

HOW TO NAVIGATE BY SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

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Once when I was providing a consultation for a rocket scientist who was discussing topics ranging from operant learning to human factors engineering, I happened to casually mention the concept of navigating by spiritual principles. Intrigued, my colleague inquired, “What does it mean to navigate by spiritual principles?”

Because he had awarded me the Gift of Bibliography (10-13-2022), I decided to cite some primary sources that would be more enlightening than would be my own original thought. My first mental image was that of a pilot, which made sense given that he had operated various crafts in the air and on the sea. He had also once explained to me so many differences between a drone and a quadcopter that I had forgotten the question I had asked.

Man as a Pilot

In their monumental treatise *Systems of Psychotherapy*, psychologists Donald Ford and High Urban (1963) provide a metaphor that is implicit in some systems of psychotherapy. Notwithstanding their gender-specific language, which might seem archaic by contemporary standards, Ford and Urban provide the following narrative:

One underlying assumption about the nature of man is the idea of man as a pilot: Sometimes man is viewed as exercising control over his behavior and the situations he encounters. He pilots his craft through the sea of life, choosing his course from among those presented by the characteristics of his ship, the influences of the winds and waves at the time, and the ports toward which he wishes to sail. He can be ‘responsible’ for his behavior. (Ford & Urban, 1963, p. 595)

Courage to Change

My second thought, which I enumerated as “Thought 1(b)” because the idea was still related to the metaphor of piloting a ship, was from a book *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon, 1992). Again, I quoted the original source, because I had read this page hundreds of times:

I am told that the automatic pilot in an airplane does not work by locking onto a course and sticking to it. Instead, it steers back and forth over the path of an assigned course and makes the necessary corrections when it senses that it has strayed.

In reality, the auto pilot is on course only 5 or 10 percent of the time. The other 90 or 95 percent of the time, it is off course and correcting for its deviation.

I, too, must make continuous adjustments. I am much more willing to do so today because I have stopped expecting myself to be perfectly on course. I am bound to make plenty of mistakes, but with the help of the Al-Anon program, I am learning to accept mistakes as an inevitable part of the adventure of living. (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 60).

“This stuff is not rocket science,” I concluded after I had rattled off the auto pilot script stored in my mind. “I understand rocket science,” replied my brilliant colleague, “It’s the fuzzy stuff that makes no sense.” Fortunately, I had survived enough mathematics courses in college to know a bit about fuzzy clustering. I had also known since childhood that some of us are comfortable with the fuzzy stuff, whereas others are gifted in understanding angles, sharp edges, and spatial rotations. Fortunately, they are also the ones who design our pyramids, bridges, and buildings.

Putting Virtues Into Practice

My second thought, which I enumerate as 2(a), involves the idea of practicing the classic spiritual virtues by putting them into action. For those who are unfamiliar with these virtues, they are essentially the polar opposites of the seven deadly sins: pride (arrogance), greed, wrath (self-righteous anger), envy, lust (excessive desire), gluttony (insatiable appetite), and sloth (apathy, indifference, or laziness). In contrast, each of the classic virtues provides an antidote or counterbalancing effect to the *cardinal* sins (on which all other sins hinge) or capital vices (Latin *caput* for “head”), because they originate in the head. Listed in the order in which they are corrective to each of the vices, they are listed as follows: humility, generosity, patience, gratitude (or sometimes, kindness), chastity, moderation, diligence. Because we do not innately possess these virtues, we learn to put them into practice by being around others who are practicing them and by acting *as if* they are already part of our character (Doverspike, 2021, p. 12).

Practical Application

Putting virtues into practice involves a few simple mental efforts and behavioral actions.

- ✓ Maintain vigilant self-awareness throughout each day.
- ✓ Take an ongoing inventory of ourselves—not others—throughout the day.
- ✓ Practice the virtues by acting as if we already possess them (e.g., acting as if we are generous, pretending we are patient while we wait).
- ✓ Notice and use our vices as early detection signals for practicing opposite action.

Using Vices as Signals for Opposite Action

Vices are not all bad if we use them as early warning signals and reminders to practice the corresponding virtue. One of the keys is to correctly identify the vice at a subclinical level and then to use that urge as a cue to engage in opposite action (Doverspike, 2021, p. 12).

- ✓ When feeling arrogant, strive to be humble with others.
- ✓ When feeling greedy, strive to be generous with others.
- ✓ When feeling angry, strive to be patient with others.
- ✓ When feeling envious, strive to be grateful.
- ✓ When feeling lustful, strive to be chaste.
- ✓ When feeling insatiable hunger, strive to be moderate.
- ✓ When feeling lazy or careless, strive to be diligent.

Principles of a Spiritual Program

Once when asked about the principles of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill P. replied by saying, “The principles of Twelve Steps are the opposite of our character defects.” In *Drop the Rock*, first author Bill P (2005) makes this observation:

In recovery, we try to take the opposite of our character defects and shortcomings and turn them into principles. For example, we work to change fear into faith, hate into love, egoism into humility, anxiety and worry into serenity, complacency into action, denial into acceptance, jealousy into trust, fantasy into reality, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, judgmentalism into tolerance, despair into hope, self-hate into self-respect, and loneliness into fellowship. Through this work, we learn to understand the principles of our program. (Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005, Introduction, p. xvii)

Ethical Considerations

Navigating by spiritual principles includes ethical considerations related to maintaining confidentiality, respecting sacramental privilege, and protecting the anonymity and privacy of those sharing their stories with the secular priest. In the examples contained in this article, the rocket science colleague was actually a submarine officer whose deployments often consisted of silent operation under the seas. In this context, navigation under the polar caps in stealth mode was often a mixture of faith and doubt, with no active sonar systems to ping ahead for potentially lethal hazards such as undersea mountains or other submarines.

American Psychological Association (2017) Standard 4.07 (Use of Confidential Information for Didactic or Other Purposes) has relevance:

Psychologists do not disclose in their writings, lectures, or other public media, confidential, personally identifiable information concerning their clients/patients, students, research participants, organizational clients, or other recipients of their services that they obtained during the course of their work, unless (1) they take reasonable steps to disguise the person or organization, (2) the person or organization has consented in writing, or (3) there is legal authorization for doing so. (APA, 2017, p. 8)

The story in this article is actually fictitious, designed to illustrate some principles that are easier to understand when there is some skin on them. Composite stories are anonymized and fictionalized stories that are based in part on compilations of trends observed or reported by actual people in the real world. Throughout these stories, background information, demographic data, and other variables have been changed to ensure and protect anonymity.

References

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1992).
Courage to change: One day at a time in Al-Anon II [B-16]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

American Psychological Association. (2017).
Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (2002, Amended June 1, 2010 and January 1, 2017).

<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.asp>

[X](#)

The downloadable and paginated version cited in this article is available as a document file (PDF, 272 KB) at the link below:

<https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf>

Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005). *Drop the rock: Removing character defects* (2nd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.

Based on the principles behind Steps Six and Seven, *Drop the Rock* combines personal stories, practical advice, and powerful insights to help readers move forward in recovery. The original book was published in 1993 by Glen Abbey Books in Seattle, Washington.

Doverspike, W. F. (2021). *How to understand the seven deadly sins*.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Ford, D. H., & Urban, H. B. (1963). *Systems of psychotherapy: A comparative study*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

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