A Response To:
Dr. Rebecca Konyndyke DeYoung's
A Change of Habits a Change of Heart:
A case study of love, sloth, and the scriptural discipline of *stabilitas*

By: Dr. Jeremy Lelek, Ph.D.

While reading through Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung's paper, *A Change of Habits a Change of Heart*, wherein she brings to the forefront the classic work of 13th century theologian, Thomas Aquinas and his views on *acedia* and *stabilitas loci* I was also reading through a book by Harvard psychology professor, Steven Pinker, entitled *How the Mind Works*. Pinker, a man who would certainly distance himself from the likes of Aquinas posited the following, “Beliefs and desires are the explanatory tools of our own intuitive psychology, and intuitive psychology is still the most useful and complete science of behavior there is...the odds are high that it will be incorporated in some form into our best scientific theories” (p. 63). While it would be inaccurate to relegate Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung's propositions to that of intuitive psychology, it is worth noting that the components making up such a psychology (i.e., beliefs, desires, and goals) are replete throughout her paper. This significant overlap in constructs definitely implicates the classic ideas of men such as Aquinas and others cited in her presentation as profoundly relevant to the ongoing conversation and development within the field of psychology.

As far as my own profession, counseling, is concerned her ideas introduce a narrative that certainly touches what we, in psychology, refer to as the therapeutic process. Following, I will highlight how her ideas offer a very specific conceptual framework of wellness, the overriding existential purpose inherent in the process of change, and how the ideas of *acedia* and *stabilitas loci* correspond well with my own views of soul care.
First, her conceptual framework of human flourishing appears to be deeply rooted in biblical orthodoxy. It is characterized by intentional relationship centered in love of and communion with God and others. As a practitioner whose form of care reflects a biblical counseling approach closely aligned with the developing model offered by such men as David Powlison, Ed Welch, and Paul Tripp, I found Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung’s construct of “flourishing” extremely significant to the counseling endeavor. If we concede to her point that “love relationships are what we were made for; they constitute a morally and spiritually healthy life of human flourishing”, then we introduce an existential as well as ontological framework that will serve to shape our understanding of being-in-the world which in turn will influence and guide our approach to counseling.

Understood from a biblical frame of reference, her idea of flourishing serves to orient our sense of purpose around that which brings authenticity to our existence, namely the glory of God. Furthermore, her conceptualization of flourishing as being “a way of life” rather than a temporal state seems to reflect the words of Jesus who summarized the entire law, and frankly the purpose of mankind, in two succinct phrases, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Jesus’ words indicate a divine call for all people located in the context of relationship, and seems to correspond well with the overall themes outlined in this presentation.

The makeup of our conceptual lens of wellness wields significant influence on the goals and purposes within the counseling process. While she outlines the final goal of our lives as being realized in “living and being in communion with God and others” a corollary by which we become individuals able to flourish in this manner, according to Dr.
Konyndyke DeYoung, resides in “character cultivation and transformation”. Again, as a practicing counselor, these ideas deeply resonated with me. I appreciated her emphasis on the fact that in order to experience such transformation “our current desires and our subjective conception of happiness need to be reeducated and re-ordered.” Weekly, I am confronted with this reality in my counseling office as many who are suffering from symptoms such as depression, anxiety, worthlessness and emptiness have formulated models of “happiness” that have left their souls anemic. It is here that Dr. Konyndyke’s ideas intersect with the message of the Gospel. Paraphrasing the apostle Paul, he reminds us that the very intent of God in offering the Gospel is to unleash upon His people a grace that is inherently goal-specific and designed to reorient our hearts. It is a grace that is training the believer to renounce ungodliness and to live a self-controlled upright and godly life in the here and now (Titus 2:11-12). Such a process culminates in the very kind of character cultivation cited in this paper in which the individual, naturally bent towards him or herself, is infused by the Holy Spirit and formed into a creature of glory designed to flourish as one becoming divinely equipped to fulfill that ultimate purpose, as she reminds us, to love God and neighbor. I will now consider the components presented in this paper that impact such a process and attempt to highlight how they relate to the field of counseling?

Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung initially introduces the concept of acedia or the “spiritual vice of sloth” as the “vice most directly opposed to love” and therefore the vice most threatening to her conceptual ideal of human flourishing. I deeply appreciated the distinction she put forth in expanding the construct of slothfulness beyond the typical caricature of laziness. Instead, the concept of sloth was contextualized as fundamentally
inseparable from the interpersonal. I loved her statement on this matter, citing Aquinas, in which she wrote, “sloth is principally a disorder or deficiency in our love for God.” As a biblical counselor, I embrace a view of human nature that ascribes to every heart the involuntary nature of worship. People are innately beings of worship. As such, humans exist in perpetual relation to God, and seek either to live unto His glory or not. This is an existential absolute in my understanding of things. Therefore, rescuing the concept of sloth from a rigid task-oriented idea to that of being necessarily interpersonal not only fits well in her paradigm, but it appropriately orients the process of change in its rightful place, the glory of God or, as I have previously stated, the relational task of loving God and neighbor.

As someone who frequently utilizes the Bible in counseling, such a view of sloth (or any struggle for that matter) seems critical in that it may serve to minimize the propensity of many believers to view the process of change through the dreadful lenses of legalism and rote behavioral modification. Her conceptualization of the idea of slothfulness sets the stage for a process of transformation that is not primarily egocentric, but one that keeps us anchored in that which truly offers us the opportunity to flourish.

Briefly, before moving into my final thought on this presentation, I was very grateful for Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung’s realistic approach to change. Without fostering a type of antinomian laziness, she compassionately expressed the genuine nature and contours of change. She reminds us that it simply takes time. Again, citing Aquinas, she notes, “the unique thing about being human is that spiritual re-formation—from our sinful bent toward destructive and self-damaging loves to the kind of love that suits us for friendship with God—takes a long time, usually our whole lives.” When my clients determine to tackle the vices and sins that have consumed them for many years, these words serve as a
gracious reminder of their desperation for Jesus, and forces them to be confronted with His gracious and completed work via the Gospel in this on-going process we call sanctification. It also pushes against the illusion of instantaneous change often fostered in our culture of self-help, and brings to bear the significance of embracing a mindset of perseverance in the pursuit of lasting change.

Now, in closing, I will consider this idea of *stabilitas loci*. In my view it is an iconoclastic concept when inserted into the norms of our Western cultural ethos. “Staying the course” and exemplifying this “embodied practice” of “staying with the same person, staying in the same house, and the same bed, with the same familiar habits of daily conversation and affection and service” seems to be a counter-cultural and even counter-intuitive approach to life in our time. Yet, if we succeed in helping others reconsider what constitutes a flourishing existence, then *stabilitas loci* not only makes perfect sense, it becomes an appealing virtue worthy of our practice. Without knowing it, I have often encouraged *stabilitas* in my clients, but the ideas outlined in this presentation will help me do so as a more informed counselor. It was also encouraging to be reminded and affirmed by someone outside my field that, “Love requires personal transformation, habituation, effort, giving, risk, maturation, and growth in virtue—all of which take effort and daily practice over the long course of a lifetime.” These are ideas and values that shape the paradigm from which I operate as a professional counselor, and it was refreshing to hear them stated and explained from the vantage point of a gifted scholar of philosophy. Thank you Dr. Konyndyke DeYoung for your wisdom, your insight, and your valuable contribution to the ongoing development within the discipline of Christian psychology and beyond!