

Managing the Spiritual Neighborhood

How to Restore the Conscience of America's Communities

A Grass Roots Approach



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Chapter 4

Responsibility and Spiritual Growth

The preceding chapters presented fairly clear evidence of the decline in the quality of life in Westchester and the surrounding neighborhoods. The decline has been manifested on several levels. On the gross level there has been a marked increase in serious crime, including crimes of violence. At the same time the aspects of life that touch upon individual awareness, and which reflect the finer qualities of character – courtesy, respect, compassion and so forth – they too have declined. At the risk of contradicting myself I feel compelled to point out that the rather unflattering image that I've presented is a bit misleading. When you look at the big picture, the quality of life in these parts is not all that much worse – or better – in the late 1990s than it was in the late 1960s or even the late 1660s. What I would like to suggest is that, with minor variations, the overall quality of life has been something less than ideal throughout these decades and centuries.

You don't have to look very closely at history to find proof of this. Civil war, slavery, religious persecution, genocide against native Americans. Witch trials, lynchings, the Klan, the Mob. Street gangs, riots, assassinations, bombings. American society has been replete with violence and criminality since the earliest days. As children we were taught that the settlers from Europe and their colonial descendants brought Western civilization to this continent, but it seems to me that a strong case could be made that civilization actually declined after the arrival of the European; that the quality of life on the coastal Chesapeake plain, and elsewhere in the Americas, was actually better during the age when the only inhabitants were indigenous peoples. Now clearly, we're not talking about the basic requirements for sustaining life: food, water, medicine, etc. Certainly there have been significant improvements in the quality of such material factors (although the disparity in the distribution of these improvements is troubling). What I'm referring to are the non-material elements that we discussed in Chapter 1: awareness, courtesy, respect for the garden zone, and safety. When you assess the quality of life not just for a privileged elite, but for all of society, you have to conclude that generally speaking these core factors have remained at a fairly constant, and distinctly poor, level for centuries. Could we go a step further, and use the same criteria to assess the quality of life in Europe and other parts of the globe before America was even colonized? Yes, and I dare say that we would come to the same conclusion; that with few exceptions, there is nothing particularly civilized about the history of man leading up to the development of modern society.

But what is the relevance of this assessment? Crime and violence have been with us throughout history. So what? Is this not the human condition? Do you really think you're going to change the basic nature of people? Come on ... get real ... crime is a fact of life that is not going away, so deal with it. Install the security lights and the window bars, activate the alarm system, and when we catch the thieving little bastards, let's lock them up and throw away the key. There's the answer for you.

There are several things wrong with this argument. First, it's not useful to generalize about the nature of man. The word "nature" is not well defined in this context. Every person born into the world is unique. Some develop into good people, some develop into bad people, and some of us hardly develop at all. Solutions are not going to come from generalizations, rather they require that we recognize the supreme individuality of human beings. Second, there is no disputing that alarm systems and jails still do have a place in our society. But we need to balance such measures with measures that are preventive, otherwise nothing will ever change. And by preventive, I mean truly preventive. We need more people working on the kind of prevention that incorporates the new mindset that we discussed in the first chapter (see Section 1.2). As we saw, it's an approach that turns your perspective about the quality of life completely upside-down, which brings up the third point. When you are able to grasp the essence of true prevention, you begin to see the full range of possibilities. Your perspective becomes so broad, so all-encompassing, that yes, there is importance in knowing where you are relative to the history of mankind, and there is importance in having a global view. It's a bit of a paradox. At the same time that you are striving to keep your attention focused at home – on your family, your block, your neighborhood, etc. – you are also cognizant of where you are in history, where you are on the planet, and where you are in the universe. But how can your mind be oriented inward, on yourself and the immediate environs, and simultaneously be directed outward towards the distant reaches of time and space? If the here and now demands your undivided attention, how can there be room for universal considerations? It's a question that deserves to be examined in greater depth. But let's leave it for now. Let's get back to the practical consideration of what exactly we mean by these "balancing" measures of prevention.

In the preceding sections we raised a number of different concerns about the quality of neighborhood life. It's possible to conceive of several prevention-oriented schemes to address each of these. For example, we could address crime through a program of prevention. We could also design a program to deal with humanitarian concerns such as homelessness. And there could be yet a third plan that addresses the issues related to maintaining the green space in the neighborhood. What I'm going to propose is that there is a way to bundle all of these programs into one, big preventive package. We might still operate the

Community Patrol, write letters to churches and prepare tree reports, but all of this activity could come under one umbrella, not just in a practical sense, but philosophically as well. What makes such a consolidation possible is the common element that links these diverse concerns: awareness. In pursuing each of these avenues of prevention our strategy will be to refine awareness, individually and collectively. Refined awareness is the key because it sits at the top of the quality of life pyramid. When awareness is improved, the other factors follow suit: There is more courtesy, and hence more respect for the garden zone, and finally greater safety.

Let's take a concrete example. Let's consider juvenile crime for a moment. Generally speaking we want kids to grow up and become responsible citizens. To accomplish this we must somehow shepherd them through the age where they are prone to stealing cars and what-not. If an adult can keep even one neighborhood kid from taking that first baby step into criminality, then the program would be a success. But we're probing some tricky terrain here. We're proposing to examine what goes on in a budding young criminal's mind and to devise ways that we neighbors, outsiders as it were, could in some fashion influence how a kid makes decisions. Surely we would all acknowledge that such a thing is possible. We see it happen all the time, this transfer of ... what? Intelligence? Enlightenment? What is that substance, I wonder, that passes from an adult to a child which results in a better behaved kid? Whatever it is, I submit that this process is an educational one. It's that other kind of education, the different kind, that we talked about before. The *mere presence* of an adult in an assembly of children can produce this magical effect. But it can't be just any adult. It has to be an adult who is both responsible and interested. That would rule out people like, say, an adult drug dealer showing kids how to take crack cocaine, or a shock-rock musician who induces head-banging mania among his youthful audience.

Now clearly we are making a judgment here about what sort of activity is responsible and what is not. There are people who may rightly demand to know what business we have declaring that drug dealers and rock artists aren't responsible. It's that pest morality haunting us again. You wish you didn't have to make judgments like this, but it's hard to illustrate an argument without doing so. Let us retreat to the platform we constructed earlier; that responsibility in the broadest sense is a result of being able to think clearly, and that clear thinking comes from refined awareness. Being interested, on the other hand, has to do with where your attention is focused. We've seen some strong evidence which suggests that only the more aware among us can allow their attention to be directed towards the affairs of the neighborhood and the community. Dope dealers and rock stars may appear to be interested in kids, but they are actually much more interested in themselves. With respect to keeping young people out of

trouble, it seems we must begin by assembling a group of especially aware adults. I submit that if we seed the community with enough of such folks, then the *collective* awareness in each neighborhood will become more refined, and the conduct of neighborhood children will automatically improve. Thus, refining the awareness in a neighborhood means that you start with a few individuals who are already aware to some degree. They in turn will take a responsible interest, essentially an educational interest, in what kids are doing, and the good results will follow from this.

Simple right? Actually, I'm sure you have detected some circularity in this argument. To refine awareness we must start with refined awareness ... it does sound circular, doesn't it? It seems that once again our logic has turned into a blind alley.¹

Hmm ...

I'm afraid we'll have to let this question hang for a while also. By the way, there are no doubt some folks out there who are right now mumbling to themselves, "What about the parents? How come we have to do *their* job? Shouldn't they bring up their own kids?"

What I've been trying to explain is that the parents themselves are in need of guidance, or inspiration ... something. The adults of my neighborhood are for the most part anonymous, uncaring, and uninvolved, and in many households, fearful as well. Their kids are bound to pick up these characteristics unless some other influence comes into play. In most cases that influence will have to originate outside of the family. Now certainly there is the possibility that the *parents* will be the ones who are influenced, and that they in turn will influence their kids. That is perfectly okay. You may recall how we postulated that positive qualities could be transferred from the garden zone to the personal environment. Without question the children in a household will be among those on the receiving end of such a transfer. The power to indirectly affect many people by interacting with just one person is actually an important phenomenon. And it works not only by adults influencing kids. It can be kids influencing other kids, or even kids influencing parents. This is the kind of effect you produce when you stir up collective awareness.

¹ The question of how enlightenment arises in human society goes deeper than you might think. Looking at it from an historical perspective, one wonders how the first enlightened people came into existence – how did this knowledge first appear? Did the great creator of all descend from his heavenly station and confer a boon on early man? Did he tap people on the head with a magic wand and infuse them with intelligence? And what became of those first enlightened individuals? Did they have any descendents? If so, where are they now, in this age of crime and confusion?

4.1 *The Meaning Of Responsibility*

There are a couple of issues related to responsibility and prevention that we ought to examine before we get into the specifics of refining community awareness. Let's for the time being assume that we have some small inkling, some minimum degree of comprehension, of what responsibility is. Since everyone uses this word, you would hope that there were at least a few among us who had a rudimentary grasp of its meaning. Take whatever is your most primitive sense of the word responsible, and hear me out on what I consider to be a key point. In case I haven't yet made this clear, let me now state without ambiguity that we must not put all of the blame for crime on the criminal. The community must also carry some of the burden. Indeed, not just some of burden, but most of the burden, and perhaps all of it. What this implies is that those of us who are not committing crimes are in fact *responsible for the commission of crime by others*. This assertion is so obvious to me that I scarcely feel the need to offer an explanation. And believe me when I say that I'm not expressing a political view, or repeating some doctrine that I picked up. This is a truth whose source is difficult to put my finger on, but which is nevertheless manifestly clear. What else could responsibility mean, if not that one assumes the blame? What else could it signify, if not that one steps up to the plate and shoulders the bat? Taking the blame goes to the very heart of responsible thinking. But however obvious this point may be to some of us, it is apparently incomprehensible to many others. Unfortunately those others happen to include the people who are writing our laws and running our justice system. Do I need to prove this? When have you ever heard of parents doing time for their law-breaking child? How about the math teacher, or the minister, or the coach? Would they ever be held responsible, legally or otherwise, for the criminal act of one of their charges? Our society doesn't work that way. It is the person who commits the crime whom we hold for judgment, and it has been like this for quite a long time.

Yet here we are proposing that not just parents or guardians, but mere neighbors should take the blame. And by blame, I mean exactly that. The fault, the error, the onus ... they do not belong exclusively to the criminal. We all deserve a share. I further maintain that folks who understand this are *obliged* to accept this assignment. Not because of some law or doctrine, but because in their hearts they know it's the right thing to do. This shift in one's understanding of who is at fault is yet another consequence of prevention. The preventive mindset not only inverts your perspective about the quality of life, it also makes clear just who among us holds responsibility for the problems of society. You do ... I do ... each of us does.

But hold on. Aren't there some truly bad actors in the world? People who deliberately hurt others for personal gain?

I'll grant you that there are criminals who are very devious. That there are cunning characters who seem to know exactly what they want, and who calculate with great precision how they're going to go about getting it. Many of them are indeed quite ruthless. Evil, you might say. They are people who seem to enjoy seeing another person suffer. But taking pleasure in someone else's pain is the characteristic of a childish mind. Children are the ones who laugh when someone trips and falls. It is children who scoff when another kid strikes out. It is children who heap pitiless abuse on playmates who are (pick one): pimply, fat, slow-witted, nerdy, or the wrong race/religion/ethnicity. Kids, and adults who still think like kids, haven't yet developed sensitivity to another person's suffering. They are impaired, regardless of how old they are. The impaired condition of such folks should stand out in stark relief against the background of an involved and aware community. Take our neighbor Skip. The slasher. After just one conversation with that man I knew he was person you should keep your eye on. So how hard could it be to identify the real maniacs in the world? The bombers, the psychopaths and so forth? Those people are essentially no different from the delinquents who are roaming our neighborhood streets. They all need to be kept on a very short leash. Thus, it doesn't really make sense to discriminate between juveniles and adults as far as criminal justice is concerned. From the standpoint of prevention, any scheme we come up with to address juvenile crime should work equally well for adults.

What about punishment? Do we all share that too?

The answer is that punishment has nothing to do with prevention. Punishment and retribution belong to the reactive approach. On the preventive side punishment has no purpose. It accomplishes nothing. This is another one of those points that is so obvious that it really needs no proof. Clearly by the time you arrive at the punishment phase of a criminal event, the damage has already been done. Remember, prevention means exactly that, to keep crime from happening in the first place. Inflicting punishment does not change what has already transpired. In truth, from the preventive perspective the punishment was already meted out when the crime was committed. We were punished by the criminal act itself. It is *you* who suffers when someone else gets hurt. And when you think about it, such punishment is entirely appropriate, since as responsible individuals we are the ones accepting the blame. Incidentally, an honest attempt to *reform* a criminal is quite a different matter. If our "correctional" institutions truly served to correct and reform, instead of being the desperate hell-holes that they are, then we should all consider spending a few years as inmates. I'm not being facetious at all. Ideally prisons should be designed such that the folks who go into them eventually come out as better people: more responsible, more civic minded, courteous, trustworthy, with greater awareness, etc. The fact that the

prisons don't work that way now gives clear testimony to the failings of our justice system, and our society.

I should point out that it's easy to put the blame for all our social ills on the political leadership. Not only is it easy, but it also makes you feel good to think that you're more righteous than they are. It gives me personally a great deal of satisfaction to fault the politicians for everything that's wrong in the country. Lawyers in particular make great targets for criticism, if only because so many of them are such unsavory characters. But however easy it is to point a finger at these folks, we must not forget the fact that we ourselves give the political leaders their power. Whether they attain their offices through the democratic process, or in some other fashion, these leaders are simply a reflection of society as a whole. So again, as with the criminals, to blame them is tantamount to blaming ourselves.

The good news about responsibility is that it only takes one or two people with the preventive mind-set in a community to make a difference. The bad news is that not many people have it. I submit that part of the problem is that it's not exactly clear what one is expected, or even allowed, to do if one does step forward. There is no structure in which to function. And I'm not overlooking existing programs that supply food and shelter for the homeless, outreach for at-risk youth, and so forth. They do indeed provide a mechanism for people to get involved in a worthwhile way. However, such programs are mainly reactive in nature. Particularly the ones that address the problems of the poor and the underprivileged. When you look at the way so many inner-city (or for that matter, inside-the-beltway) residents live, you cannot help but see that the condition of life has already fallen into the crisis category for them. The programs that reach out to those people seem more like damage control than anything else. Ask yourself this: If your long-lost brother, or sister, or son suddenly turned up, and you discovered he was living in a run-down D.C. housing project, what would be the first thing you told him? I know what I would say. "Don't spend another day in that place. Here's some money. Get on a bus ... hitchhike ... walk. Find some open sky ... some clean air. Just get out of there."

Don't you wish that some honest politician would have the guts to do this? To tell the truth to the poor slobs who live in those decrepit neighborhoods? That someone in authority would stand up and say to them, "Folks, the place where you live is not suitable for human habitation. I recommend that you get as far away from there as you can, as quickly as you can."

What's troubling is that there are people who have said words to that effect about this very neighborhood of mine, Westchester Estates. There are folks for whom even one incident of violent crime is enough to make Westchester unlivable. Yet Westchester is not a neighborhood that you should flee *from*, it's a neighborhood that you should flee *to*. I live in a place where people come to get

away from the urban nightmare. It's simply hard to imagine how anyone on the planet, whatever their station in life, could be unhappy living here. Big homes, quiet streets, tall trees ... from a physical standpoint it's ideal. But what we're missing here is not something physical. There are holes to be filled, but they are not material holes.

4.2 Experiencing The Inner Realm

The second point I would like to make with regard to our discussion of prevention is that when you bring up concepts like compassion and responsibility, you touch upon the inner realm, the region where the mind functions. By proposing a preventive, educational approach to crime, what I mean to suggest is that there are methods by which we can assist, or perhaps inspire, folks to turn their attention in this direction.

Stop right there. The inner realm? The functioning of the mind? How did we get from bratty kids and street people to this?

I admit that these concepts will sound a bit strange to many folks. But look, they are no more strange than the ideas we've already discussed – awareness and so forth. You could view these notions in a superficial way, or you might see the deeper significance in them. It very much depends on where you are, and I don't mean where you are physically. Yes, the inner realm does exist, and yes the mind does exist, and these concepts are indeed relevant to the problems we've been discussing, but logic alone won't convey their reality or their relevance. They go beyond the range of the abstract to the experience of the real world. It may seem like we're playing with words here, but it involves more than semantics. Language is a representation, an arrangement of sounds and symbols that creates an image. The inner realm is not merely an image, but part of reality. It's the non-material part. It's the tablet where the images of language are drawn. But it's slippery. You could write volumes about the nature of the mind, and still not convey to your readers what you're driving at. Read, for example, the monk Thomas Merton's discussion of "contemplation", and see what trouble he has in describing the "contemplative" mind. And he fully admits the difficulty, saying that the experience of contemplation is "beyond the reach of verbalization and rationalization."² Talking about silence, solitude and "interior life", Merton writes:

... the truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul.

² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, New Directions Publishing, 1972) ch. 2, p. 6

And this abyss of interior solitude is a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing.

The only way to find solitude is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire, and the man who has found solitude is empty, as if he had been emptied by death.

He has advanced beyond all horizons. There are no directions left in which he can travel. This is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by traveling but by standing still.³

If you didn't already have some inkling of where Father Merton was coming from, you'd be totally lost. He might as well be writing Greek. Yet clearly Merton is talking about *something*. It's the mind, right? The nature of the mind? Can it be that hard to fathom?

Truthfully, I hardly grasp it myself, though I'm watching my fingers type these words. Yet grasp it you must if you want to have the correct angle as one of those neighborhood educators that we envisioned. The people you are educating will show the best response if this is where you're coming from. Even if they don't exactly understand it, the effect will be there; the non-verbal communication, the vibes. I think kids in particular tune right in to this. It is certainly not the way we normally think of education. It is not book-learning. Rather, it has to do with a growth process that goes on internally. As this growth occurs, you gradually develop a greater appreciation for the distinction between the internal and the external aspects of existence. And if you could identify one, single truth that every human being must come to experience in order to understand the nature of life, it is the distinction, and the connection, between the non-material and the material, the inner and the outer, the mind and the body. As your appreciation for this distinction develops, your comprehension broadens in the most general way. It is quite different from intellectual growth. The world is full of people with dazzling intellects, folks who blow you away with their ability to organize and recall vast amounts of data. But these same brilliant people can be utterly clueless, completely without development, as far as an appreciation of the non-material aspect of existence is concerned.

This sort of development takes place in all of us to a certain extent, but it can be a very subtle thing; so subtle that you might be experiencing it for years and not realize that anything has changed. Needless to say, I am not the first person to recognize this process. Some folks call it self development, or self realization. The term I prefer is spiritual growth.

I can hear what you're thinking: "Hmmm ... spiritual growth ... that sounds like it has religious overtones."

³ *Ibid.*, ch. 11, p. 80

You're right. It does. And no doubt there are folks who are going to say that anything that is even remotely connected to religion belongs in a church (or a temple, or a mosque). But I'm afraid those folks are going to have to be a little flexible on this point. The growth we're referring to doesn't take place exclusively at Sunday service, or even exclusively among those who are religious. It's a process that involves coming to grips with some fundamental issues of life. Questions like: What *is* life? What is existence? Who am *I*? What is the nature of man? What is the nature of God? Where does modern science fit in? Is there even a remote chance that man can understand these things? And again, when we say coming to grips, it means not just intellectually, but experientially. In our culture as it happens, such questions are not given much attention outside of a purely religious environment. When the President meets with his top advisors for example, you're not going to hear him say, "... and Ray, can you look into that 'meaning of life' thing, and get back to me on it?" It's possible that Ray might be personally interested in something of this nature, but you can be fairly certain that he won't be bringing it up in a meeting with the chief executive.

But the problem is not so much that the President isn't concerned with these things, it's that no one else is either. Not the legislators, or the courts, or the mayor or anyone else who is in position to lead and direct the public. Yet there are indications that some of our leaders at one time or another gave at least passing thought to such matters. Take the Declaration of Independence. It begins by talking about the "Laws of Nature", and "Nature's God", and then tells us how we have unalienable rights that are "endowed by the Creator". Pretty heavy stuff. The folks who signed it further declare that there are "self-evident" truths and that life is for "the pursuit of happiness". There are some tantalizing points here. Self-evident truth is clearly knowledge that comes from within, and the notion of life for the pursuit of happiness is quite metaphysical. You would like to believe that Thomas Jefferson and his confederates understood that the ultimate source of all happiness is, again, inside of you. Unfortunately, these lines of thought are not pursued very far, not in this document anyway.

So we do see hints that our founding fathers were cognizant of something or other having to do with nature, God and creation. But that's all there are, just hints. And it seems the leaders of today are even less aware of these matters. No one in public service ever brings up the topics of life, existence or the inner realm in his official capacity. It's not that these things have low priority, they don't have *any* priority. They are not considered relevant to the day-to-day workings of the government, or for that matter, to how we do business, how we educate our school kids, and certainly not to how we deal with crime. Oh, you occasionally hear a politician refer to "God, family and country", but in the legislative chambers and in the offices of the bureaucracy the discussions are not so much about God, family and country as they are about budgets, debt and economics. If

the decision-makers, the folks steering "the course of human events" as it were, don't consider questions of existence important, I guess it's not surprising that the other 99% of the population doesn't either. But don't misunderstand. I'm not proposing any radical changes in our government. There are no new constitutional articles up my sleeve. I'm only saying that these issues deserve some acknowledgment. Someone, somewhere, has to at least mention them from time to time. Let me emphasize that the matters that we are speaking of – life, existence, spiritual growth – do not belong to the exclusive domain of philosophers and theologians. However murky they may seem, these notions are an intimate part of the being of every person on earth, and the capacity to grasp their essence is built into everyone, bricklayers and academics alike. Not that I myself can cast much light on these matters. But of this much I am certain: If you never in your life bother to seek the answers, or at least seek to understand the questions, then you are pretty much frittering away your precious time on this planet, and this applies to everyone, including presidents.

4.3 Juvenile Madness

There is another point that I would like to bring out before we get back to the topics of courtesy and prevention. Now that we have gone to such great lengths to argue the importance of the mental and spiritual aspects of behavior, and have delved into the psychology of the subjects in the anecdotes in the preceding chapters, I must tell you that the mental state of most of those subjects on the particular occasions that I described is not worthy of any deep, extended analysis. I'm referring mainly to the badly behaved teens that we encountered. Take for example the kids who attempted to stop cars by putting trash and what-have-you in the street. What was going on in the heads of those boys can be described quite adequately as mindless confusion. Yes, those kids have been neglected, and yes, they are looking for attention, but they are by no means candidates for psychotherapy. They are immature, ignorant, and out of control, but they are not mentally ill.

How do I know this? Because I was their age at one time, and I remember quite clearly the kind of destructive idiocy that we engaged in as teenagers: Heaving rocks through the school window just to hear the glass break. Snapping off car antennas for no particular reason. Setting fire to a six-foot, wooden swastika and watching from a nearby hill as the fire trucks came to extinguish it. Stealing church wine and getting fall-down, sick-to-your-stomach drunk in the schoolyard. Marching into the local five-and-dime to steal candy and soda, and scaring the wits out of the poor shopkeeper's wife. There were lots of clever stunts that we devised for our own amusement during those years, including many that are too vulgar to describe. We never tired of seeing how outrageously

we could act in front of our friends, or what new and more obnoxious acts of daring we could invent. And if our stunts crossed the line into criminality, so much the better. Rebellion and lawlessness were the highest ideals of our warped philosophy. And they continue to be the hallmark of the coolest dudes to the present day. Such radical non-conformity seems to be a sign of our times. But it's not a good sign. Not at all.

Growing up in the suburbs of Boston there were kids I played with who displayed a surprising degree of cruelty for their young age. I myself didn't have quite the malicious nature of some of my boyhood pals, but we were all guilty of a distinct lack of respect for anyone or anything. I remember attending the wake when the father of my little league coach died. I was about thirteen at the time. Several of my buddies and I went in to view the body, and as we made our way through the chapel, amid the somber assembly of friends and relatives, there we were, us goons, goofing and snickering under our breath. We found the entire scene, dead body and all, riotously funny. I think we spent all of two minutes paying our "respects", before rushing out back so we could laugh out loud and sneak a cigarette. We were quite incapable of feeling grief, or of sympathy for others who were grieving.

Many years later I was attending my own father's wake, and I bumped into a cousin of mine amid the gathering of mourners. This particular relative had been a fairly wild child. He ran with a crowd of rowdies and jocks, and fit in quite well with them. Like me and my boyhood friends, my cousin understood very little of the significance of somber rites like wakes. So here we were at the funeral home, and there was my cousin, now approaching middle-age, weeping uncontrollably. You could see the sorrow in his face. Clearly something had clicked in him. Somehow the sight of my father's body lying in the casket had awakened in him a sentiment that had been dormant. My father, who had been like a rock in the family, was no more, and my rowdy cousin, still among the living, had discovered what grief was. The question raised here is why a person has to be jolted by tragedy before the finer qualities of his character come to the surface. You would think that there must be a more gentle way for a mind to be coaxed from its youthful ignorance; to be set in a direction that enables the better qualities to develop. Is it not obvious that this is a desirable thing? That growth of this kind benefits not only the individual who experiences it, but everyone else as well? Furthermore, I submit that if we can put our finger on the mechanism behind this process, then we will have found the key to our problems.

It's obvious then that the decisions kids make, taking place as they do in a vacuum state, can only be bad decisions, or at best haphazard ones. Actually they hardly qualify as decisions at all. There simply isn't enough behind them to provide a meaningful foundation. We've all on occasion heard someone declare that he wanted to do such-and-such ever since he was child – be a veterinarian,

climb Mount Everest, etc. I maintain that most folks who manage to carry out a childhood ambition like this do so by means of fate, luck and circumstance, rather than because of any well made decision to follow that path. Similarly, criminal acts committed by young people are based on decisions that are made in a state of dullness and idiocy. This is even true in cases of so-called premeditated crime. It makes no difference that the kid "decided" ahead of time to commit the act. The thoughts surrounding his decision were essentially worthless.

Let's take a closer look at this idea of premeditation. It seems to be a key element in the law. What I believe it means is that the crime was planned in advance. When it can be shown that premeditation took place, the punishment for the crime is much more severe. But imagine if you will what might go on in a young criminal's head during the crucial planning stage:

"... That rotten Mrs. Peebles. She is such a #&*%\$. She thinks she can throw me out of English class and get away with it. Well, we'll see about that. I'm going to wait 'til school gets out. Yeah that's it. When school is out. And I'll hide my BB gun under my coat. Yeah, under my coat. Definitely. Then I'll walk up to the school and see if there are any cars in the parking lot. Yeah, that's it. No cars, so no people around. It's going to be so cool man. Then I'll go around the side of the building where Mrs. Dweeble's classroom is, 'cause I know exactly where it is. And I'll hide behind the bushes and shoot her window full of holes. That'll teach her. And then I'll see the look on her face tomorrow. She'll be like, so bull___. And me an Billy will be, like, laughing our heads off ..."

Ah yes! Payback! Sweet revenge for an enemy who has done you wrong. We're all familiar with it. Even a five-year-old understands it: "He hit me first! No you did! No YOU did!" But guess what? Only people with childish minds and childish thoughts take action from such vengeful sentiments. Only those with undeveloped character assign any validity to the notion of vengeance.

Malice aforethought, intent, premeditation ... lawyers spend their careers arguing these issues. Yet it's clear that there is no great and profound substance to it. In most, and maybe all cases, criminal premeditation amounts to nothing more than shallow, confused thoughts in the mind of a shallow, confused individual. In kids this warped logic is the rule, not the exception. And tragically, it sometimes leads to things that are far more serious than flat tires or broken windows.

4.4 The Tatia Brennan Case

How far can unchecked idiocy go? How much damage can out-of-control teenagers do? Consider the case of Tatia Brennan, the fourteen-year-old girl who was murdered in November 1995 by two of her Suitland High School classmates, just down the road from Camp Springs.

The newspapers reported that Tatia belonged to a "gang" called the "Bloods", and that her fellow gang members were "under orders" to kill her. The details of the murder are gruesome. According to press reports, two of Brennan's classmates, Shawntee Perry and Vouthymor "Billy" Sovann, both fifteen at the time, bludgeoned and stabbed Brennan after luring her to some woods near Suitland High. It seems that Brennan went along with her friends because they promised to give her a gang tattoo and a gun. Sovann testified in court that he and Perry were ordered by the gang's leader, a nineteen-year-old named Chris "Big Dog" Witcher, to kill Brennan because she had warned a member of a rival gang of their intention to kill him.

Wait a minute ...

The Bloods? Gangs and rival gangs? Orders from Big Dog? What kind of nonsense is this?

It gets even worse. From a *Washington Post* article about the case we have this:

There were three ways to join the Bloods of Suitland. You could be 'blessed in,' slapped three times in the face. You could be 'sworn in,' jumped and beaten black and blue by the gang. You could be 'sexed in,' sleeping with a certain number of gang members, ...But, according to the teenagers in the gang, there was really only one way to leave the Bloods. You had to 'die out.'

The *Post* reported that the gang had ranks, from Foot Soldiers to Baby Gangsters to Killers, and there was a "Blood Bible" complete with signs and symbols and something titled "The Vice Lord's Prayer".

Is it possible to imagine anything more pathetic? It is ignorance in its most profound state. An incident like this makes you feel like you're reading *Lord of the Flies*, children's games gone horribly awry, only it's all too real. The first question I wanted to ask when I heard this story was, where the hell were the adults? How is it that no one noticed the deviant behavior of these children? Parents, teachers, principals. Coaches, counselors, clergy. Friends and neighbors, relatives, social workers, police ... possibly hundreds of people knew these kids. Where were they while their little boys and girls were playing this la-la gangland game?

Again from the *Post*:

Police said neither Sovann nor Perry, had a criminal record, and a police report concluded that Bloods members at Suitland High 'were generally well behaved and posed no significant disciplinary problems prior to this incident.' Parents for the most part did not know their children were in a gang, and those who did didn't take the group seriously. Tatia's and Perry's parents told reporters they

had no clue; Sovann's parents said they heard about the gang just weeks before Tatia's death. Patricia Ray, the one parent who testified she knew about the Bloods, said she considered them a harmless group and not a 'real' gang, according to Witcher's attorney.

It's clear that the parents were tragically out of touch with what their kids were doing, and even the authorities were unconcerned to the point of negligence regarding the activities of these "Bloods". Once again we witness an example of massive, community-wide, attention deficit disorder. What I would argue is that we are not only way out of touch with play-time gangsters like these, but with most of the supposedly normal kids as well.

At Billy Sovann's sentencing Judge Sherrie Krauser had this to say to him, "Tatia Brennan had the strength of character to resist the gang she joined. ... She broke the rules of the gang ... You did not have that strength ..."

It appears that the judge was offering some moral instruction to Billy. She was telling him that he should have been more like Tatia. Judge Krauser was at least partially right. We do indeed want to encourage kids to follow the wiser people in their lives. But the timing of this instruction was way off. The absolute worst had already happened. Billy's error had already resulted in a person's death. Someone should have been offering this kind of guidance to young Billy long before any of this occurred. Besides, put yourself in Billy's place and look at how this instruction was presented: a few words spoken by a complete stranger, dressed in a stupid-looking robe and sitting way up behind a bench, while you, the "student", are flanked by armed guards who are ready to pounce if you so much as sneeze. Is this a willing disciple? Is this an educational environment? It's not hard to imagine what was going through young Billy's mind. "Come on judge. You're wasting everyone's time here. Just put me in jail and get it over with."

I suppose you could argue that since Billy will be spending the next thirty years behind bars, that he'll have a good long time to ponder the judge's instruction. But it hardly seems fair. This child was so confused, so impaired that he couldn't even tell that it was wrong to kill another person. How much more screwed-up can you possibly be? Yet no one was able spot this flaw in his development. No cop, no judge, no parent. Finally he commits the horrendous act of murder, and only then do we figure out that something ain't quite right with the boy. And now that we're about to throw him in prison for life, we give him his first, and only, lesson.

There is something else that is troubling about Judge Krauser's words. She held up Tatia Brennan as a model for Billy because Tatia had the "strength of character" to break the gang's rules. But keep in mind what rules we're talking about here: Big Dog's Blood Bible!

How vulgar! How infantile!

Such "rules" do not deserve acknowledgment. They are nothing more than perverted babble concocted by bored, teenage idiots. As for strength of character, it's an easy phrase to recite, but to define it is quite another matter. Anyway, by anyone's criteria, Tatia was light years from having any semblance of character strength. Remember that she herself was fully involved in the gangster game for months and maybe years. Her parents had even purchased her a pager so she could stay in touch with her friends. Can a fourteen-year-old girl go from taking orders in Big Dog's basement one day to having strength of character the next? Can a girl who goes into the *woods* to get a *tattoo* be anything but a confused, misguided child?

According to the news reports, Judge Krauser called the Brennan case one of the most shocking murders in county history. Sentencing Shawntee Perry to life in prison, Krauser said, "You committed a crime so shocking, so immoral, so distasteful that to this day I can't believe I'm looking at a sixteen-year-old child." She went on to say, "You were a good student and had caring parents ... You had a foundation to know right from wrong."

There's no dispute about how shocking the crime was, but I maintain that it was equally shocking that no one in the community was able to prevent this tragedy; that no one was able to see how far afield these kids had gone in their bizarre activities. Krauser declares that Perry is a child, yet Krauser and Perry were essentially strangers to each other. Presumably the only contact between the girl and the judge took place in the formal setting of a courtroom trial. Despite this minimal interaction, the judge was able to recognize the immaturity in Shawntee. You would think that adults who had been involved in Shawntee's life beforehand, people who had years worth of opportunity to become familiar with her character, that those folks could have easily spotted the danger that she was courting. And to those who would argue that we can't meddle in other people's affairs, I can only point to Tatia Brennan's grave. Is the principle of non-interference more important than a child's life?

As for having a foundation for knowing right from wrong, I'm guessing that what the judge had in mind was that Shawntee's upbringing was relatively normal. That she had two parents at home, was going to school, perhaps attended church. What we must ask ourselves however, is why these outward aspects of her life should necessarily imply that this young lady should have the slightest understanding of the far deeper questions of right and wrong? The same could be said for all the children involved, including the older kid, Witcher. Priests, prophets and sages have expounded on rightness and wrongness for millennia. Scholars spend their lives pouring over tomes of religion and philosophy in hopes of glimpsing the wisdom behind the words. No less a figure than King Solomon himself, the epitome of biblical wisdom, struggled with these ques-

tions.⁴ Yet immature adolescents are supposed to have this stuff down cold. If anything, this episode proves the exact opposite of what the judge said. It proves that kids absolutely don't know right from wrong. How on earth could they?

I submit that the behavior of Billy, Shawntee, and the other gang members was actually quite typical for kids that age. That these children were so profoundly impaired that they could go through with the murder of a classmate makes this case unusual. Nevertheless, the deranged thought process that resulted in their make-believe gang play is not any different from the way our own minds worked, me and my childhood pals, when we were fourteen and fifteen. We too loved the notion of forming secret cliques and conducting clandestine operations. We too liked to pretend that we had our own little army. We too gave ourselves nicknames: Gilla, Tinkerbelle, Nitty, Cossak. We didn't have access to guns, fortunately, and anyway we were too wimpy – or perhaps I should say, not quite stupid enough – to really use a gun. If the truth be known, we would talk big about getting even with some other kid, or some other gang, but most of my friends were far too timid to actually beat-up on someone. When the truly tough Irish boys from the Heights came up our way looking for a fight, we ran like hell. Nevertheless we fantasized endlessly about being bold enough to do bad deeds. Like making your own weapon. Now there was a worthy accomplishment. A homemade canon fashioned from a piece of pipe, and powered by a cherry bomb. It would shoot a ball bearing clear out of sight. How cool can you get! And anything military was truly neat. Helmets, pins, storm trooper boots. Boy, did that stuff ever command respect among your friends. And we didn't just collect such paraphernalia. We wore it. We showed it off.

So where were the responsible adults in my own upbringing? Where were our own parents, neighbors, teachers? I'll tell you where they were. The same place where Tatia's parents were. In a different galaxy. They were completely disconnected from what their kids were doing. As far as adult supervision is concerned, there is no difference between what we had in the sixties and what those Suitland High kids had in the nineties: none whatsoever. That's why we were smoking pot by the age of sixteen, and cigarettes even younger. That's why we had nothing better to do with our time than to cruise the streets blasting psychedelic music through the speakers. Going nowhere, but burning rubber to get

⁴ When asked what was the one thing he wanted, Solomon asks God for wisdom: "... give me the wisdom I need to rule your people with justice and to know the difference between good and evil." (1 Kings 3:9) Solomon becomes "wiser than the wise ... the wisest of all men" (1 Kings 4:30). Despite this divine gift, Solomon shows that he is yet capable of making serious errors. Solomon's errors become so severe in fact, that God threatens to "take the kingdom away from you ..." (1 Kings 11:11).

The Good News Bible Today's English Version, 2nd ed. (New York, The American Bible Society, 1992)

there, and taking great pains to avoid the cops along the way. Yeah, we were useful members of society. Uh huh. And the same thing is happening right now, right here, in my own neighborhood of Westchester. Take a walk through the nearby park and you see gang-like graffiti spray-painted on the benches, the trash cans and the basketball court. No doubt put there by mindless teens. Who are they? What are they doing in their spare time? Why do they even have spare time? There's a sixteen-year-old down the street who is living with a grandparent. He never sees his mother, and doesn't know who his father was. I've talked to him. He seems like a smart kid. But why does he have a safety pin stuck through his ear? And why isn't he going to school? Does it matter to anyone? A seventeen-year-old further up has burned a tattoo into his arm. It's the same kid who was stealing bicycles a year or two ago. Whatever possessed these boys to puncture and burn themselves? Is body mutilation supposed to be some sort of cultural expression? There is not an ounce of intelligence behind it.

You can label these teen years as a phase if you like, but let's be clear that however typical this behavior may be, that doesn't make it okay. Phase or no phase, it's idiocy. If these confused young men merely stuck pins in their bodies, and otherwise conducted themselves sanely, there wouldn't be so much cause for concern. But the death of Tatia Brennan, and of others, shows that this nonsense is way out of control. No one is paying attention to these children. They didn't when I was their age, and they aren't now.

4.5 Growth Of Character

Somewhere along the road to adulthood most of my friends managed to move beyond their infantile state, or to at least shed the outer trappings of it. I'm fairly certain that none of my boyhood chums are still vandalizing schools or parading the streets wearing combat helmets. We all mature to some degree as we get older. Even these children from Suitland High School would have someday become mature adults, and possibly good citizens, had they not swung so far into the tragic business of gang play. What happens is that people become more sensitive to the feelings of others; their emotions become more genuine. In my cousin's case it seems that it all came out at once when my father died. Still, I'm not sure if what I saw at the wake indicated real development in him, or if it was just a temporary outburst of feeling; a sudden release of something that was pent-up inside. In any event, this sort of growth, growth of character, is something that you would certainly want to foster in young people.

Fostering growth of character ... it sounds simple enough, but what are we really saying? Does character grow as a corn plant grows? Does it flower like a peony? Or does it expand, like an expanding balloon, say? Expansion is good word; an expansion of compassion, of charity, of kindness; expansion of the

heart. But where does this expansion take place? And how does one measure it exactly? Furthermore, how does one conceive of cultivating such an expansion in another person, or for that matter, in yourself? Can we bottle the qualities of the heart and give people a daily tonic?

Once again we've uncovered a concept that on the surface is quite straightforward, but which on closer examination suggests a much more complex framework. I believe the key to understanding it is to think in terms of improving one's sensitivity. We have to figure out how to handle relationships, and the situations that we encounter, in a more delicate way. But one must not confuse delicacy with weakness or phony sweetness, and being sensitive does not mean being neurotic. The right kind of sensitivity is the kind that is complemented by inner strength and clarity of purpose, qualities that also come with character growth. What I would like to suggest is that greater sensitivity is a by-product of refined awareness. It is fairly clear that there is a connection between them. Remember that refinement of awareness leads to more responsible thinking, thus it's not so far-fetched to argue that the same process also leads to growth of character. Awareness ... sensitivity ... feeling ... heart ... it does make some sense. What I suspect is that people are born with different amounts of compassion inside them. Refining your awareness does not create a new font of such qualities, rather it uncovers what you already have. Thus the word "growth" in this context actually means discovery. As for where the discovery occurs, it takes place in the inner realm that we discussed. That other field from which our thoughts and emotions spring. In order to cultivate something in that field, it's clear that you start by directing your attention towards it. Beyond that things get tricky, but we must at least perform this adjustment of our attention if we want to move off the ground floor.

Let us be clear about the unusual nature of this adjustment. At this moment, as you are reading these words, your attention is *not* directed towards the place where growth of character occurs. It's easy to get confused about this. People can pick up a book – a book on compassion, say – and read it, and think, "Now I am directing my attention towards compassion," but that is not the kind of redirection that we're talking about. Similarly, you could search out a lonely person, and give him or her a hug, and that's a very nice thing to do, but it does not mean that you have directed your attention towards the font of finer qualities within you. Although they do have some merit, external actions and externally directed attention are not the same as internally directed attention. A different process is involved. A different exercise. We'll talk more about this later.

How one measures growth of character is a topic in itself. On the surface it would seem that you begin by looking at a person's actions. But just as Judge Krauser looked at Tatia Brennan's actions and, in my estimation, erroneously concluded that she had strength of character, there can be a rather large gulf be-

tween how you make this assessment and how I do. That gulf can only be bridged when you see action in a different light; when you develop an outlook that recognizes the subtleties of action. As we saw above, one can take a small step in that direction by viewing behavior in terms of courtesy. Your gait, your posture, gestures, expressions, the tone of your voice – it is elements such as these that form the basis of courtesy. Perhaps we should call it physical courtesy, with the understanding that as your physical actions become more and more refined, you begin to approach the mental aspect of action. Thus the practice of EX-ternal courtesy eventually leads you to the field of IN-ternal courtesy.

I would like to point out that the uncovering of one's individual qualities during character development, the personal discovery process, should not only expose the positive things inside you, but the negative as well. At least that's what one would logically expect. But I must admit that I'm struggling to reconcile this reasoning with my own experience. Let's say that a not-so-nice person sets out to grow his character, and diligently follows the steps required to accomplish it. (And I know I'm being vague about what those steps might be.) Could that person end up becoming an even bigger boor than he would have otherwise? Say it's a person who doesn't have an abundance of the superior qualities we've been discussing – kindness, compassion, etc. – but instead has more of the negative elements. Say he or she is distinctly cold-hearted, or mean, or selfish, or all three. I'm tempted to argue that the personal discovery process would merely accentuate the gap between the positive and negative elements of his character, yet I can't bring myself to believe that a growth process could ever produce a negative result. Ignorance does not grow. Ignorance is the antithesis of growth, the antecedent of growth. What I suspect happens with a person like this is that he gains a deeper understanding of himself. He is able to recognize the qualities that he has, good and bad, and more clearly understand which of them are directing his actions. Furthermore, the person begins to appreciate that he is not alone, and that even the smallest of his actions can have a large affect on the rest of the world. I submit that these two realizations alone serve to temper a person's behavior, and that such tempering is a good thing, a positive thing. The person may not become another Albert Schweitzer, but some development can indeed occur, and some benefit can be produced both for him and for the rest of us.

So now we've introduced yet another way for an individual to progress in life. We have growth of character, plus spiritual growth, the development of a preventive mind-set and refining awareness. Let me briefly restate how we defined these notions and offer a couple of observations about their interrelationship.

First, we've been speaking all along about the preventive approach. I described it as a reversal of your ordinary outlook on the quality of life. It is not

just a change in philosophy, but a different way of experiencing things. Second, we explored the idea of refining awareness. I acknowledged that it was hard to pin down what this actually means, but argued that there were significant benefits to be derived from it. We saw numerous examples that illustrated the apparent deficit of awareness and attention in my community. Third, we talked about the idea of spiritual growth, which we defined as the development of your ability to distinguish the inner aspect of life. Finally, there is this character thing, which has to do with the growth of compassion and sensitivity.

The common thread that links these various phenomena is that they take place at the individual level. They are not top-down adjustments to our social system. They cannot be impressed upon people from the outside or implemented from afar. Rather, each person must on his own locate these avenues and seek to progress in them. This is true even for growth of character, which seems to take place without conscious effort. I submit that one can indeed purposely set out to uncover the compassion and charity that are inside. Moreover, if you don't embark on this course, the finer aspects of your character will never come to the surface, and the difference between where you might have ended up and where you do end up in this regard is very large. Anyway, the point is, one must do something on one's own, take a personal initiative, in order for these phenomena to manifest. What this implies is that the quality of life depends above all else on individual action.

The second thing I would like to point out is that there is a physiological aspect to all of this. Much information has come out recently about the mind-body angle of personal development. More and more we are recognizing the importance of maintaining a healthy personal regimen – diet, exercise, daily routine, etc. People are beginning to see that all of these things factor into the overall well-being of an individual, both mentally and physically. Moreover, it's clear that anything that has to do with refining one's inner qualities must have a physical, biological correlate; some connection to the brain at least, if not to other parts of the body. For, what are we but thinking, reasoning bodies of matter? Our thoughts and our very consciousness originate in the cells of our nervous system.⁵

These topics are beyond the scope of this work, and anyway I can't offer a whole lot of guidance in this area, but what I can say is that there is still a wide gap between what we know and what we practice. For example, the experts have been talking for quite a while about the benefits of cutting back on sugar,

⁵ Actually, this isn't quite accurate. One would logically surmise that thoughts arise from the body, that thinking is a characteristic of matter, particularly the matter in human brains. But in fact it seems that just the opposite is true. Incredibly enough, it appears that the physical body arises – or arose – from thought, that the material comes from the non-material. See the discussion on infinity, the big bang and the origin of man in Section 5.5.

salt, and cholesterol, yet the staples of our diet are still burgers, fries, and junk food. Also, I think it's not quite so widely understood that one's personal regimen can have a significant effect on awareness. Considering that awareness is the most important element in the quality of life hierarchy, we can't afford to overlook anything that influences a person's awareness in even the smallest way. Does this mean that what a kid had for lunch may be a factor in whether or not he steals your car that day? Yes indeed. What he had for lunch, how late he stayed up last night, how many cokes he drank, how many cigarettes he smoked, and host of other things. Kids, adults, all of us need to start looking at life as if we were in training. We need to pretend as though the Olympics were coming up and the team was depending on us to be in our best shape. And there are techniques and programs available that are specifically designed to enhance awareness. Not only camps and retreats that require you to spend time away, but activities that people can incorporate into their routine at home. These things have been available, but it's not so clear that very many of us have been taking advantage of them.

I suggested above that the most important thing to know about the nature of life is that there is a material and a non-material side, an outer and an inner realm, and that a clearer experience of the inner realm is the key to understanding what this existence of ours is all about. The term we used to describe the development of this understanding was "spiritual growth". People use the word "spiritual" in many ways. It has always been used in religious contexts, but we also hear it from some very different sources. Few of these sources are precise about defining what spirituality actually means. Like so many other words, the term "spiritual" has become popularized to the point where it's difficult to determine where the fluff stops and the substance begins. Most often people will include aspects of behavior in their description; the definition of the term comes from observing how people act – their culture, their rituals and so forth. Archeologists and anthropologists spend a great deal of time cataloging such rituals, and they do uncover some fascinating details about them, but these scientists are nevertheless missing a big, huge point. You can't understand why another person does what he does unless you can get into that person's head. Since that isn't possible, the next best thing is to get into your *own* head. You must understand why you do what *you* do, before you can make any sense of the actions of another. Thus to understand spirituality in the general sense you must turn away from these other folks and instead look at yourself. You personally must have the experience of spirit.

From my own personal perspective then, I'd like to suggest that if one strips away the outer layers of what learned people call spiritual, there is a common denominator to be found. The common basis is the recognition of an internal aspect of existence that is integrated with the reality we each experience.

Whereas the external side of life is in constant, dynamic flux, the internal side is unchanging and silent. Once again, the important thing to understand is that we are not just speaking in the abstract, but that one can experience this internal side of life. When the clarity of the experience improves, we say that a person is growing spiritually. More precisely, as your experience of the internal becomes gradually more integrated with the everyday experience of external activity, that's when true spiritual growth is taking place. The other modes of development – refining awareness, the preventive mind-set, and growth of character – are tightly interwoven with spiritual growth. All of these things are so closely connected that for purpose of public consumption, for educational purposes so to speak, I would like to bundle them all together and use the term "spiritual growth" to refer to the whole package (Figure 4.1)

I don't think we are confusing things too much by doing this. It's not going to matter to most people anyway. Most of what we've been talking about is going to sound pretty far out to the average person. Moreover, when people hear the word "spiritual", they are going to fall back on their own personal notion of what it means, and cloudy though it may be, that's probably good enough to start with. There are many approaches to spirituality. The angle that I propose to take is that of courtesy, where courtesy is not a moral undertaking, but an art form, a dance. I admit that it is not exactly a high art form, and that there is a bit of a leap between courtesy and spirituality, but you have to start somewhere, and the universal need for something like this is quite apparent. The success of this approach is not going to depend so much on what you do, but where you're pointing while you do it. That's where the magic is. You can transform a walk around the block into a spiritual event if your walk takes place not only in the everyday, outer realm, but also in the inner realm. Sounds weird doesn't it? But this is what spiritual growth means, that your everyday actions become more and more infused with the qualities of the inner realm.

I'm sure that many practicing Christians, Jews, Moslems and others will raise objections to this rather abstract definition of spirituality. Some will say that this entire discussion should be set within a religious context; that it's dangerous to secularize a topic like this. Be we must avoid getting tangled in a debate about whose version of spirituality is the right one. Our definition has to be as generic as possible in order to accommodate the diverse beliefs and theologies that exist. You simply can't make severe judgments about such things when you're trying to get folks involved in community affairs. When so many of us are living in such an isolated, anonymous fashion, we can't afford to be picky about whom we recruit into our civic-minded legion. At least not picky as far as religion is concerned. Aside from the obvious exceptions, the well-publicized cases where acts of violence were committed by so-called religious groups, apart from those, religion is generally speaking a good thing. Most religious doctrines stress

the very qualities that are so dearly lacking in our communities. One's attitude has to be inclusive rather than exclusive if there is to be any hope of finding common ground in this area.

Aspects of Spiritual Growth

- Adoption of a preventive mind-set
- Refinement of awareness
- Distinguishing the inner realm
- Growth of character

Figure 4.1 Spiritual growth