

Reflections

MARCH 2020

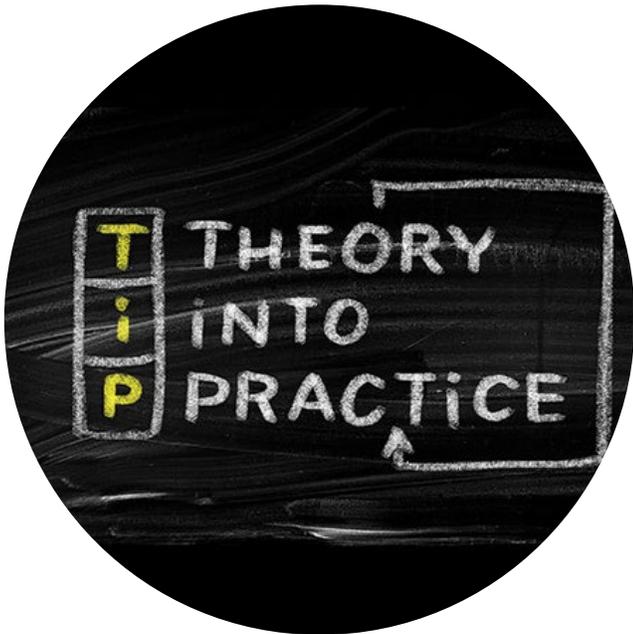
Practical Advice and Encouragement



S. Lewis spent a significant amount of his time carefully responding to the many letters he received, from both adults and children, believing it was a duty to answer letters fully.¹ Many of the letters sought his advice, and Lewis regularly offered practical advice and encouragement. An excerpt from one such letter, written in 1942 to a former student, Mary Neylan, follows:

Sorry you're in a trough. I'm just emerging (at least I hope I am) from a long one myself. As for the difficulty of believing it is a trough, one wants to be careful about the word 'believing'. We too often mean by it 'having confidence or assurance as a psychological state' — as we have about the existence of furniture. But that comes and goes and by no means always accompanies intellectual assent, e.g. in learning to swim you believe, and even know intellectually that water will support you long before you feel any real confidence in the fact. I suppose the perfection of faith wd. make this confidence invariably proportionate to the assent.

It is when we notice the dirt that God is most present to us: it is the v. sign of His presence.²



In the meantime, as one has learnt to swim only by acting on the assent in the teeth of all instinctive conviction, so we shall proceed to faith only by acting as if we had it. Adapting a passage in the *Imitation* one can say 'What would I do now if I had a full assurance that there was only a temporary trough', and having got the answer, go and do it. I a man, therefore lazy: you a woman, therefore probably a fidget. So it may be good advice to you (though it wd. be bad to me) not even to try to do in the trough all you can do on the peak.

I have recently been advised by Fr Adams to abbreviate a prayer for other people wh. was becoming so long (as my circle widens) as to be irksome. I have done so, but kept the longer one on two days a week. Result, that having ceased to be the rule and become a kind of extra, it ceases to be irksome and is often a delight. There is danger in making Christianity too much into a 'Law'. Let yourself off something. Relax..

I know all about the despair of overcoming chronic temptations. It is not serious provided self-offended petulance, annoyance at breaking records, impatience etc doesn't get the upper hand. *No amount* of falls will really undo us if we keep on picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be v. muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathrooms are all ready, the towels put out, & the clean clothes are in the

airing cupboard. The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give it up. It is when we notice the dirt that God is most present to us: it is the v. sign of His presence.²

In his letter, Lewis offers practical advice and encouragement about three challenges often faced by followers of Christ — getting through a "trough", managing one's time, and overcoming chronic temptations. Have you experienced any of these or similar challenges? What do you think about what Lewis had to say?



*"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up,
just as you are doing."*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:11 (ESV)

¹ See Joel Woodruff, "C.S. Lewis's Humble and Thoughtful Gift of Letter Writing", *Knowing & Doing*, Fall 2013.

² *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, vol II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949*, edited by Walter Hooper, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, pp. 506-507.

