By faith I mean the most basic trust in oneself and in others, including God.** I don’t mean religious faith that is fraught with layers of doctrine and moral dictates. And I don’t mean faith in institutions or in public figures, be they civic or spiritual. I’m talking about really basic stuff here: *the ability to open up to oneself or to another without grasping for control.*

I find that I have no problem opening up to others, but ***I have real problem letting go and giving up control of the situation.*** It’s not that it will get out of hand. Rather it’s that I’m afraid of losing myself in it.

**This is what James Dickson zeroed in on when he met me.** He sensed my yearning for connection and at the same time my self-sabotaging which constantly prevented me from achieving true intimacy. He ends his ***Twelve Powerful Words Needed for Spiritual Fulfillment*** with **Faith**. He states that once I know deeply my unity with the universe I would be able to experience faith and therefore trust in who I am and what I’m about. Unity with the *other* will enable me to let go of control and just “be.”

**So how did a priest for 32 years and a committed Christian since youth lose his faith?** Maybe it’s because I never had it. Very early in life I learned to be wary of the minefield we call the world. I felt something was missing in me that made it difficult to negotiate the world (and

have since discovered that it's being wired as highly sensitive). I constantly compared myself with others to check and see if I were "normal". This only magnified my sense of isolation and eroded what little faith I might have had.

**As an adult I learned to abandon my heart in favor of my head.** The risk of feeling deeply was simply too great and the sensation too intense. Despite some profoundly transcendent spiritual experiences, my heart remained torpid. Even love could not be trusted to soften my defenses.

The source of my unease was my **quietly seething resentment** toward God for whom I professed love, but who I blamed for what I considered to be an abnormal life (self-pity and victimhood played a huge part). I wanted to be rescued and be given the life I thought I ought to have. I looked to God and then to the church but kept having to peer into the mirror and face my empty heart.

**The more I yearned for outside recognition the less I got, or maybe the less I was able to perceive.** My anger and envy blinded me to how I would sometimes come across to people. My tone, self-expression, opinions, candor, and idealism belied a deeper unease. Like the emperor, I was the last person to know that I had nothing on. Having little faith in myself *per se* I depended on concrete accomplishments to give me value and when they were not forthcoming, I dried up inside.

**Have I found faith?** Honestly, faith is momentary. I constantly move into and out of a state of trust. This is actually a good thing because now I am conscious of my inner spirit. I can sense with gratitude what trust feels like in the moment and forgive myself when those moments pass. Even so, I constantly second-guess myself because I want people to like me and not push me aside. But I know that's not really the issue; I have to stop pushing myself aside and show up in the world in my totality. ***So have I found faith? At this stage the answer is Yes and No...a vast improvement with plenty of room to grow!***