

An Integration of Contemplation and Action

Attitude

*“Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart
and you shall find rest for your souls.”*
Jesus, in Matthew 11:29

Jesus teaches that the primary foundation for prayer is humility “deeply rooted in the very heart” (Abba Dorotheus of Gaza). It is our attitude that makes prayer possible...a looking away from ourselves. Jesus also said,

*“The person who is willing to die to self, is the person
who will find life and his or her true self”*

The heart is the seat of our being. It is the place where each of us truly lives...the place where we are truly ourselves. The heart is also the place where God dwells within us. A soft and flexible heart can expand and make space for the One who is already there. The heart is the seat of our will, the self-less passion that yearns to become one with the desires of God. A humble heart is a heart which knows itself as a creature of God and responds in wonder and gratitude. A flexible heart makes room for love.

This attitude is different from the conventional wisdom of today's society exemplified

so well in the highest levels of institutional leadership
Contrary to conventional attitudes in the twenty-first century,

Civility is not weakness...
Listening to conflicting points of view is not
disloyalty...

Civility, sensitive listening and humility
are manifestations of compassion
flowing from a humble heart.

“If you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

In the eighth chapter of John’s gospel Jesus is challenged by authorities within his faith community who do not accept his teaching and activities. Jesus responds by saying that they cannot accept what the Holy One is saying through him “because there is no room in your hearts for my word.”

In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, one of the monks asked the great teacher Abba Nistero, “What should I do for the best in life?” And the Abba answered: “All works are not equal. The scripture says that Abraham was hospitable, and God was with him; it says that Elias loved quiet, and God was with him; it says that David was humble, and God was with him. So, whatever path you find your soul longs after in the quest for God, do that, and always watch over your heart’s integrity.”

Our attitude makes personal prayer possible. The flexibility of each person's heart opens that heart to become one with the heart of God. This is a life-long process and gradually makes it possible for us to become rooted in God. The relationship between our prayer and the activities and responsibilities of daily life is most profound when we allow ourselves to be rooted in God. The attitude we take on in our life with God becomes the attitude we have in relation to the world and to our human relationships. The openness of our hearts in relation to God becomes the openness of our hearts in daily life. Our attitude toward to God becomes our attitude toward all of life. The inner environment of our life with God forms the environment in which we embrace the world and other people. The environment we create in our relationships with others and in our work will reflect the nature of our inner life with God. What does our outer, personal environment say to other people? Our stewardship of the earth and its resources, the state of the physical environment, is a window into the inner environment of our life with God, as individuals and as a society.

Being Rooted in God

Contemplative prayer is important because it keeps us rooted in God, which is the only way to embrace living fully in the world.

"Meditation is a practice that enables us each day to root our lives in the spiritual reality of God. It is a positive way, even though our current materialistic and outer-directed values may dismiss it

as a waste of time or as unproductive introversion. Yet in meditation we do not reject the world or construct any false opposition to it. We wish to live fully in the world but we know we can only arrive at that fullness and wholeheartedness if we are truly rooted in God.” (John Main in *Word Made Flesh*)

Being rooted in God has been called “listening with the ear of the heart”. Saint Benedict knew that if we cannot hear the word of God within ourselves and in sacred scripture we will never be able to hear that same voice in the hard work and challenges of daily life. Benedict knew that being rooted in God is a matter of life and death, literally, for ourselves, and for those around us. In the solitude of the desert Antony of Egypt discovered how difficult it is to be rooted in God. He knew that we must look clearly at the false self we create and the myriad of ways we can degrade our lives through worldly and self-serving values. Contemplation guides us through the soil which is dry and lifeless to the rich and moist soil bathed by the aquifer of God’s inner presence. Abba Antony said:

Whoever sits in solitude and is quiet has escaped from three wars: Those of hearing, speaking, and seeing. Then there is only one war left in which to fight, and that is the battle for your own heart.

Interrupted Ecstasy

Contemplative prayer and the routines and responsibilities of daily life are not competitors. We do not escape from life to pray and prayer is manifest in all we do.

There are many voices speaking in the world today...which words will we heed? Which words will be the springboard of our action and the source of our vision? In a world of many voices and values our loyalty can be scattered. Our vision can be blurred amidst competition for our hearts. Jesus invites us to...

“...make my word your home...”

and to base our actions and words on...

“...what we have seen with the Abba, the Holy One...”

Where we have made Jesus' word, The Word, our home and taken time to see the world with God's vision, our actions and words will not be scattered because we will know the Truth and truth will give us freedom. This freedom will not take us away from the world or from ourselves, but rather, will enable us to know what is fundamental and life-giving, just and responsible, caring and generative in the world.

Contemplative prayer leads us across the threshold where we can make the words...the mind...the consciousness...of Jesus our home. And that home is not a haven from the world. It is a placeless place where we are accepted, loved and formed for our constant re-crossings of the threshold between contemplation and action. This journey into Christ, each day as we meditate, forms us with the

qualities we need for the journey itself and for being human. These qualities are :

*Humility...
Fidelity...
Courage...
Perseverance...
A willingness to be led...
Trust.*

Being at home in Jesus' word, the one who is the Word, will help us know our true selves rather than the self we try to create or the self we have allowed the world around us, with its endless expectations for achievement and reputation, to create. To live in the word of Jesus means to live authentically rather than seek perfection by the world's or the church's standards.

To see the world and ourselves WITH God assumes a knowledge that is shared in union with God. This experience of God is the womb of compassion and action. To dwell in the Word means to pay attention to our only source of true knowledge and vitality. From this place within us, this *ecstasy*, flows our active self. This true self, like Jesus, is sent from God and has its source of truth and power in God. Jesus said:

“Out of the heart, the mouth speaks.”

Our ecstasy, while often perceived as a competitor of ordinary, daily living, is in fact the source of our daily life. *Ecstasy is our experience of the*

wonder and delight of God's presence in ordinary things. Our actions, while **seeming** to interrupt our ecstasy, are actually manifestations of ecstasy. This means that we are called to faithfulness and authenticity even when they involve suffering, pain, rejection and failure according to the world's standards.

The important issue or goal is not success or completion of expectations. The issue is **faithfulness** to what is true regardless of the outcome. This is abundant life.

A Shared Journey

Our pilgrimage into the heart of God...living in God's word...is a personal journey we must make ourselves. Yet it takes place in the company of others. There is a dynamic and life-giving tension between three essential dimensions of human life:

SELF.....COMMUNITY

HEART.....MIND

CONTEMPLATION.....ACTION

At the heart of Jesus' life of prayer was "remaining in the Abba, the Holy One". This is what it means to "be at home in the word of God". "Remain in me as I remain in you." The earliest Christian saw this "being in God", "participating in God", "living in God's word" as the purpose or goal of our lives. It is a vocation which cannot be lived apart from God or

apart from each other. Contemplation and action are integral to the richness and wholeness of human living.

“Jesus Himself has told us that He has placed His love within our hearts and by meditating we do not set out to earn God’s love or to deserve God’s love, we simply set out to be open to what is given, to what is.”

John Main, *In the Beginning*

This is where our life for the world can begin. If it begins in the heart and its home remains in God’s words the outer environment of our daily lives will be transformed and guided by love.

Restored Consciousness

In his book, *Seeking the Face of God*, William H. Shannon refers to the doctrine of “The Fall of Humankind” as “deformed consciousness.” God created women and men to be completely aware of what is fundamentally real. By wanting to have “more” than that, human beings choose to create thoughts and ways of living that are not real. By wanting to know all things we deform our unity with God and creation and prefer the knowledge of good and evil. This dichotomy is the foundation of all dualistic thinking and action. We created a consciousness that looks at life in terms of “me” and “everyone and everything else.” This is the source of self-serving individualism. It is, in the words of Shannon, “deformed consciousness.”

William Shannon has edited over 4,000 letters of Thomas Merton. Influenced by Merton, he described contemplative experience as a path to restore our original consciousness. It is always there, but we so often choose to prefer and act out of an unreal or semi-real consciousness. Here is how Shannon describes the difference between “ordinary awareness” and “total awareness.”

“At this point I should make it clear that the kind of awareness I have been talking about (what I called “ordinary” awareness) is only a preliminary condition for achieving that *total awareness* that is contemplation. Total awareness is more than simply being in touch with what is happening about us (though that is important.) Total awareness is not just a matter of being more alert than others. It is nothing less than a whole new way of life whereby we move to an entirely different level of consciousness, in which we come to see God, ourselves, and all else that is in an entirely new light. We undergo a *metanoia*, a conversion that is not just a change in behavior but a transformation of consciousness. We enter into a new world in which we see reality as it actually is; or, to say the same thing in a different way, we return to the world in which we were intended to exist from the beginning.”¹

The way towards this transformation of consciousness is relational. We place ourselves in a mutual presence with God. In that inner space, as

¹ William H. Shannon. *Seeking the Face of God*. New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1988. Page 120

Jesus called it, there is no differentiation between each of us and God. We have distinct “presences”, but we are totally together in the same way that Jesus described: *“I and the Father are one.”* He was not making a theological statement about his identity. He was describing the reality of his contemplative experience. Thomas Merton puts it this way:

“In other words, then, contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God. It knows God by seeming to touch Him. Or rather it knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him... Touched by Him Who has no hands, but Who is pure Reality and the source of all this is real. Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real... Contemplation is also a response to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depth of our being: for we ourselves are words of his. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer Him, to echo Him, and even in some sense to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the innermost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One.”²

Some Further Thoughts About Contemplation

Contemplation is:

- silent, imageless presence...

² Thomas Merton. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1972. Pages 2-3 passim.

- a letting go of rational controls on our perceptions and experience in order to experience another way of knowing...
- a prayerful discipline of our bodies that enables us to experience a reality within and around our bodies that transcends body, mind, and spirit...
- an intention to be simply present...
- an opportunity to empty ourselves:
 - ...to let go of attachment to things, places, plans, desires, anxieties, wishes for others, even our desire for God...

We do not like emptiness. We want to FILL IT with activity, noise, words, possessions, yet...

Emptiness is not *nothing*.

Emptiness is filled with *potential*.

Emptiness leads to a wholeness, *a fullness* which we cannot create and which is beyond our sight, our words and our actions. Emptiness is a threshold into more of life than meets the eye.

BUT, to embrace emptiness involves *risk* and the possibility for *change and transformation*. Jesus said:

“I have come that you may have life, and have life in abundance.”

We experience both risks and riches in contemplative prayer:

"There are vaster regions of the soul, (where space and time, definitions, arguments and reason are transcended), where unions are immutable. This is the abode of the God of peace, the unchanging meeting-place of our unions..."

"Alas, for us that we do not live sufficiently in those depths where peace reigns, but far too much on the surface where we get disturbed."

Evelyn Underhill

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