

a method for discerning



personal inner truth

photo by Kaye Twining

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Introduction

Recently I wrote an article entitled: The nature of truth in an age of perspectives. As a follow-on, this article offers one method for discerning personal inner truth. The method draws particularly from research undertaken by Bernard Lonerganⁱ in the field of human consciousness. Such research was recorded in his book entitled: *Method in Theology*. As the title suggests, Lonergan's method was contextualized within the framework of theology, particularly Christian theology. Even so, because the method relates to the nature of human consciousness, its application extends beyond the boundary of religion.

Lonergan's research gave rise to the discovery of a set of four precepts within human consciousness which formed the basis of a method he named as: the transcendental method of conscious intentionality.ⁱⁱ At the heart of the method is the posing of open ended questions within the light of our current personal horizon. We then discover responses which form our personal truth through engaging in the conscious activity of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding. Lonergan claimed that each of these four functions are a natural part of human consciousness.



photo by Kaye Twining

I was introduced to Lonergan's method during my Graduate Diploma in Spiritual Direction. I then studied *Method in Theology*, as a subject for my Master of Arts Degree. Also I have lived in accord with the method for many, many years. Through such experience, I have found Lonergan's method of conscious intentionality fundamental to my discovery of personal inner truth.

Drawing from my studies and lived experience of the method, the article will proceed in the following manner. Firstly it will outline my understanding of Lonergan's method of conscious intentionality which will include the topics of: our personal horizon of meaning,

transformative living and the role of open ended questions, and the four precepts within human consciousness. From there the article will offer a spiritual practice which draws from the method. Such a spiritual practice allows us to discern personal inner truth.

The method

A method, according to Bernard Lonergan, "does not specify the exact details of how to achieve a certain goal." Rather, a method is a "foundation for exploration." Additionally, a method needs to "afford space for new insights to arise." In line with such understandings, Lonergan's method revolves around the human as subject. Inherent within the term, *the human as subject*, is the notion that when we are experiencing an object, we are conscious of both *what* we are experiencing, i.e., the object; and *that* we are experiencing, i.e., as subject. From such a recognition Lonergan concluded that we humans have the capacity to study ourselves with a conscious spirit of inquiry.



photo by Anna Twining

A conscious spirit of inquiry allows us to ask questions and discover responses; ask more questions and again discover further responses. In this way we gain cumulative and progressive results. These cumulative and progressive results reveal that we are capable of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence here means: as we continue to wonder, to question and to discover responses we are able to transcend the limit of our personal horizon, i.e., our current view of ourselves-in-our-world.

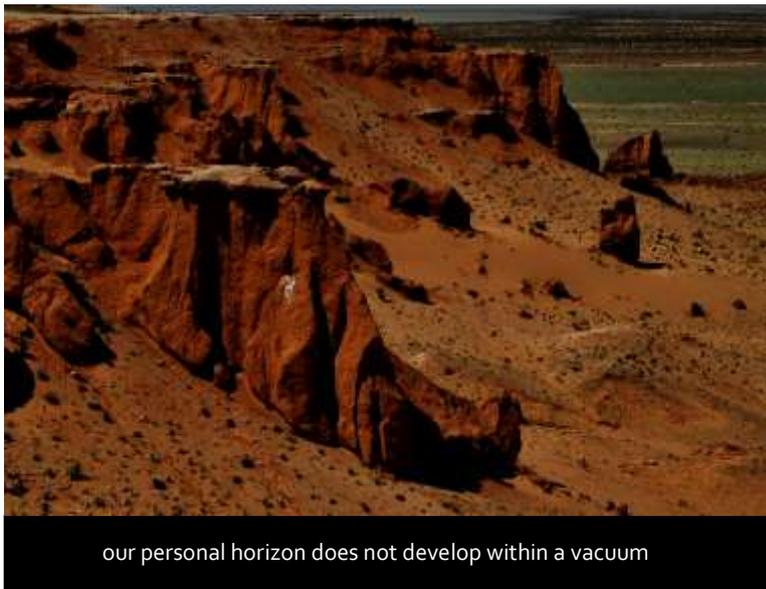
Our personal horizon

Lonergan maintained that our personal horizon encompasses both the boundary of our perceptions and the lens through which we view our Self-in-our-world. Such a boundary/lens filters, "all that we see, hear and know and what does not fit into our horizon will not be seen or heard, or if it is will be viewed as irrelevant." Therefore our horizon is incredibly potent. Whilst we are not usually aware of our horizon, it is constantly

operating within us, shaping our view and in turn, determining the way we live within, and act upon our world.

our horizon is incredibly potent

What factors shape our horizon? Our personal horizon consists of our current knowledge, beliefs, values and life experience, all of which do not develop within a vacuum. Rather our personal horizon is both formed and limited by the norms and beliefs of our family of origin, our wider communities, our religious/spiritual traditions, our cultural context and our ongoing life experience. Therefore, our personal horizon is not solely ours. Our personal horizon stands within a complex web of relationships.



our personal horizon does not develop within a vacuum

photo by Kaye Twining

In light of the above understandings, our personal horizon acts as the interpretive framework we use for living meaningfully. Meaningfully here, refers to our experience of personal identity, purpose and belonging-in-our-world. Without a personal horizon there would be no foundation from which to experience meaning. Therefore, our personal horizon is invaluable, for to be human is to live meaningfully within a particular personal horizon. As a result, Lonergan's method of transcendental conscious intentionality does not seek to eradicate personal horizons. Rather, the method allows us to recognize the boundaries of our current horizon and break through the limitations of such, if and when necessary.

Added to Lonergan's understanding of the term horizon, is that of poet David Whyte. Whyteⁱⁱⁱ understands the term *horizon* as both: "a far off calling. . . an invitation," and at the same time an "astonishing foundation for our feet coming to ground again," i.e., the experience of being at home in our world. When we feel at home in our world we experience authentic Selfhood, i.e., personal inner truth, from which to respond to life from a place of inner freedom and communal responsibility. Drawing from Whyte's poetry, our personal horizon is understood to be the foundation for experiencing authentic Selfhood in the present, and

an invitation to metaphorically *see more*; to transcend our current view. As such, personal horizons are foundational to human being and becoming.

foundational to human being and becoming

A cautionary note:

Even though our horizon offers our foundation for living fully in our world, it can become like a prison, confining our sense of Selfhood.

In this regard Whyte states:

“It is lovely to have a home, habits, etc. but when that beautiful home becomes a prison, when you can't really see anything out of the windows any more, or anything beyond the establishment you have made for yourself, then it is time to walk out of the door or listen for the knock on the door.”

As a result we live with a paradox:^{iv} One side of the paradox is that to be human is to experience Selfhood through a certain personal horizon. The other side of the paradox is that our experience of Selfhood is not static. In response to ongoing lived experience we are able to transcend the limitations of our current horizon. And yet we may become stuck within a particular horizon, which then imprisons our continuing growth.



if that beautiful home becomes a prison

photo by Andrew Twining

In summary

The term *horizon* includes:

1. Our interpretative framework for viewing ourselves-in-our-world.
2. The foundation for being at home in our world .
3. An invitation to transcend our current view, if and when necessary.
4. Possible imprisonment of Selfhood.

Transformative living and the role of open ended questions

How may we move through the paradox, i.e., to live fully from our personal horizon, and not become *imprisoned* within it? We can choose

to engage in *the art of transformative living*. Such a choice does not involve seeking transformation in-and-of-itself. Rather it involves living daily life in accord with our present beliefs, values, knowledge, and life experience. In this way we embrace who we know our Self to be at this moment of time. At the same time we also remain open to transformational shifts in our view, if and when they emerge within us.

The *practice of transformative living* involves continuing to gently grow in self knowledge, recognizing where the boundaries of our current personal horizon hold true for our living, and where they do not. Lonergan's method offers a way of continuing to grow in self knowledge. Within such a context, one particular practice is that of posing open ended questions in response to our present moment lived experience. Lonergan claimed that open ended questions are at the heart of transformation. Of course the tone of our questioning is important. Are we posing our questioning with a tone of open, rational curiosity and even playfulness, willing to wait for insights and understandings to emerge? If we do so, we continue to cultivate personal inner truth. Such a tone stands in direct contrast to a tone of probing, dissecting, and analyzing, each of which inhibits the discovery of inner truth.

*open ended questions are at the heart
of transformation*

The capacity to pose open ended questions is a natural part of human consciousness. Therefore we each possess such a capacity. By way of reinforcing such an assertion Lonergan claimed, "while human beings as a species are no different from the higher animals in terms of substance, the one striking difference is the human capacity to wonder, to question and to discover responses." Such an ability and desire



transformation is known to be an intrinsic, ongoing dynamic within human consciousness

photo by Kaye Twining

to question in both our outer world and inner being allows us to break through and transcend the limitations of a current horizon. Lonergan names this process as conversion, or transformation.^v

Within such an understanding, transformation is known to be an intrinsic, ongoing dynamic within human consciousness which manifests by way of breaking through the limitations of our current formation, or in other words, our personal horizon. Trans-formation may be experienced, in the poetic words of Whyte as, "the opening of eyes." The opening of our inner eyes gives rise to personal inner truth, which in turn leads towards an ever deepening experience of connection within our own Self, with others and with that which animates our being.

The practice of transformative living also leads towards an ever deepening experience of Self-in-love, or in the terminology of Lonergan of, "being-in-love." As we experience Self-in-love we may live daily life with joy, awe, and authenticity. And yet, such an experience of Self-in-love does not involve transcending the worries and cares of daily life. Rather Self-in-love involves living the everyday with the experience of personal wholeness which includes the whole gamut of life experience.



personal wholeness involves the whole gamut of life experience

photo by Kaye Twining

The four precepts which form the method

Lonergan discovered that the dynamic pattern of human consciousness involves four precepts. The four precepts are not hierarchical in nature. Rather each precept is subsumed within the next. According to Lonergan the four precepts operative within human consciousness are:

be attentive; be intelligent; be reasonable; be responsible

The precepts are the distinct, though related operations which form a pattern which may be repeated indefinitely and where the results are

cumulative and progressive. Because the precepts are already taking place within us, the method does not involve imposing them on our awareness. Rather, the method requires that we become intentionally conscious of the precepts activity within us.

*the dynamic pattern of human consciousness
involves four precepts*

Loneragan does not presume that one level improves on the other. They all make up part of the human consciousness. Consequently, he states that, "On all four levels, we are aware of ourselves, but as we mount from level to level, it is a fuller self of which we are aware and the awareness itself is different." Hence the transcendental nature of the method.

Be attentive - to what?

To what are we being attentive? Lonergan states that we need to be attentive to "human affairs." Another way of stating this is: to be attentive to our experience, i.e., to begin to consciously notice what we "sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move" in response to daily life. Such qualities form our affective experience. Lonergan claimed that it is our affective experience which is the "drive and power" behind authentic self-knowledge. Walter Conn,^{vi} writing on Lonergan explains the concept further. He claimed, "our feelings – joys and sorrows, fears and desires – give our intentional consciousness its mass and momentum, its drive and power." Therefore, it is not simply our thinking which drives the method. Rather, it is our attentiveness to our affective experience.



attentiveness to our affective experience, in response to daily life

photo by Kaye Twining

Be intelligent - how?

How may we apply our intelligence? On this level Lonergan argues that we engage in the conscious activity of "inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, and formulating." We also "come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression." Therefore, it is with a spirit of open, rational curiosity that we engage in this level. In this

regard, this level incorporates the “hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities.”

Be Reasonable - how?

How may we be reasonable? Lonergan asserts, “being reasonable includes the rejection of what probably would not work, but also the acknowledgment of what probably would.” This requires the faculty of rational judgment whereby one continues to “reflect, marshal, weigh the evidence and make a judgment.”

Be Responsible - how?

How may we take responsible action? For Lonergan this includes, “basing one’s decisions and choices on unbiased evaluation of short-term and long-term costs and benefits to oneself, to one’s group, to other groups.” As a result, on this level we not only make reasonable decisions, we also carry them out.



photo by Kaye Twining

Discerning personal inner truth via the method

As we each engage with the method of transcendental conscious intentionality, do we discover the same truths about ourselves-in-our-world? No, we do not, because we each pose our own questions within the light of our own personal horizon, and each individual's horizon is different. Therefore, while the method remains constant across all peoples, the responses will differ.

As each individual engages in the conscious activity of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, they touch into what Lonergan names as their "objective truth." Objective truth is not the same as belief. Objective truth, or, in my terminology personal inner truth, means: "that which an individual has found to be true through engaging in the transcendental method." In turn, an individual's truth will orientate their value system, which in turn will determine the way they live within and act upon their world, from a place of inner freedom and communal responsibility.

In Summary

To summarize the method: At the heart of Lonergan's transcendental method of conscious intentionality is the posing of open ended questions within the light of our current personal horizon. We discover responses through engaging in the conscious activity of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding. Each of these functions are a natural part of the human consciousness. The responses we discover via such a process, shape our personal inner truth.

Over our lifetime our personal horizon will most likely expand, and/or be broken open, in response to ongoing lived experience. In turn, our personal inner truth may also expand and/or be broken open. Therefore, engaging in the method is not a once-for-all-time spiritual practice. Rather, to continue to engage in the method is to continue to participate in the art of transformative living - a lifelong adventure of being and becoming.



photo by Andrew Twining

Lonergan's method is particularly relevant for the current era of western history. In this era, our cultural horizon has been broken open, which in turn has broken open the old Story of meaning^{vii} from which we individuals sourced our identity, purpose and belonging. As a result, we are now required to each discover our own internal source for personal identity, purpose and belonging-in-our-world. Lonergan's method offers one way of discovering such a source.

A spiritual practice drawn from the method

The spiritual practice involves four movements:

Noticing what is happening within us in the present moment with an orientation of self-compassion, non-judgmental curiosity, and playfulness.

Letting Be - within the light of loving kindness. So often we want to do something with our affective experience. In this practice we simply let it be for a while.

Gently, non-judgmentally opening up and exploring what we have noticed; within the light of our values, belief system, and life experience.

Listening for the whisper of our inner wisdom in the form of emerging insights, understandings, or whatever . . .

The practice

In response to the life experience e.g. a conversation, an event, a general feeling of joy, disquiet. . .
notice what is happening in your present moment affective experience

Your body: gently allow the bodily sensation some space within your being.

Perhaps ask yourself "Where do I feel it in my body?" "How does it feel?"

e.g., relaxed/tense, warm/cold, open to life/shut down to life . . .

Your emotions: e.g., delighted, sad, angry, joyful, stressed, fearful, alive, jealous, radiant, resentful, challenged, disturbed, peaceful, judgmental. . .

Your thinking: e.g. is your thinking judgmental, compassionate, circular, racing, calm, stuck in a habitual pattern . . .

Letting Be

As you are able . . . simply hold your present moment experience within the gentle light of loving-kindness . . . breathing through your experience without denying, resisting, seeking change, or seeking resolution.

Listening and waiting

If and when you are ready . . . some open-ended questions which could be helpful to ask yourself:

I wonder why it is that my body responded this way?

Is this sensation or emotion tapping into a particular area in my life?

If this sensation / emotion / image had a voice, what might it say to me?

Is there a colour / shape / texture / image which seems to encompass it?

(If so, feel free to draw it; express it in prose or poetry; or simply write down words which arise in response.)

What may your inner wisdom be inviting you to see or see afresh through this experience?

Is there any insight arising for you?

Are you being invited to stay, move, change, grow? . . .

Do not try to dig around, force, think out, or manufacture anything. Simply wait for a response to emerge - try it on - see how it fits. Do not worry if there is no discernible response as yet - simply pose the question and live into the answer (Rilke).

ⁱ The following information on Bernard Lonergan was sourced through the Lonergan Institute, Boston College website and *The Desires of the Human Heart*, edited by Vernon Gregson, 1988

Bernard Lonergan was born in Canada in 1904. He became a Jesuit in 1922 and was ordained as priest in 1936. Although he had a love for mathematics and the sciences, he was a Professor of Theology at various theological institutions. In 1965 he had a cancerous lung removed. He retired in 1983-84 and soon after died. "Faced with cultural upheavals that have shaken the very foundations of philosophy, the church, and economics, he recognized that the cries of modernity call for a thorough and profound recasting of *method*." What method you might ask? A method which outlines human understanding; in the light of God's revelation of love. This became his life's work. ⁱ

ⁱⁱ For a further exploration of Lonergan's method see www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/MA essay: A Beginner's Guide To Bernard Lonergan's method in Theology.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Whyte CD *A Great Invitation*
The Path of Risk and Revelation

^{iv} Paradox in this context means two coexisting opposing truths

^v For a more detailed understanding of transformation see [www.treeoflife.org.au/The sacred work of being human/The art of transformative living](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/The%20sacred%20work%20of%20being%20human/The%20art%20of%20transformative%20living)

^{vi} Walter E Conn, *The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion* 'The Desires of the Human Heart'

^{vii} For more information on the old/new Story of meaning see [www.treeoflife.org.au/The sacred work of being human/Finding our place of belonging](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/The%20sacred%20work%20of%20being%20human/Finding%20our%20place%20of%20belonging)