

FOCUS: Mussar—A Spiritual Practice to Elevate Character

Practice, Practice, Practice

Three stages of practice—attention, action, and transformation—can guide us toward our highest spiritual potential.

BY ALAN MORINIS

Recently, my wife Bev had a hip replaced. For three weeks after surgery she couldn't get in or out of bed by herself, or even roll over. Every night I was woken up six, seven, eight times to help with this or that. My challenge was to be helpful and patient, and not irritable and short-tempered.

In the journey of learning and growing that is life, each of us faces tests like this. A situation becomes a test when it challenges us in our own personal spiritual curriculum—those inner traits that need some improvement if we are to be embodiments of the virtues Jewish tradition has set for us, and draw closer to God. The Mussar masters understood that life keeps delivering up everyday situations which show us that personal curriculum, and give us the opportunity to grow in just the ways we need.



How can a person determine the traits on his/her own “spiritual curriculum”? Well, I know the traits of patience, trust, truthfulness, and humility are on my own curriculum—because too often I find myself being impatient, worried, loose with truth, and getting puffed up about my own accomplishments. I'm not embarrassed to tell you this, because you are in exactly the same boat, if not in regard to these traits, then in others, like anger, or stinginess, or being judgmental. We all have a personal spiritual cur-

Alan Morinis is the author of Climbing Jacob's Ladder and Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar and founding director of The Mussar Institute (www.mussarinstitute.org).



“Whenever I encounter a situation in which I have the option to be generous (or not), up comes this image of the open hand, inspiring me to give.”

riculum. It's part of life.

Life will show you your spiritual curriculum, if you pay attention. Your closest relations—your spouse, parents, children—have been trying for decades to make you aware of it. Your close friends, too, are holding up a mirror in which your spiritual curriculum is reflected, as you have been holding up a mirror to theirs. The problem is that it's much easier to be a genius about someone else's spiritual curriculum than your own.



Let's say you have identified inner traits that could do with some improvement. What now?

Mussar is a very practical discipline to help us grow. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who started and led the Mussar Move-

ment in the 19th century, spoke of three stages of practice:

In stage one, called *hergesht*, meaning “sensitivity,” we are paying attention to and learning about the traits in our inner world that are at varying degrees of balance and wholeness, and figuring out our personal spiritual curriculum.

In stage two, called *kibbush*, which literally means “conquer,” we make behavioral changes, using our intelligence and our will to stretch ourselves toward the ideal expression of the traits in which we're challenged. Sometimes the word *mussar* is translated as “ethics”; it's at this stage that we do what we can to improve how we act.

The third stage, to which I will return later, is even more challenging.



For a long time I didn't think that generosity ranked very high on my spiritual curriculum. No doubt I could give more, but basically I saw myself as a generous person. I had proof: I always gave a coin or two to a homeless man outside the local drugstore. Then one day I witnessed a person giving this man a five-dollar bill and asking him, “How'd you come to be on the street?”

Realizing my level of generosity was not as high as I'd thought—I had room to grow—I began digging into my pocket more frequently, giving more, and looking for ways to bring humanity into my interactions with people in need.

This approach can be practiced on almost any trait. Just as repeatedly opening the hand will cultivate generosity, you can set yourself goals that will stretch you to become more trusting, or