PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

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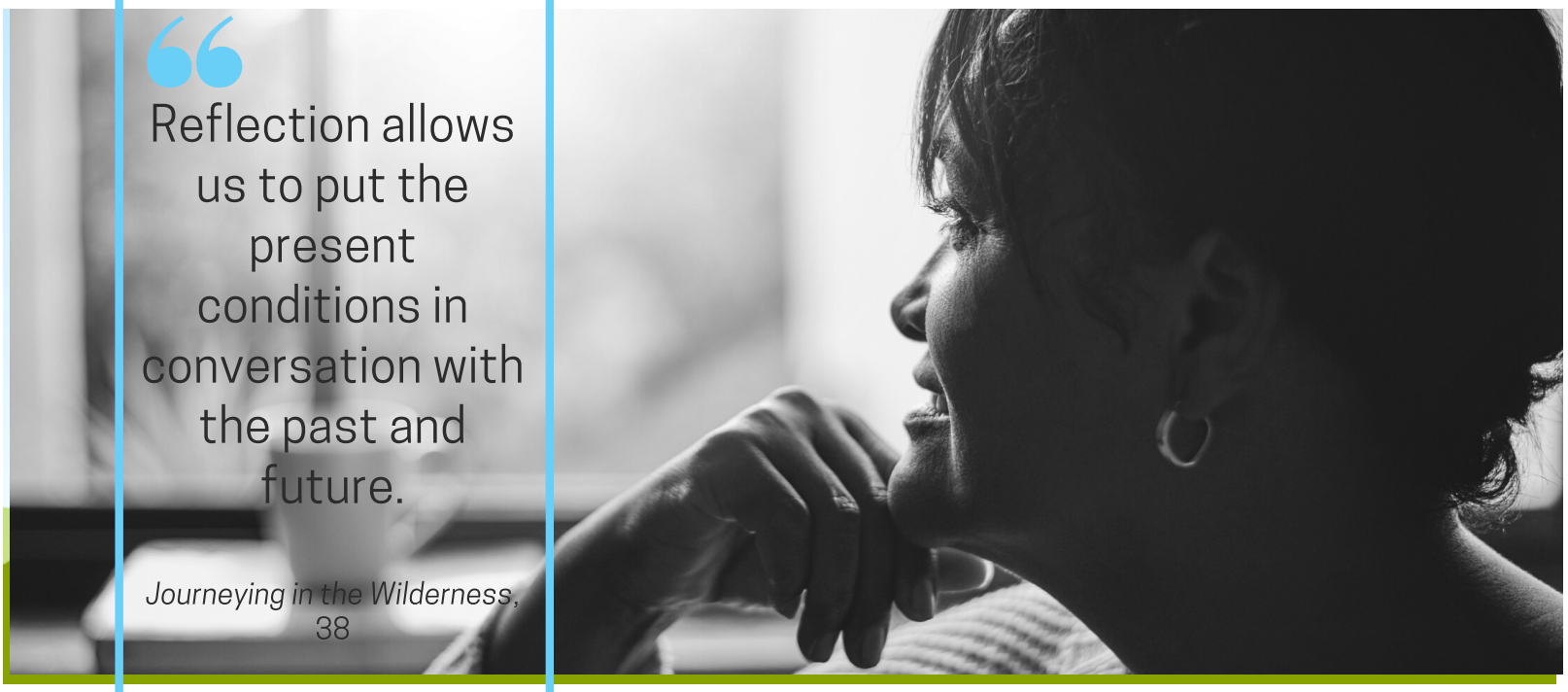
REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE

Imagine this: The day starts with your mother calling with an update on her health. Your workday is filled with meetings. Your daughter texts you at lunch asking to talk after dinner. After work, you remember you need groceries. The gas tank is empty, so you stop at the gas station only to get an incorrect amount of change from the cashier, and then it happens—you lose it. Having navigated challenges all day, you release your pent-up energy on this poor stranger. At home, you draw on reserves to make dinner, and almost forget to talk with your daughter.

This day, with its mix of ordinary and extraordinary experiences, could represent what happens in the harried life of many people. Filled with cognitive, emotional, and relational demands, we rely on our personal frameworks, mental habits, patience, and stamina to get by. What happens when life provides no opportunity to pause and reflect?

Jack Mezirow writes that "a defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experiences." To understand our relationships and daily encounters, we must develop the ability to reflect and set aside time to do it. In this age of acceleration, dedicating ourselves to reflecting on experience goes against the flow yet without it, our ability to make meaning and live abundantly is hampered.

> "What happens when life provides no opportunity to pause and reflect?
>
> *Journeying in the Wilderness*, 38



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As becoming people, Christians lean into God's promised future. Reflection allows us to put the present in conversation with the past and future. As God's love and promised future become part of our reflection, making meaning becomes holy, life-changing work. Reflecting on experience gets us in touch with our mental state and helps us consider our emotions while also looking at our agency and impact on others. Reflecting on experience guides us in processing situations in order to understand what is happening *around us* and *within us*. Our human tendency is to focus solely on our wants and needs, but reflection makes it possible for us to step outside ourselves to see situations through other perspectives.

Institutions used to help us do this work. They offered frameworks and communities that engaged us in reflective practices and helped us develop these capacities. As our attachment to institutions loosens, many of us are left without frameworks, practices, guides, and/or communities. Ironically, this loosening is happening in a time when human beings need to be "more conscious of [one's] self, more social, more culturally wise, and more innovative in taking action."

Developing our ability to reflect critically on experiences is uniquely human. Vital to this human development is making visible our operating framework or "structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions." Operating frameworks exist so we can read situations and exchanges quickly. *But are our operating frameworks fitting for this time? Are they guiding us toward abundant living?* Shedding light on our operating framework allows us to see what "selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes." In other words, seeing our operating framework reveals the filters we use to understand the world around us. Are those filters aligned with God's promised future?

Developmental theorists recognize **humans have the capacity to grow across their lifespan**. Unlike child and youth development, adult development is related to learning and active reflection, not simple biology. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, scholars in adult development, understand it as the "gradual evolution of people's meaning-making systems and psychological capacities." Kegan and Lahey's research shows adults can increase their mental capacity, though most do not. Of their three stages of adult development, most (over 50 percent) are in the first level called

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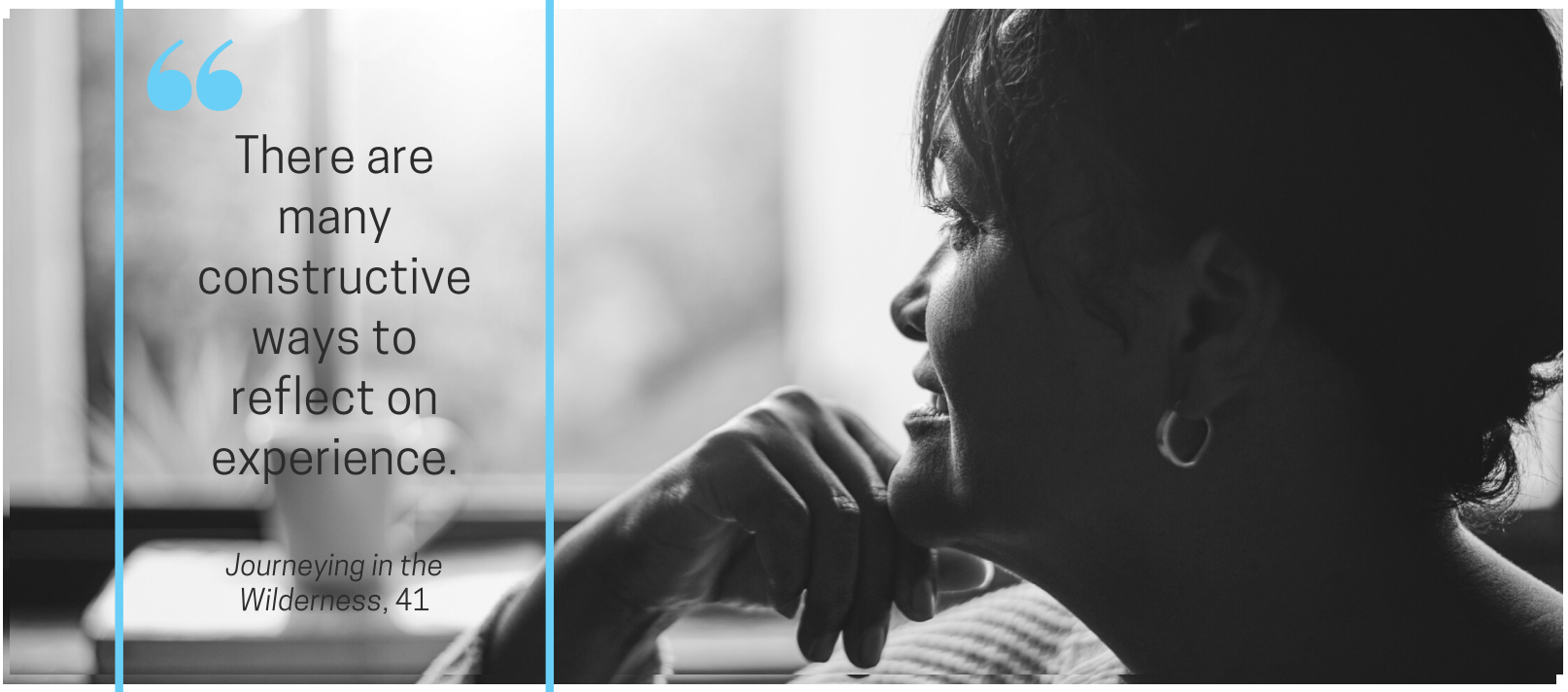
>
> *Journeying in the Wilderness*, 40

socialized mind. At this level, people are shaped by their personal environments, and they express themselves primarily through relationships. About one-third fall into the second level called *self-authoring mind*. Here, some have developed belief systems and the ability to make choices apart from their environment. Only a few (less than one percent) are in the third level called *self-transforming mind*. Persons in this level have a developed ideology (or belief system), are open to new ideas, are interdependent, and can handle contradictions. Developing through the stages increases one's ability to process complexity. Today complexity exists in all areas of our life, and our VUCA environment demands "innovation, self-management, personal responsibility, and self-direction" from all of us.

Reflecting on action takes many forms. Each type brings to light habits, frameworks, commitments, and concerns. Integrating reflective practices into our daily routine deepens and strengthen us, as it also reorients us to the needs of others, the needs of those who are suffering, and ways we can use our knowledge and position to impact positive change." Here are six types of reflection Jennifer Moss Breen names in *Visionary Leadership in a Turbulent World*: anticipatory, in-the-moment, technical, personalistic, deliberative, and critical."

Let me highlight one: *critical reflection*. We all have blind spots, and critical reflection provides a process for exposing these so we can grow and take action. Edgar Schein offers a simple model for critically reflecting on action—*the ORJI model*. It has four components: "We observe (O), we react emotionally to what we have observed (R), we analyze, process, and make judgments based on our observations and feelings (J), and we behave overtly in order to make something happen—we intervene (I)."Each component brings in new data that provides understanding and the opportunity to change. Because "we block out a great deal of information that is potentially available if it does not fit our needs, expectations, preconceptions, and prejudgments,"stepping back and reflecting on this loop gives us a bigger picture.

Here is an example to illustrate the ORJI process. A young couple with two young children moves in next door. You notice an awkwardness in your encounters with the husband. His wife travels frequently for work, so he stays home



with their children. You encounter him and the children often—at the park, school functions, and the YMCA. Upon reflection, you observe this dad is often the only "at-home" dad at these places (O) and remember the uncomfortable feeling you have each time you talk (R). Unsure about that feeling, you process what is happening and conclude he is the only stay-at-home dad you know, and you do not know what to talk about (J). This realization reveals the gender bias you have around at-home parents. With this new understanding, you decide to get to know the dad better and set-up a play date (I). During that time, you learn more about him, and future conversations become less awkward.

SPEND TIME REFLECTING ON THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What reflective practices are you already doing?
- How might reflecting on action become part of your becoming who God created you to be?
- What practices Contribute to your ongoing development and that of your community of faith?
- Who might join you in exercising this practice?

There are many constructive ways to reflect on experience. Some are simple, while others are more time consuming. **The goal of reflecting on experience is making meaning so we can live abundantly as children of God.**