

Wholeness Is Not a Cup

An Essay on Self-Care, the Four Arenas, and the Coram Deo Life

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Version: V4-Jun2026

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Abstract

The dominant metaphor of modern self-care, “filling your cup,” accepts depletion as baseline and reduces human flourishing to an energy-economics model: spend some, take some back, hope the daily ledger balances. This essay argues that the cup itself is the problem. Drawing on a convergence of psychological traditions, such as Adler’s holism (Adler, 1956), Frankl’s noetic dimension and self-transcendence (Frankl, 1946/2006), Linehan’s dialectical synthesis (Linehan, 1993, 2014), Rogers’ congruence (Rogers, 1961), the values-as-direction framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2012), and Buber’s *I-Thou* (Buber, 1923/1970), alongside the Hebrew concept of *shalom* (Brueggemann, 2001) and the Lutheran tradition of *coram Deo* (Wingren, 1957), the piece reframes wholeness as the integration of right relationships across four arenas: time, self (identity and embodiment), others (community and vocation), and what is greater than the self (cause, the spiritual, and legacy). Energy, in this frame, is not a quantity to be managed but a diagnostic gauge running across the arenas, signaling where integration is breaking down. An operational application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy gives the framework practical teeth: naming values within each arena, identifying the functional idols competing for ultimacy, and protecting what matters through committed action. The essay closes with a theological reading for those who share a Reformation framework (Forde, 1997), locating wholeness not in self-construction but in life lived *coram Deo*, before the face of God, where the cup metaphor finds its biblical resolution: not life support, but overflow.

Practitioner Note

For practitioners (counselors, therapists, mediators, coaches, and clinicians), this essay offers a diagnostic alternative to the “filling your cup” framework most clients arrive carrying. The four-arena structure (time, self, others, what is greater than the self) provides a relational map across developmental, existential, and behavioral traditions, supporting assessment beyond the presentation of symptoms. Energy is reframed as a diagnostic signal of integration across the arenas, a clinically practical reading of where, in a client’s life, tensions are fragmenting rather than synthesizing. The operational core is an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy values-clarification exercise adapted for the four-arena structure (Hayes et al., 2012), with explicit attention to the off-list items (status, approval, comfort, performance, optics, being needed) that often surface in mediation and counseling as the substitutes clients are unconsciously defending. Suitable as a client framework, a teaching resource for graduate counseling and conflict resolution courses, or a structural addition to integrative case conceptualization.

Theological Note

For readers approaching from a Christian framework, particularly the Confessional Lutheran one, this essay locates contemporary self-care within a theological architecture. The “filling your cup” metaphor, which treats wholeness as a self-construction project, runs counter to the Reformation insistence that wholeness is finally received rather than achieved. The four arenas (time, self, others, what is greater than the self) are read both horizontally, as the integration of

relationships, and vertically, as callings held *coram Deo*, life lived before the face of God. Vocation recovers its full Lutheran depth as the means through which God's care for the neighbor flows through ordinary life (Wingren, 1957); the theology of the cross holds the framework against triumphalism, integrating suffering rather than exempting from it (Forde, 1997). The cup metaphor finds its biblical resolution in Psalm 23: " *My cup runneth over*, overflow not as self-produced but as a gift received from the One pouring in. Suitable for pastoral formation, theological education, and faith-integrated counseling in Lutheran and broader Reformation traditions.

Wholeness Is Not a Cup

“Filling your cup” has become the dominant language of modern self-care. We are told to pursue rest, experiences, hobbies, and rituals that replenish us, and these things matter. They restore. They nourish. They help us recover from life's demands. I do not dispute any of this. Self-care is real, necessary, and worth prioritizing in each of our lives. But filling your cup is, ultimately, a set of activities you perform. They are important in themselves, but oriented toward nothing larger than themselves, with no context beyond the energy they deliver in the moment. The cup model is, at root, an energy-economics model: spend some, take some back, hope the ledger balances by week's end.

The problem with “filling your cup” is not that it is wrong. It is that we have made it primary. When restoration becomes the entire framework for well-being, you have already accepted depletion as your baseline. You are no longer pursuing health; you are managing an energy ledger tilted toward loss. The individualism baked into that ledger has not gone unnoticed: Letak (2024) traces how popular self-care isolates well-being within the private self, and argues for reconceiving it relationally, a turn she names the move from self-care to social self-care.

Two sips out. One sip in.

And little sense of how full the cup was to begin with. You wake up drained. You search for relief. You consume experiences to recover. Then life takes more energy from you than you

restore, and the cycle resumes the next morning. Eventually, you find yourself exhausted even as you are actively practicing self-care, and that contradiction is the diagnosis. You can also keep adding water to a cracked vessel and still feel empty.

The deeper issue was never the cup. It was the condition of the person holding it. The instinct at this point is almost always tactical: pour faster, pour better, find activities that refill more efficiently. But the math is not what is failing you. The metaphor is.

As long as the self is imagined as a vessel, a container that holds finite stuff and slowly leaks, the best you can ever aim for is *less empty*. That ceiling is built into the picture. You can be disciplined about self-care, structured about rest, conscientious about boundaries, and still find yourself running a managed energy deficit. The cup itself is the problem.

Energy is not the wrong measure. It is just too small.

Wholeness asks a different question. Not: *What fills me?* But: *What makes me whole?*

That reframe changes the architecture. Your entire frame of reference moves from what makes you happy in the moment to something more substantial and sustainable. The self is no longer a vessel; it is a web of right relationships. And right relationships are not drained by being lived. They are constituted by being lived. They do not leak; they hold.

It is worth pausing on what *relationships* mean here. Not only the interpersonal connections we usually name as such. The relationship with yourself, how you see, treat, and speak to the person you wake up to each morning. The relationship with community, with vocation, with a sense of meaning that orients your days. And for many, the relationship with a higher purpose or a higher being can also be a connection to a legacy or to aspirational desires that pull a life forward. These are less like discrete ties to maintain and more like an ebbing and flowing river, always moving, always shaping the ground beneath them.

Several serious psychological traditions converge on this distinction. Adler's holism (Adler, 1956) insists the self is indivisible. Nothing in life gets fixed in isolation. Frankl's noetic dimension (Frankl, 1946/2006) treats meaning as a vector running across past, present, and future, not a feeling to be topped off; and he pressed it further with self-transcendence: the self is most fully itself when oriented beyond itself, not when curated inward. Linehan's dialectical model treats wholeness as the synthesis of tensions held together, with Wise Mind as the integration of emotion and reason, rather than the elimination of one by the other (Linehan, 1993, 2014). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy understands values as direction, not feelings as fuel (Hayes et al., 2012). Rogers (1961) named congruence, the alignment of self-concept with lived experience, as the mark of the fully functioning person.

Buber (1923/1970) pushed the same insight further: personhood itself is fundamentally relational, not substantially constituted in the I-Thou encounter but in the curated I. And the older wisdom traditions point in the same direction: the Hebrew word *shalom* does not name

the absence of trouble (Brueggemann, 2001). It names the right ordering of a life. It is wholeness as integrity, not equilibrium. The same intuition has been operationalized empirically: Fisher's (2010) widely used model of spiritual well-being locates it in the quality of a person's relationships across four domains (with self, others, the environment, and a transcendent other) and deliberately names the construct after *shalom*.

The Four Arenas of Wholeness

If wholeness is the quality of your relationships across the full spectrum of your existence, those relationships organize into four arenas, with one diagnostic instrument that reads across all of them. Contemporary self-care scholarship has been moving in a parallel direction: Butler et al. (2019) argue that genuine self-care attends to the whole person across several interdependent domains (physical, professional, relational, emotional, psychological, and spiritual) rather than to any single reservoir of energy.

Your relationship with time. Frankl (1946/2006) named this the *noetic dimension*: past, present, and future are not three separate dimensions but one continuous vector of meaning running through you. Wholeness here means none of the three is severed.

- *Past*: How do you carry your formation, your wounds, your gratitude, your unfinished grief? Not denying it. Not trapped by it. Integrating it into a coherent story.

- *Present*: Can you inhabit your current life honestly, consciously, without constantly escaping it?
- *Future*: Is there a self you are becoming? Does your direction have a shape (purpose, calling, hope) that your present actions actually serve?

Your relationship with yourself. This includes identity, but it has to include embodiment. Rogers (1961) called the inner alignment *congruence*, the matching of who you believe yourself to be with how you actually live, and he named it the mark of the fully functioning person. Adler (1956) pressed the point further: the self is indivisible, and nothing in a life gets fixed in isolation, including the relationship between mind and body. The cup model is implicitly disembodied; it treats the self as something separable from sleep, breath, hunger, touch, rest, and fatigue. The older anthropologies push back hard against that instinct: you are not a mind that has a body. You are an embodied person.

- *Identity*: Beneath performance, titles, productivity, and external validation, who do you actually believe you are? Does that match how you live?
- *Body*: Are you on speaking terms with your own physical existence? Or have you been treating your body as the inconvenient delivery system for your “real” life?

Your relationship with others. This is a community, but it is also a vocation, in the older sense of the word, not the LinkedIn sense. Buber (1923/1970) put it sharply: personhood itself is constituted in the *I-Thou* encounter: you do not first become a self and then enter relationships; you become a self by entering them. Vocation is the web of callings (spouse,

parent, citizen, neighbor, worker, friend) through which you serve others (Wingren, 1957).

Leaving vocation out of wholeness makes it sound private. Including it grounds it in service.

- *Tribe*: Does anyone truly know you? Is there reciprocity, accountability, and belonging?
- *Vocation*: Are you faithfully present to the people your life has placed in your care?

Your relationship with what is greater than you. Frankl (1946/2006) named the foundational principle here as *self-transcendence*: the self is most fully itself when oriented beyond itself, toward a task, a person, a cause, a meaning that pulls you out of self-absorption. ACT carries the same insight in clinical form: values are direction, not feelings to top off (Hayes et al., 2012). A person can have a cause without an articulated spiritual framework, a deep spiritual orientation without a clear cause, or a strong sense of what they hope to leave behind without explicitly naming either. Wholeness asks after all three.

- *Cause*: Is there a horizon of meaning you are serving, something that pulls you beyond self-absorption?
- *The spiritual*: For some readers, this is named God; for others, it is the sacred, the transcendent, or simply the dimension of life that is not finally about you. Wholeness asks whether your life is oriented to something beyond yourself, or merely decorated by it.
- *Legacy*: For some, legacy is biological: children and grandchildren who carry forward what you planted in them. For others, it is institutional: a business, a body of teaching, a movement that outlasts the worker. For still others, it is relational: the

people whose lives are different because you were in them. Wholeness asks what your life is *for*, and what of it will continue when you can no longer carry it yourself.

Your relationship with your energy is the diagnostic that runs across all four. It is not a fifth dimension; it is the gauge. What nourishes you and what erodes you, what produces clarity and what produces fragmentation, what gives life and what slowly drains it. This is where Linehan's dialectical insight (1993) becomes diagnostic: wholeness is not the absence of tension but the productive synthesis of it. When your energy is being eroded across the arenas, the tensions in your life are not integrating. They are fragmenting. Energy tells you where the work is. This diagnostic logic has a measurable analog. Fisher's (2016) refinement of the SHALOM instrument gauges well-being not by a raw score but by the gap between a person's lived experience and their ideals in each domain, a difference he names spiritual harmony or dissonance. Energy, read this way, is the felt register of that same gap: it signals where lived experience and what you most value have quietly come apart.

This is the move worth making. Stop trying to refill the cup. Ask instead whether your life is rightly ordered, whether the relationships, commitments, work, rest, and meaning that make up your life are doing what they were meant to do.

Hold tightly to what makes you whole. Set down what does not. And let the small acts of filling the cup do what they were always meant to do, not stand in for wholeness, but serve it.

Naming What Is Worth Protecting

Knowing the architecture is not the same as living inside it. The four arenas describe the shape of a whole life, and the energy gauge tells you when something is off. But neither tells you what to do tomorrow morning. I have watched this gap up close: in the counseling room, in mediation rooms, in board meetings, in classrooms, and in my own life. People can be articulate about wholeness in the abstract and chronically unprotected in the particular. For the framework to become operational, you have to name, concretely, in your own words, what you actually value in each arena.

This is the work that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has done more clearly than almost any other modern psychological tradition (Hayes et al., 2012). We met ACT briefly among the converging voices above; here, it earns its place at the center of the operational work. ACT's hexaflex (acceptance, cognitive defusion, contact with the present moment, self-as-context, values, and committed action) places values at the center of psychological flexibility. Values in ACT are not goals (destinations you reach and check off) and not feelings (states you wait to arrive). They are chosen directions, the compass headings by which a life is oriented. Goals can be achieved; values are walked toward. They are how the right ordering becomes visible. ACT is, by design, transdiagnostic and values-directed: it begins from the premise that pain, grief, and disappointment are inevitable features of a human life, and orients a person not toward eliminating them but toward the committed pursuit of what they value (Dindo et al., 2017).

The exercise is straightforward in form and demanding in practice. In each of the four arenas, name the values that orient you. Aim for ten to fifteen total across all four, enough to be specific, few enough to be defensible. Write them down. Then do the harder second pass: name what is *not* on the list. The pursuits, postures, and approvals you have been chasing that you now recognize do not belong there.

What follows are illustrative (not prescriptive) examples for each arena, showing the level of specificity the exercise requires. They are written in the register I tend to reach myself; yours may differ, and they should.

Time. Presence (not productivity). Gratitude (for what has been, not only for what is going well). Honest memory (carrying your past without distortion or denial). Hope (not optimism, but the durable kind that survives bad news).

Self. Honesty (the internal kind, congruence between who you believe you are and how you live). Embodied stewardship (treating your body as part of yourself, not as a tool). Self-examination (the daily turning, not a one-time event). Humility (the kind that does not need to defend itself).

Others. Faithfulness (showing up for the people you have promised to). Hospitality (making room for those outside your circle). Truthfulness (love that does not lie, even when lying would be easier). Service (vocation in practice, not as a feeling but as a posture).

What is greater? Reverence (a posture, not just a mood). Fidelity (to the mission, to the cause, to the calling). Generosity (the open-handedness that flows from receiving life as a gift, however you account for the gift). Orientation (the conscious choice to live for something larger than yourself).

Now the harder list. What is *not* on it? For most of us, the off-list items are the loudest ones in our daily lives: status, approval, comfort, performance, optics, being seen as the smart one, being right, and being needed. I have sat across the table from people defending these things at high cost (in marriages, in boardrooms, in mediation), never quite recognizing that what they were defending was not their value but its substitute. These items are not always bad. Some of them are first-order goods that have been promoted to ultimate ones. But explicitly naming them as off-list in writing is what gives you something to protect against. A value you cannot name is a value you cannot defend.

This is why the language must be the language of protection. Once you have named your values, you have to protect them jealously. The old wisdom literature put it in operational terms: “Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23, English Standard Version, 2001). That is not sentimentality; it is instruction. The world will not

protect these values for you. The economy will not. Your phone will not. Your calendar, left to its own gravity, will not. You have to keep watch over them: say no to the things that erode them, say yes to the practices that serve them, and let the rest fall.

If energy is the gauge, values are what the gauge is measuring against. A life that is leaking energy is leaking from somewhere specific, almost always from values you have not yet named, or have not yet learned to protect.

Only now does the question arise, *what fills my cup?* Come back, and in its right place. The activities, rhythms, and practices that nourish you are no longer emergency triage in response to accepted depletion. They are the specific, embodied expressions of valued living. Rest serves presence. Friendship serves faithfulness. A long walk serves embodied stewardship. Reading serves humility and honest memory. The question is no longer “what makes me feel better?” It is: *what concrete action serves the values I have named and must protect?*

That is the move from values to committed action, the last vertex of the ACT hexaflex (Hayes et al., 2012), and the place where the framework finally stops being descriptive and becomes a life. It is not glamorous work. It looks like saying no to good things to say yes to better ones. It looks like protecting an evening because that’s when you have promised to be present with the people you love. It looks like keeping a Sabbath even when the inbox is full. The work is small. The cumulative effect, over time, is wholeness. The empirical literature points in the same direction. In a comprehensive meta-analytic review, Macri and Rogge (2024)

found that gains in psychological flexibility, the capacity ACT trains, track with reductions in distress, and they urge the field to widen its outcomes beyond symptom relief to forms of well-being such as peace of mind, vitality, and connectedness.

A final thought, for those reading through a Christian lens.

The exercise above can sound, in the ACT register, like the work of a self-directed agent: you choose your values, you protect them, you act on them. The Christian frame holds the same shape but locates each piece differently.

Values are not finally chosen so much as received. They are the compass headings that emerge when a life shaped by Scripture, tradition, and the example of Christ is questioned honestly. The work of naming them is closer to discernment than to invention, asking not only *what do I value?* but *what has God formed me to value, and where have I drifted?*

The off-list items, too, are named more sharply under this lens. Status, approval, comfort, performance, and optics are not just first-order goods promoted to ultimate ones. They are functional idols, and the first commandment names them as such: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3, English Standard Version, 2001). The exercise of putting them in writing is, in the older language, the work of identifying which gods you have been quietly serving alongside the One you mean to serve.

And the work of protection is not finally the work of heart guarding itself. *Guard your heart* (Prov. 4:23) is a command, but it is not a solo achievement. The same Spirit who shapes the values steadies the watch. The Sabbath that closes this section is not, in this frame, a discipline among others; it is the weekly enactment of the deeper truth: you are kept by a faithfulness that runs underneath your own, by One who, the Psalmist says, *neither slumbers nor sleeps* (Ps. 121:4, English Standard Version, 2001).

You name; you protect; you act. And you do so knowing the deeper watch is already kept.

Integration, Not Refueling

Wholeness does not mean perfection. It does not mean constant happiness. It does not mean a life free from pain, struggle, or grief. It means there is no civil war within you.

Your inner life is no longer divided against itself. The arenas no longer compete; they cohere. The past no longer ambushes the present; the present no longer hides from the future. Identity and embodiment are on speaking terms. Community and vocation are not a private debt to one and a public performance to the other. Because the spiritual and the legacy are not three pulls in three directions but three strands of one orientation. You are no longer

medicating disconnection with moments of relief. You are no longer confusing stimulation for fulfillment, escape for peace, pleasure for meaning, or recovery for healing.

This is what Linehan (1993) called Wise Mind, Adler (1956) holism, Frankl (1946/2006) the noetic dimension, Rogers (1961) congruence, and what *Shalom* was naming long before any of them (Brueggemann, 2001). Integration is not the absence of tension but the productive synthesis of it. It is not the elimination of difficulty but the right ordering of a life under difficulty. Wholeness as integrity, not equilibrium.

A full cup cannot repair a fractured soul. You can keep adding water to a cracked vessel and still feel empty. Wholeness is what repairs the vessel, or, more accurately, what reveals that you were never a vessel to begin with. You were a web. You were a river. You were a person being formed across four arenas by the relationships that constitute you. The cracked-cup language was always the wrong diagnosis.

From a place of structural integrity, the things that “fill your cup” do not disappear. They are transformed. Rest, beauty, friendship, prayer, hobbies, time outdoors, and the meal with people you love no longer function as emergency triage against an accepted deficit. The walk in the woods serves your relationship with your body. The dinner with friends serves your tribe. The hour with a book serves your honest memory and your humility. The Sabbath serves the One you are oriented toward. The cup-filling activities are not removed from your life; they are part of it.

They become what they were always meant to be.

Not life support. Overflow.

A life on life support is a life perpetually one missed activity away from collapse. It runs on the precarious assumption that the next refill will arrive in time. A life of overflow is something else entirely. It is a life so structurally integrated, so rightly ordered, so well-protected, so faithfully oriented, that what comes out of it is what has been put into it, with margin to spare.

Energy is no longer the measure of your day. Energy is what your day produces.

A final reflection, through a Christian lens.

The cup metaphor returns at the end of this piece because Scripture itself returned to it first. The Psalmist wrote of a cup that *runneth over* (Ps. 23:5, King James Version, 1769), but the overflow is not the work of the one holding the cup. It is the work of the One pouring into it. *Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.* The cup is real. The overflow is real. But the source is not the self.

This is what changes most under a Christian lens. The integration described above is true and good, and it can be partially achieved through attention, discipline, and right ordering. But the deeper integration, the kind that holds when grief comes, when failure comes, when death comes, is finally the work of the Spirit. Paul calls it *the peace of God which passes all understanding* (Phil. 4:7, English Standard Version, 2001). It is not the absence of trouble. It is a guarding underneath your guarding, a watching beneath your watch, an integration that holds when your own integration falters.

The overflow, in this frame, is not a metaphor for what your well-ordered life produces. It is a description of what a life touched by grace does, almost despite itself. You did not pour out what spills from you. You were poured into. And what comes out is meant to be poured back, into your spouse, your children, your students, your neighbors, your work, your worship. The cup is not a closed system. It was never meant to be.

A life on life support is a life trying to manage its own filling. A life of overflow is a life that has, however slowly, stopped trying.

Coram Deo: Wholeness Read Vertically

For the reader who shares a Christian framework, particularly the Confessional Lutheran one, everything above takes on a different weight. The piece to this point has been written for a wide audience. The cup, the four arenas, the energy diagnostic, the convergence of

psychological traditions, and the values exercise: each can be taken up and worked with by anyone, with or without theological commitments. None of it requires faith to be useful. But for the reader formed in a Reformation tradition, there is one further thing to say: the framework above does not stand on its own. It rests on a ground.

Wholeness is not merely the integration of four relationships across the spectrum of your existence. It is the integration of those relationships within a single, governing orientation: *coram Deo*, life lived before the face of God.

The Reformation tradition has a phrase for what makes a person whole, and it is not a feeling, an activity, or a quantity. It is an orientation. To live *coram Deo* is to live the whole of one's life (work, marriage, body, sleep, conflict, sorrow, joy, vocation, friendship, even the most ordinary Tuesday morning) in the presence of God and under his gaze. Nothing is bracketed out. Nothing is private from him.

That is the actual ground of wholeness.

In the framework above, the spiritual sat as one strand within "what is greater than you." That placement is honest in a pluralistic register, but for the reader formed in a Reformation tradition, it is structurally incomplete. *Coram Deo* is not one dimension among others. It is the ground beneath all four arenas. The vertical axis does not sit alongside the horizontal ones; it runs through them. Your relationship with your past is *coram Deo*. Your

relationship with your body is *coram Deo*. Your relationship with your spouse, your work, your neighbor, your unfinished grief: each is already vertical before it is a horizontal one, because the God before whom you stand is the one giving and ordering each of those callings (Wingren, 1957).

The convergence of psychological traditions named earlier (Adler's holism, Frankl's noetic dimension, Linehan's dialectical synthesis, Rogers' congruence, Buber's *I-Thou*) describes something real about the structure of human flourishing. The Lutheran claim is that those traditions are converging on something the church already had a name for, given to her long before any of those thinkers picked up a pen. They were tracing, in their various traditions, the shape of life *coram Deo* without always knowing it. The flourishing literature has itself begun to feel the absence at its center: Rudolph and Barnard (2023), studying wellbeing among pastors, argue that spiritual wellbeing, long treated as the Cinderella of positive psychology, belongs explicitly within any adequate account of flourishing rather than at its margins.

This is why the Lutheran tradition has insisted that wholeness is not a project we complete. It is the peace of being held, *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously righteous and sinner, in a relationship we did not initiate and cannot earn. *Shalom*, in its biblical depth, is not the absence of trouble (Brueggemann, 2001). It is the right ordering of a life lived before God. Justification is its ground; sanctification is its slow architecture.

Reading the Four Arenas Vertically

The four arenas do not change shape under a *coram Deo* reading. They deepen.

Time. The past you carry, what Frankl (1946/2006) named the noetic dimension of meaning across past, present, and future, is brought before God and integrated into a coherent story he is still writing. The present moment is itself the place where you stand before him, not a slot to escape from, but the slot in which faithfulness happens. The future you are becoming is not self-determined; it is the shape of the sanctification he is working in you.

Self. Embodiment is not merely a corrective against modern disembodied self-help. It is grounded in the Incarnation. God himself took on a body. You are not a soul that has a body. You are an embodied person, and your body is already *coram Deo*. Rogers' (1961) congruence deepens accordingly: beneath performance, titles, and external validation, do you live as the person God says you are? Adopted, named, called, justified: these are not metaphors, but the actual structure of the identity on which a *coram Deo* life rests.

Others. Vocation here recovers its full Lutheran depth (Wingren, 1957). The web of callings (spouse, parent, citizen, neighbor, worker, friend) is the means through which God's care for your neighbor flows through ordinary life. Luther's recovery of this doctrine is one of the most clarifying gifts the Reformation gave the church: the milkmaid and the monk both serve God in their callings, and the mother changing a diaper at three in the morning is doing holy work. Buber's (1923/1970) *I-Thou* encounter takes on its deepest grammar here too: every horizontal *I-Thou* between persons is grounded in the prior vertical *I-Thou* between the soul

and the God who called it into being. There is no spiritual labor that ranks above faithful presence to the people God has placed in your care.

What is greater? Cause and the spiritual, which read as two strands for a secular audience, are not really separable under a *coram Deo* reading. The cause you serve is meaningful because the God who calls you to it has given it meaning. The horizon of significance beyond yourself is not a self-generated frame; it is the kingdom you have been folded into (Matt. 6:33, English Standard Version, 2001).

Legacy, similarly, is not finally an achievement to be engineered. It is the fruit of faithful stewardship of what was entrusted, taken up by God into a story that began before you and continues long after. The biological, institutional, and relational legacies named in the secular framing are real. However, in the *coram Deo* frame, they are gathered into one: you are one chapter in a story God is writing, and the chapter that follows is held in the hands of those more reliable than your own (Heb. 12:1, English Standard Version, 2001).

Energy, the diagnostic that runs across the four, takes on a practical dimension in this frame. Energy is where prayer becomes operational. You bring the gauges to God because he is the one who can read them most truly. The disordered relationship, the depleting pattern, the slow erosion you have been compensating for: these are not just self-diagnostic data. They are matter for confession, intercession, and the slow work of being conformed. Linehan's (1993)

dialectical wholeness, in this frame, becomes dialectical prayer: the bringing of tensions to God rather than their elimination.

Values, Vocation, and the Stewardship of the Heart

The values exercise from the main framework (naming ten to fifteen values across the four arenas, naming what is off-list, protecting what remains) takes on a different character when read vertically. Your values are not self-generated preferences. They are the shape of faithfulness within the callings God has placed you in (Wingren, 1957). ACT's clarity about values (Hayes et al., 2012) pairs naturally with Lutheran clarity about vocation: ACT gives you the discipline; vocation gives you the ground.

Within this frame, *coram Deo* itself is a named value, and not just one among others. It is the value that orders the rest, because every other value is a particular expression of it. Reverence is a *coram Deo* posture. Faithfulness is *coram Deo* in vocation. Repentance, which the secular framing softened to "self-examination," is *coram Deo*, turned inward, the daily turning that Luther called the entire life of the believer.

The off-list items deepen under this reading as well. Status, approval, comfort, performance, optics, being seen as the smart one, being right, being needed: these are not just first-order goods promoted to ultimate ones. They are idols, and the first commandment names them as such: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3, English Standard Version,

2001). The exercise of writing them down is, in the older language, the work of identifying which gods you have been quietly serving alongside the One you mean to serve. Repentance is not just the daily turning inward; it is the daily turning *toward*, back to the One who has not moved.

The protection of language deepens, too. “Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23, English Standard Version, 2001) is not a wisdom-literature aphorism in this frame; it is operational instruction within the *coram Deo* life. The heart is what is being stewarded. The values are what give stewardship its specificity. The protection is the daily work.

And the protection itself is finally not yours to manage alone. The same Spirit who shapes the values steadies the watch. The Sabbath rhythm built into creation, kept even when the inbox is full, is not a productivity practice; it is the weekly enactment of the deeper truth that you are kept by a faithfulness running underneath your own. *He neither slumbers nor sleeps* (Ps. 121:4, English Standard Version, 2001). The Keeper does not.

The Theology of the Cross and the Cracked Vessel

Wholeness in a *coram Deo* frame is allergic to triumphalism. The theology of the cross has always known that the Christian life is not a smooth ascent toward integration (Forde, 1997). In the Confessional Lutheran tradition, Marrs (2019) has carried this same theology of

the cross directly into Christian counseling, insisting that suffering be named honestly rather than explained away. It includes suffering, integrated into the *coram Deo* life rather than exempted from it. The civil war within you is real, and the peace that ends it is not the absence of struggle but the relocation of your standing: no longer earning, no longer defending, no longer compensating, but held. Paul called this peace one that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7, English Standard Version, 2001), not the absence of trouble, but a guarding beneath your guarding, an integration that holds when your own integration falters.

Augustine (ca. 397-400/1991) named the same restlessness the cup metaphor diagnoses, and located its resolution outside the self entirely: *our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee*. The diagnosis of the opening (exhausted while still actively practicing self-care) and the reframe of the middle (you were never a vessel; you were a web, you were a river, you were a person being formed across four arenas) come together here. Wholeness is not the achievement of an effortful self. It is the peace of one who has been brought home.

A full cup cannot repair a fractured soul. You can keep adding water to a cracked vessel and still feel empty. Wholeness is what reveals that you were never a vessel in the first place: you are a person, embodied and called, standing before the face of God.

From that place, the things that “fill your cup” do not disappear. They are transformed. Rest, beauty, friendship, prayer, hobbies, time outdoors, the meal with people you love: they

are received as gifts from the God before whom you live, and given back to him through the people he has placed in your care.

The cup metaphor finally finds its Christian resolution in the Psalmist's image. *Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over* (Ps. 23:5, King James Version, 1769). The cup is real. The overflow is real. But the overflow is not the work of the one holding the cup. It is the work of the One pouring into it. The Christian does not finally fill the cup. The Christian does not even hold the cup. The Christian receives a life ordered from outside the self, and then, slowly, faithfully, sometimes through long stretches of dryness, learns to live inside it.

Not life support. Overflow.

*A life of overflow is a life that has, however slowly, stopped
trying.*

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