



UNCOVERING THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR YOUR LIFE AND MINISTRY.

By Sibyl Towner

An Examined Life

AUTHOR MARY OLIVER STATES the instructions for living as: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

One of the best practices in helping others grow spiritually and professionally is to pay attention to how you have grown. Who were the people, what were the experiences, what was the learning that has made a difference? How did failure help you to grow?

Next, be astonished by the activity of God in all of the above. As David Benner says, “Our challenge is to unmask the divine in the natural and name the presence of God in our lives.”

Tell it by the way you are with others—help them to pay attention, to be astonished by God’s activity in

their everyday lives, and encourage them to tell it to others.

Three related sections of Scripture come to mind:

Genesis 12:1-3: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Ephesians 4:11-13: “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

2 Timothy 2:1-2: “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also

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be qualified to teach others.” (TNIV)

Each of those verses is a call to pay attention and be ushered into a far larger work and then pass it on, to tell about it.

I will unpack this by way of my own story with hopes that as you read, it will bump into your story and God’s story in your life. My desire is that you will be motivated to develop and invest in those in your personal and professional lives in ways that are more intentional, stewarding the gifts that God has given you.

I spent 16 years working as the head counselor and assistant director at a private camp for girls. I loved what I did. It was my job to equip and develop a staff of 40 to work with children, teens, and each other.

Upon leaving that camp, I was invited to start a Christian camping and leadership development program for my church. At the same time I joined Christian Camping International (CCI) and took a camp director’s certification program. An amazing thing happened. Through that instruction and time with others, I gathered the words to explain why I did what I did. Some years later, a gifted writer helped me name the guiding principles for my life and ministry. That was a profound exercise, and one I highly recommend. I believe that understanding and articulating your own guiding life principles will increase your fruit-bearing tenfold.

Below are the seven principles I uncovered. They are embedded in and expanded upon in the current work of One Life Maps (onelifemaps.com). These principles work in all areas of life: home, church, marketplace, and community.

THE “WITH ME” PRINCIPLE OF LEADERSHIP.

There is no substitute for modeling and allowing people to see you up close. This is not new, but is a four-stage model: (1) I’ll do, you watch and experience; (2) I’ll do and you help; (3) You do and I’ll watch and coach and encourage; (4) You go into the world and do, and I will follow in prayer.

THE CONCEPT OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Growth is the synthesis of change and continuity, and where there is no continuity there is no growth.” Lasting change occurs in the context of continuity—the provision of regular events

at regular times, with consistent expectations and consequences. In the context of continuity, you can periodically introduce change in a way that the person has to re-evaluate their life with God, themselves, and others. They can then make new commitments and live out those change decisions in the context of continuity. This principle is probably worth a whole article. It is Jesus with the disciples, taking Peter, James, and John to the mountain to experience the Transfiguration (where they would like to stay) and then taking them back to the valley where a boy needs to be healed.

A SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT GROWTH MODEL.

Understanding how we grow spiritually and what the key needs and developmental tasks are for various ages is essential.

- Ages 0–5: The need is to know you are beloved. The key task is trust and security.

- Ages 6–11: The need is to develop confidence and competency. The key task is skill development.

- Ages 12–18: The need is to begin to know you are unique. A key task is discovering identity by learning to serve others and, in the process, discover your spiritual gifts.

- Ages 19–35: The need is to discern a purpose for our lives. The key task is exploring intimacy and life purpose in a community of accountability.

DEVELOPMENT OF A CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW.

The goal is to develop an awareness and understanding of the culture through a biblical perspective. This enables us to make wise and God-honoring decisions in a sea of choices, such as having concern for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, and accepting and embracing diversity.

GROWING IN CHRIST.

(A never-ending process until we meet Christ face to face).

The marks of this growth are:

- A relationship with the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- Believing in the truth of Scripture
- Living in the empowering work of the Spirit
- The centrality of prayer
- A spirit of gratefulness and forgiveness

THE CHURCH IS THE FAMILY OF GOD.

We are called to be in community. Growth occurs in the context of community. As traditional family networks are often separated by many miles, the church can become the “family of God” in new, deeper ways.

OUR LIFE STORY IS A TREASURE AND A PRIMARY WAY IN WHICH GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF.

Reflecting upon our life story, understanding how it impacts our present, and seeing God’s hand at work in retrospect, brings home the truth that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. It is true, as Thomas à Kempis said, “The unexamined life is destined to repeat itself.”

Can you name the principles that guide your life? Are you engaged in living them in such a way that people you work, live, and play with want to learn from and with you? Are you helping others grow in ways that honor and express who God has made them to be?

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. Live a life worth being asked about. ●

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