According to psychotherapist M. Scott Peck, the purpose of life is spiritual evolution and, in the context of wellness, spiritual competence is the highest form of mental health. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck teaches you how to face the inevitable challenges in your life, grow through hardship, and ultimately attain deeper self-knowledge.

First, we'll look at common obstacles to self-knowledge and spiritual evolution. Then, we'll explore the four factors that assist you in your journey: discipline, love, personal religion, and grace.

### What Hinders Spiritual Evolution?

There are two key obstacles to spiritual evolution.

**#1: Laziness**

Laziness impedes you from working through the problems that support your growth. Furthermore, if you don't conquer laziness, you won't conquer the other obstacles; if you *do* conquer laziness, you know the others are conquerable, too.

**#2: Fear of Power**

When you spiritually evolve, you develop greater awareness of your actions and their impact. This makes decision-making more difficult, because being aware of the impact of your actions means understanding the pain and suffering you can cause. The more spiritual awareness you develop, the greater your uncertainty may become.

### What Supports Spiritual Evolution?

There are four factors that positively impact individual spiritual evolution.

**Factor #1: Discipline**

If you have strong discipline, you use willpower to work through the discomfort associated with problem-solving. The challenges of life require mastery of four components influenced by discipline.

**#1: Delayed Gratification**

We often procrastinate solving problems because the process is uncomfortable, and we are not willing to sit with discomfort even if doing so will result in an overall more positive result.

To develop strong discipline, you need to be willing to sit with the discomfort of the problem-solving process. When you immediately take care of painful or frustrating tasks, you enhance your experience of later, more enjoyable activities.

**#2: Acceptance of Responsibility**

Related to procrastination, people with poor discipline usually struggle with embracing responsibility. But if you try to make your problems the responsibility of others, they won't get solved, and you will be the one who suffers. Avoiding responsibility can lead to one of two types of mental illness:

**Neuroticism:** Neurotics feel responsible for too much, leading them to avoid commitment, develop codependent relationships, and succumb to generalized anxiety.

**Character Disorder:** Character disordered people feel responsible for too little, leading them to blame others for their problems and stagnate their own growth.

Life is a series of choices, and the best way to develop a healthy sense of responsibility is to engage in rigorous self-examination while you make those choices. Observe yourself, and notice whether or not what you expect of yourself is realistic, and make adjustments where necessary. Alternatively, notice when you may be blaming others for a problem that is your responsibility, and take responsibility for solving it.

**#3: Committed Honesty**

Seeing and engaging with the world through an honest lens is often painful, but when you have the discipline to do so, you are able to make choices that best support growth.

One obstacle to committed honesty is *transference*: We inherit our perception of reality from our upbringing. As we grow, these perceptions become outdated, and this misalignment causes mental illness.

* For example, Peck once had a patient named Stewart, who was a successful professional in his midlife who developed severe depression. There did not seem to be a specific trigger, but he had grown up in a dogmatically religious
environment, and in adulthood had become an atheist. Stewart, through therapy, eventually realized that his upbringing had instilled in him a belief in a punishing God, whom he had rejected once leaving home. His attempts to reject the existence of God had only suppressed this underlying belief.

You can overcome transference by evaluating your current values and beliefs and determining whether or not they are outdated. **You must deliberately replace outdated values and beliefs with ones that are consistent with who you are.**

- For example, in Stewart's case, he realized that his idea of God had actually come from his experience of his own parents. They had been ruthless in their punishments for any perceived transgressions, and consequently, Stewart grew up to believe in a world and God that was terrifying and dangerous, just like his parents.

### #4: Balancing

Balance is an aspect of discipline that allows you to take a measured approach to your life. Optimal balance looks like:

- Understanding when to be truthful and when to withhold truth for the higher good.
- Understanding what you are and are not truly responsible for in life.
- Understanding when to delay gratification versus when to be in the present moment.

Balancing is critical because it keeps you from making extreme decisions. For example, when you're angry, you might be inspired to do harm to another person when that isn't the appropriate course of action to take. There will also be times when you're angry because you're genuinely under threat and you'll need to take action to defend yourself. Balancing this choice is the job of your flexible response system, which controls how you moderate the expression of your emotions. For most people suffering from mental illness, the flexible response system is out of balance. Therapy often seeks to correct this imbalance.

**Optimal balance (and indeed, optimal wellness) occurs when you find a middle ground between contrasting needs, objectives, or experiences.** This kind of balance requires you to give up certain needs, objectives, or experiences. For example, when you're angry and choose not to lash out at the object of your anger, you are letting go of your need to “get even” or your perception of yourself as “under threat.”

### Factor #2: Love

To master discipline, you need to harness the energy of genuine love. Genuine love occurs when you move beyond yourself to support your own spiritual growth or the spiritual growth of someone else.

There are five myths to understand to master genuine love.

**Myth #1: Love is a Feeling**

We tend to believe love is a feeling because we've grown up on the idea of “falling in love.” However, what we think of as “falling in love” is actually a process called **cathexis**, during which we identify something as an extension of ourselves and, because this creates a bond, invest our energy into it. We can cathect people, pets, or even objects.

**Cathexis:**

- Doesn't require an interest in supporting someone's spiritual growth
- Is feeling-based, and feelings change. For example, if you feel emotionally connected and sexually attracted to a coworker, these feelings may prompt you to cheat on your partner.

**Genuine love:**

- Is rooted in the willingness to support the spiritual growth of another
- Is action-, not feeling-based. For example, if you genuinely love your spouse, you will remain faithful even when you are angry with them or tempted by other people.

**Myth #2: Love is Dependency**

Dependency causes relationships to become parasitic, where the needs of one person are prioritized, which prevents spiritual growth. For example, say you're primarily staying in a relationship with someone you don't love because they pay your bills. Not only are you financially dependent on this person, but you're unable to grow into your own competence, and the relationship is keeping you from finding a partner you truly love.

The foundation of genuine love is the ability to make choices freely. In this context, you are aware you can meet your needs on your own, but you wish to develop a mutually fulfilling partnership with someone anyway.

**Myth #3: Love is Self-Sacrifice**

The idea that love requires self-sacrifice causes two potential problems:
We accept mistreatment because it reinforces that we are the “good guy” to our abuser’s “bad guy.” We unconsciously use nurturing behavior to make someone else dependent on us. This allows us to be a “savior.”

In contrast, the purpose of genuine love is self-replenishment. Genuine love can be selfish or selfless as long as the motivation for your actions is your own spiritual growth or the spiritual growth of someone else.

Myth #4: Love Is Effortless
Many people believe that love shouldn’t require work, but spiritual growth and interrelational fulfillment cannot occur with this mindset.

The only way to develop a genuinely loving relationship between yourself and another person is to extend yourself through deliberate effort. This requires energy and attention. One of the key ways you can develop attention is to practice good listening.

Myth #5: Love Prioritizes Growth as a Couple
A common misconception about love is that we all have a soulmate, and when we find them, they are our “forever” relationship. This causes us to stay in unhappy or unfulfilling relationships out of a desire to preserve the myth. But when you value coupledom over being in a genuinely loving and fulfilling partnership, you impede your ability to build such a relationship, because neither partner is seen as a whole and separate individual.

Genuine love honors the separateness of both individuals in a relationship and treats each person's spiritual growth with equal importance. In a genuinely loving relationship, the relationship is not the focal point, but a vehicle to serve the spiritual growth of the individuals within it.

Risks
As with every step on the journey to self-knowledge and spiritual growth, loving genuinely is not easy, and there are four significant risks involved:

1. Loss: When you genuinely love, you risk abandonment or change. You may even lose aspects of yourself.
2. Independence: Genuine self-love requires you to establish your identity as separate from those who raised you.
3. Commitment: In any relationship, you need to be able to reasonably expect consistency in order for growth to take place. It’s always a risk to commit, as there is no guarantee that your commitment will yield positive results, and it’s a risk to trust the commitment of others, as there is no guarantee that others can be safely relied upon.
4. Confrontation: Loving confrontation is a thoughtful act of redirection used only when doing so will support the spiritual growth of the person being confronted. Choosing not to confront when it would serve spiritual growth is to miss an opportunity to express genuine love. For example, if your partner is spending all their time smoking weed and it causes them to drop their commitments, it would be genuinely loving to confront them and point out that their weed use is negatively impacting their life.

Factor #3: Worldview (“Personal Religion”)
To grow in any area of your life, you need to understand the world and your place in it. This understanding makes up something called your personal religion. Your personal religion is most influenced by the environment of your upbringing, including your culture and the respective personal religions of your parents.

As you age, the religion of your upbringing typically begins to clash with your developing perception of the world. As you structure this perception, you may run into three core problems.

1. Limited Idea of Religion
   There is a widespread misunderstanding that religion is about God and requires a belief in God. In reality, religion does not require God at all and is simply made up of your own personal beliefs about the nature of reality.

2. Transference
   Most people don't choose their first personal religion. Instead, it's handed down to you by...

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The Road Less Traveled Summary Part 1: Discipline

In *The Road Less Traveled*, psychotherapist M. Scott Peck teaches you how to face the inevitable challenges in your life, grow through hardship, and ultimately attain deeper self-knowledge.

*The Road Less Traveled* is based on three assumptions:

1. The mind and spirit are connected (mental growth is spiritual growth and vice versa).
2. Spiritual growth is a painful, complicated, lifelong process.
3. The purpose of life is to develop full spiritual competence and spiritual power.

According to Peck, our greatest impetus in life is to spiritually evolve. *Our greatest obstacle to spiritual growth is the reality that it only occurs through the overcoming of obstacles.* We would rather complain, suffer, and resist, because acceptance means confronting our problems, and the confrontation process is often uncomfortable or painful. However, avoiding spiritual growth eventually leads to poor mental health. In fact, the core of mental illness is the inability to confront problems and the pain or discomfort associated with them. Avoiding problems = decreased growth and increased suffering.

In contrast, *confronting and solving your own problems builds courage and allows you to develop wisdom.* You can do this by developing discipline, love, personal religion, and grace. *The Road Less Traveled* is an in-depth exploration of these tools through the lens of Peck's experiences as a psychotherapist.

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**The first and most valuable tool you can develop to support spiritual growth is discipline.** There are four key components to discipline.

**Key #1: Delay Gratification**

To delay gratification means to confront pain when it arises because you know it will allow you to experience greater pleasure in the long run. The goal is to get the challenging part out of the way first, then be able to enjoy yourself without anxiety.

How you are parented is what determines whether or not you develop the discipline for delayed gratification. There are two subtle problems that can occur when a child does not learn how to delay gratification. There are two subtle problems that can occur when a child does not learn how to delay gratification.

**Problem #1:**

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**Shortform Exercise: Check Your Discipline**

Consider the key components of discipline as it relates to delayed gratification.

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Think of a time recently where you had an impulse to do something but chose to take your time before acting on that impulse (maybe you had the urge to snap at your mom, but instead took a breath and explained your frustration calmly. Or maybe you had the impulse to buy some ice cream while out, but you knew you already had some at home so you chose to wait). What was that experience like? Was it easy or hard to delay acting on the impulse?

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**Shortform Exercise: Achieve Balanced Truth Telling**

Review the rules to balanced truth-telling.

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Recall the last time you felt the need to lie. What was the lie? Whose needs did it serve?
The last chapter was about discipline, and the four tools used to practice it. To grow spiritually, you need to be willing to confront reality, and discipline supports you in doing that. But what motivates discipline?

According to Peck, developing your will to love is how you improve your relationship to discipline, which then enhances your ability to confront reality. In this chapter, we'll discuss myths about love, what genuine love is, how genuine love supports spiritual growth, and how to act with it.

To genuinely love is to be willing to stretch the boundaries of your "self" to support your or another's spiritual evolution. Before we can explore what love is in greater depth, we first need to understand the myths around it.

**Myth #1: Love Is a Feeling**

What seems to be love can often be some other motivating force or emotion (for simplicity, let's call this force *nonlove*). This is because there is a misconception that "falling in love" is genuine love or a manifestation of it. In fact, falling in love is simply an experience we feel intensely. There is a feeling of "I love you," but it's not a feeling based in reality.

**Why Isn’t “Falling in Love” Genuine Love?**

One reason falling in love isn't genuine love is that it's linked to erotic feelings. We only fall in love when the underlying motivation is sexual in nature. Additionally, the feeling of falling in love is impermanent and chemical.

**Why Is Falling Out of Love Inevitable?**

Love as a feeling occurs when you find a person or object you are attracted to and committed to beyond your ego boundaries. This process is called *cathexis*. To “cathect” someone is to become invested in them in a way that pulls you outside of yourself. Paradoxically, when you stretch outside of yourself to invest in a person (or thing), you also incorporate them into yourself. This creates a bond. Once something has been cathected, you see it as an extension of yourself.

- Cathecting is not love because it can occur with any object, not just sentient beings.
- Cathecting doesn't mean you...

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**Shortform Exercise: Distinguish Between Genuine Love and Nonlove**

Review the differences between nonlove and genuine love.

**Nonlove:**

- Defines love as a feeling
- Is motivated by the desire for comfort or control
- Often considers the needs of one partner more than the other

**Genuine love:**

- Defines love as an action
Is motivated by the desire to support the spiritual growth of the other person  
Considers the needs and well being of both partners equally

Now read the following scenarios and see if you can identify which represents genuine love and which represents nonlove.

You and your partner have been together for three years. Typically, you work full-time, and they work part-time, spending the rest of their free time working on their creative ambitions. You suddenly develop an auto-immune disorder that makes it difficult for you to continue working at the level you normally do. Your partner offers to work full-time while you take time off to stabilize your health. What kind of love is this and why?

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The Road Less Traveled Summary Part 3: Personal Religion

Everyone has a personal religion (also known as a worldview). In order to grow spiritually, you need a personal religion that reflects a healthy balance between reality and your experience of it. To develop a healthy personal religion, you need to constantly question and revise your understanding of reality. This section explores why developing a personal religion supports spiritual growth, how to discard it when it is outdated, and how to develop a healthy one.

The Power of Your Worldview

Your growth in the areas of discipline, life experience, and love is equal to the growth in your understanding of the world and how you fit into it. This is your personal religion. While everyone has one, most people aren't conscious of it. Often, people even consider themselves devout to a traditional "religion," when in reality their belief system indicates something entirely different than their chosen worldview.

For example, you might consider yourself a devout Roman Catholic in practice, but your personal beliefs indicate an inherent deviation from the beliefs that would motivate genuine devotion. Perhaps your “official” religion condemns homosexuality as a sin, encouraging its followers to stay away from “practicing” homosexuals, but you personally do not believe this, have many close friends who are gay, and harbor no fear or judgment of them.

The most significant factor in the development of your religion is always the culture you grew up in. We tend to match our beliefs to that of those around us. For example, you are more likely to become a Christian in America than in India, where Hinduism is the norm. Beyond your greater societal culture, you are most influenced by the worldview of your parents. You watch how your parents behave, you experience how they treat you and others, and this is what creates your initial worldview.

You can run into a number of problems navigating personal religion.

Problem #1: A Narrow Perception of Religion

We often have difficulty developing a personal religion partially because our idea of religion is too limited...

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Shortform Exercise: Revise Your Personal Religion

Reflect on your beliefs and perception of the world.

What is one life lesson or truth about the world you learned from your family or community growing up (perhaps something like “people cannot be trusted” or “I need to make a lot of money to be happy”)?

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The Road Less Traveled Summary Part 4.1: Obstacles to Grace and Spiritual Growth

There is one final tool available to us on our journey of spiritual growth. Arguably, it is the most significant, and yet, the least explainable. Grace is the force greater than ourselves that aims to support us to stay on the path to spiritual evolution. It does this by giving you clarity and encouragement along the way through auspicious phenomena like the collective unconscious and serendipity. To develop it, you need to work through any resistance you have to it and be willing to be open to its influence.

Before you can understand grace and its impact on spiritual growth, you need to understand the roadblocks that grace eliminates. In this chapter, we’ll explore the three core obstacles to spiritual growth. In the next chapter, we’ll look at why grace is the answer to these problems.

Obstacle #1: Laziness

Laziness is the greatest obstacle to spiritual growth. Discipline is about fighting against laziness. Genuine love is about fighting against laziness. Everything that keeps you from growth can be traced back to laziness.

For an example of laziness in action, consider the story of original sin. God tells Adam and Eve that they can live in this beautiful garden but not to eat from the tree of knowledge. The serpent tells them otherwise, as you know, and Eve eats the apple. What is noticeably absent is an effort from Adam and Eve to first ask God why they can't eat from the tree. Instead, they listen only to the serpent. Since God represents good and the serpent represents evil, their contradictory advice about the apple tree is a debate between good and evil. This is a debate you have the opportunity to have in your mind all the time, but it's easy to only partially engage it, or, like Adam and Eve, not engage it at all.

When you don't engage in the debate between "good" and "evil," you don't get "God's perspective." Meaning, you don't listen to the God within you when determining which action to take, whether that be an opportunity to act with genuine love versus toxic love, or an opportunity to make a meaningful change in your life versus...

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The Road Less Traveled Summary Part 4.2: Openness to Grace

To overcome the obstacles to spiritual growth, become open to grace.

Based on theology, grace has traditionally been defined in two ways. The first is the Doctrine of Emanance, which is the notion
that a god outside of ourselves passes grace down to us. The second is the *Doctrine of Immanence*, which is the notion that grace exists within us as a manifestation of God. This is a paradox, and the issue with this paradox (or any paradox) is that we want to categorize the concept cleanly. This tendency makes us want to "make sense" of grace by determining whether it comes from God or comes from us. Truly, the relationship between us as individuals and the mystery of grace as it relates to God is an integrated one. Grace is an external force that is of God but nonetheless moves through us.

All manifestations of grace share the following:

- They contribute to and protect the growth of the human spirit.
- They make only partial sense (dreams) or completely defy the laws of nature (paranormal events).
- They occur frequently and universally.
- They do not originate in the conscious mind, nor can they be deliberately summoned by the conscious will.

These characteristics all can be explained as being an expression of the influence transcendent of human awareness and comprehension which exists to support the spiritual development of humanity, known as grace.

**Grace and Resistance**

You have many tools available to you on the spiritual growth journey, but using them is a matter of discipline. **Your will to heal is what will determine your growth, and your openness to the tools of growth, including grace.** The determining factor for how much the tools impact your life is your level of commitment to using them. There are plenty of severely ill people who heal, and plenty of mildly ill people who do not. For some, no matter what is available to them, they are resistant to growth, and therefore none of the tools are put to effective use. The will to grow can be directly compared to the will to love, as love is defined as the will to extend yourself...

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**Shortform Exercise: Analyze Your Dreams**

Reflect on your dreams, serendipity, and the unconscious. Try to recall a recent dream. If you’re not able to remember a dream, keep a notebook next to your bed, and the next time you wake up from a dream, engage in the following process.

Quickly write down a basic summary of your dream, and underline specific aspects or details that stand out most to you.

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