Many times, we wonder about how to manage and deal with our emotions, how to express and act on them. As a psychoanalyst, I am often asked: “Now that I know I am angry (sad... afraid... ashamed...), what now? What do I do with the feelings I have?” While this question around emotional expression, what “to do” about our feelings, is valuable and necessary, it is often asked prematurely. Making the behavioral choice around how to express emotions that we feel is an invitation that comes towards the end – rather than near the beginning – of the process around how we engage and attend to our feelings.

Regarding emotions. Perhaps the more fundamental query lies in how to consider the emotions we have. How do we regard our feelings? With what conscious and less-conscious beliefs and attitudes do we experience our emotions? Or, more concisely: How do we feel about having feelings? Parental upbringing, childhood experiences, cultural norms, religious education form our dispositions towards the emotional life, especially in how to be with the more challenging affects of anger, fear, sadness and shame.

We are born for feeling. How might the way we regard emotions be different, with the awareness that our emotions are an intrinsic dimension of who we are? Because we are human, we have feelings. We are created with the capacity to feel. We are born feeling and born with feelings. The infant’s cries at birth signal aliveness to those present. From the moment we come from the womb, we experience feeling. We are born for feeling. This is the way we are made. Because emotions arise naturally and spontaneously from a deep soul-space within, their emergence in us cannot be controlled, their being in us cannot be stifled. While external experiences, relational tangles, environmental circumstances can provoke their arousal, they do not cause our feelings to be. Feelings just are, as they are, within us.

Feelings contain both sensation and meaning. Most feelings can be uncomfortable to feel. The heaviness of sadness, the heat of anger and the cold sensation of fear in our body can be upsetting and unsettling. Because the sensations can be disconcerting, we may tend to focus on how to relieve and soothe the discomfort of feeling-sensations. However, feelings never arise gratuitously, without reason. These feelings may seem irrational to the rational mind; nevertheless, they do possess an internal logic. Feelings carry meaning. The sadness of a woman whose father has died witnesses to the value and place he has had in her life. The anger of a man at his boss comes with the awareness of having been treated unfairly. The guilt of a thief invokes awareness of having done wrong. Wrote John Updike in his novel *Rabbit Rich*, “There is this place the tears have unlocked that is endlessly rich, a spring.” Feelings hold a wealth of meaning-layers needing to be uncovered and discovered. They are an endless resource of our humanity and of our being alive. When we are unfeeling, we lose life. When we are without feeling, we can experience emptiness and meaninglessness. When we disconnect from feelings and become numb to them, we disconnect from our humanness. When we deaden them, we kill off a part of ourselves.

Making the distinction between having feelings and expressing them. Frequently, our resistance to feeling a feeling comes from the anxiety around how it might be expressed. We do not want to feel angry because we fear that the way we choose to express it may become out of control. We do not want to feel sad because we are afraid we will never stop crying. Having a feeling does not involve a moral judgment of rightness or wrongness. We need to make the invaluable distinction between the feelings we naturally feel and the behaviors we choose to express and act on these feelings. Emotional expression arises from feelings; feelings are more than their expression. While feelings arise spontaneously, their emotional expressions engage our capacity to choose how to appropriately and effectively express them.
“To form men and women for others” Father Pedro Arrupe’s rallying call to Jesuit schools many years ago was mission-defining and resonant. It powerfully conveyed the essential ideals not just of Ignatian, but more importantly, of Christian education: service and commitment. However, one wonders whether “commitment” and “service” still hold currency today. We seem to live in a world where self-fulfillment has become the primary drive in life. Nothing is so certain anymore; the only reliable thing is what is “for now” and “for me.” In such a world, what is the place of commitment? Of vows? Of being called to a life of ministry and mission?

As described by contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor, there’s a growing concern about lives being “narrowed and flattened” by individualism and self-absorption. There are misgivings about this “centering on the self”, about the “the fruits of a permissive society, the doings of the ‘me generation’ and the prevalence of ‘narcissism’”. Perhaps in such a world, moral ideals are indeed passé. However, Taylor proposes that while we should not discount “the dark side of individualism” we ought not to dismiss the unarticulated moral principle at its core: the belief that everyone is called upon to be true to oneself... and what this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself.”

This principle of self-determination and authenticity is rooted in instinct. Social psychologist Sheena Iyengar points out that human beings are born not only with the tools to exercise choice, but also the desire to do so. The capacity to choose and control one’s environment is part of being human. It is strongly related to well-being. Having grown up within a rich and conservative religious faith (Sikhism), Iyengar wanted to find out whether the various religious traditions make followers feel more helpless by constricting the range of choices in their life. The result of her research was “an eye-opener.” The ones who were most susceptible to pessimism and depression were the atheists and members of liberal religions. Apparently, the freedom to think and do as one pleases does not necessarily increase one’s sense of control. She came to conclude that while we all want and need to be in control of our lives, how we understand control depends on the stories we are told and the beliefs we hold as true.

As Christians, we need not be afraid of this contemporary stress on “self-fulfillment.” What we should do instead, following what Taylor proposes, is to engage in the work of retrieving its deepest meaning. Far from isolating us, this ideal of being true to ourselves and listening to the “voice within,” actually connects us to a greater, wider whole. The Christian tradition is infinitely rich in symbol and narrative that give meaning to this paradox. In the Christian perspective, self-fulfillment is ultimately self-transcendence. To lose the self for the sake of Christ is to find it. No greater love is there than to lay one’s life down for others.

Fidelity to a commitment does not negate freedom. Seeking out and living one’s calling is not to forfeit the power to choose. Surrender and trust is the key to true freedom and a deeper, fuller life. Willingly relinquishing control for the sake of love and service is not to abdicate being human but to fulfill it. After all, “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and die, it shall not bear fruit”. This is what men and women who profess (marital or religious) vows are called to witness to and proclaim. The world today badly needs to hear it.