

# HOW TO MEASURE THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF LIFE

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**W**hen I think of life,  
I think of three dimensions:  
length, breadth, and depth. <sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Harold Kushner (1935–2023) provides a useful perspective on life: “I will insist to my last day that life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many other people does it reach out to embrace?—and depth—what values do I stand for, even in my somewhat diminished condition?” (2015, p. 150).

## Length

*Length* is the measure of life that is the most publically recognized, yet it may be the least important. Even when an event is less than a day old, we can already be aware of how important the longevity—or brevity—of one day can be. Even when milestone anniversaries or birthdays are reached, we live only one day at a time. For many reasons, focusing on today—just for today—is one of the best ways to approach life. That is, we can make the most of life today as if it is our last day, and make the best of life today as if it is the first day of the rest of our lives. It is never too late to start a new day. In her book *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard observes, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing” (1989, p. 32). In other words, how we live today is how we are living our life.

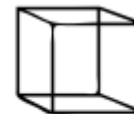
## Depth

*Depth* is the dimension of life reflected in the underlying foundation of the values and principles by which we live. For those of us who are introverts and focus on the interior life, it is the dimension that matters the most.

Foundations are unseen but, without them, nothing stands. Depth is measured not only by the values we believe in our hearts, but by the virtues we practice in our actions: humility, patience, kindness, and gratitude. We practice humility by being respectful to those who are lowest. We practice patience by slowing down when we feel like rushing others. We practice kindness by loving those who seem like they deserve it the least. We practice gratitude by expressing appreciation for the smallest of things we can notice.

## Breadth

*Breadth* is the measure of life that is counted by the number of lives we touch. It is the dimension that matters the most to extraverts and those who are outgoing. It is what we establish and nourish as we interact with family, friends, and strangers. Historically, breadth has been measured by the number of children, grandchildren, and descendants that we give to future generations. Yet for those of us who will never be blessed to pass on our genes to the future, we can actualize our generativity in a never ending number of ways. Not only by being the favorite aunt or uncle of a dozen nieces and nephews, but also by touching the lives of others each day in our offices, hospitals, universities, and houses of worship. We never underestimate the power of a gentle act of kindness or an uplifting word of encouragement. In doing so, we can leave people, places, and events just a little bit better than we find them when they cross our path each day.



Thomas Merton (1915–1968) is one of my spiritual mentors. Also known as Father M. Louis, he was the Cistercian monk whose first guest master (at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardstown, Kentucky) I met on my first silent retreat at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit (in Conyers, Georgia) in 1991.<sup>2</sup> I met “Father Jo,” also known as Fr. Mary John “Joachim” Tierney (1912–1999), 50 years after Merton first encountered him at the guest house at Gethsemani in a cold Wednesday night of December 10, 1941 (see Merton, 1951, p. 373).<sup>3</sup> Almost 20 years before my own first silent retreat at the Monastery in Conyers, Georgia) in August 1991, I had encountered Merton’s writings in the very small bookstore during my first visit to the monastery in October 1972.

Merton once wrote words that I recite to myself on almost a weekly basis. In *No Man is an Island*, Fr. Merton wrote, “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, with the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be love?” (1955, p. 168).<sup>4</sup> Merton’s words highlight the spiritual principle of acceptance as the cornerstone of any quality relationship. Without acceptance, we have no relationship with another, but only with projections of ourselves onto others. With acceptance, we can experience genuine love, which has little to do with our emotions and everything to do with our actions.

There are few among us who seem naturally blessed with the virtues of humility, patience, and charity. Just standing next to them makes us feel improved in our own lives. There are many among us who are not naturally endowed with these virtues. Yet we can learn and practice them in our actions, until they become part of our natural behavioral repertoire. We can practice them in our beliefs

and thoughts, until they become our habits. We can practice them by our belonging to and connecting with others—particularly those who practice them in their own lives. Eventually, these virtues become part of our character.

### References

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## Notes

1. As pointed out by book editor and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD, the use of the definite article “the” in the title implies that the article refers to the definitive three dimensions of life (i.e., rather than simply three dimensions of life). Of course, there are many dimensions of life, and the use of the definite article (“the”) in the title is not to imply literal reality but rather it is simply a literary device to add impact and to pull the reader into the text.

2. The Monastery of the Holy Spirit, officially the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, is a Trappist monastery located near Conyers, Georgia. Officially known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCS), the Trappists are a Catholic religious order of cloistered monastics that branched off from the Cistercians. The primary work of the monks is prayer.

3. Father Mary John Joachim Tierney (1912 to May 20, 1999) is mentioned in *The Seven Story Mountain* (Merton, 1951, p. 373). After reading a transcript of my invited address at a graduation (Doverspike, 2011), Abbot Bernard Johnson (1925-2017), in his retirement at the Abbey of our Lady of New Clairvaux in California, wrote me a letter on November 11, 2011. Dom Bernard wrote, “I had a very strange thought in reading the footnotes: Fr. Joachim would love to be a footnote. He used to talk a lot about Saint Bernard’s [1090-1153 the founding Abbot of Clairvaux Abbey in Burgandy] phrase—*ama nesciri*—love to be unknown. Whereas I suspect Thomas Merton would hate to be a footnote to anything. Figure that one out” (B. Johnson, personal communication, November 11, 2011).

According to Dom Bernard, Father Joachim’s motto was *ama nesciri* (English: “Love the obscurity” in the sense of “Love to be unknown” or “Do not seek fame”).

4. The quoted material in this text is also contained on pages 176-178 in Chapter 9 (“The Measure of Charity”) of the 2005 publication, which is a smaller size and paginated differently than the original 1955 version from which the quote was taken.

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