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SPIRITUAL FOOTPRINT



*The Presence You Leave Behind
and Why It Matters*



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“I can feel their presence.”

How often do we say or think this?

What Is a Spiritual Footprint?

You may be walking back into a room once occupied by a loved one, looking at a piece of artwork, remembering a piece of music that was shared with someone dear to you, or visiting somewhere of historical importance—and you find yourself saying, *“I can feel their presence.”*

That feeling is real. It’s the experience of something that lingers after a person has gone—a spiritual residue, a trace of who they were and how they moved through the world. When a loved one passes away, we often continue to speak about them in the present tense. Their presence doesn’t end simply because physical proximity does. They remain alive in the hearts of those they touched.

This paper is about that kind of presence—but it’s not only about what we receive from others. More significantly, it’s about the presence *you* leave behind. Every time you leave a meeting, finish a conversation, pass someone on the street, or share a moment with your family, something of your spiritual essence remains. People carry pieces of you with them. They may not be able to articulate what they’re experiencing, but they feel it.

Your Spiritual Footprint is the lasting impact—positive or negative—that your presence, choices, and actions leave in the world and in the lives of others.

Everyone has a spiritual footprint because your presence in the world, in some way or another, is important. The impact can go on for generations, centuries in some cases, and be life-altering or not. It has not much to do with the length of your life. A one-day-old child whose lungs could not sustain them still left a monumental footprint on the parents, the twin sibling who would always sense something missing, the nurses and doctors who tended them for twelve short hours. The spiritual footprint was brief but profound.

Why Your Spiritual Footprint Matters

The Problem of Segmented Spirituality

Many of us have developed what might be called a segmented spiritual life. We divide our existence into categories: the time we spend in prayer, worship, or meditation is “spiritual,” while the rest—our commute, our workplace interactions, our grocery shopping—somehow

falls outside the spiritual domain. We measure spiritual progress by the frequency of our prayer or the depth of our devotional life, while the other twenty-three hours of the day go largely unexamined.

Consider what happens on a typical weekend. You leave a place of worship feeling nourished and centered. Within minutes, someone cuts you off in traffic and you're back to frustration. Monday morning arrives, and you find yourself navigating office politics, guarding your ego, operating from fear rather than faith. The peace of the prayer hour seems to evaporate the moment real life intrudes.

The concept of the Spiritual Footprint challenges this segmentation head-on. It insists that *everything we do has a spiritual cause and effect*. There is no opting in or opting out of being spiritual. Every interaction, every decision, every moment of your day leaves a spiritual trace. The question is never whether you have a spiritual footprint—you already do. The question is whether you are aware of it, and whether it reflects who you truly want to be.

The Ripple Effect

Think of a stone thrown into a pond. The ripple effects touch everything around, with greater impact the closer you are to where the stone enters the water. But the ripples still have a bearing—the disturbed stillness resonates all the way out to the very edges of that pond, or lake, or even ocean.

So it is with your spiritual footprint. The way you greet a colleague in the morning affects the tone of their next interaction. The patience you show your child at breakfast shapes how they treat a classmate at lunch. The anxiety you carry into a meeting is absorbed by everyone around the table. We spread states of being to one another constantly—joy or misery, peace or agitation, presence or absence. This aligns with what neuroscience has recently called “social-emotional contagion,” the way our inner states affect those around us through mirror neurons and emotional resonance.

Your spiritual footprint matters because it persists. Long after you've left a room, a conversation, or a relationship, something of your spiritual essence remains. People carry pieces of you with them. They may not articulate it, but they've been changed—in some small or large way—by the spiritual trace you've left behind.

What Keeps Us from Seeing

If we all have a spiritual footprint, why do so few of us live with conscious awareness of it? Several barriers stand between us and this deeper sight:

We simply don't see. We move through life on autopilot, categorizing experiences through habitual assumptions rather than truly seeing what's before us. We glance rather than gaze. We react rather than respond. We rush through moments that deserve our full attention.

Fear holds us back. Becoming aware of our spiritual footprint means acknowledging the weight of our impact on others. That responsibility can feel overwhelming. It is easier not to look.

Ego gets in the way. The false self resists anything that threatens its illusion of control. Genuine spiritual awareness asks us to let go of our need to manage how others perceive us and instead attend to how we actually affect them.

Distraction overwhelms us. The pace of modern life conspires against the kind of inner stillness that spiritual awareness requires. Notifications, obligations, and noise fill every available space.

Woundedness clouds our vision. We absorb the spiritual traces of others—not all of them nourishing. Over time, the accumulated weight of difficult experiences can blur our spiritual vision, making it harder to see clearly or respond with grace.

These barriers are not permanent walls. They are doors waiting to be opened. And the good news is that the very act of recognizing them is already a step toward greater awareness.

Once You See, You Cannot Unsee

Here is the beautiful paradox at the heart of the Spiritual Footprint: once you develop sensitivity to it, you can't unknow it. Once you develop what might be called "spiritual antennae"—a heightened sensitivity to the atmosphere created by your presence and actions—the light of awareness, once turned on, cannot be turned off.

You might recognize patterns in your relationships you'd rather not see. You might become aware of how much energy you spend maintaining masks. But this awakening, even when uncomfortable, almost always leads to greater authenticity and peace.

A teacher discovers the concept of the Spiritual Footprint now does what she calls a "trace check" before entering her classroom each morning. She asks herself: *What am I carrying? What will I leave in this room? What will these children absorb from my presence?* This simple awareness has transformed not just her teaching but her entire sense of purpose. That is the power of conscious attention to the footprint we leave. What spiritual trace will I leave behind ...

A Path Forward: The Practice of Sacred Noticing

Recognizing the Spiritual Footprint naturally raises a question: *How do we become more conscious of the presence we leave behind?* How do we move from unconscious impact to intentional awareness?

One powerful method for cultivating this awareness is a contemplative practice called **Sacred Noticing**—a simple, three-movement rhythm designed not as something you add to an already full schedule, but as awareness you bring to the life you're already living.

Sacred Noticing weaves mindfulness, contemplation, and conscious response into one flowing practice built for the messy beauty of everyday life. Its three movements are:

The Three Movements of Sacred Noticing

NOTICE with contemplative awareness what is actually present in this moment. Practice seeing beyond automatic assumptions. Ask: *What else might be true about this situation that I'm not seeing?*

PAUSE to create sacred space for wisdom to emerge before responding. Either pause in the way that suits you best. Or take a more structured approach. Take three conscious breaths, feel your feet on the ground, and ask: *What does this moment need from me?*

RESPOND from integrated awareness with wise, heart-centered action. Let your response arise from the wisdom accessed in the pause—not from surface emotion or habitual reaction.

What makes Sacred Noticing distinctive is its completeness. Many practices excel at one aspect of spiritual awareness: mindfulness develops exquisite attention to the present moment; contemplative prayer opens space for deep reflection and decision-making frameworks that guide wise action. Sacred Noticing weaves all three into a single flowing movement—awareness through wisdom to action—closing the gap between our interior life and our lived experience.

This directly addresses the problem of segmented spirituality. Sacred Noticing does not ask you to set aside special time for contemplation separate from daily life, though it complements such practices. Instead, it sanctifies ordinary moments: morning coffee becomes contemplative practice, walking to your car becomes moving meditation, and difficult conversations become thin places where wisdom can break through. The practice increases awareness of your spiritual footprint by cultivating conscious presence. As you

practice the three movements, you become increasingly sensitive to the quality of presence you bring to each moment—you notice how your inner state affects others, and you recognize opportunities to shift from reactive to responsive, from unconscious impact to conscious care.

The Gentle Path of Transformation

When we commit to this kind of awareness—when we practice noticing our presence throughout the day—we begin to leave a different kind of spiritual footprint wherever we go.

People notice when they're in the presence of someone who has learned to live from a place of inner peace. They may not be able to articulate what they're experiencing, but they feel calmer, more at ease, somehow safer. This isn't because the person is projecting an image or has achieved spiritual perfection. It's because practice gradually transforms us into the kind of people who naturally radiate the peace and love we've been cultivating within.

This transformation does not come through force. The contemplative tradition speaks of *kenosis*—a gentle self-emptying, an art of getting out of the way so that grace can flow through us. It is not dramatic surrender but quiet consent. Not forcing transformation but allowing it to unfold like a flower opening to the sun.

How do you know transformation is happening? Often, you don't—at least not at first. Others see it before you do. Your spouse notices you're less reactive. Your children sense you're more present. Your colleagues experience you as calmer, more centered. The cashier at the grocery store receives an unexpected moment of genuine human connection. These are the signs that your spiritual footprint is changing—becoming lighter, more graceful, more infused with love.

What This Looks Like in Real Life

In Relationships: Instead of trying to fix, control, or impress people, we learn to listen not just to words but to hearts. We respond not from our agenda but from whatever serves the highest good.

In Work: Instead of forcing outcomes or promoting ourselves, we ask better questions because we're curious rather than trying to look smart. We make decisions from wisdom rather than fear.

In Conflict: Instead of winning arguments, we become channels for understanding and healing. We seek to comprehend before being comprehended, creating space for grace.

In Service: Instead of helping from obligation or guilt, we serve from overflow—giving not to earn credit but because generosity wants to express itself through us.

The Invitation

The invitation at the heart of the Spiritual Footprint is deceptively simple: *become aware of the presence you're creating.*

You don't need to become someone else. You don't need to retreat to a monastery or adopt an elaborate spiritual program. You simply need to begin noticing—really noticing—what you carry into each room, each conversation, each encounter. When you notice you're emanating anxiety, you can breathe and choose peace. When you feel bitterness rising, you can acknowledge it and choose not to pass it on. This is not about perfection. It's about presence.

Think of your soul as a garden—a place where people can enter and see all the characteristics that are truly you. The rain and the storms, the sunshine and new growth, the old and the blooming—all residing together in this interior space. When you tend this garden through conscious awareness, through the gentle practice of noticing, pausing, and responding with care, the fruits of that attention become the spiritual footprint you leave wherever you go.



Choose love over fear, harmony over discord, presence over absence.

*For in the end, we are all walking each other home,
and the path we create together determines the world we leave behind.*



Continue the Journey

The concepts explored in this paper are drawn from two companion works by Dr. Michael J. Cunningham, OFS:

Spiritual Footprint: A Journey of Inner Growth and Connection explores the full depth of the Spiritual Footprint concept—what it means to leave spiritual traces in

the world, the barriers that keep us from seeing clearly, the role of spiritual essence and kenosis, and how our individual awareness serves the common good. (Not yet published)

The Practice of Sacred Noticing provides comprehensive instruction in the Notice–Pause–Respond method, with structured exercises, weekly practices, and real-life applications for relationships, work, conflict, and community. It serves as both an introduction for newcomers and a deepening resource for experienced practitioners. (Published April 2026, Contemplative Company)

For weekly reflections, stories, and contemplative resources, visit **spiritualbreak.com**.

About the Author

Dr. Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, is a contemplative writer, retreat facilitator, and Executive Director of San Damiano Retreat Center. His work explores the intersection of spiritual seeking, human connection, and the search for authentic identity. A member of the Order of Franciscan Seculars, he holds a doctorate in spirituality and draws from contemplative Christian traditions—including Franciscan spirituality, Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, and Celtic Christianity—to create accessible practices for everyday seekers. His writing integrates personal narrative, poetry, and practical wisdom for people navigating the spiritual life in the midst of busy, modern living.