

Caring for the Spiritual Lives of InterVarsity Staff

By Steven Stuckey

Executive Summary

Introduction

- InterVarsity staff are the organization's greatest asset. Because of who they are, what they do, and who they become, it is important that we care for them well.
- Definitions:
 - InterVarsity Staff profile- They are young adults engaged in the critical first half of life tasks of discovering a dream, finding a community, and becoming economically self sufficient. They are also in the early stages of their faith journey.
 - "Spiritual" life is:
 - Our interior, hidden, inner world that influences our outer behavior.
 - Energy that animates us and creates a sense of meaning.
 - Our intimate experiential relationship with the Triune God.
 - Care giving involves becoming a safe companion on the journey, helping them pay attention to their inner world, helping them discern, offering them disciplines to enhance their relationship with the Lord, knowing when to refer, and taking care of ourselves.

Common Dis-eases of the Soul for InterVarsity Staff

- One—The Headless Chicken Syndrome
 - *This is the person running five directions at once who does not yet know themselves well and lacks a system to manage their energies.*
 - Two—The Dunkin Donut Diet of Spiritual Disciplines
 - *This is the person practicing only the disciplines of engagement and neglecting disciplines of abstinence.*
 - Three—The Monday Morning Blues
 - *The overextended person experiencing reactive depression and self medicating with media or other unhealthy drugs.*
 - Four—The Seven Year Itch Syndrome
 - *The person experiencing intra-psychoic depression of boredom and lethargy who needs help discerning voices that may be of the Lord or just distractions of the soul.*
 - Five—Life Stage Transition
 - *The person entering their thirties or later at midlife who discovers that some part of their soul is asking for a bigger voice in the direction of their life.*
 - Six—The Heady Thinker
 - *The person who is not in touch with their emotions or devalues inner experience.*
 - Seven—The Highly Sensitive Person
 - *The person who because of biology or upbringing is highly sensitive to external stimulation and expectation and feels overwhelmed as a result.*
 - Eight—When God Dies
 - *The person who suffers a great loss and questions God's goodness or sovereignty.*
 - Nine—The Ten Talent Person
 - *The multi gifted individual who garners praise wherever they go.*
 - Ten—Staff Team Conflict
- ❖ Summary

Introduction

InterVarsity staff are the movement's greatest asset. They are the ones who embody the vision, train, student leaders in a host of critical ministry skills, and create authentic connections with non-believers, faculty, donors and the broader Christian Community. Most come from our student ranks and represent our best and brightest. They are also our most significant gift to the church. After serving with us for 5-7 years on average, most remain in the field of ministry working in the pastorate, cross cultural mission, or the nonprofit world. Over the years, hundreds have gone on to create a plethora of agencies that address the human condition in a variety of ways. Because we value them for who they are, what they do, and who they become, it is right that we learn to care for them well. This essay seeks to explore practical ways to do that, with a specific focus upon their spiritual lives.

Definitions

InterVarsity Staff

On average they are college graduate, young adults between the ages of 22-35. Student ministry is often their first post college job. Many see us as a hands-on graduate school for Christian Leadership Training. Most come to us while in a transition phase from adolescence to young adulthood. They are engaged in the critical first half of life tasks of:

- Discovering the dream that is a unique expression of who they are at their deepest levels and animates them to live life fully. This dream will lead them to a sense of vocation.
- Finding a post college community that for some includes a spouse and family that will become a place of belonging and service.
- Developing practical talents and skills to earn a living so they can support themselves and those they love.

The vast majority are in the early stages of their faith journey. They are drawn to the person of Jesus, possess a belief system that is somewhat black and white, enjoy being with a community of like minded believers, and experience a genuine desire to serve the Lord.

Spiritual Life

Spirit in Hebrew and Greek is the word "breath" or "wind." When the Spirit of God breathed into a lump of clay called Adam, it animated him and caused him to come to life. It is the breath that comes to us when we are born into the world and the one that departs from us when we leave. This idea has three implications for the term "Spiritual Life."

- "Spiritual Life" is the hidden, invisible, inner world of a person that influences their outer behavior. It is their thoughts, feelings, moods, beliefs, and values. It includes their unconscious self that is expressed in their dreams, longings and sorrows. The language of that hidden world is symbol and metaphor.
- "Spiritual Life" is that which animates, motivates, gives *energy* and a sense of purpose and *meaning* for our journey. Changes in energy and a longing for meaning are things to pay attention to.

- “Spiritual Life” is our relational life with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit who is autonomously at work in our lives whether we recognize it or not. The point is to try and recognize it.

Care

As caregivers we work under the authority of staff directors augmenting their pastoral care efforts. We care for the spiritual lives of InterVarsity staff as we:

- Become a safe, confidential companion on the journey who is interested in the whole of their existence, not only their organizational roles.
- Ask questions, listen, and help them create space to pay attention to their inner world.
- Help them distinguish the voices in their life and discern which might be the voice of God’s Spirit.
- Offer them tools (spiritual disciplines) that might enhance their relationship with the Lord.
- Know when we are over our heads and need to refer them to another professional.
- Care for ourselves and not load them down with expectations for our own ego fulfillment.

Common Dis-eases of the Soul for InterVarsity Staff

Listed below are ten common syndromes, conditions, or situations that I have encountered in caring for InterVarsity staff.

One—The Headless Chicken Syndrome

The typical challenge for many young staff members is creating a system to manage their energy—they are usually going in five directions at once. Through trial and error, they have to learn their physical and emotional limits and develop a structure that will keep them from melting down or burning out. Sometimes the admonition is as simple as “exercise, eat three meals a day, get eight hours of sleep, and pay attention to your inner life with God.” But as we all know, it is much easier to say those things than it is to do them consistently.

The schedule of a typical staff member is erratic at best and chaotic as worst. People who make it over the long haul must learn to manage themselves with discipline and grace. So I ask younger staff about their use of time, their goals for next month, and what they are learning about God and themselves along the way.

Two tools that were developed by Doug and Marilyn Stewart, the *Life Purpose Statement* and the *Rule of Life*, have proved quite helpful to staff in San Diego. It helps staff think about the bigger picture.

Two—The Dunkin Donut Diet of Spiritual Disciplines

Dallas Willard says that there are two categories of spiritual disciplines—disciplines of engagement and disciplines of abstinence. Disciplines of engagement take seriously our role as disciples of Jesus and focus on our responsibility as his followers. Disciplines such as worship, intercessory prayer, service, giving, evangelism, and inductive Bible study are things that we hope all young believers will embrace. We major in these types of disciplines, however if these are the only disciplines in their tool kit, staff will eventually wear out and feel overwhelmed by their life with the Lord.

Disciplines of abstinence focus on the Lord's responsibility in the relationship. They are intended to make space for the Lord to act and speak. They help the believer get beneath the distractions, addictions, and psychological complexes of the ego to hear the autonomous voice of the Lord speaking to the soul. Disciplines such as contemplation, silence, solitude, fasting, chastity, and lectio divina fit into the second category. It has proved helpful to introduce young staff members to the ideas of the disciplines of abstinence even though some will find it difficult to reign in their nervous, extroverted energy. Eventually they all hit the wall and the discipline will make more sense.

Three—Monday Morning Blues

Between now and mid June, each of our Southern California InterVarsity staff will spend at least a week with their students at Campus by the Sea. They will be on call 14 to 16 hours per day teaching, praying, and counseling. It's a high energy, extroverted affair.

During the conference, staff members are the stars. Students laugh at their jokes, write down everything they say, and want to become like them when they grow up. But then when an exhausted campus staff member returns home, their overextended spouse just wants them to take out the garbage and watch the kids for a while. That subtle psychological let down, called reactive depression, often catches our people by surprise. In addition to the fatigue of sleep deprivation, they experience a loss of esteem as they return to the mundane. Meanwhile their poor spouse must manage the house for a day or two longer while dealing with a pouting partner.

For some their immediate response is to self medicate and for this generation the drug of choice is to binge on media—games and movies. Men are most tempted to internet pornography the day after a major conference. I try to help our folks understand the dynamic and take personal responsibility for developing a plan to deal with post conference blues in healthier ways.

Four—The Seven Year Itch Syndrome

It presents itself as lethargy, restlessness, or boredom. Some feel trapped in a role. Others are repeatedly discontent with a supervisor or the organization. It seems to happen about every seven years throughout our adult life. In psychology it is called intra-psychic depression. Look below the surface and it is as if some part of us is sending subtle messages that disturb the status quo to another part of us. Look deeper and there is often fear—fear of change, fear of disappointing someone or fear of taking greater responsibility for our destiny. Sometimes those messages are the voice of God inviting us to become more fully the unique person he created us to be. Sometimes the messages are just a distraction tempting us to escape our current call. Those who are from families with very high shame induced expectations find themselves in this situation. In order to keep peace in their family of origin, individuals have learned to suppress their own inner voice.

With this group of people, my goal is to listen, ask probing questions, and help them sift and discern what it might all mean. And finding meaning with the deepest part of ourselves and how we connect with God and his work in the world is the goal. This syndrome requires a person to face something that they may be avoiding. The way out of their malaise is to work through their internal fears and take

responsibility for the new thing God may be saying to them. Ignatius Rules of Discernment are often helpful at this stage. (eg. *Weeds Among the Wheat* by Thomas Green)

Five—Life Stage Transition

This condition is a subset of the Seven Year Itch Syndrome. It manifests itself at two important times in a staff member's career. The first is the transition to the thirties. The typical person has worked with us for seven years. They are ready for their first sabbatical. Most discover that chasing students around a dorm at two in the morning no longer turns them on like it did earlier. If they are single, they want to get married because they see the door to that state slowly closing. If they are married they want to have children, buy a house, or get a dog. All represent expressions of putting down roots and making their life more meaningful. But the tradeoff is that they also make their life more complex.

These individuals visit me when they discover that all their old spiritual disciplines no longer work. The chaos that young children bring to a home torpedoes their daily quiet time. Getting the tribe out the door on time for Sunday morning worship becomes a chore. Date nights with their spouse disappear. Exercise becomes pushing the stroller around the block. The staff member feels pressed for time on all sides. The new spiritual discipline that they need to learn at this stage is the *discipline of good enough*. Add to that is the Ignatius admonition of looking for God in all things.

The midlife transition between ages 40-50 is another important event for spiritual growth in our lives. A high percentage of staff at this stage have climbed the administrative ladder up a few rungs. This season is a good time to ask if the ladder is possibly leaning against the wrong wall. It's a time to reassess life goals, foundational relationships, and life with God. Sabbaticals become especially helpful at this stage.

Six—The Heady Thinker

The staff that I meet in this category are often taking classes at Fuller Seminary. Many fit the Myers-Briggs *NT* category. They get used to thinking about God in a heady, detached, academic way. Some lack language to describe their suppressed feelings. Others devalue the role of inner experience and as a result don't pay attention to what might be going on within their souls. Many of these folks are our best pioneers because they are able to override emotional distress that comes with launching a new work. But in terms of their life with the Lord, their strength is also their weakness. Usually what gets them knocking on my door is some repressed emotion such as anger or lust leaking out in an uncontrollable and surprising way.

Helping this person get in touch with the repressed emotion and talk to the Lord about it is the goal. Some lack language to express what they feel so I suggest words or give them a vocabulary list of emotional phrases. In time their life with the Lord and their own inner world can become richer and more meaningful.

Seven—The Highly Sensitive Person

These individuals have a very large inner world, tend to be responsible NF's, creative introverts, and often feel overwhelmed by life. Many fit the psychological category of Highly Sensitive Person. Their brains are hardwired in such a way that they are more sensitive to external stimulation. They are prone

to panic attacks, depression, and guilt when they try to keep up with their Heady Thinker friends. Large public events such as Urbana or chapter conferences quickly fry their circuits.

I try to help these friends value the minds and bodies they have been given receiving them as a gift from God rather than a liability. I tell them that if they were a musical instrument they would not be the all weather trumpet that can take all kinds of abuse; they are rather the finely tuned violin. I help them strategize ways to care for themselves in high stimulation situations. We work on trying to discover appropriate ways to measure success given who they are. With heady thinkers, the goal is to help a person get more in touch with their feelings. For the highly sensitive person, the goal is to help them embrace their identity in Christ and stop comparing themselves to others. Books such as the *Introvert's Advantage*, *The Highly Sensitive Person*, and *Introverts in the Church* are helpful as is looking at the lives of other people who fit that category.

Eight—When God Dies

We are cast from the womb, the place of ultimate safety and provision, into a world that is overwhelming and dangerous. Religious experience often feels like a return home to that place of predictability and security in the beginning stages. Then something happens, usually a calamity—the death of a parent or close friend, loss of an intimate relationship, personal health crisis. Suddenly the God we believed in seems very distant. Faith is quickly replaced by the three dark horsemen of doubt, disillusionment, and despair. We wonder, “Will we ever get home again.” The answer is “No.” Staff members at this stage of life may often need the initial help of a professional counselor to help them deal with the symptoms of their reactive depression in the face of loss. Later on, if they don't abandon their faith all together, they may need the help of a spiritual director to help them integrate their experience of loss into a new faith that is more complex, more ambiguous, and less black and white. They may need help learning to talk to a God who promises to be with them but not keep them safe. They may need to become friends with Job, Elijah, or Moses.

My approach with these friends is to be present, listen, and resist giving advice or be too helpful. God will show up if they are able to pay attention. Their instinct will be to pull away and stop praying. But if they are able to tell God how they feel and if they will be able to engage the “new” God, they will discover a faith that is deeper and richer than before.

Nine—The Ten Talent Person

The movement is fortunate to have multi talented individuals pass through our ranks from time to time. They are high achievers with boundless physical and intellectual energy who are able to do all things with ease. Wherever they go they seem to set the bar of expectation higher with their performance. Many in this group eventually cultivate a rich inner life with the Lord. Often, however, their journey requires a crisis or personal stumble to realign their egos. They become used to impressing others and being held in high esteem. Personal failure can become the doorway into a deeper life with the Lord. Moses is their patron saint.

In working with this type, I try as always to be present, listen, and keep my awe of them to myself. They are helped by having a neutral and compassionate sounding board.

Ten—Conflict with Fellow Staff Members

It has been said that conflict is the fertilizer for grown in intimate relationships. It smells bad but if managed properly, it can help a team deepen their relationship with one another. InterVarsity staff teams are often very complicated social structures. Team members not only work together, they may also be roommates, date one another, mentor one another or supervise one another. Add to that, team members may be less mature and not know themselves very well.

When conflicts arise, they are usually handled by the staff directors. Those of us in pastoral care positions often hear about the conflict in private conversations with individual team members. Without taking sides, we try to help individuals grow in self knowledge through the experience. On other occasions, if the staff director is unable to bring about resolution and the team gets worn down, we may get called in to help mediate. By that time, however, most easy solutions have been exhausted and our role is to help members pursue spiritual growth in the midst of disappointment and loss.

Summary

InterVarsity staff members are a great treasure. It is an honor to work with young adults who function at such a high level and have so much potential. Caring for a person's soul, their spiritual life, is a high calling to be taken seriously by the movement in general and by those of us in pastoral care roles in particular. ⁱ

ⁱ Filed under Documents/Spiritual Direction Training/Caring for the Spiritual Lives of InterVarsity Staff.doc