

**DISCOVERING AND FLOURISHING IN ONE'S DIVINE IDENTITY
AMIDST THE INFLUENCES OF SOCIETY AND SUFFERING**

**How does knowing one's identity influence a spiritually ready warfighter's ability to
accomplish life's mission and address suffering resiliently?**

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Contents:

- I. Abstract
- II. Identity and Suffering in the Military
- III. Interpretive Frameworks
 - a. Suffering and Trauma
 - b. Societal Influence of Identity
 - c. Sustaining the Transformation (Our identity before and because of the Corps)
- IV. Institutional Challenges and Programs
 - a. Tone of Force
 - b. Spiritual Fitness
 - c. Warrior Toughness
 - d. Transcendent Identity of Service-Member
- V. Theological Reflection
 - a. Divine Identity
 - b. A Letter within The Letter, Written by a Prisoner
 - c. *Case Study, Current Brig Inmate*
- VI. Who Supports Warfighters in Discovering Their Identity?
 - a. MCO 1500.61 (Marine Leader Development)
 - b. MCRP 6-10.1 (Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide)
- VII. Making Sense of and Integrating Suffering Into Identity
 - a. Acceptance and Commitment
 - b. Provision and Facilitation of Identity
 - c. Case Study Petty Officer Second Class D. Me
 - d. Ownership of Transformation
- VIII. References

I. Abstract:

Directed toward Commanding Officers and Effective Leaders¹ within the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy, this project analyzes and supports command cultures that intentionally facilitate service members' ability to discover their divine identity, which transcendentally influences their ability to accomplish life's mission and address suffering resiliently. The Project argues that The God of our country and corps has a sovereign identity, purpose, and plan for all to resiliently experience within the Divine amidst the inevitable influences of society and suffering. Yet, far too many people, Marines, and Sailors pointedly, fail to flourish because we live in light of superficial titles and ever-fluctuating feelings rather than our divine identity that frames and elevates character, conduct, conversation, crew, coping, and perspective. This work strives to introduce the ill effects, value of, and suggestive strategies of how our warfighters discover and live in their divine identity and purpose, resulting in a more lethal force and resiliently thriving military culture.

¹ MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development (Department of The Navy, July 28, 2017).

II. Identity and Suffering in the Military:

Who am I? What is my identity? What is my purpose? What is my true essence? How might knowing and flourishing in one's identity and essence influence our ability to accomplish life's mission and address suffering resiliently? We are all on a lifelong journey to discover and deepen our understanding of those meaningful questions during our time on the battlefield of life, in which I believe the most significant (internal) wars occur. For many, identity is rooted in faith, and they strive to live within the influences of their divine identity and disciplines.² Those faith adherents accept as true and live according to the conviction that they have been divinely created with a God-like identity and purpose to discover, deepen, accomplish, and flourish in, for God's glory. For many others, identity and purpose are connected to discovering and expressing the true essence of one's highest and noble self and soul.³

For some, life's desired fullness is never achieved because their days are experienced uninfluenced by divine identity and purpose. Without the discovery of and ability to flourish within their transcendent divine identity, humans can antithetically define their identity based upon society and their suffering.⁴ Such reality is not God's desire for any image bearer. Yet, within our American society and specifically within the military component of the Department

² The language of **Divine Identity** is grounded in Christian theology that believes God creates human life with a divinely designed identity and purpose for The Creator's glory and good works (Genesis 1:26-27, Ephesians 2:8-10, James 3:9, Revelation 4:11); that is to be defined by and lived out based upon the theological influences of the sacred text. Preeminently seen with God's Son, who had a divine identity and purpose prior to and for His humanity (Isaiah 49:1; Matthew 1:21, 16:16; 1 John 3:8). Not limited to Christianity; however, this concept of sacred identity is found within many religions to include: Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Aborigines, and Norse Paganism (although many Norse Pagans adhere to scientific principles of evolution).

³ The language of True Essence is influenced by beliefs connected but not limited to Agnosticism, Buddhism, Spirituality, and Secular Humanist in that, while discovering and forging one's true essence (highest nature, nobility), people are able to effectively process suffering unto a purposed life well lived.

⁴ Divine Identity will be used in this paper going forward while noting reverence and same intention for those without a religious or spiritual belief system.

of Defense resides warfighters behind any hatch, restrictive housing unit cell bars, or in any fighting hole, whose troubled souls yearn to be whole. Warfighters are burdensomely wrestling with fundamental questions to the detriment of operational proficiency and human resiliency.⁵ For this, further identity work can begin with the question: ***“How does knowing who I am influence how I live?”*** Thus, I propose the thesis woven throughout this project is: warfighters' soul-deep knowledge and experiential application of their divine identity righteously influences their resiliency during a life and career fraught with, but not supposed to be defined by, success and suffering.⁶

From first-hand experience as a Marine Mustang called into Pastoral ministry from within the Marine Corps, many warfighters step into the proudly esteemed titled identity of United States Marine or Sailor without ever having discovered or begun to flourish in their divine identity and purpose.⁷ As an 18-year-old Black American male who graduated Marine Corps boot camp from the hallowed grounds of Recruit Depot San Diego as a Private First Class from a Christian, single-parent, Midwestern, middle-class culture, I can attest that many warfighters join the ranks with avoided and unaddressed trauma.⁸ Many newly graduated

⁵ While recognizing not all warfighters may experience such inward wrestling of identity and purpose in connection to faith; I believe the absence of distinctly discovering and flourishing in one's divine identity and purpose is why so many warfighters struggle to resiliently address suffering and accomplish the mission of life.

⁶ Robyn D. Walser, Steven C Hayes, and Jason A. Nieuwsma, eds., *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care*, 1st edition (Oakland, CA: Context Press, 2016). **Knowledge (of)** throughout this project is rooted in the Greek word *Epignōsis* which conveys an precise, relational, and applicational understanding [of one's identity and purpose]. James Strong's, *G1922, Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

⁷ “Mustangs” Prior enlisted warfighters who continue service as commissioned officers.

⁸ Although the Marines and Sailors within the ranks are the focus, this conversation also implies that many spouses (and adolescent children) of warfighters have not discovered their own divine identity either, before assuming the layered identity of a (military) spouse. For more on avoidance and acceptance of trauma, see Walser, Hayes, and Nieuwsma, *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*.

warfighters are relieved to mask the lack of any semblance of a confidently known identity beneath the institutional and occupational identity given to them. Furthermore, many warfighters are unable and unwilling to resiliently frame their past pain into the divine identity and purpose ascribed to their name. A solution to the problem? Present healing can begin when Commanding Officers and their Effective Leaders, chaplains, and clinicians intentionally support their willing warfighters in revisiting past pains. Where? Within a command culture in which all feel safe and challenged to seek that kind of self-improvement. As researchers in Acceptance Commitment Therapy explain:

“If you are unwilling to experience memories, thoughts, and feelings that childhood abuse produces, you will get stuck with chronic distress as an adult. However, if you are willing to experience those thoughts, memories, and feelings again, the same abuse history is significantly less destructive to your life.”⁹

Warfighters, not limited to the Generation Z populace, are overwhelmingly struggling with mental health issues, suicidality, poor coping behaviors, negative perspectives, and harmful behaviors towards one another due to the lack of knowledge concerning identity and purpose beyond their 0730 to 1630 uniformed billet description.

Too many live with an undefined life mission ill-influenced by society and depression, suffering, and temporal titles tied to occupational specialties, successes, and stresses. Walker Percy’s work, designed to evoke questions about who one thinks they are, what one believes and values, and what one thinks they are doing on earth, coined the term “The Depressed Self.” For Percy, the self can either be depressed “because there is something wrong with it” or

⁹ Steven C. Hayes and Spencer Smith, *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life: The New Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, 1st edition, pg47 (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2005).

because “depression is a normal response to a deranged world.”¹⁰ As such, I am wrestling increasingly, both personally and professionally, with the idea: *Could Warfighter’s (and their spouses) depression, poor coping behaviors, negative perspectives, and inability to flourish in a resilient life be the result of individual neurological illnesses and/or their yet discovered divine identity’s resistance to the deranged, deprived society in which we live?*

Monthly and yearly, the Navy and Marine Corps data troublesomely reflects the prohibited activities and poor behavioral trends of active duty and reserve warfighters that evidence what I believe is, in significant part, life uninspired by a moral character and ethical conviction that is connected to a discovered divine identity and purpose.¹¹ Similarly, research indicates many veterans globally experience challenges post-transition from the military to civilian life because they lack what Flack calls “effective identity and social adjustment.”¹² Flack’s research describes how the Australian Defence Force veterans are at greater risk of psychological distress and lower well-being than the civilian populace because they have experienced what he calls “inhibited social connectedness.” I identify it as a layered lack of identity.

¹⁰ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, (New York: Picador, 2000), p73. In his considerations, he causes us to wonder if depression is the result of individual illness or the deranged society that our self is resisting in its depressed state.

¹¹ Headquarters USMC, *Tone of Force Summary*, accessed Feb 12, 2023. In this report, continuing metrics are published of pre- and current service prohibited activities and conduct that degrade our tone of force via service related suffering and or layered trauma in the duplication of victimization. As the Chaplain for Camp Pendleton’s Emergency and Services Battalion and Base Brig (Civilian Law Enforcement, Fire Fighters, 911 Call Center Dispatchers, and Military Corrections Specialists, Police Officers, and Criminal Investigation Division Agents), there is a concentrated exposure to Warfighters, DoD Authorized Users, Civil Servants, and Inmates whose character, conduct, conversation, crew, and coping abilities are uninspired by a discovered identity and purpose that influences resiliently flourishing life.

¹² Flack M, Kite L (2021) Transition from military to civilian: Identity, social connectedness, and veteran wellbeing. Accessed February 28, 2023. PLoS ONE 16(12): e0261634, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261634>.

The overlapping problem is the centrality of not knowing and growing in one's divine identity and purpose. The now enlisted or commissioned warfighter must struggle to assimilate and or acculturate into additional layers of professional and sub-cultural identity tied to their rank, occupational specialty, geographical assignment, command, painful losses, society's ever-evolving construct of identity, and post-service identity; all of which further complicates and distances self from the still undiscovered core of identity and life purpose.¹³ The Australian-based research harmonizes with the United States Department of Defense in that one of the missions of military services is ultimately to return quality warfighters to society as better citizens.¹⁴ Implicitly, with a deeper awareness of their divine identity and purpose, we can successfully reintegrate and advance our nation's interest as flourishing members of society.

However, while within the ranks and even after warfighters have completed their service, depression, homelessness, destructive behaviors, incarceration, and or death by suicide evidence the active absence of who one is and the inability to frame pain and suffering into a well-lived present, with a transcendent purpose for the future before returning "home," Valhalla, heaven or elsewhere... Too few within the ranks readily know intellectually, let alone experientially, their divine identity and purpose. This is evident within surging clinical care case files, confidential conversations with Chaplains, prohibited activities and conduct, brig incarcerations, and administrative separations that decry the silent suffering that consumes our

¹³ Viktoriya Sus (MA) and Chris Drew (PhD), "Acculturation Vs. Assimilation: Similarities And Differences (2023)," March 15, 2023, <https://helpfulprofessor.com/acculturation-vs-assimilation/>.

¹⁴ MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development (Department of The Navy, July 28, 2017).

nation's greatest. *Corporal* Fondren, first award, was once one of the "too few."¹⁵

Consequently, *Chaplain* Fondren passionately cares for and collaborates with warfighters, whose lack of identity, purpose, meaning, and direction is too often evidenced by drug and substance abuse, divorce, hand restraints with iron chains, memorial services, oxygen tubes, torn flesh, and tears that temper hospital visits post incomplete or completed suicide attempts.¹⁶ Institutionally, as introduced above, I contend that the most significant ongoing war we face occurs within the battlespaces of the individual warfighter's head, heart, and soul. Victory on those personal and professional battlefields is inextricably connected to the discovery of one's divine identity and purpose from the God whose divine enablement we draw from to serve our country and Corps.¹⁷ Before we further explore, let us ground ourselves with non-exhaustive terminology.

III. Interpretive Frameworks:

Suffering and Trauma:

Why do we suffer? Who is responsible? Is there eternal value in temporal suffering? Can suffering be avoided? Questions of a conversation that traverses time, trouble minds, and bind us in our humanity. By nature, suffering and trauma are inevitable. They are etymologically derived from the Greek word *paschō* and the Latin word *pātiōr*, which carry the

¹⁵ I was Non-Judicially Punished, "NJP'd", and awarded rank reduction back to Lance Corporal, 2/3 pay forfeiture, and 45 days of restriction, for conduct not in keeping with Godly and Marine Corps character. During that season of lacking identity and purpose deeper than that of our Corps, suicide seemed better suited than shame.

¹⁶ Michele Shields, Allison Kestenbaum, and Laura B. Dunn, "Spiritual AIM and the Work of the Chaplain: A Model for Assessing Spiritual Needs and Outcomes in Relationship," *Palliative and Supportive Care* 13, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951513001120>.

¹⁷ The Oath of Office and Oath of Enlistment calls for the solemnly sworn or affirmed commitment of service to our country and corps, with the help of God.

idea of strongly and negatively experiencing an emotion, a passion, or suffering. Be it emotions due to unresolved childhood trauma, the death of a beloved, or the psychological unrest as a repeated witness to tragedy (as my Military Police Officers, Brig Correction Specialists, and Fire Fighters chronically are), all suffer. Equally valid, much has been made about the cause, effect, and concepts of making meaning of our suffering. Yet, too many people, too many warfighters, remain paralyzed wholly from discovering and flourishing in their identity and purpose because of what Dr. Shelly Rambo calls unintegrated suffering.¹⁸

Rambo and others distinguish between suffering and trauma in that (acute) suffering is grief that is experienced temporarily. At the same time, trauma is the ongoing, relentless stress and chronic suffering that is unaddressed and unintegrated into our (divine) identity and (life) purpose.¹⁹ While most of humanity thinks it best to ignore and suppress grief and stress, I now suggest and implore we be trained more in how to *sit with, accept, and move forward* in our suffering and anxiety, with values-based behaviors towards the flourishing execution of life that's influentially grounded within our divine identity and purpose.²⁰ Rambo remaps the framework of addressing trauma with an intensity to discover how to accept and integrate suffering to alleviate and or eliminate the unhealthy bio-psycho-social-spiritual effects of ongoing pain. Not just the psychological and or social consequences of suffering but also the physiological and spiritual effects of one's inability to live in their transcendent identity.

¹⁸ MHICS 3.1, Dr. Kent Dresher's Bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of health, within spiritual practices and contemporary psychotherapy; Rambo, Shelly. "6.1: A Theological Rethinking of Trauma and Suffering." Accessed October 23, 2022. Video, 31.37.

¹⁹ Lawrence Robinson, Melinda Smith, and Jeanne Segal, "Emotional and Psychological Trauma," 2023.

²⁰ Walser, Hayes, and Nieuwsma, *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*, 2016.

Such training and therapy fuel humanity's transformation before, during, or in light of the warfighter's newly discovered identity.

Warfighters at every rank can be cognitively fused to their suffering and trauma.²¹ Their identity is ill-conformed to and ill-influenced by a traumatizing experience in which acceptance, forgiveness, healing, and detachment have not occurred. Congruent with the Marine Corps "Tone of Force Summary," much of my pastoral care is for those whose pre- and service-related suffering has been transposed into their present existence, from which they desire to be free. Warped and or thwarted in their trauma-influenced identity, they contemplate deeply any remedy for the psychological restlessness tied to unaddressed suffering. Hayes states, "This is especially true of the uniquely human behavior of suicide, which emerges out of an inability to contemplate a future where cessation of self-awareness allows escape from suffering."²² A truth that is too common for America's sons and daughters in arms and a truth that needs to be vehemently combatted. Suffering and trauma undeniably influence our identity, both the discovery and transformation thereof. Therefore, how and when are we within the ranks taught to understand and address stress and suffering in such a fashion that ready our ability to be victorious on the militaristic and mental battlefields? Simple answer: we aren't.

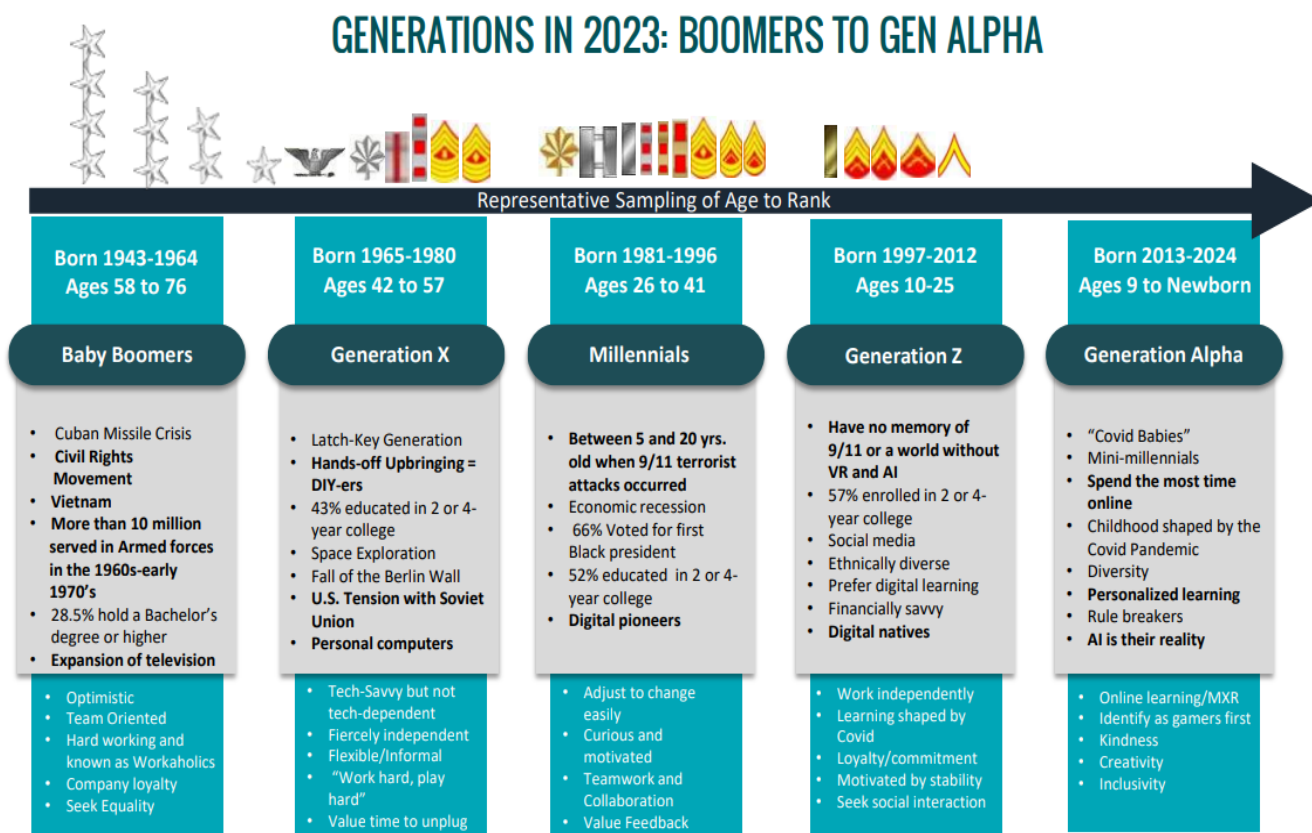
Societal Influence of Identity:

Across the Department of Defense, four generations of warfighters take up arms in service to our nation today. From the sage Baby Boomers to our social media Techsters of

²¹ The idea that our thoughts and words are our reality. Example: I feel broken therefore I am broken. Steven C. Hayes, "Verbal relations, time and suicide," 1992.

²² Steven C. Hayes, *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*, 2005.

Generation Z, we mustn't deny society's influence's identity. Dr. Catherine Sacarellos recently led a professional military education workshop for the 2d Marine Logistics Group leadership aboard Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, in which she presented a scientific approach to understanding the newest generation of Marines. In her presentation, she asks and begins to answer the question, "Who are the generations in 2023?" with a generations chart.²³



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4

The chart and presentation contain descriptors and influencing factors of the focused Gen Z, including the political and social unrest and digital technology of the day, with the resulting correlations of neurological development, behavior, worldview, well-being, and identity.

²³ Catherine Sacarellos, "A Multigenerational Marine Corps: Bridging The Gap Between Leadership and Generation Z" (Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., March 2023).

Dr. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn contends that the depressed well-being of many Americans is tied to the rise of a neoliberal, capitalistic society that has initiated a global epidemic of depression.²⁴ He also argues that society (culture) profoundly influences identity through the religious, economic, political, and social domains and norms established by the ruling class. And when some fail or refuse to conform to societal norms, the “internal form of resistance” known as depression occurs.²⁵ Depression can be seen as a soul-deep cry of disparity concerning the conditions in which we live, according to Rogers-Vaughn. A trending diagnosis comorbid with posttraumatic stress disorder that Elhai et al. found 48-55% of sampled National Guard Soldiers experience.²⁶ Of note, Rogers-Vaughn shares in his journal article that in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association published the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*, which reframed “Major Depression” as a diagnosis “conceived of as a biological disease constructed around the medical model and treated by biological interventions...the implied cause links depression to biochemical and neurological conditions.”²⁷ This shift is critical because, before the influence of the 1970s neoliberal ideology, depression was “regarded as a symptom, as any other” to social and political circumstances, “that required the analyst to pursue its inner meaning.”²⁸ This means that depression evidenced societal troubles and negative influences that needed to be heard and communally resolved, not simply silenced with a psychotropic suggestion.

²⁴ Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Depression as Political Resistance,” *Pastoral Psychol*, no. 63 (November 6, 2013).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jon D. Elhai et al., “Structural Relations between DSM-5 PTSD and Major Depression Symptoms in Military Soldiers,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 175 (April 1, 2015): 373–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.01.034>.

²⁷ Rogers-Vaughn, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Depression as Political Resistance.”

²⁸ Ibid.

Rogers-Vaughn draws from leading voices of Psychoanalysis the overarching theme that depression is the ill experience people suffer due to the local, national, and or global society in which they dwell. Stryker believes that “a sociological approach to self and identity begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society.”²⁹ In a later work, Stryker et al. wrestle with “The interplay of affect and identity,” exploring the relationships of social structure, social interaction, and emotion.³⁰

As mentioned above, it is a growing consideration among the authors that the way many humans understand and demonstrate their identity is influenced by the hegemonic capitalistic society and culture of which they are a part. This sentiment can be applied to militaristic culture. As such, if society and or military service foremost shapes our identity to the tune of a highly depressed and stressed humanity, how does one discover their divine identity? What societal systems are in place to support said discovery? How might commanders create cultures and systems that challenge societal influences so their Marines and Sailors are supported in their ability to discover and flourish resiliently in the mission of life divinely assigned unto them? How might the transformation of Sailors and Marines be reframed to challenge and instruct them, us, to compartmentally step away from societal and service-influenced personalities to discover the ever deeper, most fundamental identity of self?

²⁹ Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version* (Blackburn Press, 2002).

³⁰ Richard T. Serpe, Robin Stryker, and Brian Powell, “Structural Symbolic Interaction and Identity Theory: The Indiana School and Beyond,” in *Identity and Symbolic Interaction: Deepening Foundations, Building Bridges*, ed. Richard T. Serpe, Robin Stryker, and Brian Powell (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 1–33, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41231-9_1.

Sustaining the Transformation:

Within the United States Navy and Marine Corps, from recruit training to officer candidates school and throughout our careers, commanders, leaders, chaplains, clinicians, and civilian resources instruct and enable warfighters to become combat-ready killers of ethical character who are Spiritually Fit and have Warrior Tough resilience.³¹ These policy-driven frameworks from which great programs derive help commanding officers and their small unit leaders at every level focus on the wholeness of the warfighters in their charge. Per the Marine Corps Marine Leader Development Order 1500.61, the mission for Marine leaders is to develop Marines and Sailors to sustain the transformation, help them achieve their full potential (within the swath of their institutional identities), and prepare them for long-term personal and professional success.³² Apart from physical fitness, rifle qualification, glass-polished boots, and occupational proficiency, General Krulak's concept of identity transformation was lost on the 20-year-old me. Deeper than professionally, I was personally and 'religiously' unaware of the necessary journey to deal with my trauma toward discovering and flourishing in my own divinely malleable identity. In year three of my career, by God's mercy, I was again promoted to Corporal of Marines, having endured what my Sergeant described as a season 'in which a Marine had to deal with the consequences of having perpetuated an identity and lifestyle influenced by certain cultures in the city and Corps that was not true to who he was and void of

³¹ "While the importance of physical, mental, and social fitness are more recognizable, **Spiritual Fitness** is just as critical, and specifically addresses my priority to build character and instill core values in every Marine and Sailor." Gen D. H. Berger, 38th Commandant, accessed March 15, 2023. ALMAR 027/20.

The US. Navy defines spiritually readiness as the **Warrior Toughness** strength of spirit that enables the warfighter to accomplish the mission with honor. OPNAVINST 1730.1F. <https://www.netc.navy.mil/Warrior-Toughness/> accessed March 15, 2023.

³² MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development (Department of The Navy, July 28, 2017).

values-based decisions.’³³

As a second awardee Corporal, I now felt “I’m good” because I was no longer suicidally depressed in my shame and institutionally cast guilt based on my identity as Black, Non-Judicially Punished, Marine pariah. I was outwardly “back on track” towards my potential and professional success. However, subconsciously, behind the mask of motivation, I was still a lost young man who deeply needed to be saved from the “identity crisis” that nearly defeated me.³⁴ How could I aspire for long-term professional success if I was in present personal distress about my undiscovered, untransformed identity?

Our identity before and because of the Corps was most important for the Marine Corps 31st Commandant, who published “Sustaining the Transformation” in 1999.³⁵ Continuing the proud tradition of making and sustaining the transformation of Marines, General James F. Amos said in 2014, “The Marine transformation is forever ingrained in our DNA, from recruit training to Officers Candidate School and throughout the rest of our lives. The transformation to becoming a Marine is often the defining moment in a person’s life.”³⁶

This statement sources conversations I, as their chaplain, socialize with former recruiters and drill instructors within the tenant commands I serve. I ask, “Do you feel the men and women being recruited to undergo the transformation into the title and identity of Marine, foremost,

³³ I was assigned to Marine Air Group 42, Naval Air Station Atlanta Ga, June of 2000, under Sergeant Shawn “Soup” Campbell, whose godly demonstration, collegiate achievement, and commissioning into the Air Force (from which he retired as an Major), set ablaze my own divine identity journey and discovery. In that chapter of my unfolding destiny, Sergeant Campbell, Staff Sergeant Kendrick Bagmon, and Gunnery Sergeant Ernest Prather developed their subordinate(s) wholly, within the spirit of sustaining the (identity) transformation. Forever grateful.

³⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1968).

Tedashii, *Identity Crisis 2009 Reach Records Album based upon 1 Cor 15:10: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect...”*

³⁵ General Charles C. Krulak, Foreword of *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A (Dept Of The Navy, 2018).

³⁶ *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A (Department Of The Navy, 2018).

know their own (transcendent) identity and purpose?” Emphatic rejection of such an idea is often followed by “Sir, I’m a (11-year) Staff Sergeant, and I’m still trying to figure out who I am.”

The following exploratory questions become:

What is YOUR how, when, and why for discovering YOUR divine identity and life purpose? Conversely, how might you also inspire that discovery amongst your Marines and Sailors?

Sadly, far too few provide confidently articulated strategies. I sincerely believe questions as such, couched within spirituality, evidence-based practices such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy, and the mission of transformative discovery should be intentionally socialized in every phase of our career, as this is a matter of vital import for every warfighter that leads and is led, to sit with. Intentional, individual, and institutional discovery and sustainment unto flourishing combatants, characters, and reintegrated community members is invaluable. The transformative mission only begins in the Recruiting and Basic Training Phases because even upon earning the titled identity of Marine or Sailor, Erickson says, “identity movement during young, middle, and late adolescence clearly shows that identity will continue to meet challenges and, for some, the need for revision throughout adulthood.”³⁷ Not just the Gen Z’s, but our Baby Boomers too, because the cessation of suicidality nor depression does not happen in the Millennial or Gen X age range. Because our existential identity is constantly challenged, I believe it is fundamentally necessary that we at least have an idea of our divine identity and life purpose that influentially anchors us in hope and destiny towards a flourished life through life’s inevitably horrible sufferings.

³⁷ Jane Kroger, “Identity Development in Adolescence and Adulthood,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology, February 27, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.54>.

During the phases of transformation from civilian to United States Marine, men, and women undergo ten to thirteen weeks of initial combat preparing indoctrination and training that teaches hardships are integrated and overcome within the identity and mission of the Marine Corps, making them more resilient for the various trials and wars sure to come. Warfighters are academically trained in the history and legacy of the Navy and Marine Corps core values of honor, courage, and commitment, military professionalism and ethics, leadership principles and traits, prohibited activities and conduct in concert with the uniformed code of military justice, resiliency and a host of other topics. However, the intentionally introductory and enduring conversation of why and how discovering and flourishing in one's character influencing identity is mission essential was missing in all my Marine Corps and Naval training. It is imperative that during the sustaining transformation from recruitment to interment, indeed those actively dawning the fabric of our nation, men and women are carefully challenged to foundationally frame their identity and suffering because of the military upon their discovered identity and purpose before the military.

IV. Institutional Challenges and Programs:

It is understood that the U.S. Military is a microcosm of American society; therefore, although there are unique institutional challenges within the ranks, the difficulties of humanity at large are the same. Some of those institutional challenges are but are not limited to eighteen-year-olds being trained and authorized to kill, men and women avoiding unresolved childhood trauma towards (superficial occupational) identity, the propensity to avoid shame by preventing stress and trauma from being ascribed to their name, burnout and secondary

traumatic stress among military First Responders and Chaplains,³⁸ the comparatively high rates of marriage and divorce among 18-25-year-olds,³⁹ and the gravity of commanders being responsible for making warfighters, winning battles, safekeeping, character development⁴⁰, and returning quality citizens to their communities. Akin to the civilian work of Angela Duckworth's *Grit*, the military community has intently championed concepts such as resiliency, operational excellence, (military, warfighter, spiritual) readiness, relational enrichment, and warrior toughness in the past few years within the spirit of developing our nation's greatest resources, warfighters.

As such, initiatives such as the Marine Corps Spiritual Fitness and the Navy's Warrior Toughness have become pioneering efforts to "steel your spirit so that you can better deal with adversity."⁴¹ Let us introduce the heart of these programs.

Spiritual Fitness:⁴²

"Fitness is a vital part of being a United States Marine. Although we all understand the importance of being physically fit, it is also important to remember the other three aspects of overall fitness: spiritual, mental, and social. All of these aspects are essential to the well-being of each individual Marine and Sailor, and our Corps as a whole..."

General Robert B. Neller (37th USMC Commandant)

³⁸ Jason T. Hotchkiss and Ruth Leshner, "Factors Predicting Burnout Among Chaplains: Compassion Satisfaction, Organizational Factors, and the Mediators of Mindful Self-Care and Secondary Traumatic Stress," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 72, no. 2 (June 2018): 86–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305018780655>.

³⁹ Naval Chaplaincy School and Center, "Discover the 'Why?' Behind High Rates of Marriage & Divorce Among Marines and Sailors (E-5 & Below)" (United States Navy, 2016). Historically, challenges have been unique for certain demographics, to which women are one. In the recent 21st century initiative to integrate and diversify the ranks, military women have statistically experienced extreme stresses over and above identity and flourishing.

⁴⁰ Jonathan H. Vaughn, LtCol, "Character Development in the Profession of Arms - Each Leader's Daily Responsibility," *U.S. Naval War College*, 2021.

⁴¹ General Neller, USMC, "Spiritual Fitness," 2017.

⁴² USMC, All Marines Message (ALMAR 033/16 and 027/20), 2020.

Neller goes further to say,

“Research indicates that spiritual fitness plays a role in resiliency, in our ability to grow, develop, recover, heal, and adapt. Regardless of individual philosophy or beliefs, spiritual well-being makes us better warriors and people of character capable of making good choices on and off duty. By attending to spiritual fitness with the same rigor given to physical, social, and mental fitness, Marines and Sailors can become and remain the honorable warriors and model citizens our Nation expects.”

Warrior Toughness:⁴³⁴⁴

“Warrior Toughness (WT) is a holistic human performance skillset that enhances the toughness of our Sailors with a focus on the pursuit of peak performance. The system emphasizes the coequal development of toughness in the mind, body, and soul. WT combines performance psychology skills with character development and teaches the Warrior Mindset, whose concepts were initially developed by members of the Naval Special Warfare community.”

Naval Education and Training Center (NETC)

“Warrior Toughness. The Warrior Toughness character development syllabus is rooted in the Navy’s core values (honor, courage, and commitment) and core attributes (integrity, accountability, initiative, and toughness). Sailors are receiving this training at the beginning of their careers by exploring each attribute through instruction, reflection, dialogue, and real-world case studies. Central to the character conversation are the values, beliefs, and principles that guide us individually and collectively in making decisions and setting priorities.”

Former Commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic

Within the Warrior Toughness Term of “Spiritual Toughness” rests the idea of knowing (discovering) one’s *identity*, *beliefs*, and personal *why* enables warfighters to live and act with (sound) convictions and decisiveness in critical moments. It is vibrant work that the Department of Defense and Department of the Navy have begun institutionally to implicitly

⁴³ Naval Education Training Center, “Warrior Toughness” <https://www.netc.navy.mil/Warrior-Toughness/> (2018).

⁴⁴ Warrior Toughness: https://www.surflant.usff.navy.mil/Portals/44/WT%20Overview_V2.pdf

support the individual Warfighter in discovering self in unity with military service.

Chaplains are called into this richly evidence-based, holistic work as contributors to the personal and professional character development of Marines and Sailors through the provision and facilitation of faith, command advisement, ethical and moral education, relational enrichment, counseling, and interdisciplinary team membership.⁴⁵ Chaplains and commands champion the programs of Spiritual Fitness and Warrior Toughness towards developed characters and a more lethal force. Yet, has the divine identity of those whose character and resilience are being deepened been explicitly discovered? At this point within the Department of the Navy's resilience and transformation initiatives, Commanders and Chaplains (surely Chaplains with the interdisciplinary team support of Clinical Pastoral Education, Mental Health Integrative Chaplaincy, and Clinical Counseling Colleagues) should encourage, provide, and facilitate intentionally initiated and or elevate conversations, sacred text inspired messages, and local policy supported curriculum with the mission and purpose of creating opportunities for warfighters to contemplate, and begin the discovery of their divine identity unto a flourishing reality of life well done.

⁴⁵ Along with command team members such as marine leaders at every level, medical officers, Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS), Morale and Welfare Recreation (MWR), and Marriage Family Licensed Clinicians (MFLCS).

Transcendent Identity of Service-Member:

Suppose the transcendent source of identity and purpose of a Spiritually-Fit Marine or Warrior-Tough Sailor happens to be discovered in our nation's service. Theoretically, the ever-deepening identity discovery of that service member influences how one lives, serves, and executes their purpose in and out of uniform. Having earned it, bestow upon a young man or woman the esteemed title of United States Marine after an initial three-month investment of morally orienting what Chaplain Moon calls their "meaningful matrix of values, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships" with the virtues of honor, courage, and commitment.⁴⁶ Infused with pride, train them as riflemen and/or provisional rifle platoon commanders within a specific military occupational specialty identity and purpose. Along the way, Effective Leaders, chaplains, and clinicians intentionally sustain the transformation for the duration of service within the multiscopic lens of personal character and professional development through education, modeled leadership principles and traits, accountability, and affirmation. Then, despite the sub-cultural and societal influences and professional stresses, one could fully anticipate that said service member is well equipped to accomplish their militaristic purpose resiliently. Why? Their discovered and deepening identity as a Marine influences how they live and win on every battlefield. This concept applies to every military service member.

V. Theological Reflection:

Dare to believe the transcendent source of identity and purpose of a flourishing young man or woman is preeminently discovered in the belief and existence of The Creator and Savior

⁴⁶ Zachary Moon, "Warriors between Worlds: Moral Injury and Identities in Crisis." Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019, 23-34.

of this world and God of our Country and Corps. By divine design, upon entrance into God's sovereign and comprehensive Kingdom (Psalm 24:1) through salvation, the ever-deepening identity discovery of that chosen believer should ever more influence how they 'live, behave, and present their being' (Act 17:28).⁴⁷ Returning to the heart of the thesis, I believe that warfighter's greatest soul-deep need is the grace and faith-based discovery and deepening of their divine identity. Upon salvific acceptance of The Creator, Savior, and Lord, the transformative work of sanctification begins, and spiritual warriors learn they have been fully equipped with and must mature in what is needed to execute the most authentic calling of their lives (Ephesians 4:1).⁴⁸

Divine Identity:

While honoring the diversity of religions, growing secularity,⁴⁹ and absence of faith within the United States Navy's "keystone of institutional ministry" Chaplaincy concept,⁵⁰ I invite all faith and philosophical adherents and intellectuals to continuously explore oral traditions and search sacred texts with a passion to discover their identity and purpose. Embarking upon such work within my faith tradition, I present a non-exhaustive Christian theology frame in how discovering and deepening one's divine identity and purpose supports the ability to accomplish life's mission and address suffering resiliently. Let us commence.

⁴⁷ *New American Standard Bible-NASB 1995.*

⁴⁸ For theological definitions of words such as: Chosen, Believer, Savior, and Lord, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994).

⁴⁹ James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk, "The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America, 'Introduction' and 'The Quakerization of Mainline Protestantism.'" (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1–14, 175–92.

⁵⁰ Joseph A Kennedy, "Supreme Court of the United States," No. 21-418 (2001). Chaplains are to implement the religious programs of Commanding Officers to support the diverse religious needs of service members in a pluralistic environment.

YOUR IDENTITY DRIVES YOUR BEHAVIOR

Who else could speak with more insight and authority about who you are than God, the One who designed you, knows you best, and loves you most?

Each of us is one-of-a-kind, uniquely created to know God and to live a meaningful life of purpose, value, and love. But knowing is only the beginning...

Are you ready to discover who you were created to be? What God thinks of you and can do through you is much more incredible than you think.⁵¹

(Selah)



The above is the back book cover invitation to exploration by the Kendrick brothers on how knowing The Giver of divine identity is the influential genesis for a meaningful, values-based life of transcendent purpose. Yet they begin their pen on the inner front cover with:

Everyone is on an identity journey. Over time, what you choose to believe in your heart about your own purpose, meaning, and worth will constantly affect how you value your life, how you react to difficulties, and how you relate to your family and people around you. If you define yourself by what you do, by what others say about you, or by your present feelings, then you are setting yourself up for a future of failure and disappointment. While the culture spirals into deeper confusion, God has remained timelessly clear all along. The Creator gets to define His creation, and that's a very good thing. To be convinced of who you really are, by The One who truly knows you, is a life-changing breakthrough that unlocks how best to live.⁵²

To provide editorial for the above: whether we know or choose to believe, we are all on a divinely predestined journey of self-discovery within the sovereign Designer's identity and

⁵¹ Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *Defined: Who God Says You Are* (B&H Books, 2019).

⁵² Kendrick and Kendrick.

purpose for our lives.⁵³ Our willingness and ability to accept and commit to discovering and deepening our divine identity and purpose drastically influences how we move towards or from accomplishing the mission of our destiny. In my experience, nearly every male Marine, Sailor, or Inmate I serve presents me with an understood identity inextricably tied to their profession, social status, or biological construct. Sir, *“I’m a Marine. I’m a Military Police Officer. I’m a son. I’m a dad...”* Conversely, nearly every female Marine, Sailor, or Inmate (MCAS Miramar Brig) I serve presents me with their understood identity inextricably tied to an emotional touchpoint. Sir, *“I’m strong. I’m a woman and mother. I’m a survivor...”* Responsively to all who have invited me beyond the veil of their hearts, I ask, *“Can you go deeper? Describe the soul-deep identity and purpose of the person represented by the name on your right breast name tag.”* Sadly, the vast majority were stuck in uncertainty and un-discovery, silently hoping to be relieved of the spotlight that exposed their masking identity tied to profession, self-proclamation, and or vacillating feelings of circumstantial happiness.

Indeed, our global culture is rapidly spiraling into profound confusion. Drawing again from Dr. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn's work on the “cry of the soul,” depression due to identity crisis is but one significant evidence of societal, political, mental, and even spiritual “confusion” and suffering in our (global and military) culture.⁵⁴ The spiritual evidence of such confusion can be arguably correlated to the work of Dr. James Hudnut-Beulmer, who states that the middle decades (1950-1960's) of the American twentieth-century religious identity saw some 62% of

⁵³ **Divine Identity** continues to be understood as the conviction by which faith adherents believe they have been divinely created with a God-like identity and purpose to discover, deepen, accomplish, and flourish in, for God's glory and good works (Genesis 1:26-27, Ephesians 2:8-10, James 3:9, Revelation 4:11).

⁵⁴ Rogers-Vaughn, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Depression as Political Resistance.”

Americans, not including the LatinX community belonging to one of the eight mainline protestant denominations of the day. Contrastingly, in the twenty-first century, just 51% of Americans are affiliated with a protestant faith, while 16.1% of Americans register as “No Religion.”⁵⁵ As “traditional religious devotion” and “spiritual health” decline, societal and psychological stressors rise.⁵⁶ However, God’s divinely designed “Kingdom Agenda” remains unchanged.⁵⁷ So, to experientially know God beyond a cerebral knowledge as He who divinely designed and purposed every part of you and your story (Psalm 139:13, Acts 13:36) is likened to what my Generation Z son would call *The Cheat Code* for the soul. I reason because of God, a life victoriously lived through stress and success within one’s identity and purpose has been spiritually made possible from the foundation of this world (Ephesians 1:3-4).

To live void of a relational experience with the God who, in the beginning, knew and ascribed divine identity and purpose (Psalm 57:2, Jeremiah 1:5) for all His created leaves this Chaplain’s heart as crushed for my people as Pascal’s was when he penned:

⁵⁵ James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk, “The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America, ‘Introduction’ and ‘The Quakerization of Mainline Protestantism.’” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1–14. In his lecture, he goes further to statistically suggest that over 80% of Americans in 1958 were ‘faith affiliated’ if denominations such as Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics were analytically captured. Diana L. Eck’s 2021 “A New Religious America” presents a religious diversity metrics that captures the 16.1% of “No Religion.”

⁵⁶ Chaplain Mark Torres, in his “Biblical and Theological Analysis” (Vanderbilt University, 2023), defines Spiritual Health as “*harmonious connection of oneself with God and others*” as drawn from Theologian William James’ Traditional Religious Devotion in his work “*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Centenary Celebration*. James defines Religion as “Belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Centenary Celebration*,” accessed October 9, 2023, <https://web-s-ebshost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=dd46e252-44c7-464f-8735-f1f17125b1c2%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>, p. 43.

⁵⁷ Tony Evans, “The Tony Evans Bible Commentary” (Holman Bible Publishers, 2019) pg 18-20. Dr. Evans defines God’s Kingdom Agenda as *The sovereign and comprehensive rule of God over all of His creation, through the visible manifestation of God over every area of life.*

There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God The Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.⁵⁸

In the same breath of Pascal's seventeenth-century desire for each man, let us visit a first-century teacher I affectionally consider a Chaplain, who, too, yearned for His people to know God as the Creator, Lord, Definer, and Divine Influencer of their spiritual identity.

A Letter within The Letter, Written by a Prisoner:

Ephesus, located in what is now modern-day Turkey, was a first-century port city in the Asia province with waning economic, political, and social prominence around AD 50-55, as seen in Acts 19-21.⁵⁹ Therefore, in compensation for the holistically diminishing influence once enjoyed, the metropolitan culture of Ephesus, arguably like New York City of today, became an idolatrously touristic hot spot for hyper-sexualized immorality, cultish prostitution in the "worship" temple of the goddess of Artemis, and paganism. As such, the socially and culturally degrading climate of the time, pressed hard on the heart and mind of a geographically distributed Pastor for the local assembly of Christian Believers in the city. The Apostle Paul knew the church at Ephesus faithfully knew God but did not fully know their divine identity in and because of God. Let alone how their divine identity was to influence how they live, especially in light of their time's societal and religious plight. As such, theologians could suggest the letter to the Ephesian church was written with one heart in mind: that God's Spirit would reveal truth deep in their hearts, giving them the understanding to know relationally

⁵⁸ Nick Nowalk, "Pascal's God-Shaped Hole," *The Harvard Ichthus* (blog), May 2, 2011, https://harvardichthus.org/2011/05/pascal_hole/.

⁵⁹ *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Moody Publishers Chicago, 2014).

1) *Who they are in Christ*, 2) *What they have in Christ*, and 3) *How much God loves them through their relationship with Christ*.⁶⁰

At the risk of moving too quickly from concepts to commentary, there is rich context and content to briefly consider regarding the Ephesian letter (see Dr. Tony Evans and Kendrick's works for beautiful exposition) written within The Biblical Love Letter to God's Universal Church. In light of the day's societal, religious, and multicultural influences, Paul was all the more passionate, despite the criticism and death threats to tell Believers about their divine identity in God's eyes. Therefore, he pens the first half full of foundational indicatives, soul-deep truths regarding their spiritual identity. The first indicative he addresses the Ephesians by is a divine identifier, "Saints" (1:1). Having deeply grounded them in the theological, Kingdom of God perspectives concerning their divine identity and how the revelatory knowledge and wisdom thereof influences all aspects of their being; he shifts the thrust of his pen in the latter half to powerful imperatives for contextualized application into every part of a life well lived. The first imperatives given are to "*live* in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (4:1,17), 'lay aside the old, corrupted, former manner of living' (4:22), and "be imitators of God as beloved children, *walking* in love..." (5:1-2, 8, 15).⁶¹

Paul's Ephesian and collective New Testament theology evidences the pure heart of a Chaplain who desired his people, from the collective body to the individual believer, to be divinely equipped during their earthly experience (1 Peter 1:17). Discernibly, he felt their lives

⁶⁰ Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *Defined: Who God Says You Are* (B&H Books, 2019), pg 116.

⁶¹ The Greek word for *Live and Walk* in Ephesians 4-5 is *Peripatéō*, which carries an ethical sense of continuously regulating one's life. To conduct oneself in a worthy *lifestyle* in keeping with the divine identity bestowed. James Strong, G4043, Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

lacked the fullness of flourishing because they lacked an applicable understanding of their divine identity. He knew experientially that God alone transforms hearts and elevates human identity into its holy identity.⁶² Responsively, when the individual's holy (divine) identity is discovered and lived, the family is elevated. When the family is elevated, the local church is elevated. When the local church is elevated, the community is elevated. When the community is elevated, the (global) society flourishes!⁶³

Two Pauline prayers evidence that heart:

For this reason, I, too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ...

Ephesians 1:15-20a

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:14-19

The Apostle Paul knew that in becoming spiritually aware of their divine identity, power, inheritance, fullness, and purpose, every aspect of their lives (character, conduct, conversation,

⁶² Human Identity speaks of how one sees themselves in light of the culture and society at large.

⁶³ Tony Evans, *"The Tony Evans Bible Commentary."* Dr. Evans states God's kingdom operates through four biblically covenantal spheres: individual, family, church, and community (or government), and when those spheres are properly connected to God and each other, the more the individual and society will thrive.

crew, and coping) would be made anew through God's Agape.⁶⁴ The kind of love that allowed the Creator God of this world to leave His throne, make earth His home, die as a sinner and sacrifice, and rise as the True and Living God. Why? So that the Ephesians' divine identity could be known within the layered truths of God's chosen, God's adopted children, God's forgiven, God's new creation, God's redeemed saints, God's dwelling place, God's Masterpiece, and God's beloved.⁶⁵ The Ephesians were not simply given love; they received identity as His Beloved Children.

Therefore, within the fiery newness of passion for the Lord, their first love, the people of the Ephesian church received many meritorious commendations from the Apostle John in Revelation 2 for well-done diligence demonstrated by hearts that tirelessly labored unto good works for God's glory and the good of the community as God's Ephesians 2:10 workmanship. Moreover, the church's people at Ephesus were commended for faithfully enduring adversity and suffering amidst the societal stressors, influences, and religious persecutions for the sake of their Messiah.

However, being faithful to the sacred text, the Apostle John's rebuke to the people of the Ephesian church must also be expressed. Though still sound in theological doctrine and active service, their heart of worship and devotion had been replaced by acts of duty. The preeminent love, passion, 2 Peter 1: 3 "knowledge of Him who called them," and intentionality to deepen and mature in their divine identity as a Church had waned, and they needed to

⁶⁴ Agape love as defined by Dr. Evans is "The decision to compassionately, righteously, and sacrificially seek the well-being of another (above oneself)." See "What Does Agape Love Really Mean in the Bible?," Christianity.com, for more: <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-does-agape-love-really-mean-in-the-bible.html>.

⁶⁵ The same for you and I, as understood in the personalization of The Letter to the Ephesians.

repent.⁶⁶ Like many others of the (and this) day, the Ephesian church started strong in the motivation of their newly discovered divine identity. Still, they failed to apply *epígnōsis* and grow deeply in it so that the divine purpose of the individual, family, local church, and community could be elevated. If the Ephesian church was to be the thriving “culture” and or “institution” it was desired by Paul and God to be, it would be because the collection of “individuals” knew and lived in their divine identity within their homes and communities. They had to acknowledge their degraded spiritual, social, and cultural conditions, accept the saving truth and solution of their God, and commit to holding the broken parts of life as they progressed forward in a lifestyle in keeping their divine identity.

Take heart, though; this letter ends in victory! The conclusion of John’s letter to the Ephesian church finds the Lord God encouraging believers to listen to the spiritual principle of ***what the Spirit has to say...*** To the believer whose divine identity in Christ Jesus influences their grace and faith-based ability to *nikaó* [victoriously overcome any circumstance that illegitimately holds a Believer hostage], they will eat fruit from the tree of life.⁶⁷ As seen in Genesis 2:9, the Tree of Life and Garden of Eden speak of a unique intimacy with God in heaven. In Revelation 2, we see such intimacy will be eternally experienced by those whose

⁶⁶ The Greek word for Repent in Revelation 2:5 is *Metanoéō*, which carries a few meanings to include “heartily amending with disgust of one’s (past/current) sin,” and “thinking differently afterwards.”—to about face, having changed one’s mind, motion, and lifestyle from spiritual rebellion towards an obedience based destiny. James Strong, G3340, Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

⁶⁷ The Greek word *Nikaó* in Revelation 2:7,17,3:21 and 1 John 5:4-5 can be rendered overcomer or conquer. It’s The Apostle John’s pen that proclaims overcoming victory rests with the individual who by faith believes in and identifies with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This definition is influenced by Dr. Tony Evans and James Strong, G3528, Exhaustive Concordance of *The Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

divine identity and lifestyle caused them to victoriously overcome the temptation to dismiss or disregard the Creator God who defines His creation.

The above introductory exposition of the Church of Ephesus is merely a beginning dive within the sum of biblical treasures a reader will find *in Him*, the John 1 living Word. Like the Apostle John, Apostle Paul knew that was God's will for them because he had first discovered and progressively deepened in God's will himself! As an Acts 9:15-16 chosen sufferer for God's sake whose layered identity would soon become that of a "Prisoner," I believe Paul's ability to accomplish his life's mission and address said suffering resiliently was because of his known identity and purpose *in Him* who chose and called him. This convicted Prisoner and Author, who certainly wrestled to a sincere degree in his humanity with regrets, shame, guilt, and being an outcast, overcame because he knew his name and divine identity had eternal victory imputed unto it as a beloved son and saint of God.

As the Chaplain for First Responders and a Brig, Paul's testimony inspires my chaplaincy in entirely new ways as I serve the collective staff demographic and prisoners whose heads, hearts, and souls need to know their divine identity all the more amidst even further strained identities. All are invited to navigate daily what I call the spiritual warfighting publication published by The God who loves and assigns divine identity, divine purpose, and godly strategy for victory.⁶⁸ In the meantime, consider three qualifiers from the Christian faith for such a declaration:

⁶⁸ Just as Marine Leaders live by MCDP 1, Warfighting Publication for maneuver warfare doctrine, I live by The Bible (Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth), for spiritual warfighting doctrine.

- 1) God has perfect knowledge of **You** (Psalm 139:1-6, 33:15, 56:5; Jeremiah 17:10; Matt 10:30).
- 2) God has complete ownership of **You** (Psalm 100:3, 24:1; Isaiah 43:1).
- 3) God has ultimate authority over **You** (Psalm 103:19, Matthew 28:18, Ephesians 1:22).⁶⁹

To answer the first four questions of this work, one must also ask, “Who is God?” for it can be understood that the former answers are intricately connected to the latter question. Why? How? The Apostle Paul’s inaugural work teaches that the sum of creation innately finds its true meaning and divine identity in God, its Creator.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Romans 1:18-20

As such, if it is in God, the Creator, that one lives, moves, and has their being (Acts 17:28), as suggested within the Christian conviction, it may be best for Seekers and Believers alike to start their discovery of divine identity and purpose *In Him*. In Ephesians 1-3, the Apostle Paul praises God for all the spiritual blessings bestowed upon those faithful *in Christ Jesus, In Him*.

As seen in Appendix A, Spiritual Blessings *In Him*, such a list is worthy of a second and third reflection and a more profound introduction of its author. First-century persons privileged to have met and followed the Apostle Paul would have experienced tremendous awe because of him. Yet, the same can be true for me and you as we read the body of his thirteen

⁶⁹ Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *Defined: Who God Says You Are* (B&H Books, 2019), pg 28-36.

letters and learn of his beginning. New Testament scriptures within Acts and Philippians tell us Saul of Tarsus has Roman citizenry and a noteworthy Jewish pedigree tied to the tribe of Benjamin. Well-educated in the Roman and Jewish halls of learning, Saul became a devout observer of the Torah and a faithful Israelite. Serving as a Pharisee, tradition suggests and translations such as *The Message* in Philippians 3:6 state Saul “meticulously” kept Torah to a devastating degree of killing and persecution of any who were, according to Acts 9:2, belonging to the Christian faith then called “the Way.”

Saul confidently knew and lived in his social, economic, political, ethnic, and religious identity, which I applaud. His discovered and ever-deepening identity undoubtedly influenced his character, conduct, conversation, crew, coping, and perspective. And yet, in the prime of his skewed life identity and purpose, he was profoundly living as one whose soul was missing the mark of who God created him to be. Approximately 30-36 AD, the persecuting Saul of 1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13-14, Philippians 3:6, and Acts 8:1-3 ceased to be.⁷⁰ For you see, the Apostle Luke pivots in Acts 9:3-20 in the sovereignty of God’s plan with the man Saul, falling to the ground before The Lord God. On the dirt road, Saul was traveling towards more religiously terroristic destruction when Jesus, having identified with His suffering people, confronted Saul for persecuting all whose lives, identities, and purpose are *In Him*. With the brevity of words exchanged, the now blind Saul heard the voice of the resurrected and glorified God introduce Himself, declare a doctrinal indicative concerning the Person of Jesus, and instruct him regarding his first mission in his soon-to-be-realized divine identity and purpose.

⁷⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), pg 44.

With the obedient participation of another brother whose identity had been discovered *In Him*, Ananias, the Lord God gave a vision to commission Saul as “a chosen instrument of Mine...(who will) bear My name...(and) must suffer for My name’s sake.” Having now experienced God’s salvific conversion and eternity change, Saul regained physical sight, gained Kingdom insight (in Christ), was baptized into the faith, received the indwelling filling of the Holy Spirit, and discovered his divine identity and purpose. With immediacy, the discovery of divine identity began to influence his ability to accomplish the mission of proclaiming Jesus and suffering for His Name's sake. His repentant lifestyle continued to evoke shock in fellow Believers in Damascus radically, as Saul “kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews by proving Jesus *is* the Christ” (v22).

Saul, who customarily was dually known also as Paul (Acts 13:9), engages in an initial three-year discovery and deepening of his divine identity and purpose (Galatians 1:15-17, Philippians 3:3-11) in light of his calling to proclaim and suffer for the Name of Jesus. I acknowledge that time and space do not grace this project with a deep dive into the redeemed and divinely identified life of the Apostle Paul. Yet, all who study his life can arguably attest to the second-best demonstration of a life well executed within the understanding and wisdom of one's divine identity and purpose. With nearly three decades between the death of his former identity and the death of his body, Brother Paul increasingly and unflinchingly accomplished the mission of his life amidst extremely harsh societal, environmental, relational, political, economic, religious, and spiritual stresses and sufferings (see 2 Corinthians 11:21-33). His ability to not allow societally ascribed names that identified the conditions of his frame infiltrate his brain as barriers to his Philippians 3:10-11 goal of “Knowing Him and the power of

His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” is remarkable.

Be it Fool, Hebrew, Roman, Jew, Crazy, Ship-Wrecked, Zealot, Beaten, Stoned, Pharisee, Poor, or Prisoner, no depth or breadth of negative labeling could disrupt the knowledge of, appreciation for, and application of His God-given identity and purpose.⁷¹

Unlike all the prisoners I serve, Paul was societally convicted and identified as a prisoner *because of* knowing and living in his divine identity and purpose. Yet, in God’s sovereignty, even the purpose of prison for Paul was providentially used to pen some of his most prolific work to church ‘institutions’ and individuals still to this day.

Case Study, Current Brig Inmate:

Regarding the Pre-trial Inmate ‘U. S. Marine,’ I could express the same. Below are unpolished responses to self-exploratory questions I presented and facilitated during the initial and subsequent conversation of pastoral care.⁷²

***Who am I? Define/describe myself.** “I am a caring, loving person. Dumb and naïve if I were being honest. Can be very stubborn and prideful. He thinks he knows it all. Funny. He would instead take care of everyone rather than himself. But in the same sentence, he can be self-centered and only care about himself. In all honesty, “Last Name” isn’t a bad person, just a young, hard-headed man who isn’t intelligent enough to listen to the guidance he had growing up and too prideful to admit he didn’t have everything under control and needed help.”

⁷¹ In consideration for my Jewish siblings, the group of expressions are not meant as anti-Semitic, rather, conveyance of the idea that one who is aware of their divine identity is unbothered by any ill-intended labeling that may be societally ascribed.

⁷² During Chaplain requested counseling’s by a Camp Pendleton Brig Inmate, these questions were introduced and initially worked through on November 9th and 14th, 2023. Pastoral care within the spirit of helping warfighters discover their divine identity continues with this inmate and increasingly more, incarcerated and free.

***Who does God say I am? {Initially, he answered}** “I can’t answer that question right now.” **{A week later, he answered}** “God says I’m His masterpiece; not everything is perfect, nor will it ever be, but the way he views us and uniquely created us. What I mean by that is we are perfect in our own ways, not literally perfect, but to God we are because we are his creation.”

***Describe my story about how living without knowing my divine identity has influenced my lifestyle (behaviors).** “I would say living without knowing who I was and staying away from god caused me to make a lot of dumb decisions growing up. I tried fitting in with the wrong crowd because I thought I was cool. Instead of being different and doing the right thing, I continued time and time again out of the house doing the wrong thing, which just became worse because I played right into the devil's hand.

I thought being cool meant stealing, smoking, disrespecting others, violence, disobedience, basically doing whatever the heck I wanted to, which was straight-up disrespect towards God.”

How might unresolved trauma negatively influence my ability to live well? “There are a lot of things in my life that had happened to me that I suppress because I was too scared to face them head-on, and I thought sex, money, and drugs would help me cope with the trauma when, in reality, every negative reaction I had played a vital role in the devil's hand to destroy me. I could have reached out and asked for help, but being the prideful idiot I am, I chose to think negative behaviors and choices would help heal/take away the pain. When in reality, all I was doing was creating a temporary escape for the moment. Knowing I couldn’t run forever, I created a very unhealthy, negative way of living.”

***How might discovering and deepening my (divine) identity influence a well-lived life? {Initially, he answered}** “I can’t answer that question right now.” **{A week later, he answered}** “If I was actually able to find my identity and develop it, it would influence a beautiful, happy-filled life. I could actually feel positive about everything and actually do good things, not just talk about them. Everyone can talk about what they want to do, but the hard part is actually doing it/staying committed to it.”

***Where might divine identity be discovered? After answering for yourself, see “In Him” Ephesians 1:4, 7, 9, 10, 13. {Initially, he answered}** “I can’t answer that question right now.” **{A week later, he answered}** “To be honest, I really don’t know where my identity might be discovered, but what I do know is that I should turn to God more. And put more trust in Him and stop taking my life/freedom for granted.”

This Inmate, this young man whom God appointed divine identity and purpose unto, is not alone in his inability to wrestle with and answer these questions and grasp the gravity of the consequences of not knowing and applying them. His **character, conduct, conversation, crew**, (poor) **coping** behaviors, and perspective, in significant part, evidence a heart that’s

unresolved of trauma and uninfluenced by a known, divine identity.⁷³ He is but one warfighter, within every generation and rank of warfighters, who lives unaware of and uninfluenced by their soul-deep identity. (Imprisoned or free, all of us, to a degree, live short of the full glory of knowing our divine identity.) His incarceration is evident. The frequency of new Prisoner “intakes” is evident. The conviction charges of the Brig inmates are evident. The overflow of boots, heels, and adolescent sneakers into Mental Health offices is evident. The amount of psychotropic medications being prescribed is evident. The divorce, domestic violence, and suicidality rates are evident. The speed by which alcohol is removed from the Exchange shelves on paydays is evident. The lack of military Chapel attendance is evidence. The depth of despair and depression confidentially divulged on Chaplain couches is evident. The retention, staffing shortfalls, and burnout within the force are apparent.

Yet, I am confident that if warfighters begin to discover and deepen their identity *In Him*, minds, bodies, and souls will have the divine equipment to fill the holes in their holiness toward flourishing lives.⁷⁴ Thereby making a more lethal force, thriving militaristic culture, and flourishing communities inside and outside the wire. The Triune God of the Christian tradition and God’s appointed leaders supported the institutional church of old; who then supports our Corps’ individual warfighters and families today?

Heavenly Father,
 You are praised for creating all of humanity with divine identity and purpose, for good works that bring You honor and help for one another. May Your creations discover and flourish in their divine identity amidst the influences of society and suffering toward a life well done. Amen.

⁷³ My Fighter’s and Family’s know ‘Chap’s has **Five C’s** that are to be influenced by my divine identity.’

⁷⁴ Kevin DeYoung, “The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness,” ThriftBooks, 2012, https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/the-hole-in-our-holiness-filling-the-gap-between-gospel-passion-and-the-pursuit-of-godliness_kevin-deyoung/507151/.

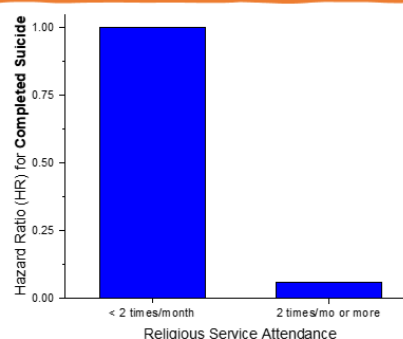
VI. Who Supports Warfighters in Discovering Their Identity?

Too often, the immediate answer for mentally, relationally, and or emotionally hemorrhaging Marines or Sailors remains, “Go talk to the Chaps or the Wizard!”⁷⁵ Yes, Chaplains and Mental Health Clinicians are unquestionably vital (and understaffed). Clergy and clinical facilitators are mission-critical supporting elements to those they serve, as revealed by British Clinicians in their 2014 collaborative Journal of Psychiatry work with Clergy that yielded a compelling finding concerning religious involvement importance...

Why is Religious Involvement Important?

Religious involvement (RI) is related to fewer Destructive Behaviors = higher readiness.

94% reduction in likelihood of committing suicide over an 18-year period among those attending religious services at least twice per month (compared to < 2/month), after accounting for many other known predictors of suicide. – British Journal of Psychiatry



76

However, are Chaplains and Clinicians the first to fight in supporting warfighters to discover their (divine) Identity? As a Marine and Navy Chaplain, I say no. The “Mission (of) Marine Leaders,” according to General Neller’s 2017 Marine Corps Order 1500.61, Marine Leader Development, is to “...develop Marines and Sailors in order to sustain the transformation, help them achieve their full potential, and prepare them for long-term personal and professional success.” I would argue that implicit focus is embedded within the explicit

⁷⁵ Colloquial language among Marine and Navy leaders, while engaging a troubled Warfighter. As a Chaplain with Mustang pedigree, I can assure you, many chaplain’s counseling’s are moments of mentorship that could have occurred at the small unit leader level.

⁷⁶ E. M.; Kleiman and R. T. Liu, “British Journal of Psychiatry, 204, Why is Religious Involvement Important?” 2014.

language of “Commanders” and “Effective Leaders (to) take a holistic approach to developing subordinates” and “be aware of and involved in the lives of those we lead.” The summons to be “holistic” and “aware and involved” implies caring for their subordinates in ways that help their people discover themselves deeper than their temporal titles, successes, and stresses within our institutional and societal frames.

The Tasks section of MCO 1500.61 specifies that “Commanding Officers (Lieutenant Colonel and above, Main Effort)” are to “deliberately integrate” and, among other things, “instruct junior leaders” within an established culture of ongoing individual development of Marines and Sailors towards “achieving their full potential and be successful.” What might this mean regarding their greater identity and mental health flourishing?

MCRP 6-10.1: Spiritual Fitness Leader’s Guide⁷⁷

As the 2023 revision clearly states: “Spiritual Fitness is not the Sole Domain of the Chaplain.” Holistic development, including spiritual development, is the duty of the individual Marine and their family foremost, and, ***along with their commander***, the Religious Ministry Team ***supports*** the domain of spiritual fitness. It is the called and commissioned honor of the Chaplain and Clinician to come alongside Effective Leaders as interdisciplinary collaborators who provide, advise, facilitate, and care for the holistic development of warfighters who win on militaristic and mental battlefields before returning to society alive as quality citizens who have discovered and or deepened their divine identity.

⁷⁷ “To ensure the continued health of our collective character and identity and maintain our reputation as elite warriors, I am reaffirming the importance of spiritual fitness. All Marines and Sailors must tend to their individual character (and identity) to keep the ethos and reputation of our Marine Corps intact.” –General David A. Berger

It is my belief, after a quarter century of service, that the privilege of military service in connection to developing people beyond the surface of their rank or occupation is a waning conviction and art. In efforts to accomplish the prioritized mission of a daily checklist, individual Marines and Sailors are regularly shuffled away and delegated to the Clinician or Chaplaincy within the fray of small unit leaders timelines, taskers, self-care, staffing shortfalls, budgeting constraints, undeveloped leadership, and or apathy.

Is helping others discover their divine identity a “Religious Thing” exclusively tasked for the Chaplain and RP? No. An Effective Leader's responsibility is to create a safe space, initiate the dialogue, and knowledgeably challenge their people to go deeper than societal titles, emotions, successes, and unresolved sufferings in discovering one's transcendent self. Commanders, leaders, and Chaplains, I appeal to you to take your rightful positions and develop our people within our complimentary spheres of collegiality. Whether we support one's routine engagement of faith in a Savior, Military Service, Cosmic Source, or Moral Self, it is well established that knowing one's identity influences one's ability to accomplish life's mission and address suffering resiliently.

VII. Making Sense of and Integrating Suffering Into Identity

Chaplain couches, and Medical Treatment Facilities should not automatically be the first sought source for helping Shipmates make sense of and integrate suffering into their divine identity. In many ways, who better to help a 20-year-old second-award Lance Corporal with childhood trauma flourish than the small unit-level servant who is further along in the self-discovery journey and able to teach the younger how to integrate pain into purpose?

Who better to do life with a young female Sailor trying to navigate the emotionally stuck points of guilt and shame because her frame recently endured a miscarriage than an older active-duty woman who has processed her pain and now enjoys the patter of tiny feet? Who can better help a Corporal whose older Brother and Marine Officer died by suicide than the Lance Corporal whose Dad died by suicide? Who is better positioned on the expeditiously operational diaspora of our Marine Corps and Navy than the Commander and Effective Leaders who have sea bags of sea stories of sufferings that have been integrated into soul-deep successes? Yes, Combat Chaps and Combat Docs are always on the clock, but often, several thoughts of suicide have already shot across the bow by the time we meet thee in the mental foxhole of despair.

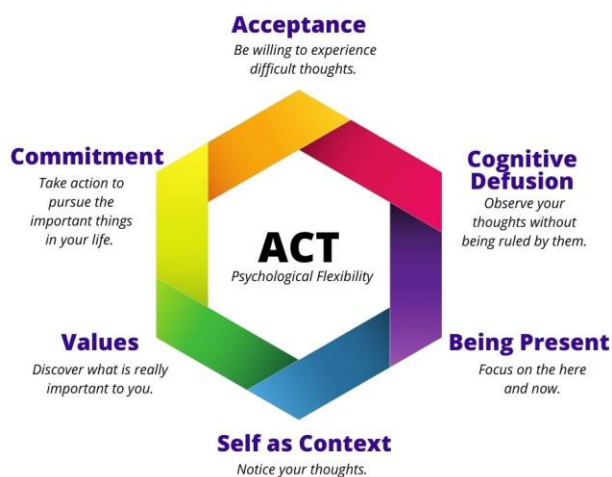
Commanders. Effective Leaders. Prerequisites for soul-care and making sense of suffering aren't foremost qualifying degrees. Instead, a servant who is humbly pleased to help the grieved experience future hope and glory. Sometimes, that's with a silent presence, a shared tear, a short prayer, a suggested perspective, or a simple story. When we have truly begun to know who we are (*Spiritually*) and been divinely tempered by inevitable sufferings, I believe we are best able to "comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:2-4).⁷⁸ And if traditional religious devotion, as we saw above, isn't your influencing conviction, may the simple heart position of a Good (Samaritan) Person inspire you to the roadside of an emotionally stripped sibling in arms.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *New American Standard Bible-NASB 1995.*

⁷⁹ Luke 10:25-37 and Matthew 7:12, *New American Standard Bible-NASB 1995.*

May we not institutionally dare to fight another day with the implicit mindset that Sergeants, Second Class Petty Officers, and recently Commissioned Officers are not among our nation's best resources to offer mentally assuaging mentorship and wisdom to stress and suffering weakened warfighters. I speak with broad swaths of expression because I know there are success stories of this kind of leader-first-oriented service within the ranks, yet said ownership is not deliberately intentional and executed enough.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):



Without knowing it, many Effective Leaders facilitate the concepts of evidence-based practice (EBP), known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, in their day-to-day service.⁸⁰

Famous phrases such as:

“Marines run towards the sound of chaos!” ~Recruiting Command

“Know yourself and seek self-improvement!” ~Leadership Principle

“So they’ve got us surrounded, good!” ~Chesty Puller

“I think character is permeant, and issues are transient.” J. Stockdale

⁸⁰ Steven C. Hayes, "Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life.," 2005. As well as Walser, Hayes, and Nieuwsma, *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*, 2016.

...and scores more, militaristically capture the psychotherapeutic spirit of the concept Hayes et al. call "Psychological Flexibility." For example, Marines and Sailors "Accept" the presence of chaos on the battlefield (be it a combative or cognitive battle space) and run toward it for resolution. Marines and Sailors exercise "Cognitive Defusion" when they acknowledge their thoughts while improving what, who, and how they presently are. Marines and Sailors embrace "Being Present" when they realize the stress of life surrounds them but are focused on what's currently before them. Marines and Sailors demonstrate "Values and Commitment" when they maintain sound character amidst circumstantial crisis.

The goal of ACT is to help people become unstuck from unresolved trauma and negative thoughts by accepting (not avoiding) that which is burdensome before them and living honorably even if total resolve does not occur. What would our Marine Corps and Navy landscape look like in one year if the MCO 1500.61, MCTP 6-10A, and the Spiritual-Fitness, Warrior-Tough curriculum were amplified with Lines of Efforts that reflected the spirit of Acceptance and Commitment? How many fewer Inmates would my Brig receive, and how much more grounded would those confinement-completed men be if they knew their divine identity? How many victories on the mental battlefield could be won if we located, closed with, and destroyed one trauma at a time? How many fewer car rides to the Legal Services Support Team and Emergency Department for divorce and suicidality would there be? It would be excellent for more weekends of poor coping behaviors and their consequences to be redeemed by the suggestive influence of Effective Leaders on their warfighters to engage God, identity discovery, and/or their Sacred Grounding.

Suggestive influences inspired by research that evidences “those engaged in spiritual practices (including religion) are 50-80% less likely to die by suicide, 60% less likely to suffer depression, 80% less likely to suffer addiction and 70% less likely to participate in risky behaviors.”⁸¹

Envision the fruits of resiliency within our ranks if Commanders, Effective Leaders, and Religious Ministry Teams were foundationally oriented to the basic concepts of ACT and intentionally create command cultures that systematically take these clinical concepts and colors them green and blue. Starting with you, my appreciated reader, are you in a soul-deep state of psychological flexibility?

- *How might you answer the Case Study Questions presented to the Current Inmate?
- *How might the Marine Total Fitness Self-Check Tool, Appendix B, support your flexibility?
- *Are your identity and behaviors transcendentally aligned or traumatically skewed by avoidance and cognitively fused views?

Please don't rush past those critical questions; return and wrestle momentarily...

Consider this: The culture will never be influenced by concepts our Commanders have not committed to. ~Chaplain Fondren. Selah.

Within my personal and academic development over the last three years, I have psychologically integrated ACT into my personal, paternal, pastoral, and professional tool kit with the thesis conviction that “**knowing my identity in Christ rightly influences my character, conduct, conversation, crew, and coping!**” How? Why? I had to come to terms with God's sovereignty over my suffering-impacted life. The assurance I receive when I read my spiritual warfighting publication, which teaches me difficulty is not intended to defeat me but rather to

⁸¹ Gregory Todd, “The Navy Needs More Chaplains,” *Religion News Service*
<https://religionnews.com/2023/05/15/the-navy-needs-more-chaplains/> (May 15, 2023).

define me as a more excellent image bearer (Genesis 1:26-27, Job 23:10, 1 Peter 5:7, James 1:2-4), is edifying. Therefore, why remain stuck in the mental mire of unforgiveness, shame, guilt, regret, anger, betrayal, criticism, poor coping, and so forth? In the same way I held the pain of a second miscarriage and my mother's unexpected death while moving through my most trying Marine Corps deployment, I needed to accept and hold all my unresolved suffering while committedly moving forward with values-based living and healing (Hold and Move) until I could make sense of and integrate it into my divine identity!⁸²

Provision and Facilitation of Identity

The motivation and honor that emits from the pages of the Religious Ministry within the below United States Marine Corps Publication cannot be contained. Join me in the foreword.

FOREWORD

Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 6-12, Religious Ministry in the United States Marine Corps, describes the Chaplain Corps' philosophy of ministry in the context of the unique mission requirements of the United States Marine Corps. It provides the basis for how we train, plan, prepare, and provide for the free exercise of religion for Marines, Sailors, and their families. This publication defines the basic principles and outlines requirements for delivering religious ministry to the men and women of the Marine Corps. **It provides guidance for commanders, chaplains, religious program specialists, lay leaders, and support personnel.**⁸³

I draw the Chaplain reader's attention to the notion that within the context of the unique mission requirements of the Marine Corps, we, the spiritual leaders and principal staff officers, have been provided basic principles and outlines. We have been bestowed a framework from which we creatively, contextually, and excellently co-labor with commanders, adjacent

⁸² "A pithy summary of the ACT model can be had in three words: **"Hold and Move."** Walser, Hayes, and Nieuwsma, *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*. P4, 2016.

⁸³ "MCWP 6-12 Religious Ministry in the United States Marine Corps," 2009.

Religious Ministry Teams, and supporting personnel to bring glory to God and Ephesians 2:10 good works for our people. For Naval Chaplaincy, providing and facilitating are among our core competencies, and the beauty of the matter is that we are not the sole agent of provision and facilitation of divine identity. The burdensome blessing of ‘carrying this commissioned Cross on our left collar’ is that we get to serve our people with knee cap-to-knee cap fellowship and a ‘pen-to-paper’ policy to create the very culture our commanders desire to have. The phrase “support personnel” encompasses those regarded as Effective Leaders, civilian colleagues, local clergy, spouses, and government program administrators!

It is those support personnel who, too, can contextually implement and execute for their professional disciples the process frameworks of Marine Leader Development, Sustaining the Transformation, Spiritual Fitness, Warrior Toughness, and Acceptance Commitment Therapy by 1) Discovering and deepening their own divine identity and purpose, 2) Creating a safe small unit culture for psycho-social-spiritual transparency and exploration, 3) Championing the idea of acceptance as the first means of addressing suffering and trauma, 4) Joining their people on the mourning bench as actively empathetic listeners, 5) Helping them defuse from unhealthy thoughts of self, 6) Inviting their people to be keenly aware of where and healthy thoughts of who they are in that moment, and 7) Warmly challenge their people to hold their suffering while committedly moving forward in life with a divinely grounded set of values and disciplines that transcendently influences character, conduct, conversation, crew, and coping.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ **Hold** (their unresolved suffering and still) and **Move** (forward with a healthy lifestyle).Walser, Hayes, and Nieuwsma, *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*. Pg 4, 2016.

Why? To better develop and transform our nation's greatest to fight on conventional and cognitive battlefields victoriously as men and women of character before returning to their civilian community.

It's fascinating that even as a singular part of the 1 Corinthians 12 "Body," I am not fighting demons like depression, insecurities, addiction, suicide, and the like alone on this battlefield as a servant, spiritual combatant, and leader. I have collaborative access to an entire entity of supporters who can deliver the abridged utilization process above as ones who are divinely designed and purposed for one mission: God's glory and the good of our nation! For this project and the suggestive practices, WE, the Navy and Marine family, **get to** train, plan, prepare, provide, and facilitate TOGETHER the discovery and flourishing of our people's divine identity amidst the influences of society and suffering associated with the pre and post-military service. Let's see its victory in the life of but one warfighter!

Case Study, Religious Program Specialist Second Class (RP2) Discovering Me:⁸⁵

Celebrating soul-deep psychological flexibility evidenced by a smile a mile wide, having discovered and still deepening his divine identity despite a devastating set of childhood disappointments and adult distresses, I introduce RP2 Discovering Me, whose evolving story embodies the heart of this work. In an overarching way, with Evidence-Based Practices identified throughout, here's how I walked with him through ACT. Then RP3 Me welcomed me to Marine Corps Installations West, Camp Pendleton, and the Security and Emergency Services

⁸⁵ The identity protected Religious Program Specialist represents the finest of the Navy and Marine Corps. This authorized account is derived from our time together and the stories shared, *Discovering My Identity and Calling*, June 2023.

Battalion with, “Sir, I’m excited to be your RP!” Having an effective team means knowing your people beyond their government name; therefore, I set out to learn, learn from, lead, develop, and serve alongside the Texas native. I soon discovered that the married and newly promoted RP2 had a personal relationship with the Lord and was adopted at the age of 3 years because the birth parents died. Shortly after being adopted, the adoptive parents divorced because RP2’s Dad returned to alcohol and eventually (currently) prison. RP2 shared one day, “One of my biggest challenges was not having a father figure growing up; my mom did her best with three other kids; however, I was on my own regarding how I shaped myself into a man (**Acceptance**). As I entered my teenage years, I was lost, not knowing who I really was; I just wandered through life aimlessly (**Cognitive Fusion, Not Present**). I picked up a daily habit of pornography as a way to ‘fill the hole in my chest’ even though I went to church as a kid but never took ‘God’ seriously (**Self as Context, Lack of Values**). Life continued that way for nearly five years until my Grandma started attending a new Cowboy church when I was about 14 years old.⁸⁶ The change in environment was the spark I needed to change my way of living. While I still struggled with trauma, stress, and porn during that period, I was making a conscious effort to turn myself around (**Cognitive Defusion, Commitment, Hold and Move**).”

“I began turning to God instead of relying on myself to figure out what I wanted to do (**Self as Context, Values, Commitment**). I read scripture and prayed, and one day, after the Cowboy Church Chapel, God showed me a sign that my life was called to serve in the military. It continues to amaze me just how clever God is for planning everything the way He did.

⁸⁶ Local Texan churches within distinctly Western American Cowboy/Cowgirl culture that commonly meet for corporate worship in barns, rodeo arenas and the like.

I serve as a Religious Program Specialist, directly supporting Chaplains and Chapels. Regularly, we serve people who are at their lowest. There is a lot of suffering and trauma interlaced with this type of work. What helps me get through this is knowing that God has created me, through my personality, my experiences, and key people and leaders in my life, to be the consoling individual people need during those times of suffering and trauma. I also know (although having free will) that I have a plan that has been laid out for me by a God who created the universe! So keeping those two things in mind, the trauma is not as hard, and the suffering is not as sad (**Psychological Flexibility**).”

While understanding presently, Marines and Sailors are not institutionally trained in Acceptance Commitment Therapy, it was in my ability to understand and personalize the evidence-based concepts that I am becoming better able to experience holistic self-improvement and also walk with my Marines and Sailors more effectively through the same steps toward psychological flexibility and divine identity discovery. The same is true for you, my dear reader, and the Effective Leaders you serve alongside. Being oriented to and trained in ACT during each transformation phase benefits personal discovery and amplifies our ability to professionally develop those we are called to serve. RP2 Me is just one recipient story of victory within the ranks of a command culture that intentionally facilitates warfighters' ability to discover their divine identity and live a flourishing life of everlasting success.

The hope for RP2 Me and the hope for us all in this Chaplain's heart was, is, that by knowing our Divine Identity (and growing in psychological flexibility), which influences our character, conduct, conversation, coping, and crew, we are best able to accomplish life's mission victoriously and address suffering resiliently.

I believe Discovering Me's story can resonate with many in various ways. A human who experienced suffering and poor coping behaviors in their youth. A mental prisoner of unresolved trauma who, by God's grace and genuine care of servant leaders, arrived at a heart place of determination to accept and address the despair of his life with a transcendent source and psychological flexibility. One who joined the ranks, not knowing at all or only to a degree, the deepest calling on our lives within our divine identity and how it defines our ability to accomplish life's mission resiliently.

His still-developing story of victory is steeped in societal and suffering influences. However, RP2 Discovering Me, a Warrior Tough Sailor and Spiritually Fit RP of Marines, has discovered and is ever deepening his soul salvation and flourishing within his divine identity towards a values-based life well lived. Not achieving this place of life and peace on his own, he was poured into and shown how to discover himself by Effective Leaders within his new community and military culture, whose mission and goal was and is to help people become whole. This case study illustrates some of the best of the United States Marine Corps and United States Navy. We can come together across the service and roles to develop men and women in our Navy and Marine Corps as warfighters and people of character who will serve faithfully, if required, die bravely, and return to their community effectively.

Ownership of Transformation:

It truly is our privilege, honor, and professional ownership as Commanding Officers, Effective Leaders, Chaplains, and Clinicians to create, cultivate, and carry out the mission of "Making Marines (and Sailors) and winning our nation's battles.

Our ability to successfully accomplish the latter depends on how well we do the former.

We make Marines through a (timeless) process of transformation...by imbuing them with our nation's highest ideas...our core values of honor, courage, and commitment."⁸⁷ Today, the mission remains the same. Men and women enter our Navy and Marine Corps community and culture, having earned the Marine and Sailor title as people needing a sustained transformation amidst a career and life that will be fraught with suffering and societal influences. This is done by intentionally developing their tactical, technical, **and** transcendent proficiency by Effective Leaders who knowledgeably inspire every domain of their people: professionally, mentally, socially, relationally, physically, financially, and spiritually, from oath to end of their obligation.

The goal is to be more than victorious on traditional battlefields with combat-ready warfighters. I believe it to preeminently be facilitating and developing men and women of sound character, conduct, conversation, crew, and coping who are best able to victoriously defeat the mental and emotional enemies on the battlefield of their hearts and minds (amidst inevitable societal and suffering influences) for a lifetime of success within the divine destiny ascribed unto their Divine (True) Identity.

Thank you sincerely for journeying with me, your honorary Chaplain, and helping to create and sustain the conditions of transformative successes for the Marines and Sailors in our charge and your command cultures. God Bless.

Roy L. Fondren Jr., Chaplain, Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy.

⁸⁷ General Charles C. Krulak, *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCRP 6-11D, 1999.

Appendix A

In Him, In Christ Jesus, creation is:⁸⁸

- 1) Blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (1:3)
- 2) Chosen before the foundation of the world (1:4)
- 3) Holy and blameless before Him (1:4)
- 4) Predestined unto adoption as children according to the kind intention of His will (1:5)
- 5) Redeemed through His blood (1:7)
- 6) Forgiven of our rebellious trespasses (1:7)
- 7) Lavished in grace (1:8)
- 8) Revealed the mystery of His will according to His kind intention (1:9)
- 9) Obtainers of an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose (1:11)
- 10) Provided the message of Truth, Gospel of your salvation (1:13)
- 11) Sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13)
- 12) Made alive (2:5)
- 13) Raised and seated with Him in the heavenly places (2:6)
- 14) Surpassingly rich with His grace in kindness (2:7)
- 15) Saved by grace through faith (2:8)
- 16) His workmanship, created for good works beforehand (2:10)
- 17) Brought near by the blood (2:13)
- 18) Reconciled into one body (2:16)
- 19) Provided (direct) access to The Father (2:18)
- 20) Given Heavenly Citizenship (2:19)
- 21) The dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (2:22)
- 22) Participants of eternal purpose (3:11)
- 23) Strengthened with power by God The Spirit (3:16)
- 24) Indwelled by God (3:17)
- 25) Filled up to all the fullness of God (3:19)

⁸⁸ *New American Standard Bible-NASB 1995.*

Appendix B

MARINE TOTAL FITNESS SELF CHECK TOOL Human Performance Branch / Resilience

This is a private self-assessment tool that may help a Marine or Sailor identify a need for support. It is not designed for use by the chain of command to evaluate a Marine's fitness or readiness.



Physical Fitness

RESOURCES: Gym/HITT/MCMAAP/Personal Trainers/Nutritionist/Dietician

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- a. I have the physical fitness necessary to perform all of my duties with confidence (both deployed and in garrison).
- b. My duties are not affected by an unreported medical or dental condition.
- c. In the past 30 days, poor physical health did not keep me from my usual activities or from performing my duties.
- d. I have the necessary knowledge to make good choices regarding nutrition, alcohol use, tobacco use, and safe sex practices.
- e. I meet my body composition standards (height and weight or body fat).
- f. Please indicate your most recent PFT/CFT classification.

	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
a.	4	3	2	1	0
b.	4	3	2	1	0
c.	4	3	2	1	0
d.	4	3	2	1	0
e.	4	3	2	1	0
f.	1st Class	2nd Class	3rd Class	Partial	Failed
	4	3	2	1	0

Physical Fitness Total: 19-24 13-18 7-12 0-6

Mental Fitness

RESOURCES: Mental Health/MCCS/MFLC/Chaplain

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- a. I feel pride in my accomplishments.
- b. I look forward to beginning each day.
- c. I am making a real contribution toward mission accomplishment.
- d. I usually know what I can and cannot control.
- e. I am comfortable seeking assistance and asking for help in times of emotional challenge or crisis.
- f. I am currently engaged in activities (reading and education) that contribute to growth.

	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
a.	4	3	2	1	0
b.	4	3	2	1	0
c.	4	3	2	1	0
d.	4	3	2	1	0
e.	4	3	2	1	0
f.	4	3	2	1	0

Mental Fitness Total: 19-24 13-18 7-12 0-6

Spiritual Fitness

RESOURCES: Chaplain, Civilian Clergy, Counselor, Mentor

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- a. My life has meaning/purpose.
- b. I am hopeful about life/the future.
- c. My decisions are always moral.
- d. I have no problem forgiving myself or others.
- e. I am respectful of people of other beliefs.
- f. I am engaged in core values/beliefs.

	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
a.	4	3	2	1	0
b.	4	3	2	1	0
c.	4	3	2	1	0
d.	4	3	2	1	0
e.	4	3	2	1	0
f.	4	3	2	1	0

Spiritual Fitness Total: 19-24 13-18 7-12 0-6

Social Fitness

RESOURCES: Single Marine Program, MCCS, Chaplain, CREDO Retreats

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- a. I am respectful of the members of my unit.
- b. I can depend on my spouse/significant other/friends for support.
- c. I get along well with members in my unit.
- d. I get involved in efforts to improve the community.
- e. I actively participate in base or community events and activities.
- f. I effectively use USMC and/or local civilian community resources.

	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
a.	4	3	2	1	0
b.	4	3	2	1	0
c.	4	3	2	1	0
d.	4	3	2	1	0
e.	4	3	2	1	0
f.	4	3	2	1	0

Social Fitness Total: 19-24 13-18 7-12 0-6

See Pages two and three for information and resources to increase your overall health and resiliency.

TOTAL FITNESS SCORE 73-96 49-72 25-48 0-24

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