Formation, Deformation, Transformation
by Karel San Juan, SJ, PhD

Life, it seems, brings experiences that form, deform, and transform us.

**Formation.** We are formed as persons with unique characteristics, shaped by our unique histories and circumstances. Our faith teaches us that we are formed in original goodness, created by a Good Creator God – almighty in His beneficence and providence, and thus willed by this Creator to be good, and to be His partner in the continuing creation of the world. We are formed in, by, and for love, warmly held in God’s hands, deeply cared for and unforgotten. As “works-in-progress,” we are constantly borne in love and wholeness.

**Deformation.** Though being formed in love and wholeness, we do get deformed. Deformation happens through experiences that wound us, that scar us, that weaken us. We get disoriented and we “miss the mark.” We miss the point of life, and we forget that we are loved. We yield to temptation, we get pulled further toward the self, we narrow our vision, and we succumb to fear and to the power that destroys rather than builds. We see ourselves small, stunted, deformed, unable to move, grow, and claim joy and fulfillment in the world.

**Transformation.** Amid our deformation, we can be pulled back on track. Our formation can continue. Transformation can happen. And it does happen, even slowly, painfully, unknowingly. There is something made available when we were created. And that is what we call grace. Grace freely given for us to claim. Grace that is strength, grace that is courage, grace that is possibility and hope. It helps us navigate darkness and see light. It helps us see change and newness in ourselves and in the world.

In the journey we call life, we go through formation, deformation, transformation. But we need to be aware of this. In Emmaus Center, we accompany you in this journey of seeing and claiming, this process of being transformed anew for your sake, for the sake of your community, and for the sake of the world we love. Your life – renewed, reclaimed – helps bring forth a new world of peace and justice.

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“Formation in a Complex World” is a series of brief articles featuring various perspectives on formation and psycho-spiritual integration. For more information please log on to www.emmausphil.com

“Staying Connected to the Skin of our Soul” by Dr. Inge V. del Rosario, PsyA
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Discernment and the need for contact with the “skin of the soul”. The Deuteronomic exhortation to choose life (Deut. 30:19) reflects the challenge of discernment so essential to Ignatian spirituality. Crucial to this process of discernment is our connection and attunement to what writer and spiritual director George Aschenbrenner, S.J. calls the “skin of the soul,” where “feelings, emotions and affectivity scratch and scamper” in us. (2004: Stretched for Greater Glory, 165) Without consistent sensitivity to this space of activity and spontaneity within, the process of listening and responding to experiences and inner movements can be muted, our capacity to make life-giving choices affected.

The “scratch and scamper” of feelings within. While we have been formed towards growth in intellectual knowledge, we are not as well schooled in affective knowing. We may find it difficult to identify emotions. We may struggle to differentiate and be with feelings of fear, excitement, happiness, sadness, shame, guilt, anger and despair. We are wary, even suspicious of our emotions, regarding them as an enemy to be pushed away, cast out and overcome. Emotions that are not named, acknowledged and accepted can create an anxiety within that may seem overwhelming, even out of control. We feel uneasy… bothered … distressed … put on edge by the scratch and scamper of feelings within. We may then look for ways to protect and soothe ourselves from the upset these emotions cause us.

Turning outside the self to manage inner distress. To manage inner anxiety and restlessness, we may sometimes look outside ourselves for calming and comfort. Some may turn to ingesting substances such as alcohol, drugs and prescription medication to numb themselves from having to feel. Others may engage in activities of everyday life, such as work, eating, shopping, Internet use, gambling, exercise, relationships and sexual behaviors, doing so with ever increasing frequency and intensity to deal with their distress.

The lack of efficacy of these self-soothing responses. These substances (alcohol, drugs and medication) and seemingly ordinary activities offer us only temporary calm and relief. Inner distress and restlessness become palpable again. The need to preoccupy ourselves intensifies: we need to do more, have more, use more, consume more. Engaging in these activities may take up more and more of the day, eating into time we had previously spent at work or with family and friends. Paradoxically, while we may have first turned to these behaviors to manage our distress and anxiety, we may find that these behaviors have themselves become distressing and unmanageable.

The call to choose (inner) life. Why are these means of self-soothing and comfort ineffectual? They do not work because they are external efforts to address an internal experience. We are trying to manage our feelings by turning to activity that both distracts and disconnects us from our inner world of emotions. Our inner life continues to beckon, our feelings call out to be noticed. What do we do? We do not need to “do” anything; for now, we need only to recognize their presence and be mindful of our disposition towards them. The invitation to choose life challenges us to acknowledge life within, to attend to the liveliness of feelings that scratch and scamper in us.

Reflection question: If we paused to notice what was happening inside us just before we reactively turn, for example, to alcohol or the Internet, what feelings and sensations, needs and desires might we notice present?