

THE JOURNEY OF THE LAY CONTEMPLATIVE:
RESOURCES AND GUIDELINES

Edited by Mary Frohlich and Virginia Manss

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PREFACE

by Mary Frohlich and Virginia Manss

In our times more and more people, from all circumstances of life, are finding themselves drawn to the serious pursuit of contemplation. A number of recent books have offered personal stories and models for these contemplatives "outside the boundaries." This book aims to go a step further, providing within a single volume a variety of resources that will assist the Christian layperson in deepening a contemplative vocation. Despite their diversity, these resources converge upon a single vision: support for the flourishing of the seeds of the contemplative charism that have not landed in the soil of cloistered gardens, but rather are seeking to put down roots near the busy highways of secular life.

The idea for the book emerged in the course of a five-year research project by the Association of Contemplative Sisters (ACS) on the "Formation of Christian Lay Contemplatives." The project began in 1992 when ACS, which is an ecumenical association of contemplative women from all walks of life, formed a Task Force. The group applied to the Lilly Endowment and received a small grant to support a survey of the ACS membership on this topic (see Appendix B). Later we received another small grant to collate and distribute the results. Subsequent to that, we applied for and received a larger Lilly grant to support the preparation of this book.

TERMINOLOGICAL CONTROVERSIES

From the very beginning of this research project, it has been evident that each word in our ad hoc title could be problematic and controversial within the contemporary context. "Formation," "Lay," "Contemplative," and even "Christian"--each term carries

the freight of history in a way that often makes it ambiguous or, for some hearers, even negative. It seems as if entering upon an exploration of lay contemplation involves crossing some of the major minefields in contemporary ecclesial life. For example, reference to interest in "contemplatives" often seems to arouse anxieties that someone, or someone's spirituality, is going to be unjustly denigrated by not being included in this category. The addition of the word "lay" does not help. Some express confusion about what this combination might refer to, while others are concerned that it reinforces distinctions which they would rather see minimized. Because of the importance of this issue for our project, a brief reflection on the meaning of "laity" is provided here in the preface; Frohlich's essay on "A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation" includes a more in-depth discussion.

Such terminological concerns are not trivial; they have significant basis both in the contemplative experience itself and in contemporary theology. No matter what position one takes on some of these issues, it is likely to be disturbing to some readers. We--the editors and others who have worked on the project--are aware that our own horizons are limited, and that neither individually nor collectively can we claim to speak for others. Nevertheless, we have tried--and we encourage others to try--to keep the focus where it belongs, on helping to shape an intellectual, spiritual, and practical world within which many varieties of Christian contemplatives can flourish. In that bigger picture the selection and contextualization of terminology is significant, but not the central concern.

WHO ARE THE "LAITY" THAT ARE ADDRESSED BY THIS BOOK?

That being said, orientation to the approach of the book calls for a brief statement about the application of the term "lay." Among Roman Catholics, the most common way of using the term "layperson" is to refer to someone who is neither ordained nor a

member of a canonical religious community. Recent research, however, critiques that usage and asserts that both biblically and theologically, it is more accurate to derive the term "laity" from the Greek *laos tou theou*, "people of God." In this view all the baptized are *laos*; it is a positive term for the fundamental Christian state of life, rather than a negative term for those without certain specified ministries or charisms. It is probably for this very reason that the term has played a much smaller role in Protestant self-understanding, since one of the founding concerns of Protestantism was to downplay lifestyle differences between ministers and other Christians.

Within Christian reflection the term "lay," then, can carry two different connotations. First, it can refer to the basic condition of all the baptized "people of God." Second, it can refer to the distinct condition of those who are not clergy or religious. There is a certain tension between these meanings--and, not surprisingly, there is also ongoing theological and ecclesiastical controversy over these definitions and their implications. In this book we try to let the dual meaning of "lay" be a richness, rather than simply a confusion. Insofar as "lay contemplative" refers to any baptized person who is drawn to contemplation and seeks to live it within the reality of everyday life "in the world," the resources in this book can be of assistance to a wide range of such persons--including clergy and religious. On the other hand, the particular focus of attention is on those who enter upon a contemplative vocation without the benefit of the practical support and identity that religious community and/or priestly ordination are designed to supply. Our use of the term "lay contemplative" embraces both connotations.

In light of this, perhaps something needs to be said about the fact that many of the resources presented here have deep roots in the experience of religious communities. It is often said these days that lay spirituality should not be derived from models proper to religious life. True enough--but we must be careful not to interpret that too dualistically, as if Christian

lay life and Christian religious life had nothing to do with one another. In fact, the very roots of the vast majority of religious communities are in "lay contemplation"--a profound, charismatic experience of the Spirit that moved a group of lay women or men to drastically reorder their lives around the imperative of union with God. One implication of this is that some of today's lay contemplatives may eventually be led to become founders and foundresses of new forms of religious life. Another implication, however, is that all the laity have an equal claim as rightful heirs to the hard-earned wisdom of all Christian contemplatives, whatever their state of life.

For example: while most laity cannot immerse themselves for months or years at a time in a monastic lifestyle (and many would not even want to), a great many find briefer immersions, or the adaptation of selected monastic practices, very compatible with their "secular" contemplative way. It is true, of course, that new practices, not developed primarily within the framework of religious life, need to be discovered and encouraged; but to arbitrarily cut out of consideration the heritage of contemplative practice within religious communities would not be a service to the nurturance of contemporary lay contemplatives.

THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

The original inspiration for the book was awareness of an urgent need to help lay contemplatives find ways to receive preparation and nurturance in living that vocation. Members of the Association of Contemplative Sisters were very sensitive to this need, since many have themselves endured great loneliness and uncertainty in responding to the calling that lies so deep and yet has so often been unsupported by external structures. Much of the energy of our original research went into what is now Part III of the book: reports on twenty-five centers for lay contemplative formation. More background on this section is

contained in its own Introduction.

As the Task Force reflected on the project, we realized that a real guidebook would need to include other sections as well. The first to be added was Part II, which consists of several essays providing a variety of theological, philosophical, and practical guidelines for growing as a lay contemplative.

Mary Frohlich's piece on "A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation" reflects on contemporary theological insights into theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and christology that have implications for the spirituality of lay contemplatives. The first section of Stephen K. Hatch's "The Formation of the Everyday Contemplative" reviews basic contemplative practices; the latter portion delves deeply into what he calls a "sensual philosophy of contemplation." Frohlich's second essay, "Lonely Valleys and Strange Islands: The Contemplative Encounter with the 'Other'," offers suggestions for how to come to terms with the often confusing array of spiritualities that await the contemplative seeker in today's world. Finally, Wendy M. Wright has provided some practical and theological guidelines for discernment.

Part I, "The Lay Contemplative Experience," came last but in some ways is the key to the whole book. As we reviewed the materials we were collecting, we realized that the real-life experience of lay contemplatives was the missing piece. We asked a number of people to write short reflections, encouraging them to focus on one or two vignettes that can give a flavor of this way of life. The six pieces that are offered here are powerful testimonies to the authenticity of this vocation, as well as to its many faces.

In soliciting the essays for Parts I and II, we made an attempt to include authors from a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles. Of the authors for Part II, both Stephen Hatch and Wendy Wright are married and are raising children, while Mary Frohlich recently joined a religious community. Wright and Frohlich are Roman Catholic; Hatch has an eclectic religious

identity that is centered in Quakerism and Buddhism. From Part I, Jonas, the Dundens, and Denham are married, while Scott, Damiano, and Durback are single. Among these, all are Roman Catholic except Damiano, who is Quaker.

Indeed, despite the fact that we made some efforts to include perspectives other than that of our own Roman Catholic communion, the book is by no means representative of the full range of Christian life. Most of the authors--and, indeed, most of the formation sites that were studied--are Roman Catholic. To some degree this is a function of the fact that the language and practices of contemplation have a longer public history in that tradition. It is also a function of the historical roots of the sponsoring organization, the Association of Contemplative Sisters. ACS is now ecumenical, and yet a very high percentage of the membership still consists of women of Roman Catholic heritage. Finally, it may simply be a function of our own limited horizons. We encourage future researchers to press further in the search for diverse expressions of contemplative life.

CONCLUSION

Our inclusive understanding of "laity" (as well as of "contemplation") means that any spiritual seeker may find support for their contemplative development in the resources and guidelines presented here. At the same time, one of the goals of the book is to define and foster the vocation of a less inclusive group, namely, those who experience a call to give contemplation a defining priority in their lives while living an "ordinary," secular Christian life. How large is that group? It is very difficult to say. Our experience of being among lay contemplatives is that most are much more passionately concerned with opening up boundaries than with closing them down. Lay contemplatives are open to all fellow-travelers, and they do not place limits on where or among whom they will find them. The primary focus, therefore, should not be on inclusion and exclusion--"You are/are not a lay contemplative"--but on affirming, celebrating, and understanding a vocation that some are painfully struggling to live, often with remarkably little support. In that spirit, we dedicate this book to everyone out there on the path, valiantly pursuing the contemplative way against all odds.

©LM5 ©RM70 ©LS2 ©RHA Introduction--Lay Contemplative--©PN
Introduction: The Lay Contemplative Movement
by Mary Frohlich

Recently I participated in a retreat that was advertised as "Contemplative Intensive." The regime of the retreat included fifteen 25-minute periods of contemplative prayer each day, in addition to Mass and two work periods. We knew nothing about the identities of our fellow retreatants until the last day, when we all introduced ourselves and shared something of our contemplative experience. Of the forty people present that day, two were religious priests and ten or so were women religious. The remainder included parents, grandparents, carpenters, teachers, social workers, business people, secretaries, financial consultants; women and men of all ages and races, of widely varied ethnic and religious heritage.

As each person spoke, the most striking testimonies came from those who least reflected common stereotypes of "contemplatives." A father of two young daughters spoke of how brushing his daughters' hair each morning had become a continuation of his preceding period of contemplative prayer. Another father talked about how remaining centered and clear-headed while dealing with three teenagers was his most significant contemplative practice. A retired secretary described the struggle she had gone through on the first day of the retreat as she tried to pray as she thought she "ought" to, and how a whole new simplicity of prayer had bloomed when she finally let go of expectations. A tall, elegant woman of about forty asked for prayers because, on the day the retreat began, she had resigned from her professional position and made a commitment to follow the contemplative path, wherever it might lead her.

These vignettes offer a glimpse of the burgeoning reality of lay contemplation. These people's lives are, in most respects, "ordinary": They raise families, do housework, earn a living, struggle with relational and career problems. At the same time, they have identified within themselves an urgency toward being contemplative. The specific discipline that this demands of each one varies; what is clear, however, is that each one feels deeply called and deeply committed.

The lay contemplative movement occurring today is in no way in opposition to the traditional, religious life expression of contemplative life. In fact, most lay contemplatives look to these communities for a significant portion of their support and companionship on the contemplative journey. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, as the new millenium dawns, many of the canonically established contemplative communities seem to be struggling to maintain both their numbers and their sense of fresh energy. In many cases, at least among women's communities, many of their "new" vocations are actually midlife transfers from other religious congregations. It is now quite rare for a young person to enter one of these communities and stay for more than four or five years.

Meanwhile, the lay contemplative movement is full of energy, creativity and new life. It is also often full of confusion, uncertainty and a bit of wildness--characteristics of youth. It remains to be seen what will come of all this. Even though some local monasteries have already been forced to close

and others will certainly follow, there is little likelihood that deep-rooted traditions such as those of the Carmelites, Trappists, and Poor Clares will die out. These traditions will still continue to be rich sources of nurturance for seekers on the contemplative way. In the new millenium, however, we are also seeing the seedpods broken open and the gift of the contemplative vocation scattered abroad to bear fruit by every highway and byway.

What Is "Old" About Lay Contemplation?

While some may assume that lay contemplation is a radically new phenomenon with practically no precedents in the past, the truth is considerably more nuanced. There is indeed something new about this movement, but, looking backward over the many generations of the Christian contemplative quest, we discover that more fundamentally it is the fruition of an impulse that has been present from the beginning of the Christian movement. Two movements in particular seem relevant to our own concerns.

In Christian history two of the most generative periods for the development of contemplative life--namely, the desert movements of the third to fifth centuries and the eremitical movements of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries--have been eras in which grassroots Christians took the lead. Each of these began as lay movements and, even as they evolved into more institutionalized forms of religious life, continued to inspire a significant contingent of deeply devoted adherents who did not enter religious communities but instead struggled to find ways to combine contemplative spirituality with the demands of life "in the world."

The men (and a few women) who took to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria during the third to fifth centuries of the Christian era were on fire with zeal to give body and soul over to God. Drawing upon Hellenistic philosophy and practices as well as Jewish and Christian ones, they fashioned a way of life that often strikes people today as scandalously negative toward body, sexuality and secularity. Yet their more profound guiding ideals were compunction, purity of heart, hospitality and conversion by the Word of God. The severe discipline they exercised toward their own bodies was aimed at preparing those very bodies to become radically transparent to God. The end for which asceticism was practiced was not destruction of the body, but rather clearing the way for the deification of the whole person. A story is told that, when Abba Joseph was asked how one ought to pray, he spread out his hands to heaven and his fingers shone like ten candles; he said: "If you will, you could become a living flame."
fn1

The desert monks were lay, that is, originally they had no special status or office setting them apart from other Christians, and they regarded their intense pursuit of God as nothing more than the full living of the Christian life. Even the few participants in the movement who were ordained were severely counseled that they must not expect any special conditions or treatment. Yet the desert movement clearly did separate its members from life "in the world" through geographical isolation, celibacy and intense ascetical practices. Within the social and economic conditions of the times these forms of separation served the purpose of freeing people from the claustrophobic demands of village life, in which every detail of one's existence was enmeshed in a web of customs

and expectations that left little room for the kind of intimate confrontation with self and God that contemplation demands. fn2 Lay adherents--many of them women--who could not literally go off to the desert still practiced a similar countercultural withdrawal within the confines of their own homes.

The institutionalization of the desert movement led into monasticism, for which this separation from ordinary secular life was a central dictum. The theology of seeking God primarily in the "earthly paradise" of the monastery, and ultimately in the heaven above the earth, flourished. Yet it is important to remember that the original impulse of these spiritualities was not elitist separation, but intense focus on living out the universal call to Christian discipleship.

Gradually, as monasticism became more firmly institutionalized and enwebbed in societal and ecclesial power structures, it became the norm for monks to be clerics--and for clerics to be called upon to live like monks. Religious life, originally a lay movement, became closely associated with the governing hierarchy of the church, so that even today both male and female non-ordained members of religious communities are frequently seen as having a sort of middle status in between "clerical" and "lay."

A second key period for the development of Christian contemplative life took place during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, when the ideal of the *MDUL vita apostolica* *MDNM* *MDRV* *MDNM* inspired tens of thousands of people to fervor in taking up a dedicated way of life. This "apostolic life"--the effort to practice a very literal imitation of the poor, communal, faith-filled, servant life of the apostles--*MDRV* *MDNM* fueled both evangelical and eremitical aspirations; in the context of the times, these two were not seen as contradictory but as the two sides of the same coin. Among those who claimed an eremitical vocation during this period, many did not actually live a solitary life. Rather, they abandoned ordinary economic securities to live a relatively unconstrained life of availability for service, preaching and prayer among the poor. fn3 Like the first desert contemplatives, these too were laity; they rejoiced in the poverty of being among the people without special status or protection.

The experiments of the *MDUL vita apostolica* *MDNM* *MDRV* *MDNM* engaged not only single people, but married couples with families as well. One of the largest movements of this sort was the Humiliati or "Humble Ones," in which families practiced prayer and mutual support and earned their living by clothmaking while they preached the gospel and served the poor. Originating among the laity of Lombardy, the Humiliati also developed branches for clergy and religious; by 1298 there were reported to be 389 religious houses and uncounted numbers of lay adherents. 4

Since part of the ideal of the *MDUL vita apostolica* *MDNM* *MDRV* *MDNM* was communal living, it was not uncommon for those inspired by the eremitical and evangelical ideal to form small communities. The further institutionalization of some of these groups fed into the great religious communities that aspire to an eremitical spirituality--the Cistercians, Carmelites, Carthusians, and Camaldolese. Even to this day these traditions nourish vast numbers of Christians from all walks of life who thirst for a contemplative spirituality.

The mendicant and apostolic forms of religious life also have their roots in this period. These groups dropped the confining structures of monastic cloister and constant liturgical prayer in favor of greater availability for service to the people of God. Once again many of the groups that eventually became religious communities originated with fervent laity seeking to intensify their Christian lives of prayer and service. Experiments with dedicated life apart from religious life proliferated, and religious life itself was no longer seen as necessarily requiring the geographical segregation emphasized by monasticism. Other forms of separation--the habit, celibacy, highly structured rules of life--more often than not remained, however.

These movements--the wandering hermits, the Humiliati, the mendicants and other new experiments--that grew out of the *evangelical* spirituality facilitated a significant, although still partial, shift toward dedicated Christian life combined with presence and participation in the secular world.

What Is "New" About Lay Contemplation?

It may be that today's lay contemplative movement represents the early spring buds of a third great flowering of dedicated Christian life--one that, this time, may complete the trajectory toward contemplative engagement in every dimension of human life. To appreciate this radical shift, we need to understand the way contemplation and action have been understood theologically in the past.

At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that from its origins in the patristic era until relatively recently classical Christian theology and spirituality have been deeply shaped by a symbolic and conceptual worldview that envisions divine realities as "descending" from a transcendent spiritual realm into the material realm, while human spirituality is seen as having to do with "ascending" from the material to the spiritual realm. Although this worldview is often called "dualistic," in the strict sense it is not--since both spiritual and material realms have their source and goal in the single transcendent dimension. Nevertheless, it clearly sets up a hierarchy in which physical, secular, worldly realities are less intrinsically close to God than are spiritual, sacred, religious realities.

The consequence of this classical Christian theology was a spirituality in which those who are most serious about knowing and loving God are those who can dissociate themselves from "worldly" sexual, economic and political life in favor of fulltime dedication to explicitly religious activities. As long as this theology and spirituality prevailed, it was inevitable that the Christian life of those wholly engaged in the secular world would be devalued in relation to that of the hierarchically superior church leaders and a closely associated separate category of those living a "religious" life.

Throughout the patristic and medieval eras, a positive dimension of this classical synthesis was that it placed contemplation at the center of ecclesial life. The shadow side, however, was that it marginalized the laity in favor of an honored elite who could associate themselves with this favored

contemplative center through ordination or religious vows. As the modern era began to dawn in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a significant cultural and ideological shift took place. Human capacities for reason and the domination of the physical world moved into a much more prominent place at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Contemplation began to be viewed as a marginal and largely extraneous endeavor, closely associated with irrationality and the "merely" emotional.

As the theological justification for hierarchical structures in the Church largely lost its contemplative center, these structures became rationalized and hardened. The result of all this was a Church centered on its clergy, with both the laity and the contemplative life on the margins. The move into modernity, in short, took the vital contemplative core out of the classical hierarchical understanding of Christian life, and yet left the basic structure standing.

The glory and the pain of Christian theology today is that this interim synthesis is in the midst of breaking down, to be replaced by what may appear to many as a cacophony of disparate voices. Emerging in this cacophony is a very different and non-hierarchical way of envisioning humanity in relation to God and the world. It is a vision of spirit-in-the-world instead of spirit-against-the-world; it emphasizes God as an active force of transformation in every dimension of creation instead of God as calling the elect forth from the entanglements of creation. It is only in view of this shift in theology that we begin to glimpse the fresh meaning of the term contemplative as it is coming to birth in the world today. The lay contemplative movement is, at least potentially, an embodiment of a spirituality of God radically manifest in the midst of everyday, secular life. The essays in this volume offer a variety of glimpses into that emerging vision.

Endnotes

1 "Sayings of the Desert Fathers" 12,8, in Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958).

2 See, for example, Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1978); or Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1990).

3 Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe, 1000-1150* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

4 Cf. Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1983), pp. 113-20.

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Contemplation: Journey Inward or Journey Outward?

by Robert Durbach

My entry into the deeper levels of contemplative prayer began on the day I lost everything. It was February 10, 1964. Standing alone in a room in the infirmary at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, burned out and broken physically and psychologically, I had made the dreaded decision which could no longer be put off. With the help of my good friend and guide, John Eudes Bamberger, a monk/psychiatrist at the abbey, I decided to leave the monastery.

On the bed in front of me were a pair of black pants, a matching suit jacket, a belt, a shirt, and a dark, heavy overcoat. My task was to remove what I was wearing and put on the clothes spread out before me. I cringed at the idea. Changing into these clothes I hadn't worn for years posed a threat to me, a reversal that disturbed me deeply. It meant a demotion, being stripped of my identity, giving up who I was, to become who I was not yet.

The only identity I had known for the past thirteen years was symbolized in the clothes I was wearing as I stood looking at the clothes thrown across the bed before me. My white robe and black scapular, firmed around my waist by a leather belt, made me aware that I was a Trappist monk bound by solemn vows to live as a monk until death. I had been wearing this distinctive garb during the most formative years in my life, from the age of eighteen in 1950, to this cold winter morning in February of 1964.

Yes, I had heard it said many times that the habit does not make the monk. But the habit did remind me of what I was supposed to be, what I wanted to be: a man of prayer, a man for whom God was to be the All in All of my life. Now I had reached the point of having to give up all that: Not my deepest desires, which flared up in me now with an even greater intensity, but the protective framework that guarded and fed that flame. That was the hard part. It was the first time in my life that I had prayed for days that I might die rather than have to face this moment of separation, this divorce. But people were waiting for me. There was no time to die. I had to catch a plane I didn't want to catch.

The focus of this book revolves around the question, "How do lay people live the contemplative life outside the fixed boundaries of traditional, institutionalized religious life?"

Before attempting to answer the question as posed, I'd like to clarify my own understanding of what is meant by "the contemplative life." In monastic circles these words are part of an accepted vocabulary. The presumption is that there is at least some basic common understanding of their meaning. I remember getting my first jolt from my presuppositions one afternoon while still in the monastery, reading an article by Thomas Merton. A single sentence jumped off the page: "Anyone who hasn't meditated on Auschwitz doesn't know anything about meditation." It was like having just finished arranging the furniture in my living room to the ultimate in artistry and design and suddenly to have a bulldozer come ploughing through the front door to reduce it all to rubble.

I think Merton would approve if I were to edit this statement to read: "Anyone who hasn't contemplated Auschwitz doesn't know anything about contemplation." Contemplation is not about escaping to some celestial dream world that offers immunization from concern with the evils in the world around us. The first meaning given to the word *contemplate* in Webster is: "to view or

consider with continued attention." It means "fixed attention" for one thing. Scanning the newspaper is not contemplation, until one item catches my attention and I stop scanning and start "contemplating." When I "contemplate" I allow what I read or see or hear to "touch me".

In those first weeks and months outside the monastery, outside "the contemplative life," high on my list of priorities was the determination to pursue every means available to me that would help me integrate into my new situation the good habits I had learned in the monastery: securing a place for myself that would guarantee a measure of silence and solitude--a place where I could give my "fixed attention" to the deeper Presence in my life. With the kind help of my brother-in-law I was able to fix up a room in my mother's basement that would provide me with that sacred space where I could read, pray and reflect alone and in silence, and so keep myself available and attentive to the voice of God.

Ironically, the breakthrough came not when I was absorbed in the "holy" in my basement hideaway. It came late one afternoon ten months after I had left the monastery when I picked up the daily newspaper, intending to browse. The story on the front page instantly grabbed my attention.

The headline read: "MURDER TEENAGE GIRL FOUND SLAIN IN HOME." Every violent death is shocking. But the savagery of this one sent tremors rocking the whole community.

It was three days after Christmas. Beverly was enjoying the holidays, having lunch with her grandmother. She left shortly after lunch, as she had scheduled a date with her girlfriend for 1:15 that afternoon. Her grandmother's neighbor drove her home, watched her go in the front door and drove away.

Her girlfriend arrived promptly at 1:15, rang the doorbell, but got no answer. The door was locked. She lingered, hoping Beverly would eventually show up. Hearing a blaring radio inside, she thought it uncharacteristic of Beverly to play music so loudly and ignore her standing outside. At about 1:25 she heard a thud coming from the upstairs like heavy furniture hitting the floor.

Annoyance turned to concern. Something was wrong. She decided to call Beverly's grandmother. Alarmed, Beverly's grandmother immediately called Beverly's mother at work. The mother promptly called the father, who worked closer to home. The father raced home, unlocked the front door, ran upstairs and found a grisly sight: his sixteen-year-old daughter lying on the bedroom floor in a pool of blood. Blood all over the walls. Beverly had been strangled and stabbed forty times. Her mother, who by this time was on her way to the house, was met by a neighbor who informed her bluntly: "Beverly has been stabbed to death."

I did not scan this story. I contemplated it. As I read the harrowing details, I thought to myself, "You think you have troubles. Can you imagine the trauma this family is going through!" The psychological burden of loss I had been carrying receded as Beverly's story moved to the center of my attention.

Contemplation at a given point moves from "fixed attention" to identification. One becomes one with the object one is contemplating. Beverly and her parents were no longer separate from me. Their pain became my pain. I could not be a bystander. I felt deeply the need to share the family's grief. I had no car. But there were buses. I decided to go to the wake.

I walked into the funeral parlor a total stranger. I had never done this before. But I knew the family with my heart. And they received me into their hearts. After I had shared a little of my own story with them, they asked that I say a few words to Beverly's twelve-year old sister and to her grandmother and grandfather. I came to comfort and left being the one comforted by being received so warmly, stranger though I was.

Contemplation begins with fixed attention; moves from fixed attention to identification. Identification seeks a further dimension: communion. After the funeral I began writing to the family, asking at the start for a picture of Beverly. The picture was sent, with details about Beverly's interests and achievements in school. The exchanges continued. Eventually a letter came inviting me to come for evening dinner with the family in their home. I was deeply touched by the invitation. What a grace to sit at table and break bread with this grief-stricken family, and even to be able to evoke some laughter. I was shown the poetry Beverly had written and saw at once what a gifted child she was. Her physical beauty and giftedness only added more to the enigma of the manner of her death.

It should come as no surprise that I cannot end this story by saying that the family in question "lived happily ever after." The killer was never found. The parents announced their divorce some years later, almost a statistical given in the case of parents who have lost a child. Still, in this case, they remain friends. Neither has remarried. They live apart but keep in touch. By now they are in their early seventies.

Every year for the past thirty-three years I have called the mother on December 28, the anniversary date of Beverly's death. Some years she beats me to the phone. If I'm out of town I call her from wherever I am. Her Christmas card shines brightly in my Christmas mail.

But what has all this got to do with contemplation? I can only answer that there are different modalities to living or speaking about the contemplative life, different terminologies. There is much to be gained from systematic studies about prayer. But having been engaged in such study for a good portion of my life I must conclude with my many mentors that all prayer ultimately has to be integrated with life--not somebody else's life, my life, the who and where I am right now. I like what Robert C. Morris wrote not long ago in "Weavings" (Jan/Feb 1997, pg. 30):

Scripture is bolder than our piety. Restricting our imagery to the conventional hinders people from claiming God's presence when their lives lead them into some strange land.

@PIND = If I look for my familiar Shepherd God at the moment when I am facing the Whirlwind (see Job 38:1), I may conclude there is no God there. Spontaneous images of God, especially those that come in response to our honest question, How are you here?, are often the unveiling of a Face that will change not only the relationship, but us.

@TEXT = My experience tells me that the contemplative life is not lived in the head, nor does it originate in the head. It is a stream that flows out from the heart of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a stream that flows into barren desert places thirsting for life, a stream that seeks out what is broken, discarded, given up as dead. The contemplative life is not the luxury of a spiritual elite who dine daily on wine and caviar. It is the life of those who thirst for the stream of living water. It is the life of those who follow the stream to hidden, barren, desolate places.

That stream reached me at a time when I was parched with thirst. It was channeled to me through a family whose desolation and desperation was greater than mine. In reaching out to them in my own wounded condition, I was healed. When I was with this family I knew I was standing on holy ground, for "The Lord is close to the broken hearted; those whose spirit is crushed he will save" (Psalm 34).

Before I left Gethsemani, once I had made the decision to leave, I approached Thomas Merton, who was novice master at the time, and asked if I could see him for a few minutes. I had informed him that I would soon be leaving. He made me a sign that he was "up to his neck in work," but would see if he could squeeze me in somehow. Later in the day he passed me a note saying he would see me at the first bell for Mass on Sunday morning, the next day.

Those were precious moments. In the course of our discussion I asked if he would give me in writing a "sentence" I could take with me, something like the disciples of the desert fathers would ask their "abbas" from time to time. He promised he would. Typically, he gave me much more than that, including his latest book, autographed. Later in the day he walked over to me as we were filing in for the evening meal and with a smile handed me a card with the "sentence" on it in his own handwriting. Here is what the card read:

"God manifests himself in what is hidden. Therefore if you try to find Him you don't. He shows Himself when there is no 'you' to look for Him. But whether He shows Himself or not does not matter because everything is a blessing from Him.

All the best. Stay close to Our Lady."

(Signed) Thomas Merton

I had the card framed. It hangs over my desk to this day as I write this. It's my compass.

Somehow I can't help but see a bit of irony, even humor, in that one sentence: "He shows himself when there is no 'you' to look for Him." My mind travels to that runaway monk in the upper room of the monastery on that cold winter day in February some thirty-three years ago, fretting about "losing" himself.

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Contemplative Living in Ordinary Time

by Barbara E. Scott

Saturday afternoon, I'm the on-call chaplain at a local hospital. It's been a busy day. I responded to several calls; distributed Communion to the Catholic patients; followed up on patients I had seen yesterday, then sat, with aching feet, in the hospital chapel. I was too weary to make the Stations of the Cross as I had done the previous night, bringing the burdens of patients and their families to Jesus. I simply sit before the eucharistic presence allowing the people in my heart to spill out and fill the tiny sanctuary. There is John, in his late eighties, unable to hear me unless I shout, who asked if I would "pull up a chair, please" while he recited his litany of gratitude to his Creator. There is Martin, forty-eight, who has battled brain cancer for six years. In these last days of his life Martin was brought to the hospital to receive medication for his constant seizures. With Martin are his wife and grown daughter. They appear to me as two fair-haired angels at Martin's side, each holding one of Martin's hands, each stroking his hand with tenderness, each speaking words of love and comfort while Martin endures yet another seizure. There is young Sue, married just five months, who survived a car accident that killed her husband. There is Emma, ninety-four years young, who can't wait to receive Jesus in Communion and wonders if I have time to hear "all" her prayers. There is Mike who died in ER. I am waiting for his family; they live three hours away. The chapel is filled with these people. These are your people, Jesus. I bring them to you. Give them your healing love and peace. I allow Jesus to heal me, to minister to me. "Be still, Barbara. You are mine. I will refresh you. I will restore your strength like the eagle's." And then there are no words, only a Presence.

Although I only work a few days a month as a hospital chaplain, this ministry is a major part of my contemplative journey. Being "on-call" is my contemplative fasting. Fasting from my own plans and desires, I am available to the needs of others. I am open and ready for the unknown. I surrender to the "I know not what." I respond to others' needs, not out of my strength and knowledge, but out of my nothingness. I become nothing so that Christ can become all. Surrendering, allowing, opening, listening, setting myself aside to let other people and their needs occupy my heart; trusting, waiting, feeling my inadequacies before so much pain and suffering. Figuratively, I am always taking my shoes off. I am always on holy ground. The Divine ©MDUL→is©MDNM→ close to the brokenhearted. And I am called to share this ground with the Divine and the Divine's beloved people. Each person I am called to be with, to remain with on this holy ground, becomes my teacher.

My contemplative abstinence comes from my work as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction requires me to abstain from my own insights, thoughts and ideas, to listen, really listen, with the directee to the Spirit working in the directee's life. I am only a guide. The real drama in spiritual direction is between the Spirit and the directee. I abstain. I set myself aside and wait upon others to disclose themselves to me until they have reached the place of greater self-awareness, self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-love

that enables them to move deeper into the Divine. The people who have asked me to be their spiritual guide have blessed me with their requests, their trust, their self-disclosures. These too, are my teachers.

I have two contemplative communities. The larger one is the Association of Contemplative Sisters, of which I have been a member almost from its beginnings in 1969. In this sisterhood I have found some of my dearest and deepest friendships. In ACS I have been affirmed, loved, accepted, challenged and transformed. I need my contemplative sisters to mirror and model for me their unique contemplative life styles. In this sisterhood I have prayed and played, sang and danced, laughed and cried, shared deeply and sat in silence. I have served ACS in regional leadership roles for ten years.

In 1996 I was a candidate for national ACS President. Minutes before the discernment process that would decide who would be the next President, I felt misgivings well up inside of me: Someone else could do the work. I tasted, in some small way, Christ's bitterness in the Agony in the Garden, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Then a member of the ACS came up to me and said, "I can't imagine anyone being President... except you." Her comment startled me. Was she an angel sent into my garden? The misgivings dissipated. "Thy will be done." If I was elected I would embrace the office wholeheartedly. If not, fine. Through the whole discernment process I was at peace. My ego was sitting like a "weaned child on its mother's lap." Now, several months into the office, I realize why I had misgivings. The office of President was not for my glory, but for my growth. Being ACS President would transform me--is transforming me.

My other contemplative community is quite small, comprised of two humans, Sue and I, and three cats, Bo, Fro and LadyBug. Sue and I have lived and grown together for the past twenty-four years. We have quite different personalities. This difference has provided fuel for comfort and confrontation, compassion and challenge, for life-giving sharing, praying and companionship one another in our contemplative journeys.

Our home--a log house in the woods on a lake--is a dream fulfilled. The woods are home to a multitude of forest dwellers. In winter I ski and walk on the lake. In spring, summer, fall, I canoe the lake, venturing out in the early morning fog to await sunrise. In the morning light I have watched kingfishers diving and blue heron stalking the shoreline for breakfast. I have watched red-winged black birds guard their nests among the cat-tails; seen turtles of all sizes crawl out of the lake onto rocks and logs to sun themselves; witnessed loons teach their young to dive for fish. In the multicolored hues of sunset I have experienced dragonflies feasting on mosquitoes that hum around me. I have observed a mother duck leading her newborn chicks around the tall, safe grasses. I have been surprised by beaver slapping their tails on the water to protest my presence, the shotgun-like sound startling the deer that have come down to the lake to drink. I have learned to feel the drumming of grouse on a hollow log. I know how to remain absolutely still while a family of bear ambles toward a blueberry marsh. I have frightened numerous waterfowl and caused otter to slip into the water as I slowly made my way through the narrow half mile tributary that leads to another lake. I know where to find the bright yellow marsh marigolds covering swampy ground. I know where to discover blood root,

trillium, Indian pipe and every kind of wildflower that grows in these woods. I have found blackberries and raspberries and know how to pick my share, leaving the rest for the forest dwellers. Night is special anytime of year. I have counted falling stars, traced the Milky Way, have been surprised by a bolide, heard a meteor sizzle overhead and stared at dancing Northern Lights until I thought my neck would break from looking up so long.

These woods call me, again and again, to take my shoes off, for I am on sacred ground. Nature is my daily contemplative guide revealing to me the splendor hidden within my ordinary time.→

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PROJECT SPONSORS:
THE ASSOCIATION OF CONTEMPLATIVE SISTERS

The Association of Contemplative Sisters was founded in 1968 as a meeting ground, support system, and advocacy group for members of canonically established Roman Catholic contemplative communities of women. In 1986 membership was opened to all contemplative women. National meetings occur every other summer. Five regional meetings (Eastern, New England, Mideast, Midwest, and Western) take place during the alternate summers. There are also some local clusters that meet more frequently. For information about membership, contact:

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THE CALL TO LIFE "ON THE MARGINS"

by Kathryn Damiano

Perhaps my call to the contemplative life began with a predisposition towards silence and solitude that was fostered during my early formative years by the privilege of having the upstairs of my childhood home all to myself. This space consisted of a bedroom, a den and a half bath. It was there I learned to enjoy my own companionship and to spend many hours in friendship with silence.

This environment, I believe, nourished my natural inclination to trust my own spiritual experience. Because of this reliance on inner spiritual authority, I can retrospectively say that God gave me the makings to be a Quaker. I didn't come to realize this formally until later in my life.

As I have reflected on my contemplative calling, I recognize three core themes running through it. The first theme is **liminality**. When I came across this term, which is traditionally used by anthropologists and more recently by monastic orders, it was a sanity check. I found that God does create across cultures in every generation those who symbolically embody standing on the threshold between what is and what is yet to come.

As a woman who entered seminary in the mid seventies when fewer than a quarter of the student population was female, I was downright liminal. These were times when excessive use of "He," "Father" and "brethren" was opposed by standing and whistle blowing by the women seminarians (and a few men). As I pursued my studies, I was radicalized even further. As you might imagine, I had serious trouble adopting Jesus as my model for salvation in this environment. I struggled with the concept of a male savior who was to exemplify wholeness for women. I also felt in the depths of my being that it was idolatrous to worship Jesus while forsaking his admonition to realize the Kingdom/community of God right here and now.

Being liminal was my way "into" Jesus. As I was "heard into Being" by other students and some teachers, I recognized that my call was to remain on the margin of the institutional church. Then I "discovered" that this was the call of Jesus too! I identified with Jesus not as an external model but as someone in whose life I participated. As a consequence, a spiritual power was brought forth in me that

transformed my life as the life of Christ was inwardly replayed.

My perplexity continued as I questioned how the passion of Christ could be equated with the three hours on the cross. I had read stories of contemporary women being tortured in South American coups that could more than rival crucifixion. From the reality of my own truth, I recognized that the enduring passion of Christ is in the everyday experiences of injustice, humiliation and folly of the human condition. This is a passion that does not always result in physical pain, but it engenders a pain that is suffered in hiddenness alone with God.

In this United Methodist Seminary (I was never Methodist but went there to study with a particular feminist theologian) I was influenced by a fellow student who was doing his field placement in a Friends organization. As I became more open to God's transforming work, I began to slip away on Sunday mornings to the nearest Quaker Meeting, which was about an hour away. It was among Friends that I found a spiritual home. This was a church that seemed to profess an experience of spiritual conversion that mirrored mine. Becoming a Friend meant not being ordained and therefore surrendering a means of livelihood. (Friends do not have professional clergy or laity. We are all potential ministers.) As a liminal person, I live into the in-between times that encompass the longing, the waiting, and the unconsummated desire. I am driven to prayer, and to be sustained must rely on Divine Providence.

The second theme of my contemplative call is **confronting the principalities and powers**. There is a freedom and a confidence that accompanies a contemplative life. One is less controlled by the usual ambition, desire for money and things, need for approval, or being bought off for power. Though I witness to the fact that "my Kingdom is not of this world," those in worldly power seem to be particularly threatened. I have come smack up against the limitations of human relationships and human justice. As a consequence, I experience the sacrament of failure and am even tempted to despair.

There has been a movement in my prayer over the years as I continue to encounter the

principalities and powers that are especially rampant in today's institutions. My "God fix this!" prayer has often been confounded when there are no visible results. I have stayed in a variety of these oppressive situations almost beyond tolerance. Yet as I persevered, I have been graced with little redemptions that I take as indications that God has not finished using me as an instrument. In fact, the message was to radiate the love of Christ.

As I have explored the range of understandings about power and church governance, I have come to see that Jesus' life was a testimony to an alternative concept of power. He was tempted by the same economic, political and religious demons that I had experienced. Jesus broke the cycle of violence and responded instead with love. He remained hidden for most of his life, healed relatively few, and finally aroused so much opposition that he was put to death.

I remember seeing a Twilight Zone program years ago where a certain culture has "sin eaters." Their function was to bear the burdens of others. Was I being asked to bear the burdens of institutions as part of a redemptive process? In these broken institutions, I could sense a movement that was in progress on a cosmic level. It was a process that I did not fully understand but sensed I was called to cooperate. When I am released from this use in God's time, I fall back into financial insecurity. Yet I am also deeply blessed with times of "enkindling," a respite that is infused with God's undergirding Love.

The third theme of my contemplative path flows directly from the others. It is **eschatology**. My flavor of contemplative seems to be called to demonstrate that in this broken world not all healing comes through human hands. The solitary lives a life of "relevant irrelevancy." I am asked to trust God in situations that seem to oppose God. Prayer becomes a revolutionary act in defiance of what is, in the promise that God will liberate. I become more and more convinced of "things not seen." I begin to subject life to the criterion of eternity.

Where I have learned much about eschatology is in caring for elderly people. Many are natural contemplatives. The fullness of their lives is contagious. My most recent experience has been

in caring for retired nuns, some of whom were semicomatose or cognitively impaired. I would “wire the sisters for sound” with a walkman (walkperson?) playing healing Gregorian chants. My response was a ministry of Presence to the life essence that remained in these sisters. I could commune with their energy through the practice of therapeutic touch. The redemptive suffering of these sisters elicited love from me. I was the one being redeemed!

On other occasions when a sister was dying imminently, staff and residents were often invited to sing and pray her into paradise. What touched me most deeply was the tangibility of the eternal. Heaven was so real that it was as if the dying sister was moving to Pittsburgh and we would all be with her soon. The contemplative dips into the eschatological and discovers things as they really are and enjoys them to the fullest.

As I presently enter another chapter of my life, I discern the quickenings of the Holy Spirit. God remains so inside me that God cannot be analyzed from the outside. What will God call forth from me next? Throughout Christian history, there have been those called to a life of solitude and prayer—particularly in times of church renewal. I know I am to be part of that movement, but the form is still opaque. I continue to show up in faithfulness.

GOD IN FLESH AND SPIRIT

by Ann G. Denham

Finding contemplation was a homecoming that loosed chaos in my life. Nothing in my Methodist tradition had prepared me for the forces released by intensive prayer and meditation. Expecting some cozy chats with the Lord, I was thrust into light and a landscape out of Vincent Van Gogh; a strong visual sense of a multi-layered reality and a howling fear-storm straight from a dank black hole.

In desperation I flew from my home in California to the East Coast to consult Elizabeth, a religious of the Cenacle whom I trusted. She offered assurance that I was not lost. She said my

experience was classic and added: “Most people doing such intensive work are in a convent or an ashram.” Dropping me at the airport, she advised: “When you get home, watch and see what is given back to you.” I boarded the plane with two burning questions: how would I live “without skin,” and what would become of my marriage?

Much would not be returned: my ordination; my doctoral program and hopes for seminary teaching; my secret hunch that I was going to be a saint. But against all writings I could discover, my marriage would be given back in a tumultuous gift of love and my husband, non-religious, without metaphor or path, would shelter me until I learned to bear the light.

The contemplative journey is described in various religious writings. There is a time of purification or stripping away of attachments, a time of illumination, when the soul receives graces and communications from God, and union, when the soul is united with the Divine. John of the Cross writes of nights; Teresa of Avila talks about chambers. Other authors elaborate, but I could not locate my experiences in this progression. I was inclined to think this was because I was married. I did feel like a bride, wooed and chosen, but I also worried about being drawn away from my husband and my marriage.

Ours was a growing, evolving marriage of 26 years. Two questing persons on separate paths, we shared history and space, loving the life we had created, relieved that our daughter and two sons were grown. Now, a time and place for us. Walter was immersed in reform of mathematics education, in California and beyond. In our son’s emptied room, with an altar made of a laundry hamper, I was, depending upon interpretation, playing convent or learning to pray. That God would answer my stumbling communication blew my mind.

I had thought it would probably be hard to find time and space to meditate, busy as I was being a wife, housewife, mother and grandmother. I didn’t realize I would be forced to reinvent my life, based on the proposition that marriage can be a locus for the contemplative journey.

Everything I read said it couldn’t be done. Every married mystic I tracked down was first a

widow or had made the “brother and sister vow.” It seemed to be taken for granted that sexual energies would be sublimated to aid in entering deeper into the Mystery. Other writers took a dimmer view. Sexual feelings were temptation, barrier, sin. And what of the basic but far from trivial situation of stripping away my defenses and my habits at the same time I was driving the freeway, caring for babies, and being Mrs. Walter Denham? I looked in vain for a book, my solution to everything, that would spell out what was right and wrong.

God kept wooing, light and desire and longing; prayer that wrapped me round and sweetness I could taste on my tongue. There were mornings cold and gray, when an icy fear enveloped me and I couldn’t find my way downstairs, much less to the supermarket to shop for dinner. I dreamed of a hermitage, of solitude and we talked of just such a possibility. For a man unversed in the shape of the contemplative journey, he was tender and quick to suggest ways and means.

Walter never once complained that he had a mad woman on his hands. On the road from my parent’s Fiftieth Anniversary, he found something to do and left me in a darkened motel room for the day, to recover from too much time among my relatives, newly without defenses.

“Do you think I’m crazy?” I asked him one evening, when I had tried to share as much as I could and more than he could receive. “Strange and wondrous,” he said, drawing me close. “But, no, not crazy.” “I know this is asking an awful lot,” I said. “Don’t worry,” he answered. “I won’t wear out.” In a new way, I experienced the tender faithfulness of God.

I talked to a nun who found my story odd, but saw no sign I had turned away from God. “It’s going to be up to us,” I thought. We had handled three teenagers, forced moves and women’s liberation, but never before with such communication and grace. My deepest wish in the marriage had been to be understood. Here was my husband, with no preparation, understanding the inexpressible. It was like I had a chronic illness, but one that led into an enchanted land of shared adventure. “This relationship is of God,” I said, and brought the call, the gifts and the desire into domestic life and marriage bed.

The desire was easy: love is of God. I simply brought the sweet call to surrender into our shared claim on each other. Passion, worn by time and cares, bloomed in the context of a wider Love. My gift to God was also gift to Walter. His willingness to stay the course was gifted in our renewed love.

Domestic life was, in the end, simple, too. I needed simple. I took to heart John Wesley's question: "Do you love more because your heart and mind is fixed on Jesus Christ?" If not, why not? And always, what does love require? Embracing love, I found my way back into the dozens of daily doings which create life, nurture and home. Cleaning and procuring and preparing; cooking, listening and helping. Work that is never finished, rarely noticed, undervalued and unpaid. It was made to order for progress on a contemplative path.

There was still the matter of how to hold my disability, for it was as if I had lost my skin and was opened up, both to the outside world in all its turmoil and to an inner world of unpredictable, raw emotion. Activities I had taken for granted, like driving freeways, caring for small children, making phone calls and shopping trips, would catch me unawares and become impossible trials.

I held it all as doing what love requires by enfleshing Spirit. God was calling me to open to Spirit and my flesh, mind and body, was taxed and fragile, but willing to receive, in everything, more of God. Paul says we are being changed daily into the image and likeness of Christ. I held on to that and to the Incarnation, in which body stretched and bore all there is of Spirit.

All this was a long time ago. I am tougher now and my flesh can bear more. I hear its anguish, muted and far away, as I plunge ahead with whatever love requires. I never grew new skin. I became accustomed to living this way. I am somewhere on a contemplative path, without much notion of progress. God alone knows what's really going on. I travel this way as a married woman, enfleshing Spirit in the everyday and at evening coming home to Love.

2nd draft 5/22/98

What Do You Mean By Contemplation?

One of the questions the research team posed to the directors and founders of the different sites of contemplative formation they visited was, "What do you mean by contemplation?" Below are some of the varied responses to that question.

Fr. Richard Rohr The Center for Action and Contemplation A reconstituted sense of the self (the image of the vine and the branches). The individual autonomous "I" is able to die, one reaches Reality. There is a different experience of the "I", a communal "I", as in "I live no longer I,..." We have an identity transplant. The thing that comes from that... Living out of the contemplative space choicefully, consciously.

Fr. John Kane Desert House of Prayer I believe with St. Thomas that contemplation is that gift of the spirit which is Wisdom, (in Latin, Sapientia, - a taste knowledge of God). Contemplation brings us a consciousness of the presence of God.

Sister Margaret Williams Desert House of Prayer How we look at creation, people and events of every day... that comes from God, our Source, leading us in how to see the world.

Sister Therese Sedlock Our Lady of Solitude Contemplative House of Prayer Presence to this NOW Presence to Presence Spousal Prayer

Dean Margaret Fraser Pendle Hill Deep relationship with God - so deep it is like breathing air - one doesn't know one does it

Sister Pascaline Coff Osage Monastery
Inner communion with the Lord Unswerving attention to the Presence
Going beyond thought Being in the Presence

Fr. Joseph Nassal Shantivanum
A long loving look at the Real Presence, with eyes closed or not

Jennifer Sullivan Shantivanum
Communion with God Oneness with the Divine

Ginny Manss Association of Contemplative Sisters Conscious awareness of oneness with God. In the ordinary person's life, it's a gradual realization. The gift is: we begin to realize.

Fr. Warren McCarthy Christian Meditation Center (John Main prayer) Experience without words

Sister Constance Fitzgerald Summer Seminar on Carmelite Spirituality Many things... The person in whom slowly over a lifetime there grows up within more and more vibrantly the image of God Because of this, the image or likeness within calls to the likeness without... a way of life.

Fr. John Julian Order of Julian of Norwich Stillprayer

May Jo Meadows Resources for Ecumenical Spirituality Two answers: "Inflow of God into the substance of the soul" (John of the Cross). Purely passive, receptive accepting openness to God that heals us, purifies us, and makes us

able to receive the gift of God. We can call active contemplation what we do in order to have that openness and purity. "God does not fit in an occupied heart." (John of the Cross)

Sister Barbara Hazzard Hesed Community
Imageless prayer

Fr. Bruno Barnhart New Camaldoli Hermitage Receptive and affective attitude of consciousness Unitive experience

Fr. Isaiah New Camaldoli Hermitage
Sitting face to face with the Beloved

Fr. Michael Buechley Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites Let the longing to God develop to rest in God's Presence; come to a stage in which we rest in the encirclement of God

Sister Marie Coombs Lebh Shomea There is a contemplative thrust or orientation within by virtue of one's very existence; it is part of being Contemplation is a Presence: "Here I am, Lord". Wordless, imageless, loving surrender

Michael Johnson Cistercian Lay Contemplatives Being present to the Real, to Reality, to the Mystery, to God. Open to the presence of God, of the Sacred.

Rev. Donald Bredthauer Academy for Spiritual Formation Resting in God as in the fourth phase of Lectio Divina. Moving into that place of silence where we open ourselves to God's Presence in our lives; in the midst of the Presence, God works to transform us and draw us into greater union.
Theonia Amenda Academy for Spiritual Formation Silent listening to God and everything, and how I respond.

Beatrice Bruteau Fellowship of the Holy Trinity The contemplative life is a life devoted to seeing Reality and rejoicing in it. It's a whole lifestyle.... The contemplative feels that nothing is in the territory of the so-called profane; everything is sacred, everything is full of divine life and value. The supreme goal of your life is to see Reality and then contribute to the ongoing process of Reality.

Fr. Patrick Hawk The Cocontemplative Path Contemplation is simply experience of union with God Contemplative prayer? Sitting! Sit down and let everything go. John of the Cross puts it as loving intention with no specific object whatsoever.

John Michael Talbot Little Portion Hermitage Pastorally, we meditate on things of God either through sacred reading or devotions, or be simply enjoying God's creation. Then quite effortlessly, we pass over into passive contemplation, where God is experienced in Himself beyond any external form or idea

Sister Sharon Richardt St. Vincent Hospitals and Healthcare Services Seeing God in the event, in time, so God is there in every situation of our lives Awareness of God's Presence in our life in time.

TOGETHER ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNEY

by Ruth and Mark Dunden

As we were wondering what we might share that would be of interest to others, some of our friends commented, “You don’t seem to realize how extraordinary it is for a couple to together be on the spiritual path in this day and age!” This was enough to give us the courage to share what we have come to believe is the most important, enduring and stabilizing part of our marriage and life: namely, our shared contemplative journeys.

We started out our journeys in different places and times. Mark grew up as the youngest of three in a Catholic family in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Religion was an important part of the family experience. It wasn’t until he got to St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota that a deeper sense of spirituality started to take root. The wonderful Benedictine practice of Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist created a lasting impression. Compline was a favorite that was said in the dormitory each evening and Psalm 91 is deeply planted to this day.

Ruth started her journey as the middle of nine children raised on a farm near New Munich, Minnesota. That area was almost totally German Catholic, with the Church being central to the rural life she experienced. She was spiritually alive from an early age. While attending St. Francis High School in Little Falls, Minnesota she was exposed to Franciscan spirituality which made a very deep impression. She became a nurse after high school, trained by the Benedictine Sisters in St. Cloud, and was actively involved in the Sodality.

We met while Ruth was in nurses training and Mark was working as an orderly at the St. Cloud Hospital while in college. After Mark completed his military service we were married and Mark went to graduate school. Children were part of our early married lives and an important part of our spiritual growth. From the start both of us were actively involved in many faith building activities. The contemplative side of our growth really began, however, with Transcendental Meditation, which created

a thirst for a Christian form of meditation.

Our prayers were answered when we moved to Leavenworth, Kansas and met Fr. Edward Hays at Shantivanam in Easton, Kansas. Fr. Ed launched us on a powerful journey that continues to evolve. We started the practice of two prayer periods per day in 1979. Since then we have continued to learn about meditation through reading, personal experience, and guidance from Fr. Ed, Jennifer Sullivan, and the staff at Shantivanam.

When we moved to Bellevue, Washington in the mid-1980s, Ruth took a 24-week course in Centering Prayer with Father Thomas Keating. She eventually began facilitating the series for a retreat center. It was a wonderful, growthful experience. In 1991 she took formation training through Contemplative Outreach, the organization Fr. Thomas Keating started. This helped to deepen her prayer life and her understanding of the conceptual background of the spiritual journey and contemplative life.

In 1992 we moved to Kentucky and Ruth was asked to be the coordinator for Contemplative Outreach for the area since there was no activity there. There is a thirst for this form of prayer, and in these last few years many groups have been introduced to the practice of Centering Prayer. Being privileged to share so many people's stories and their personal growth through the discipline of Centering Prayer, the continued support of small groups, and the Contemplative Outreach programs has been a tremendous help in our journey. It has assisted us in remaining faithful to the discipline and in gaining new insight into the ways God works in the lives of others. That, in turn, helps us to see how God is doing the same things in our own lives.

Our personal commitment to Centering Prayer has grown through the years. Although Mark went through the first series of tapes several times, basically it was Ruth who taught Mark the essentials of this way of praying. We both have gone to intensive Centering Prayer retreats, and we have found them to be very powerful and helpful in deepening our commitment, our understanding, and our relationship to God and each other.

We are tremendously different from one another but what we share most deeply is a common commitment to prayer and spiritual growth. Mark's job has required a lot of traveling so we are separated a lot; it is our prayer that helps us feel connected. A presence is felt whether we are together or separated. Our shared commitment has also been a great help to Mark in getting in a second prayer time with his busy work and travel schedule—a constant struggle.

Right now we are in the midst of one of the most challenging transitions of our life together, especially for Mark. He is being faced with retirement, early and unplanned. It is a shock to think that after all the years of work there will be no more. In a sense Mark is at the prime of his career as a CEO. He is being merged out of his position because the new organization wants a change at the top. So far things are going pretty well, as we are able to process our feelings together, supporting, reflecting and affirming each other as we go along. There is no blaming, and he continues to hold a steady course for the organization and the people working for him.

The two things that he experiences as keys to not letting this get the best of him are his relationship with Ruth—a very healthy one of 35 years plus—and his relationship with God. Centering Prayer has helped to build an understanding that there is more to life than a job and that there is plenty of personal work to be done. We have a strong belief that God is a part of this, that God is faithful, and that this situation can be a growth experience for us both. We are being given practice in letting go as we are shown where the false self is still active and where there are areas in our lives that are unhealed. Centering Prayer has given us tools to deal with—even to welcome, embrace and integrate—the difficult, and to be grateful for it all.

Indeed, in so many ways Centering Prayer has given us insight that helps us deal more effectively with all the issues we face in everyday life. As we have come to a deeper awareness that our everyday life, our work, children, and each other are where God is active in our lives, we have begun to take more personal responsibility for our feelings and actions. One of the most important things we have learned is to see our feelings as a sign of our values. It was disheartening at first to see our

self-centered motivations and values. Now, however, we realize how freeing it has become not to be controlled by our emotions, and to be more capable of choosing our responses. We can accept each other's faults better as we have become less defensive and realize that by really working together we can process our issues more effectively.

We have three children, all grown adults. They are all aware of Centering Prayer and had experiences with meditation when they were young at Shantivanam. They have good memories of those experiences. Since they were children we have told them to remember that they have a spirit and to find ways to nourish it. We knew they would do it in different ways than we did. It turns out that they are all interested in spiritual growth and practice some form of meditation.

It has been helpful for them to see that we are working on our issues as a normal part of growth on the spiritual journey. We get help if we need it and we share our experiences with the three as we go along. Our personal growth commitments have encouraged the children to deal with their own issues which is most gratifying to us. We also are not so judgmental about the ways they behave. We know they have to learn about who they are and deal in their own way with the residue of difficult experiences from their early years, just as we have had to do.

One of our most painful but also growth-producing experiences occurred several years ago when Ruth's brother died of AIDS. Ruth remembers when he told her of his HIV status, which was a death sentence in those days. At that time she promised to be there for him no matter what would happen. With the full support of Mark and the children, it was possible to fulfill that promise. Being with him in his struggles was both a challenge and an opportunity to love and support him in a way he never thought possible. Ruth was the only one in his family who knew he was gay and that he had been counseled out of the seminary because of that fact, leaving him feeling rejected and unlovable. The practice of Centering Prayer taught Ruth that regardless of the ups and downs he would experience and the anger he would project on her as he worked through his feelings and made his peace, she could flow with it and keep her focus on caring for, supporting, and loving him unconditionally.

Ruth and our two daughters were with him when he died. Sharing that experience was a great blessing. As they sang to him, “I will never forget you, I will never forsake you,” our daughter Jackie, in tears, turned to her sister and said, “Mary, Mom will never forsake us.” The support of our two daughters while he was dying and, after he died, of our son Dan, brought us closer together. This experience showed all of us how important and essential grounding our lives in prayer can be.

The experience with Ruth’s brother was a time of great stress, much travel, and time apart. We were able to stay focused and centered on God’s love and to respond to the Spirit’s prompting, which provided the strength, courage and patience to support each other and to care lovingly for her brother, in spite of the social stigma, prejudice and fear surrounding him. We believe that the many years of the practice of letting go through Centering Prayer prepared us for letting one of our loved ones go also. We trust that now our precious brother is in a place where he knows he is loved just as he is.

When we married we said yes to being sacrament to each other, to be the manifestation of God’s love to each other in good and bad times, in sickness and health, until death do us part. That is our commitment to each other and with God’s grace and love we know even more clearly today that it is possible to keep. Contemplative practice in the form of Centering Prayer has been very much a part of this journey. It has helped us to be aware of God’s presence each day, in the surprises, the joys and sorrows, and especially in the ordinary.

CONTEMPLATION: JOURNEY INWARD OR JOURNEY OUTWARD?

by Robert Durback

My entry into the deeper levels of contemplative prayer began on the day I lost everything. It was February 10, 1964. Standing alone in a room in the infirmary at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, burned out and broken physically and psychologically, I had made the dreaded decision which could no longer be put off. With the help of my good friend and guide, John Eudes Bamberger, a monk/psychiatrist at the abbey, I decided to leave the monastery. On the bed in front of me were

a pair of black pants, a matching suit jacket, a belt, a shirt and a dark, heavy overcoat. My task was to remove what I was wearing and put on the clothes spread out before me. I was reluctant. Changing into these clothes I hadn't worn for years posed a threat to me, a reversal that disturbed me deeply. It meant a demotion, being stripped of my identity, giving up who I was, to become who I was not yet.

The only identity I had known for the past thirteen years was symbolized in the clothes I was wearing as I stood looking at the clothes thrown across the bed before me. My white robe and black scapular, firmed around my waist by a leather belt, made me aware that I was a Trappist monk bound by solemn vows to live as a monk until death. I had been wearing this distinctive garb during the most formative years in my life, from the age of 18 in 1950, to this cold winter morning in February of 1964.

Yes, I had heard it said many times that the habit does not make the monk. But the habit did remind me of what I was supposed to be, what I wanted to be. A man of prayer. A man for whom God was to be the All In All of my life. Now I had reached the point of having to give up all that. Not my deepest desires, which flared up in me now with an even greater intensity. But giving up the protective framework that guarded and fed that flame. That was the hard part. It was the first time in my life that I had prayed for days that I might die rather than have to face this moment of separation, this divorce. But people were waiting for me. There was no time to die. I had to catch a plane I didn't want to catch. The interest of those who asked me to contribute to this study revolves around the question, "Is it possible for lay people to live the contemplative life outside the fixed boundaries of traditional, institutionalized religious life?"

Before attempting to answer the question as posed, I'd like to clarify what is meant by "the contemplative life." In monastic circles these words are part of an accepted vocabulary. The presumption is that there is at least some basic common understanding of their meaning. I remember getting my first jolt from my presuppositions one afternoon while still in the monastery, reading an article by Thomas Merton. A single sentence jumped off the page: "Anyone who hasn't meditated on Auschwitz doesn't know anything about meditation." It was like having just finished arranging the

furniture in my living room to the ultimate in artistry and design and suddenly to have a bulldozer come plowing through the front door to reduce it all to rubble.

I think Merton would approve if I were to edit his statement to read: "Anyone who hasn't contemplated Auschwitz doesn't know anything about contemplation." Contemplation is not about escaping to some celestial dream world that offers immunization from concern with the evils in the world around us. The very first meaning given to the word "contemplate" in Webster is: "to view or consider with continued attention." It means fixed attention for one thing. Scanning the newspaper is not contemplation. Until...one item catches my attention and I stop scanning and start "contemplating." When I contemplate I allow what I read or see or hear to impact me.

In those first weeks and months outside the monastery, outside "the contemplative life," high on my list of priorities was the determination to pursue every means available to me that would help me integrate into my new situation the good habits I had learned in the monastery: securing a place for myself that would guarantee a measure of silence and solitude—a place where I could give my fixed attention to the deeper Presence in my life. With the kind help of my brother-in-law I was able to fix up a room in my mother's basement that would provide me with that sacred space where I could read, pray and reflect alone and in silence, and so give God an opportunity to break in.

Ironically, the breakthrough came not when I was absorbed in the "holy" in my basement hideaway. It came late one afternoon ten months after I had left the monastery when I picked up the daily newspaper, intending to browse. The story on the front page instantly grabbed my attention : **TEENAGE GIRL FOUND SLAIN IN HOME.** Every violent death is shocking, but the savagery of this one sent tremors rocking the whole community.

It was three days after Christmas. Diane was enjoying the holidays, having lunch with her grandmother. She left shortly after lunch, as she had scheduled a date with her girlfriend for 1:15 that afternoon. Her boyfriend drove her home, watched her go in the front door and drove away.

Her girlfriend came promptly at 1:15, rang the doorbell, but got no answer. The door was

locked. She lingered, hoping Diane would eventually show up. Hearing a blaring radio inside, she thought it uncharacteristic of Diane to play music so loudly and ignore her standing outside. At about 1:25 she heard a thud coming from the upstairs, like heavy furniture hitting the floor.

Annoyance turned to concern. Something was wrong. She decided to call Diane's grandmother. Alarmed, Diane's grandmother immediately called Diane's mother at work. The mother promptly called the father, who worked closer to home. The father raced home, unlocked the front door, ran upstairs and found a grisly sight: his sixteen-year-old daughter lying on the bedroom floor in a pool of blood. Blood all over the walls. Diane had been strangled and stabbed 40 times. Her mother, who by this time was on her way to the house, was met by a neighbor who informed her bluntly: "Diane has been stabbed to death."

I did not scan this story. I contemplated it. As I read the harrowing details, I thought to myself, "You think you have troubles. Can you imagine the trauma this family is going through!" The psychological burden of loss I had been carrying receded as Diane's story moved to the center of my attention.

Contemplation at a given point moves from "fixed attention" to identification. One becomes one with the object one is contemplating. Diane and her parents were no longer separate from me. Their pain became my pain. I could not be a bystander. I felt deeply the need to share the family's grief. I had no car. But there were buses. I decided to go to the wake.

I walked into the funeral parlor as a total stranger. I had never done this before. But I knew the family with my heart. And they received me with their heart. After sharing a little of my own story with them, they asked that I speak a few words to Diane's twelve-year old sister and to her grandmother and grandfather. I came to comfort and left being the one comforted by being received so kindly, stranger though I was.

Contemplation begins with **fixed attention**; moves from fixed attention to **identification**. Identification seeks a further dimension: **communion**. After the funeral I began writing to the family,

asking at the start for a picture of Diane. The picture was sent, with details about Diane's interests and achievements in school. The exchanges continued. Eventually a letter came inviting me to come for evening dinner with the family in their home. I was awestruck. What a grace to sit at table and break bread with this grief-stricken family, and even to be able to evoke some laughter. I was shown the poetry Diane had written and saw at once what a gifted child she was. Her physical beauty and giftedness only added to the enigma of the manner of her death.

It should come as no surprise that I cannot end this story by saying that the family in question "lived happily ever after." The killer was never found. The parents announced their divorce some years later; almost a statistical given if one has followed the history of parents who have lost a child. Still, in this case, they remain "friends." Neither has remarried. They live apart but keep in touch. By now they are in their early seventies.

Every year for the past thirty-three years I have called the mother on December 28, the anniversary date of Diane's death. Some years she beats me to the phone. If I'm out of town I call her from wherever I am. Her Christmas card shines brightly in my Christmas mail.

But what has all this got to do with contemplation? I can only answer that there are different modalities to living or speaking about the contemplative life, different terminologies. There is much to be gained from systematic studies about prayer. But having been engaged in such studies for a good portion of my life I have to say that all prayer ultimately has to be integrated with life. Not somebody else's life. My life. Who and where I am right now. I like what Robert C. Morris wrote recently in Weavings (Jan/Feb 1997, p. 30):

Scripture is bolder than our piety. Restricting our imagery to the conventional hinders people from claiming God's presence when their lives lead them into some strange land. If I look for my familiar Shepherd God at the moment when I am facing the Whirlwind (see Job 38.1), I may conclude there is no God there. Spontaneous images of God, especially those that come in response to our honest question, How are you here?, are often the unveiling of a Face that will change not only the relationship, but us.

My experience tells me that the contemplative life is not lived in the head, nor does it originate in the head. It is a stream that flows out from the heart of the Crucified and Risen Jesus. It is a stream that flows into barren desert places thirsting for life, a stream that seeks out what is broken, discarded, given up as dead. The contemplative life is not the luxury of a spiritual elite who dine daily on wine and caviar. It is the life of those who thirst for the stream of living water. It is the life of those who follow the stream to hidden, barren, desolate places.

That stream reached me at a time when I was dying of thirst. It was channeled to me through a family whose desolation and desperation was greater than mine. In reaching out to them in my own wounded condition, I was healed. When I was with this family I knew I was standing on Holy Ground. For "The Lord is close to the broken hearted; those whose spirit is crushed he will save" (Ps 34).

Before I left Gethsemani, once I had made the decision to leave, I approached Thomas Merton, who was novice master at the time, and asked if I could see him for a few minutes. I had informed him that I would soon be leaving. He made me a sign that he was "up to his neck," but would see if he could squeeze me in somehow. Later in the day he passed me a note saying he would see me at the first bell for Mass on Sunday morning, the next day.

Those were precious moments. In the course of our conversation I asked if he would give me in writing a "sentence" I could take with me, something like the disciples of the desert fathers asked of their "abbas" from time to time. Typically, he gave me much more than that, including his latest book, autographed. Later in the day he walked over to me as we were filing in for the evening meal and with a smile handed me a card with the "sentence" on it in his own handwriting. Here is what the card read:

God manifests himself in what is hidden. Therefore if you try to find Him you don't. He shows Himself when there is no `you' to look for Him. But whether He shows Himself or not does not matter because everything is a blessing from Him.

All the best. Stay close to Our Lady.

(Signed) Thomas Merton

I had the card framed. It hangs over my desk to this day as I write this. It's my compass.

Somehow I can't help but see a bit of irony, even humor, in that one sentence: "He shows himself when there is no `you' to look for Him." My mind travels to that runaway monk in the upper room of the monastery on that cold winter day in February some thirty-three years ago, fretting about "losing" himself.

Robert Durbach is editor of *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader, New Revised Edition, Doubleday, 1997.*

THE FORMATION OF THE EVERYDAY CONTEMPLATIVE

by Stephen K. Hatch

Introduction

In our time, increasing numbers of everyday people are being drawn to contemplative practice. Increasing stresses in the workplace and home compounded by the breakneck pace and complexity of the "information age," along with growing lack of connection to the natural world, drive many to seek a life of greater silence, peace and simplicity. People hunger to find the sacred within the ordinary details of life in a way that makes mundane existence transparent to its divine core.

Current interest in the Christian contemplative tradition was sparked by the writings of Trappist monk Thomas Merton in the fifties and sixties. It has been fanned into flame by Trappists Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, Benedictines David Steindl-Rast and John Main, Irish Jesuit William Johnston, Dominican-turned-Episcopalian Matthew Fox, and a growing number of others. The Classics of Western Spirituality series from Paulist Press has made many mystical classics available in fine translation. In addition, many Eastern gurus, roshis, lamas and their Western students are contributing the perspectives of Asian contemplatives. Most recently, a new generation of Native

Americans is adding its voice as well. Writers Marsha Sinetar in Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics and Duane Elgin in Voluntary Simplicity have chronicled modern attempts by ordinary people to live a more contemplative life.

An Egalitarian Spirituality

My own reflection on the formation of the everyday contemplative begins with a radically democratic principle: everyone has the potential to become a fully transformed mystic. Since I do not believe in separating everyday contemplatives from a class of “professional contemplatives” (i.e., “religious”), I deliberately refrain from using the terms “lay” or “laity” when discussing everyday contemplatives. Within the Christian tradition, the Radical Reformation holds the most egalitarian perspective with regard to contemplative social structure within the spiritual community. Quakers, Mennonites, the Brethren and some evangelical charismatics view the entire community as a “kingdom of priests” where there is no ecclesial hierarchy. In the following passage, Douglas Steere articulates Quaker experience.

In an age of the rediscovery of the infinite worth of the “commonest he” [17th c.] George Fox and his followers invited men and women of all conditions into the freedom of a new corporate fellowship. There, without the authority of an infallible church or an infallible Bible or the ever-present authority of a paid clergy, those in this fellowship might gather together in meetings on the basis of silence and obedience in order to assist each other in coming into the presence of Christ within, and where they might come to know each other in that which is eternal... The group sat together waiting on God to gather them inwardly, and all shared in the responsibility for helping the meeting to become a vessel of the Holy Spirit. It has often been said that the Quakers, who were fiercely “lay” in character, had in a sense “abolished the laity” in that with all members potential ministers, they were the most radical implementers of “the priesthood of all believers.”

Friends did not traditionally use the term “contemplative,” but their valuing of silence and the interior life places them firmly within the Christian mystical tradition. In this egalitarian type of spirituality, leaders do emerge from within the community, but any authority they hold comes only by virtue of a transformed life, not because of any ecclesial title or academic training.

An egalitarian view is important today, especially given the fact that in many classical Christian spiritualities the fullness of contemplation often appears to be reserved for an elite few. John of the Cross, for example, made this comment about why some spiritual seekers do not seem to enter into contemplation:

God places them in this night [of the senses] solely to exercise and humble them... But He does not do so in order to lead them to the life of the spirit, which is contemplation. For God does not bring to contemplation all those who purposely exercise themselves in the way of the spirit, not even half. Why? He best knows.ⁱⁱ

The danger of such an apparent exclusivism is that it may prevent some people from coming into an awareness of their full potential as contemplatives due to the focus of attention on someone else—Father X or Sister Y—whom they view as being qualitatively superior with respect to the potential for spiritual growth. This may result in a cheapening of their unique graces as everyday contemplatives. As humans, we have a tendency to shirk our own spiritual call by projecting it onto some leader. But each of us must realize that no one else can replicate our unique contribution to the evolution of spirituality.

Although the foregoing discussion may seem to fault Christianity on this point, it should also be pointed out that the Christian mystical tradition, more than any other world religion, leaves judgment concerning a person's degree of spiritual attainment to the Divine rather than to some human master. In this sense, the Christian way is potentially at least as egalitarian as any of the world spiritualities.

The personal journey

I have spent the past fifteen years experimenting with a contemplative lifestyle in the midst of the everyday world. I have attempted to balance meditation practice, raising children, study, wilderness hiking, teaching spirituality, and manual labor—with varying success. This is the context out of which I write. My goal in this chapter is to articulate a contemplative philosophy adequate to the sensual, non-monastic context in which the everyday contemplative lives. User-friendly practices need to be detailed as well. Since in the contemplative journey spiritual practice and experience are always the

foundation of philosophy, the first part of the chapter focuses on the most basic practices. In the second half of the chapter I reflect in greater depth on the philosophy that emerges from contemplative experience, as well as on the practices that can foster contemplative maturity in everyday life.

I. Basic Practices for the Everyday Contemplative

Without the practice of contemplative disciplines, growth along the spiritual path stagnates unless one is specially gifted. In any human endeavour, excelling requires constant attention and practice as necessary conditions. The spiritual life is no exception. The early Christian desert tradition referred to discipline as the means whereby we simply remain in the divine artist's workshop so the divine image can be painted like an icon within us. The pursuit of distraction is like jumping off the easel before the artist can apply the next brush stroke. In another metaphor, discipline is compared to shutting the door of a sauna so the steam can concentrate. Distraction is like reducing the spiritual heat by continually opening the door.

For monastic religious, the monastery provides a rule of life that acts as a spiritual trellis to train them in their growth toward the Light. Without the advantage of such a rule, everyday contemplatives have to develop their own set of disciplines. It will be tailor-made to suit the schedule, living situation and temperament of each individual or family member. Here I list some of the practices that I have found indispensable in the contemplative quest. But the list could be extended indefinitely.

Regular Practice of Contemplative Prayer

Practices such as *zazen*, centering prayer or *shamatha* (a practice of resting deeply in silence and tranquility) train the meditator to release all thoughts and perceptions in order to discover the spacious divine silence out of which they emerge at every moment. Perhaps contemplatives who live in close and frequent communion with the natural world—such as Native Americans in their traditional environment—connect so thoroughly with the spaciousness present in the landscape that they don't need

a formal meditation practice to develop the awareness of interior spaciousness. But most of us don't fall naturally into silent vastness; we have to cultivate it. A standard dose of contemplative prayer consists of two periods of twenty minutes each day. Early mornings before work, lunchtimes and evenings are all potential times for those with 9 to 5 schedules. If you feel you don't have the time, consider reducing time spent in addictive activities—like excessive television watching or overcommitment to others' needs. Give extra time to meditation on weekends or during one-day personal retreats. If family members complain of time spent in meditation away from them and their needs, remind them with humor that you will be easier to live with if meditation is practiced regularly.

Scheduled Solitude

Solitude is one of the most important ingredients of the spiritual life because it reduces dependency upon the “herd mentality” of society and puts one in touch with one's inner resources and interior silence. Moreover, time spent in the solitude of nature adds an indispensable ingredient not found in buildings. The divine presence communicating from within nature is often the only thing that can reveal the vastness of the spirit and the pettiness of much of our human worry by comparison. I'm always amazed at how easily I forget these truths when I'm away from nature. So many times I arrive in the hills for an afternoon of solitude and find myself exclaiming spontaneously: “Oh yes, this is what is really real!” Thomas Merton writes of the importance of nature's solitude: “When you are by yourself, you soon get tired of your craziness. It is too exhausting. It does not fit in with the eminent sanity of trees, birds, water, sky.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The solitude of nature has the ability to awaken interior silence in a way that nothing else can. Henry David Thoreau says: “We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them.”^{iv} Wayne Sinsic, the author of Natural Prayer, reveals his approach: “How then do you pray in the silence of nature? Go to the landscape that appeals to you, let the silence of the landscape resonate within your being, and let God's presence fill your heart and become prayer.”^v I live at the foot of the Colorado

Rockies, so I'm able fairly easily to schedule time alone in the hills. In the summer I arrange one all-day hike or weekend camping trip per week in addition to several afternoons on my retreat spot amidst fragrant ponderosa pines at the top of a nearby foothill. In winters it is easier to lose perspective when the wildlands are more inaccessible and less temperature-friendly. But in winter, a snowstorm hitting town brings the silence of nature to our civilized world.

If a person lives in a big city with little or no access to wilderness, a city park or a roadside tree can bring the divine peace closer. Even a walk around the block can open up interior spaciousness. The exercise alone tends to free the self from its entrapment within the constricted ego. Extended retreat time—perhaps an entire day or weekend—should be scheduled at least once a month. If family members complain, encourage them to schedule a day to themselves to do whatever they want, and offer to take on added chores during that time if need be. Again, if you feel you don't have adequate time for solitude, look at your priorities. Can you cut out a little TV watching here or an over-commitment there?

The Practice of Mindfulness

Mindfulness practice, or *vipashyana*, involves several levels. At first, one trains the mind simply to attend to whatever perception or thought is present in the moment. One notices that the sky is blue or that one is having angry thoughts or that one is feeling tightness in the stomach or an ease in one's walk. This conscious attention is itself quite an accomplishment, since normally we act out of anger without even being aware that we do indeed feel anger, or we go through the day without even knowing what phase the moon is in. Gunilla Norris, in her book of mindfulness meditations entitled Being Home, reveals a mindful attitude in her meditation on "Dusting." She sees dusting as an opportunity to caress and get to know all of the textures in her home. She even calls this a sort of "love-making."^{vi} This attitude reveals an exquisite degree of mindful attention to the mundane details of everyday life.

A second level of mindfulness involves moving beyond bare attention into a deeper awareness.

One takes the vast silence one has encountered in *shamatha* or tranquillity meditation or centering prayer, and surrounds the perceptions with it. Instead of holding onto one's perceptions, one releases them, allowing them to arise out of the silence one has brought to consciousness. Rilke describes this process beautifully in a poem:

Space reaches from us and construes the world:
to know a tree, in its true element,
throw inner space around it, from that pure
abundance in you. Surround it with restraint.
It has no limits. Not till it is held
in your renouncing is it truly there.^{vii}

This practice allows the contemplative to remain in awe at the echo-like quality of perceptions, especially as he or she identifies ever more deeply with the vast silence. To facilitate this awareness at first, silently repeat the word “echo...echo” every time a perception arises out of the silence. Consciously attend to perceptions in this manner whenever you are able throughout the day. If you are in the natural world, speak the names of things--“rock,” “tree,” “flower” or “sky”--and release these sounds to be seen for what they really are: presences arising out of the vast spacious silence of the natural landscape.

A third level of mindfulness occurs when the contemplative learns to let go even of the conscious effort involved in the first two levels. Then one can say (as Buddhists do) that awareness occurs without a discrete person who is aware. Like the sunlight diffused throughout the blue sky, here there is a union of perceiver and perceived in the limitless expanse of consciousness itself. As Zen master Dennis Genpo Merzel says, “when you are no longer clinging... then you can see things clearly as they are, without the observer. Then there is just seeing, just hearing. There is no one here, just space!”^{viii} In Franciscan priest Richard Rohr's image, this is the contemplative's dissolving into the awareness that it is God who is lost in thinking the world into existence; an entering into the spacious bliss of the mind of God.^{ix} Another example of this level of mindfulness is Eckhart's experience that

“the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” When we release our grasp on experience, we can then become several different subjects trading the experience within the same awareness.

The practice of mindfulness is facilitated by doing just one thing at a time without hurrying to get on to the next thing. California writer Sue Bender discovered this mindful aspect of work while canning peas with an Amish family with whom she was staying. She reflects:

When we finished, we had forty jars of peas, each labeled and dated, to place in neat rows in the cellar. No one rushed. Each step was done with care. The women moved through the day unhurried. There was no rushing to finish so they could get on to the “important things.” For them, it was all important... Which parts of today’s process were a chore? Which were fun? There seemed to be no separation for them... when I explained how split I was, loving to do certain things and hating to do others, the women laughed and tried to understand. “Making a batch of vegetable soup, it’s not right for the carrot to say I taste better than the peas, or the pea to say I taste better than the cabbage. It takes all the vegetables to make a good soup!”, Miriam said... No distinction was made between the sacred and the everyday... Their life was all one piece. It was all sacred—and all ordinary.⁵

If one’s job is such that one can’t do one thing at a time in a casual manner, one can try attending to the general flow that is present, connecting the many busy tasks that make up the workday into a seamless loop.

Simplicity of Lifestyle

American middle class society values the accumulating of more and more goods, moving “upward” in society by making more money, buying unnecessarily bigger houses, and participating in as many activities as possible. This attitude clutters up life with so many things that none of them can be adequately appreciated in their sacredness. A contemplative lifestyle aims at clearing away this clutter so the beauty of each thing and action can appear in all its glory. In his book Voluntary Simplicity, Duane Elgin writes of this:

[S]implicity... is essential for revealing the natural beauty of things... Rather than involving a denial of

beauty, simplicity liberates the aesthetic sense by freeing things from artificial encumbrances. From a transcendental perspective, simplicity removes the obscuring clutter and discloses the spirit that infuses all things.^{xi}

In another passage, he uses a beautiful metaphor: “Simplicity allows the true character of our lives to show through—like stripping, sanding, and waxing a fine piece of wood that had long been painted over.”^{xii} One needs only to think of the very centered feeling one gets when viewing pictures of simple Shaker architecture and furniture to see the effects of removing clutter.

Simplicity also involves viewing the world as a whole instead of from the perspective of the grasping, limited ego-self. When one sees that others may be deprived by one’s over-consumptive lifestyle, one becomes content with less. “Live simply so that others may simply live.” Meditation practice identifies one with the loving spacious silence instead of with the isolated ego-self and its possessions. This allows the contemplative to see that all beings—not just one’s own bounded self—emerge with dignity and mystery out of the silence. As one discovers how another’s experience can enter and fill one’s own subjectivity, one begins to care for others as being part of one’s self.

What are some ways of fostering a simple lifestyle? First, use time more wisely. Limit passive entertainment such as TV and radio to allow more time to appreciate the simple things of life, like a sunset, a loved one’s facial expressions or the balance felt while going on a walk. Also, try to reduce the number of activities that you engage in. Pick a few causes that resonate with the depths of your heart and refuse the rest. Children especially need to be told that there will be a limit to the number of sports, clubs and social activities in which they can participate, especially since there is currently a tendency among young people to define their identities around being in as large a number of activities as possible. Indeed, the most common obstacle I have encountered to living the contemplative life among people I know is busyness. With conveniences like cellular car phones, many opportunities for mindfulness are lost in favor of more busyness. This stress caused by society’s hectic pace has to be reduced if the contemplative is ever to be able to contact the beauty present at the heart of things.

Simplicity can also be fostered by reducing material clutter in the home. Advertising

encourages the purchase of so many unneeded items, most of which possess little artistic worth. In interior design, concentrate on a few more expensive handmade items rather than on many cheaper factory-made items. An artisan can infuse more soul into a piece (which transfers to the one who then buys it) than a hurried factory machine operator can. In addition, leave space around items to foster interior spaciousness and the ability to appreciate one thing at a time. Choose clothing and home decor styles consciously because of their reflection of personal, spiritual and symbolic value. For example, I wear Indian-made turquoise jewelry because it comes from a culture whose spiritual values I attempt to emulate, and because turquoise exemplifies for me the spacious sky-mind of meditation in which I seek always to live.

Finally, environmental simplicity encourages love for the natural world and for the food we eat. Eating low on the food chain fosters a wise and mindful use of energy. Recycling discourages excess stripping of the land. When we do produce waste, Gunilla Norris encourages us to take out the trash mindfully. “I want to keep in mind the pine tree by the front door and how it keeps dropping its numberless needles—a tall and humble prayer. I want to shed my waste with quiet reverence like the pine.”^{viii}

Relationship as Practice

In a society where commitment to relationship of all kinds is so undervalued, it is important to view relating as a practice. Often the most beautiful spiritual fruits come after perseverance through the times of miscommunication that occur during the middle stages of relationship.

Spiritual community is one very important form of relationship. But contemplatives tend to be inner-directed and self-motivated. When they encounter rough waters, they often withdraw from others to work on solutions within the privacy of their own solitude. They don't like authoritarian or flashy leaders. Some of the motivations that draw people to community—for example, boosting one's own ego through being part of an elite group—do not have any attraction for the genuine contemplative.

The proselytizing activity that keeps many religious groups going also has no place for one who takes a listening attitude which would prefer to fan into flame any divine qualities that are already present in others rather than to goad them into joining one's own group. If the contemplative does draw another into the community, it is through quietly radiating a divine calm—like a flower, without hype or words.

However, spiritual community is important for the growth of the everyday contemplative who, unlike monks and sisters, often must interact all day with co-workers who have little intent to live a more spiritual life. Community is thus very much needed to provide support and to lift members out of stuck places. For the Christian, spiritual community is the major place where the experience of Christ occurs. I find that the warmth of Christ is revealed more intimately in community than in my solitude. The glow of this Presence is experienced diffusely and mysteriously in the act of the mutual giving which occurs within the community, a sort of warmth which is present when you don't try to look at it directly. Of course, community does not have to be large: "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matt 18:20).

A fruit of communal worship through waiting on God is the experience of what Quakers call "group mysticism." This is described beautifully by Quaker writer Thomas Kelly:

In the practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when the electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshipers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, a stillness that can be felt is over all... A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a superindividual Life and Power... Such gatherings I take to be cases of group mysticism... We may not know these our neighbors in any outwardly intimate sense, but we now know them, as it were, from within, and they know us in the same way... blended into the body of Christ.^{xiv}

The depth of beauty of this divine blanket, however, occurs only in direct proportion to the degree to which the individual members are convinced of "the priesthood of all believers."

Another form of relational practice open to the everyday contemplative is the path of intimate relationship. The spiritual fruits of romance are hardly ever examined by an American society which

first sees in the love affair a solution to all life's problems and then turns to despise it as shallow. Falling in love can be one of life's most spiritually transformative experiences. Usually we are attracted sexually to a person who possesses personality traits which are opposite to ours, and which we need to integrate into our own being if we are ever to become whole. Romantic attraction can provide a major portion of the energy needed to integrate these traits. Without it, would we ever acquire the motivation to follow through with the discipline needed to take on qualities that are not natively ours?

During the first few years of being in love, a couple focuses sexual energy exclusively between the two. But since this energy is at root spiritual, and since spiritual energy is by nature spacious and unlimited, the intensity of a mature relationship will eventually diffuse outward from itself. The love between the two becomes the energy needed to work on service-related activities focused on the outer world. Moreover, each member of the couple will need to spend some time doing things separately and having separate friendships if the sense of mystery so necessary for romance is to survive.

All intimate relationships eventually butt up against disappointment and disillusionment. One's partner is revealed as being unable to meet all personal needs, and attraction to the divine in others outside the relationship can lead to jealousy and hurt. When this happens, each is led face to face with a suffering that causes the inner well of each to be accessed more profoundly.

One of the most fruitful forms of spiritual relationship occurs when a man and woman find themselves in a friendship tinged with a romantic attraction which cannot be fully acted upon because of the other relational commitments each possesses. This form of relationship was much written and sung about during the era of medieval courtly love, but is hardly ever discussed now. For the troubadours, the inappropriateness of consummating this type of attraction caused an ennobling of the character of each. Longing caused by distance became transformed into the energy necessary for each to care selflessly for the other and to develop a strength of love able to endure the insecurity of the relationship.

Family life is still another relational discipline open to the everyday contemplative. A healthy

homelife can provide a spiritual womb from which each family member finds the strength to go out and face life in a competitive world. At its best, it is analogous to monastic community. The joys of child-raising include increased opportunities to be mindful at the wonder of life as seen, for example, in youthfully enthusiasm or a child's joy at the antics of a kitten. On the other hand, the trials of raising children allow opportunity for a parent to let go of expectations and to realize that children come not from us, but through us from the deeper Source of unfathomable Mystery.

II. A Sensual Philosophy of Contemplation

For the everyday contemplative, it is very important to develop a fully sensual philosophy of contemplative prayer. In earlier monastic teaching, there was a tendency to despise the body and senses as being unspiritual. However, since it is the nature of divine spaciousness to give rise continuously to phenomena, and God is forever lost in the act of spontaneous creating, the phenomenal world—including the body and senses—must be innately sacred. It is a thing of great awe and beauty. Moreover, repression of the sensual is simply not a viable option for the everyday contemplative who lives in the midst of a culture that continually sends out images of the pleasures of food, drink, sex and the arts. If the sensual realm is not used to enhance one's spiritual journey, it will end up siphoning energy away from the spiritual.

Use of the Senses as a Way of Reconciling Contrasts

The everyday contemplative may be uniquely called to discover how the senses themselves are gifted with a way of reconciling the contrasting aspects of experience that are such a challenge for every human being. Desire and that which is desired, suffering and its transformation into joy, the differences between human and natural worlds—all cry out for unification. The classical definition of beauty is "the harmony of contrasts"; insofar as the spiritual journey involves this quest for union, it is an aesthetic path as well as a moral one.

The body has the unique ability to draw contrasts into oneness in a way that the reflective mind alone cannot. Contrasts can be danced, poeticized and chanted into oneness with an ease that leaves a mind based on dualistic categories in awe. This cannot be explained; it can only be experienced bodily. In talking about that aspect of the human psyche that feeds off the mystery of sensual images rather than the analysis of mental concepts, writer Thomas Moore uses the term “soul.” He writes:

There is a difference between a problem and a mystery, and that idea is central to the issue of soul. While psychotherapy encourages us to see our lives as problems to be solved, a soulful approach to life looks at confusion or paradox as a mystery to be respected and explored rather than grasped or digested by our intellect... [T]he realization that we no longer have to understand ourselves... can be a big relief... Instead of understanding, we can look for awe. This is where the arts come in. Art of all kinds—painting, poetry, dance, music—is necessary and exquisite food for the soul.^v

Anthropologist Peter Gold, in his recent study comparing Tibetan and Navajo spirituality, makes a similar point. “The journey into union between the finite body-mind and the infinite font of which it is part is best expressed through the channels of sacred music, poetry, and the visual arts.”^{vi}

Poetry is one major way in which contrasts are harmonized. Insofar as they accomplish this unifying, poets are mystics. I have sometimes thought that poetry could be considered a major world religion alongside Buddhism, Native American spirituality, Christianity and the others! Native American (Creek) poet Joy Harjo tells us that her poetry—which, like all poetry, is properly experienced only when read bodily (aloud, using the mouth)—reconciles things that would otherwise seem separate. In an interview, she says:

In my poem “She Had Some Horses,” for instance..., the loved and hated are joined, are the same one. Maybe that’s not true, but in the poem it’s true... The poem says “She had some horses she loved/ She had some horses she hated/ These were the same horses.” Yes, my poetry is a way to bring together the paradoxes in the world... For me, poetry is a bridge over the sea of paradox.^{vii}

The poet Rilke confirms this view when he writes:

This man is occupied by a problem
to which he returns like a fly
He wants all opposing things
to touch each other just the same
He wishes God who made them all
would stop right in the midst of them--
that man who is infinitely stubborn
is the poet,xviii

Or again, "Where, though, where is the heart that sang them both into oneness, the poet's heart?"xix

Sacred dance is another means of uniting contrasts. As a spectator attending a Lakota sundance, I danced along with those in the ceremony. While dancing all day in cycles of two hours with one hour breaks, I had the sense that both the alternating of dance steps and the constant meeting of earth and foot reconciled the spiritual questions I was struggling with in a way that bypassed the dualistic mind. Joseph Rael, a medicine person from Picuris Pueblo, writes:

Walking with intent and ceremonial dancing are ways to connect with the inner, infinite self. The metaphor that is enacted is the collision of the foot with the ground. The foot is how we move out in life. In ceremonial walking and dancing, the foot connects with the ground, which is the symbol of the infinite self.xx

Notice also here a corroboration of our earlier point that the infinite (inner) self is really co-extensive with the (outer) ground.

Contrasts can be united through chant and breathwork as well. Joseph Rael again writes:

The inhalation is the metaphor of Father Sky and the exhalation represents Mother Earth. We seek to keep earth and sky and ourselves bonded together and enhance them through chanting. When we chant, we are giving energy to their connection . . . As the chanter inhales, the Spirit enters into the chanter and gives birth to life. As the chanter exhales, the Spirit of Life and the chanter participate together in generating health and vitality for all things living on earth and in the sky.xxi

Contemplative Silence Experienced Within the Phenomenal World

Sensual contemplation is profoundly fostered by a type of meditation that consists in a releasing of specific feelings, concepts, perceptions and images while resting in the divine silence out of which these perceptions emerge at each moment. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, for example, spiritual rest (called *shamatha* or tranquility) is always connected with a sharp awareness of the echo-like quality of the perceptions as they arise out of the spacious silence. This insight into the nature of thoughts is called *vipashyana* or mindfulness. These two aspects may be taught separately at first. *Shamatha* must be developed before *vipashyana*. One must become aware, through training in tranquility, of the vast spaciousness of silence before one can become attentive to the perceptions as manifestations of this silence. But before long, the Buddhist mediator is meant to practice both together: thus the term *shamatha-vipashyana* is used.

Sometimes Christian contemplatives do a fine job of teaching *shamatha*—in the form of centering prayer or prayer of the heart—but neglect the perceptive (mindfulness) aspect. Perhaps a one-sided reading of some of the apophatic mystics leads them to regard perceptions that arise during contemplative prayer as having no part in adding depth and richness to the silence, except insofar as they evacuate afflictive emotions that block deeper peace. This overly-apophatic view can lead to an overvaluing of an anesthetized state of mind during meditation. Indeed, there may be times when one needs periods of months or even years of divine anesthesia for the purpose of inner healing. But insight into the nature of the thoughts that arise out of meditative silence is just as important. Without awareness of the magical quality of perceptions as they arise out of the silence, one's meditation can become otherworldly, leading to an inability to integrate the sensual perceptions that are so much a part of the

life of the everyday contemplative.

Moreover, an overly-apophatic presentation of contemplation may give the impression that the experience of deep tranquility occurs in some transcendent darkness located either within the contemplative or in a non-sensual world beyond.

This approach can lead subconsciously to an undervaluing of the very environment which humanity is presently destroying. Buddhists are not afraid to speak of interior silence in terms of the world around us. They regularly refer to it as "vast spaciousness"

or "open-sky mind." Indeed, this interior spaciousness is actually an extension of the vast blue sky above and around us. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote,

Ah, not to be cut off
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars
The inner-what is it?
if not intensified sky
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.xxii

It is very important in this time of ecological crisis to view interior silence as being all of a piece with the natural world. Medieval Christian mystics as well could speak of contemplation as "sensual." For example, Meister Eckhart, who often spurned sensual

images, could nevertheless call divine silence "a wild wilderness," "a still desert" or "solitary wilderness." His disciple John Tauler called it "the deep, bottomless sea of God." An anonymous student of Eckhart mused:

Oh intellect! The road leads you
Into a marvelous desert,
So broad, so wide
It stretches out immeasurably.xxiii

This silence is also called a "cloud" by the author of The Cloud of Unknowing and "the river of consciousness" by Thomas Keating.

These phrases should be treated not so much as metaphors but as descriptions of an interior silence that is really an extension of the vastness of the natural world. Interior spaciousness is an extension of exterior spaciousness, and vice versa.

They are two sides to the one coin of divine mystery. If we keep this view of contemplation in mind, we will have the motivation to better care for the wide mountain vistas, the vast deserts, the immense seas, the clear skies; not just as stimuli for an interiorized

contemplation, but as co-extensive with the divine silence itself.

The Self-Emptying of God in Contemplative Awareness

Richard Rohr provides a more theistic element that can enrich our argument for contemplation as sensual. In the following passage, he presents not a God who stands apart from the act of creating, but One who gets totally absorbed in the act. Creation is a

sort of divine ecstasy or *kenosis* (self-emptying).

We are God's prayer. We are, in fact, God's thought. And God is hopelessly lost in thinking us. All we can do is stay naked and self-forgetful, ready for love-making. . . . Be quiet and self-forgetful, dear friends. . . . You must know for

yourself that Someone is thinking you. . . each creative moment.xxiv

Since "God is hopelessly lost in thinking us," and since we are a consciousness that is co-extensive with the sensual world (as we saw above), it follows that it is this nature-based consciousness itself that God is lost in. As applied to our experience, this means that it is not just we ourselves who are the subject (i.e., the experiencer) of our sensual awareness; rather, God is the primary subject. But this God is delightfully immersed in our sensual awareness without ever reemerging as a separate being. In Tibetan Buddhist terms, meditative spaciousness is like limitless sky, and awareness is like sunlight that enlightens that sky. But the sunlight, instead of emerging from a discrete sun as its source, is rather diffused throughout the sky as an element of the sky itself. The sun is, as it were, "lost" or "self-emptied" into the sky. Christians can add the insight that this light of awareness is itself personal. It may not be a discrete "person" (the sun), but it is nonetheless full of personal presence. God is lost in the vast spaciousness of the contemplative's awareness, which is itself co-extensive with the vastness of nature.

In trinitarian terms, our spacious "sky-mind" filled with the self-emptied light of awareness is itself a participation in the "Father" (Mother). It can also be referred to as "the Mind of God." The perceptions that arise spontaneously out of this spacious Mind are a participation in the "Son" (Sophia). And the limitless bliss, peace and delightful awe that together fill this spacious awareness are the "Holy Spirit." St. Thomas Aquinas calls this "the Sigh of God." Divine bliss is both the result of seeing the perceptions arise spontaneously out of "nowhere" and the cause of their arising. When God contemplates the world with a sense of awe and wonder, it spontaneously arises out of this love. And when the contemplative identifies with this divine "sigh" and blissful awareness of the phenomenal world, he or she actually co-creates with God. The world is created through our loving attention to it. Thus, contemplation is sensual because it participates in a God who loses Himself in loving the sensual world into existence.

Awe at the Magic of the Phenomenal World

When, after much meditation practice, one becomes identified with the spaciousness and bliss of divine awareness, then perceptions and the phenomena of life appear as echoes coming, as it were, out of nowhere. Tibetan Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron speaks of this "magic" in the following passage. She writes: "[T]he more you realize the lack of solidity of things, [paradoxically] the more vivid things appear. . . . Everything you hear is the echo of emptiness [i.e., spaciousness], yet there is sound—it's real—the echo of emptiness."^{xv} Perceptions lack solidity because they are manifestations of the diffuse nature of spaciousness; yet at the same time, they are experienced as vivid and solid. Another female Tibetan Buddhist expresses this poetically when she writes:

Kye Ho! [Hark! or Listen!] Wonderful! Whatever you see or hear, think or feel—the myriad things, are only reflections in the clear wisdom of the mind. Who speaks the sound of an echo? Who paints the image in a mirror? Where are the spectacles in a dream? Nowhere at all—that's the nature of mind! Kye Ho! Wonderful! Magical displays arise in the sky [the mind] through the dynamism of the sky itself, arising spontaneously as transformations of sky. Kye Ho! Wonderful! Emptiness [spaciousness], with the artistry of awareness, creates magical shows that are unborn, yet appear.^{xvi}

We can notice here the Buddhist tendency to water down the sense of awe experienced in the fact that phenomena appear as echoes out of "nowhere" (spacious Mind). The poet says that the myriad things are only reflections. Later in the same passage the writer says "The myriad things. . . . Empty, they don't exist at all. . . . All things are baseless, like a dream."^{xvii}

A Christian approach adds richness and drama to this Buddhist experience by emphasizing the awe and wonder in an unqualified manner. Combining Buddhist and Christian insights, one could say that phenomena are created spontaneously—without deliberate intention—out of a blissful contemplation in which God is forever lost. We could then exclaim, "How can it be that God speaks no phenomena into existence, yet they appear anyway, as echoes arising out of divine love, awe and wonder? Kye Ho! Wonderful! Phenomena appear as mirror-images out of the mirror of divine spaciousness even though the Original which could cause those images is nowhere to be found!" With this understanding, perceptions occurring within meditation become opportunities to wonder at the magic of it all instead of being unwanted disruptions of the silence. Meditation becomes a matchless opportunity to watch with awe as phenomena arise spontaneously and without deliberation within the

spaciousness of divine Mind. The most mundane details of life suddenly become packed with Mystery. And, if one identifies with God's creative awe-through wonder-filled attention to the phenomena as they arise Out of nowhere—one becomes, with God, the very source of their arising. As the everyday contemplative moves throughout the day encountering people in pain, landscapes in peril and work environments out of balance, he or she can—through loving, awe-filled attention to these situations—become one with the very Source out of which they emerge. Through awe, the contemplative can rekindle the spark of hope in seemingly hopeless situations.

The Natural World as a Communicative Being

One of the hallmarks of the contemplative life is the ability of silence to open us up to divine communication in the world around us. This is especially important for the everyday contemplative, who lives in a world that is being devastated by technology and desperately needs to be protected. How does nature communicate to us? Philosopher-ecologist David Abram, in The Spell of the Sensuous, reveals how people in indigenous cultures experience the very act of mental reflection as itself being a communication of the landscape to and within them. He says that since a person thinks in ideas made up of words, and since words are originally spoken (and then sounded mentally) using breath, and because breath is really a participation in the surrounding air, therefore the act of thinking is a participation in the world of nature. Reliance on written texts in our culture makes us forget this communion. In speaking of air as the source of reflection Abram writes:

[T]he sense that spoken words are structured breath . . . lends the air a deep association with linguistic meaning and with thought . . . [M]any indigenous peoples construe awareness, or "mind" not as a power that resides inside their heads, but rather as a quality that they themselves are inside of, along with the other animals and the plants, the mountains and the clouds.xxvii

Abram goes on to cite Navajo culture as an example of this point. Navajos speak of four colored winds—White Wind, Blue Wind, Yellow Wind and Dark Wind—which correspond to the four cardinal directions (East, South, West, North). Interestingly, these four Winds are also called the "Four Words" and are the means of the breath.xxviii

[I]t is Wind that enables us to speak . . . Since we speak only by means of the breath, Wind itself—the collective breath—is said to hold the power of language: "It is only by means of Wind that we talk. It exists at the tip of our tongues" . . . Finally, and most profoundly, this invisible medium, in which we are bodily immersed, is what provides us with the capacity for conscious thought . . . The invisible Wind that swirls within and around each individual person is assumed to consist in part, of such messenger Winds from the four directions. Two of these Winds, often spoken of as Little Winds or Wind's Children, are believed to be the individual's "means of knowing" . . . When a Navajo person finds himself thinking in words, this is said to be the voice of one or both of these two Little Winds speaking into his ears.xxix

Thus, Abram can say that the language out of which thought is constructed "belongs" to the animate landscape as much as it "belongs" to ourselves. "Language is the very voice of the trees, the waves and the forests." "Spoken words [are] active conscious presences afoot in the material landscape." Again, "To such peoples, that which we term 'language' remains as much a property of the animate landscape as of the humans who dwell and speak within that terrain."xxx

The contemplative can learn to experience inspired thought as the landscape's own communication by a meditative releasing of insights. They can then be viewed not as a private possession occurring within the head, but as aspects of the landscape itself. Changing the metaphor to a visual one, we can say that when we release possessive hold of what we see in nature, the divine presence embedded in the landscape views us in the same act of vision. As Meister Eckhart wrote, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love."xxxi Psychologist and shaman Fred Swinney speaks of his experience of this mutual seeing with a wolf during a camping trip in the wilderness of northern Ontario. He writes:

I opened my eyes and focused on the smoldering red coals of my fire. Beyond, in the shadow of the forest was a deeper shadow and two yellow-green eyes that trapped mine and pierced through into my soul. Simultaneously, I stared into the eyes of a wolf and back into the eyes of the human. Eventually, I noticed that the wolf shadow and eyes were gone but wolfness lingered in my mind. I was wolf!xxcii

As a result of this unitive experience, Swinney took the name "Graywolf."

The Embrace of Suffering as Transformative

Unfulfilled desires, frustrated dreams, mental or emotional anguish, social or environmental ills and physical pain all involve a suffering that must be accepted as part of life. The contemplative realizes that suffering cannot be merely explained away or dissolved with positive thinking. Instead, she must sink into it until it becomes transparent to its own hidden wisdom. How is the everyday contemplative to view suffering? Episcopalian psychotherapist Michael Dwinell, in his excellent book entitled God-Birthing, speaks of suffering as the pangs of childbirth within us through which the divine is being birthed.

How can we look the reality of human existence and human experience right in the eye, and unflinchingly comprehend its agony and terror and brutality, while at the same time giving wholehearted and unreserved affirmation of life's value?

The answer: Understanding human living is, in fact, nothing less than the labor pains of God's becoming.^{xxxiii}

In another passage, Dwinell quotes Meister Eckhart as saying "From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth. The essence of God is birthing. We are all meant to be mothers of God." Thus Dwinell can pray to God: "I will suffer my suffering which is your birthing."^{xxxiv} One's faith here is that through the tension of opposites involved in suffering—e.g., dreams and their non-fulfillment, desires and their frustration—something new and unheard of will be born.

The opposites are inextricably bound together, and it is the energy and tension between the opposites that provide the necessary fuel to keep the whole human psychology and spiritual enterprise running.

God is suffering the unbearable, is existing in the excruciating tension of that deep, deep truth. The truth is that in the very tension itself, something utterly new of God, something never before seen of God, will be born, will come forth, and that we ourselves might become the locus of that new truth, that we ourselves might become God-birthers.^{xxxv}

Lightning power is born of tensions in the clouds; electricity is birthed from the tension between opposing poles of electromagnets. So spiritual power is born of the tension between the psychological opposites held together within suffering. Dwinell also quotes Carl Jung as saying that suffering is the fire that melts the inner opposites together, and that "we are crucified between the opposites and delivered up to the torture until the 'reconciling third' takes shape."^{xxxvi}

I have noticed times in my life when instead of rejecting one contrast in favor of another, I sit with both until an unexpected path opens up. Rilke again gives us some wisdom regarding this process. He writes:

[I] have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . Don't search for the answers. . . Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.^{xxxvii}

However, sometimes the suffering caused by conflicting contrasts is simply too intense to sit with calmly. What then can we do?

We already saw how dance, chant, walk and poetry can be used to harmonize contrasts, and that includes those inherent within suffering. But there is another practice available for dealing specifically with the suffering of afflictive emotions like anger, unfulfilled desire, fear and grief. This practice involves the use of meditative spaciousness to set the suffering within a more positive context. Here, the contemplative sinks into and identifies with the spacious silence of blue sky-mind. When the afflictive emotion arises it appears as solid, tight and immovable. But (as we saw earlier) from the perspective of our identity with spaciousness, the emotion is really less solid, somewhat like an echo. If we allow sky-mind to look clear through the afflictive

emotion instead of at its apparent solidity, we see that at its core it really exists as endless space. This realization results in the ability to find some freedom from the tightness of suffering from within the emotion itself. The afflictive emotion will not disappear; in fact, it will arise again and again, appearing rock-solid each time. But each of these occurrences can be used as the opportunity to again look through the emotion and reaffirm its inner spaciousness. We can even begin to take an attitude of amazement that such a limitlessly spacious emotion can keep appearing again and again as solid and constricting. This practice does not make the suffering go away but makes it more bearable by setting it within its context of spaciousness and good-humored awe. This practice can be of help while we are waiting for the solutions of which Rilke speaks to form within us.

Creative Service in the World

A very important but often neglected discipline for contemplative formation is the activity of creative work in the world. We have seen how the divine silence or sky-mind issues creatively in a constant echo-like stream of perceptions and phenomena that constitute this world. Divine spaciousness is never static; so it should be with the contemplative's silence. True meditation issues automatically in creativity. We have already seen how our identification with silent spaciousness allows us to become one with the Source out of which phenomena arise. We can then go through the day giving loving awe and attention to ailing landscapes, hurting people, and unbalanced workplaces—and in so doing, allow the divine in each situation to come to birth. This constitutes a receptive aspect of creativity. However, there is also a more active aspect to contemplative creativity, one that involves the creation and transfer of energy. What is it that makes one's creative action uniquely spiritual or contemplative?

Active contemplative creativity is based upon the realization that all things are interconnected: everything is an aspect of everything else. Zen master Dogen expresses this poetically in his "Mountains and Rivers Sutra." He says:

[T]here are mountains hidden in jewels; there are mountains hidden in marshes, mountains hidden in the sky; . . . There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. . . when you investigate mountains thoroughly this is the work of the mountains. Such mountains and rivers of themselves become wise persons and sages. . . Hence, this study is the mountains' own study.^{xxxviii}

As a Native American, Joy Harjo expresses the same insight when she says, for example, "The bear is one version of human and vice versa." David Abram concurs on the relation between the human mind and nature when he writes:

[T]here is something in us of every animal, and also something of plants and stones and seas, for we are woven of the same fabric as everything on Earth. . . [The shaman's] magic, far from being a supernatural power, grows out of his ability to listen not only with his verbal mind, but with his animal mind, his plant mind, his soil, rock, river, and deep Earth mind.^{xxxix}

Earlier, we spoke of divinity as the silent spaciousness out of which all phenomena emerge. This limitless Depth can be called the transcendent aspect of divinity; that is, it goes beyond or beneath the phenomena of life. Here, however, we are viewing divinity as the ceaseless flow of phenomena into one another and back again. This could be termed the immanent aspect of divinity because it manifests within the flow of phenomena as a single energy source equally distributed among all things.

However, phenomena appear separate from one another to the mundane mind. A busy city street appears isolated from the silence of a wilderness area. Anger appears to be separate from vast blue sky or a glowing sunset or ecstatic joy.

It is the ministry of the contemplative—and of all enlightened humanity, for that matter—to reactualize the connections. A Mother Teresa connects the beauty of her beloved Jesus to a poor, worm-infested beggar lying in a gutter; in so doing, she creates the energy of healing for that person. Or, a George deMestral finds cockleburs stuck to his pantleg upon returning from a walk. When he discovers the hook of the bur connected to the fabric loop in his jeans, he connects this discovery to the idea of a synthetic fastener; thus Velcro is born. When we continually make these connections in our own unique field of interest, we feel amazement not so much at the connection as at how things could ever seem separate.

Moreover, meditative attention to the flow of phenomena reveals that the divine energy source is distributed equally among all things. All phenomena arise as echoes equally transparent to the spacious divine Source. To the mundane mind, however, some phenomena arise with seemingly more energy than other phenomena. Unfulfilled desire seems to carry more energy than a peaceful blue sky. The tightness of anger seems to concentrate energy much more intensely than an eagle

soaring on the air currents. Places where the energy seems more concentrated become sources of suffering. For example, a man might experience female beauty as incredibly overwhelming since he can't bear such intense experience and the desire it causes, he tries to escape its power by demeaning women. Or, the intense energy of grief caused by the breakup of a love relationship might cause a woman to seek solace in the dulling effects of alcohol or television. Or, the fear felt if we faced the devastation of nature caused by human activity would be too much to bear, so we attempt to shroud ourselves in denials. In all these cases suffering arises from the flow of energy being over-concentrated in some areas of life and taken from others.

A contemplative can work creatively with this situation by redistributing the intense energy until it is more equally shared among the other phenomena encompassed by the general flow. This can be accomplished using the connective power of the breath. For example, apply the peacefully diffused energy of the sky to the concentrated energy of unfulfilled desire until the two experiences become mere nodes within the limitless flow of divine spaciousness between them. In breathing, connect the word "desire" spoken on one breath with the word "sky" spoken on the next breath. Practice this repeatedly every time the intensity of desire arises until the breath reactualizes the limitless flow submerging and connecting the two. Again, we will feel amazement not so much at the wonder of the connection, but at the possibility that the energy could ever seem discontinuous. Realizing the interconnectedness of the two realms of humanity and nature, we can—following the above example—see the desire for what it really is: the "intense-desire-aspect-of-sky." And we can begin to see sky as the "sky-aspect-of-intense-desire." Instead of defining them against one another, we now see contrasts for what they really are: mere aspects of one another. As a result, all of reality suddenly becomes mysterious. With wonder we exclaim, "How could such seemingly discrete surges of energy emerge from the seamless, endlessly flowing loop of interconnectedness?" This realization comes by sinking into and identifying with the interconnectedness within phenomena just as we identify with the silent spaciousness that is beneath all phenomena.

As ministers of interconnectedness, contemplatives don't just transfer energy; they actually create it by adding fresh realization to the world. What makes the newness of creative work contemplative is the fact that the fresh creation, along with its human creator, occurs within the eternal spaciousness. To speak mythically, it is as though phenomena and perceptions arise spontaneously out of divine silence as miraculous echoes, but some of those echoes—human creations—add new words and new voices in addition to the contents of the echo one would normally expect. Imagine you are God thinking a thought, but just before you are ready to "speak" it into reality, the thought emerges instead in the world as an echo, and with words and a voice that are different from what you were expecting to speak! Work is contemplative insofar as it adds new content to the divine bliss out of which it arises. We are co-creators with God!

Conclusion

Hopefully, the principles and practices just outlined will serve to ignite the reader's realization that everyday contemplation effectively opens up the sacred dimensions of the world around us. Meditation is not an escape from the world but an immersion more fully within it. By identifying with both the spacious divine bliss that grounds the phenomenal world and with the flow of interconnectedness within it, the everyday contemplative can receptively and actively participate in creating a better world. Moreover, experience of the inter-subjectivity of the human and natural worlds can lead to increased motivation to care for the world as part of one's self. Finally, meditative work with afflictive emotions and a lifestyle of simplicity can release the experience of deep peace within a stressful society. It remains for the reader to implement these principles and practices in his or her own unique way. We are indeed "a kingdom of priests!"

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE LAY CONTEMPLATIVE MOVEMENT

by Mary Frohlich

Recently I participated in a retreat that was advertised as a "Contemplative Intensive." The regime of the retreat included fifteen 25-minute periods of contemplative prayer each day, in addition to mass and two work periods. We knew nothing about the identities of our fellow retreatants until the last day, when we all introduced ourselves and shared something of our contemplative experience. Of the forty people present that day, two were religious priests and ten or so were women religious. The remainder were a cross-section of humanity--parents, grandparents, carpenters, teachers, social workers, business people, secretaries, financial consultants; women and men of all ages and races, of widely varied ethnic and religious heritage.

As each person spoke, the most striking testimonies came from those whom stereotypes of the past would least predict to be "contemplatives." A father of two young daughters spoke of how brushing his daughters' hair each morning had become a continuation of his preceding period of contemplative prayer. Another father talked about how remaining centered and clear-headed while dealing with three teenagers was his most significant contemplative practice. A retired secretary described the struggle she had gone through on the first day of the retreat as she tried to pray as she thought she "ought" to, and how a whole new simplicity of prayer had bloomed when she finally let go of expectations. A tall, elegant woman of about forty asked for prayers because, on the day the retreat began, she had resigned from her professional position and made a commitment to follow the contemplative path, wherever it might lead her.

These vignettes offer a glimpse of the burgeoning reality of lay contemplation. These people's lives are, in most respects, "ordinary"; they raise families, do housework, earn a living, struggle with relational and career problems. At the same time, they have identified within themselves an urgency toward being contemplative. The specific discipline that this demands of each one varies; what is clear, however, is that each one feels deeply called and deeply committed.

The lay contemplative movement that is occurring today is in no way in opposition to the traditional, religious life expression of contemplative life. In fact, most lay contemplatives look to these communities for a significant portion of their support and companionship on the contemplative journey. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, as the new millenium dawns, many of the canonically-established contemplative communities seem to be struggling to maintain both their numbers and their sense of fresh energy. In many cases, at least among women's communities, many of their "new" vocations are actually midlife transfers from other religious congregations. It is quite rare nowadays for these communities to have a young person enter and stay for more than four or five years.

Meanwhile, the lay contemplative movement is full of energy, creativity, and new life. It is also often full of confusion, uncertainty, and a bit of wildness--the characteristics of youth. It remains to be seen what will come of all this. Even though some local monasteries have already been forced to close, and others will certainly follow, there is little likelihood that deep-rooted traditions such as those of the Carmelites, Trappists, and Poor Clares will die out. These traditions will still continue to be rich sources of nurturance for seekers on the contemplative way. In the new millenium, however, we are also seeing the seed-pods broken open, and the gift of the contemplative vocation scattered abroad to bear fruit by every highway and byway.

WHAT IS "OLD" ABOUT LAY CONTEMPLATION?

While some may assume that lay contemplation as it is occurring today is such a radically new phenomenon that it has practically no precedents in the past, the truth is considerably more nuanced. There is indeed something "new" about this movement; but, looking backward over the many generations of Christian contemplative quest, we discover that more

fundamentally it is the fruition of an impulse that has been present from the beginning of the Christian movement. Here, I will not attempt to do a full-fledged history of contemplation, or even of Christian contemplation; rather, I will briefly review two movements that seem particularly relevant to our own concerns, as a lead-in to some speculation on today's lay contemplative movement as part of a "third wave" in Christian spirituality.

In Christian history two of the most generative periods for the development of contemplative life--namely, the desert movements of the third to fifth centuries and the eremitical movements of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries--have been eras in which grassroots Christians took the lead. Each of these began as lay movements and, even as they evolved into more institutionalized forms of religious life, continued to inspire a significant contingent of deeply devoted adherents who did not enter religious communities but instead struggled to find ways to combine contemplative spirituality with the demands of life "in the world."

The men (and a few women) who took to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria during the third to fifth centuries of the Christian era were on fire with zeal to give body and soul over to God. Drawing upon Hellenistic philosophy and practices as well as Jewish and Christian ones, they fashioned a way of life that often strikes people today as scandalously negative toward body, sexuality, and secularity. Yet their more profound guiding ideals were compunction, purity of heart, hospitality, and conversion by the Word of God. The severe discipline which they exercised toward their own bodies was aimed at preparing those very bodies to become radically transparent to God. The end for which asceticism was practiced was not destruction of the body, but rather clearing the way for the deification of the whole person. A story is told that, when Abba Joseph was asked how one ought to pray, he spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles; and he said: "If you will, you could become a living flame."^{xl}

The desert monks were lay: that is, originally they had no special status or office setting them apart from other Christians, and they regarded their intense pursuit of God as nothing more than the full living of the Christian life. Even the very few participants in the movement who were ordained were severely counseled that they must not expect any special conditions or treatment. Yet the desert movement clearly did separate its members from life "in the world" through geographical isolation, celibacy, and intense ascetical practices. Within the social and economic conditions of the times these forms of separation served the purpose of freeing people from the claustrophobic demands of village life, in which every detail of one's existence was enmeshed in a web of customs and expectations that left little room for the kind of intimate confrontation with self and God that contemplation demands.^{xli} Lay adherents--many of them women--who could not literally go off to the desert still practiced a similar countercultural withdrawal within the confines of their own homes.

The institutionalization of the desert movement led into monasticism, for which this separation from ordinary secular life was a central dictum. The theology of seeking God primarily in the "earthly paradise" of the monastery, and ultimately in the eschatologically-realized heaven above the earth, flourished. Yet it is important to remember that the original impulse of these spiritualities was not elitist separation, but radical intensity of focus on living out the universal call to Christian discipleship.

Gradually, as monasticism became more firmly institutionalized and enwebbed in societal and ecclesial power structures, it became the norm for monks to be clerics--and for clerics to be called upon to live like monks. The originally lay movement of religious life was assimilated into close association with the governing hierarchy of the church, so that even today both male and female non-ordained members of religious communities are frequently seen as having a sort of middle status in between "clerical" and "lay."

A second key period for the development of Christian contemplative life took place during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, when the ideal of the *vita apostolica*--an effort to practice a very literal imitation of the poor, communal, faith-filled, servant life of the apostles--inspired tens of thousands of people to fervor in taking up a dedicated way of life. The *vita apostolica* fueled both evangelical and eremitical aspirations; in the context of the times, these two were not seen as contradictory but as the two sides of the same coin of "apostolic life." Among those who claimed an eremitical vocation during this period, many did not actually live a solitary life. Rather, they abandoned ordinary economic securities to live a relatively unconstrained life of availability for service, preaching and prayer among the poor.^{xlii} Like the first desert contemplatives, these too were laity; they rejoiced in the poverty of being among the people without special status or protection.

The experiments of the *vita apostolica* engaged not only single people, but married couples with families as well. One of the largest movements of this sort was the Humiliati or "Humble Ones," in which families practiced prayer and mutual support and earned their living by clothmaking while they preached the gospel and served the poor. Originating among the laity of Lombardy, the Humiliati also developed branches for clergy and religious; by 1298 there were reported to be 389 religious houses and uncounted numbers of lay adherents.^{xliii}

Since part of the ideal of the *vita apostolica* was communal living, it was not uncommon for those inspired by the eremitical and evangelical ideal to form small communities. The further institutionalization of some of these groups fed into the great religious communities that aspire to an eremitical spirituality--the Cistercians, Carmelites, Carthusians, and Camaldolese. Even to this day these traditions nourish vast numbers of Christians from all walks of life who thirst for a contemplative spirituality.

The mendicant and apostolic forms of religious life also have their roots in this period. These groups dropped the confining structures of monastic cloister and constant liturgical prayer in favor of greater availability for service to the people of God. Once again many of the groups that eventually became religious communities originated as fervent laity seeking to intensify their Christian lives of prayer and service. Experiments with dedicated life apart from religious life proliferated; and religious life itself was no longer seen as necessarily requiring the geographical segregation emphasized by monasticism. Other forms of separation--the habit, celibacy, highly structured rules of life--more often than not remained, however.

All these movements--the wandering hermits, the Humiliati, the mendicants, and all the other new experiments--demonstrate how the medieval eremitical and evangelical movements that grew out of the *vita apostolica* spirituality facilitated a significant, although still partial, shift toward dedicated Christian life combined with presence and participation in the secular world.

WHAT IS "NEW" ABOUT LAY CONTEMPLATION?

It may be that today's lay contemplative movement represents the early spring buds of a third great wave of dedicated Christian life--one that, this time, may complete the trajectory toward contemplative engagement in every dimension of human life. For this to take place, however, requires a profound reframing of the theological understanding of contemplation and action. In view of this, I offer a whirlwind overview of the historical development of this theology.

At the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that from its origins in the patristic era until relatively recently classical Christian theology and spirituality have been deeply shaped by a symbolic and conceptual worldview that envisions divine realities as "descending" from a transcendent spiritual realm into the material realm, while human spirituality is seen as having

to do with "ascending" from the material to the spiritual realm. Although this worldview is often called "dualistic," in the strict sense it is not--since both spiritual and material realms have their source and goal in the single transcendent dimension. Nevertheless, it very clearly sets up a hierarchy in which physical, secular, worldly realities are less intrinsically close to God than are spiritual, sacred, religious realities.

The consequence of this classical Christian theology was a spirituality in which those who are most serious about knowing and loving God are those who can dissociate themselves from "worldly" sexual, economic, and political life in favor of full-time dedication to explicitly religious activities. As long as this theology and spirituality prevailed, it was inevitable that the Christian life of those wholly engaged in the secular world would be devalued in relation to that of the hierarchically superior church leaders and a closely associated separate category of those living a "religious" life.

Throughout the patristic and medieval eras, a positive dimension of this classical synthesis was that it placed contemplation at the center of ecclesial life. The shadow side, however, was that it marginalized the mass of laity in favor of an honored elite who could associate themselves with this favored contemplative center through ordination or religious vows. As the modern era began to dawn in the 16th and 17th centuries, a significant cultural and ideological shift took place. Human capacities for reason and the domination of the physical world moved into a much more prominent place at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Contemplation began to be viewed as a marginal and largely extraneous endeavor, closely associated with irrationality and the "merely" emotional.

As the theological justification for hierarchical structures in the Church largely lost its contemplative center, these structures became rationalized and hardened. The result of all this was a Church centered on its clergy, with both the mass of laity and the contemplative life on the margins. The move into modernity, in short, took the vital contemplative core out of the classical hierarchical understanding of Christian life, and yet left the basic structure standing.

The glory and the pain of Christian theology today is that this interim synthesis is in the midst of breaking down, to be replaced by what may appear to many as a cacophony of disparate voices. Emerging in this cacophony is a very different and non-hierarchical way of envisioning humanity in relation to God and the world. It is a vision of spirit-in-the-world instead of spirit-against-the-world; it emphasizes God as an active force of transformation in every dimension of creation instead of God as calling the elect forth from the entanglements of creation. It is only in view of this shift in theology that we begin to glimpse the fresh meaning of "contemplative" as it is coming to birth in the world today. The lay contemplative movement is, at least in potential, an embodiment of a spirituality of God radically manifest in the midst of everyday, secular life. The essays in this volume offer a variety of glimpses into that emerging vision.

ENDNOTES

DAYBREAK

by Robert A. Jonas

In November 1992, I made my third retreat at the L'Arche community of Daybreak. In a way, I limped to Toronto as one who was handicapped by grief. It had been only three months since Margaret and I had lost our daughter Rebecca to a premature birth and death. She had lived only four hours, and died in our arms. Now, I would go to Daybreak, to be among my own kind, the broken and the marginalized.

I had often talked about the world of the severely handicapped with Henri Nouwen, who had given up his Yale and Harvard teaching appointments to be pastor in this L'Arche community. For those of us who pass for "normal," the handicapped can represent a threat. Our consumer culture and its symbiotic educational system create an abstract model person who is bright, slim and savvy. Anyone who is "somebody" has power, wealth, pleasure, beauty and eternal youth, attains infinite speed, completes fantastic numbers of projects, and receives everlasting praise from inexhaustible sources. Trying to emulate these models of personhood often drives us so insistently that we become addicted to the fast life. We generally don't have time for those who are moving much more slowly on the muddy roads, in the shadows of modern life.

At L'Arche, popular models of personhood are turned on their heads. Here, people emphasize the gifts that come through suffering, and through living with the wounded. Time, woven into the minutae of dressing, eating, moving, brushing teeth, and "signing," slows down. From the fast lane, things here look merely disfigured, crippled, and useless. From the slow lane, one is

encouraged to take another look, to seek out the details, delicacy, and even beauty of what we thought was ugly.

One day, Henri took me along to have dinner at a L'Arche house in downtown Toronto. The one-story wooden house, with a small front yard and surrounding chain link fence, was nestled within a residential neighborhood. Here, six handicapped residents (called "core members") live with their helpers (called "assistants"). About 25 people gathered in the basement for an informal meal and to watch a slide presentation about another L'Arche house in Australia. Two visitors, one smiling, talkative core member with Down's Syndrome named Mary, and her assistant, Janet, greeted everyone. The celebratory spirit of the gathering did not surprise me. Over the years, I had learned that, at all L'Arche communities, birthdays, welcomes for visitors and new members, goodbye parties and liturgical holidays dot the weekly landscape. Tonight, everyone seemed eager to hear about the Australian community.

Before the presentation, Henri was to lead the group in a Catholic Mass. He asked me if I knew a *shakuhachi* piece that would be a good lead-in to the worship. As I brought the flute out of its leather case, two or three people asked what kind of instrument this was. Suddenly the *shakuhachi* was the center of attention. I told everyone about how this flute was hand-made by my teacher, David Duncavage, who dug up the bamboo near Kyoto, Japan. I also spoke about the Buddhist and Christian practice of contemplative listening. One did not listen "outwardly," for a melody but rather "inwardly," as if from the heart.

"I'm learning to play what is called *honkyoku*, or 'origin music,'" I said. "As far as we know, this flute music was brought to Japan from China in the eighth century. Sometimes, in Buddhist monasteries, it was practiced as a spiritual discipline, a kind of prayer. It is a music in which order cannot be imposed by the conscious mind, but must be discovered as one listens and watches in silence to the sudden swoops, dips, and jumps of birds and land, dragonflies and crickets, streams, mud tracks, and gusts of wind. In listening, we pay attention to the silence between the notes, as

much as to the notes themselves." Everyone listened with great interest.

Then I brought the bamboo to my lips and played *Kyo-rei*, "Empty Bell." Two severely handicapped men slouched in their chairs, swinging their heads and eyes from side to side, unable to focus, and several others seemed uneasy in their afflicted bodies, squirming, pounding, rubbing and scraping their bodies against chairs and neighbors. Some, like Mary, sat very still, listening intently. When I blew *Kyo-rei*, I was struck by the immediate, comfortable silence in the room.

How strange this music must have sounded! But I sensed that *Kyo-rei* was being received. As I drew in each breath, and blew each successive note, I saw within me countless scenes from institutions and homes for the handicapped where I had visited and worked, including L'Arche residences--scenes of silent waiting for, sitting alongside of, and simply being with, the profoundly handicapped. I wondered if the severely wounded understand more deeply than others the speechless atmosphere of the *shakuhachi*. Sometimes, as they lie in bed, waiting for someone to approach, they have nothing to do but listen in the lonely silence for their next breath.

On this night, many residents, both handicapped and their assistants, came up to me afterward to share how much they had appreciated the offering of music. I felt touched to be welcomed in such a warm manner. I remembered the warmth from my first visit to L'Arche in France several years before. The L'Arche spirit opens one's heart. Under its influence the distinction between handicapped and non-handicapped people melts away. On this night I felt as if I had a foot in both worlds. Here were just plain people living together. Quite ordinary. But it was a very lovely sort of ordinary.

A week later we were back at the Daybreak retreat center called Dayspring. Twenty people had gathered for the Eucharist. A few big, vinyl-covered bean-bag chairs were plopped among the wooden chairs for the most seriously disabled core members. One such person, a woman in her twenties, lay down across a bright red bean bag next to me. Rosey had Downs Syndrome and other

serious problems that left her with little control over her arms and legs. She rolled her body back and forth over the soft vinyl, and occasionally let out a powerful cry that sounded almost like a braying cow. She seemed to be more attentive during quiet parts of the service, especially during the prayers and the Eucharist. I couldn't tell if this behavior was intentional. Periodically Rosey turned to look at me with a blank stare. I wondered if she might be curious about me. But when I smiled at her, her face remained blank.

After the communion bread and wine had been passed around, everyone sat down, and I played a *honkyoku* piece. As I blew through the bamboo, I suddenly noticed that Rosey was making her "moo" sound at random intervals. At first I was annoyed, thinking that she was distracting people from the contemplative character of the music. A string of thoughts passed through my mind. "I hope someone will tell her to be quiet," I thought, and "The beauty of the music will be wasted unless someone takes her from the room."

I had wanted to offer everyone a special gift of music and silence, but it was not working. During the length of one prolonged note I decided that I would never have the patience of L'Arche's assistants and leaders. I could never survive the constant neediness of the handicapped. But then, to my astonishment, about halfway through the *honkyoku*, Rosey's "moo" seemed to fit in with the *shakuhachi* notes.

There was no way of telling whether Rosey intended to time her "moo" in relation to the *honkyoku*. And yet I began to feel her presence in "my" music. Suddenly, I and the *shakuhachi* were no longer the center of things. The center had moved into the middle of the group. It was as if both Rosey and the *shakuhachi* were sculpting the silence with their cries. The pitch of Rosey's "moo" resonated with a certain mournful note that occurs periodically throughout the *honkyoku*. Suddenly I felt that we were crying together for mercy. With a slight bend of my neck, a slight shading of the third hole on the flute, Rosey's note and mine found a pleasing and heartfelt resonance. Tears formed in my eyes. "Oh, how I wish my daughter Rebecca had lived," I thought. In my

body, I felt a bond between Rosey and me, two wounded people suddenly transparent to Jesus' suffering on the cross. "Why have you forsaken me?" We were both living Jesus in us.

After the Mass, I watched Rosey's assistants talk to her, and move her body into a more comfortable position. It seemed that Rosey could communicate with them in subtle ways. So I went over to Rosey to introduce myself. I touched her arm and said, "Hi Rosey." Our eyes met for a split second. She looked down at my hand as if she were totally uninterested, and then let her eyes drift dispassionately about the room. I didn't know if she felt any kind of connection to me. I waited a minute, watching her face, but her eyes never returned to mine. Had I been mistaken about our musical duet? Had I merely wished for, and projected, a connection that was never there? I realized that I might never know. But could the connection, and the empathy, have been "true" nonetheless? Somehow, I was convinced that beneath the conscious intellect, we had wandered into the same dark, soul territory, and had met for a common lament, and a song.

As I prepared to leave Daybreak, I pondered the meaning of Rebecca's brief appearance. As she lay, naked and helpless in the neo-natal intensive care unit, she too presented an expressionless, inscrutable face, bearing a look that was more than her mortal self. I saw in her face a striking, unsettling resemblance to the other faces in our family--Margaret's, Sam's, and mine. It was as if, in looking into her dying face, I looked into a mirror, seeing both the "we" of our people and the beyondness, the edge of Nothing out of which we appear. Rebecca had come from Marg's body out of nowhere and disappeared into nature again, into the clouds, the ashes, the earth and the music. The *sui-zen* tradition of the *shakuhachi* was an earth music, testifying to a phenomenal, awesome flow of appearance and disappearance into nature and the Nothing that underlies it. In the Christian tradition, a perfect expression of the simultaneity of the apophatic and kataphatic.

In Zen and other Japanese arts, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of reality are meant to disappear into emptiness, so I sometimes feel as if I betray the *sui-zen* tradition when my *honkyoku*

express grief for Rebecca. Isn't the point of the *shakuhachi* to convey equanimity and mystery, rather than mourning, protest and passion? Nevertheless, the Dayspring Eucharist had given me permission to experience the precious, paradoxical truth that St. John of the Cross has so beautifully conveyed in his poetry--in silence is God's music, in Death is God's life, and in our mourning is God's grief.

On my last evening at Daybreak, a strong cool wind had come up out of the Arctic north. We could barely hear its whispered movements at the basement windows. Into the silence after communion, I played a *Shirabe* (panting breath) piece of *honkyoku*. *Shirabe* notes are blown in rhythmic, breathy gusts, echoing the weather in some northern mountains where there are Japanese *sui-zen* monasteries. For one moment during the piece, my thinking slipped over the horizon and "I" disappeared into the silence between the notes.

I only noticed this transformation later, as I was about to leave Daybreak. What had happened in that *Shirabe* at the evening Eucharist? It seemed that in the moment of "no-mind" there was only a long, winding, forested valley, untouched by human purposes, with only the wind rushing down the slopes of the surrounding mountains and over the tree tops and marsh grasses. But then, in the midst of that valley, a person appeared in my heart's eye, singing something I could not understand. Something haunting and exquisite. Who appeared? There was no distinct image, but I sensed that it was someone wise and humble, someone who stands in the original doorway where everything appears out of Nothing. Perhaps it was Christ, or Buddha singing with the wind in the valley.

That night it began to rain. Before going to bed, I walked into the darkened chapel to play one final *honkyoku* in thankfulness to the Daybreak community, and the *sui-zen* tradition. Letting my face and lips relax, the notes came from somewhere deep within. For an instant, the lowest note that the *shakuhachi* can play became a sacred plow, turning all my thoughts into the muddy earth.

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Contemplative Living in Ordinary Time
by Barbara E. Scott

Saturday afternoon, I'm the on-call chaplain at a local hospital. It's been a busy day. I responded to several calls; distributed Communion to the Catholic patients; followed up on patients I had seen yesterday, then sat, with aching feet, in the hospital chapel. I was too weary to make the Stations of the Cross as I had done the previous night, bringing the burdens of patients and their families to Jesus. I simply sit before the eucharistic presence allowing the people in my heart to spill out and fill the tiny sanctuary. There is John, in his late eighties, unable to hear me unless I shout, who asked if I would "pull up a chair, please" while he recited his litany of gratitude to his Creator. There is Martin, forty-eight, who has battled brain cancer for six years. In these last days of his life Martin was brought to the hospital to receive medication for his constant seizures. With Martin are his wife and grown daughter. They appear to me as two fair-haired angels at Martin's side, each holding one of Martin's hands, each stroking his hand with tenderness, each speaking words of love and comfort while Martin endures yet another seizure. There is young Sue, married just five months, who survived a car accident that killed her husband. There is Emma, ninety-four years young, who can't wait to receive Jesus in Communion and wonders if I have time to hear "all" her prayers. There is Mike who died in ER. I am waiting for his family; they live three hours away. The chapel is filled with these people. These are your people, Jesus. I bring them to you. Give them your healing love and peace. I allow Jesus to heal me, to minister to me. "Be still, Barbara. You are mine. I will refresh you. I will restore your strength like the eagle's." And then there are no words, only a presence.

Although I only work a few days a month as a hospital chaplain, this ministry is a major part of my contemplative journey. Being "on-call" is my contemplative fasting. Fasting from my own plans and desires, I am available to the needs of others. I am open and ready for the unknown. I surrender to the "I know not what." I respond to others' needs, not out of my strength and knowledge, but out of my nothingness. I become nothing so that Christ can become all. Surrendering, allowing, opening, listening, setting myself aside to let other people and their needs occupy my heart; trusting, waiting, feeling my inadequacies before so much pain and suffering. Figuratively, I am always taking my shoes off. I am always on holy ground. The Divine is close to the brokenhearted. And I am called to share this ground with the Divine and the Divine's beloved people. Each person I am called to be with, to remain with on this holy ground, becomes my teacher.

My contemplative abstinence comes from my work as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction requires me to abstain from my own insights, thoughts and ideas, to listen, really listen, with the directee to the Spirit working in the directee's life. I am only a guide. The real drama in spiritual direction is between the Spirit and the directee. I abstain. I set myself aside and wait upon others to disclose themselves to me until they have reached the place of greater self-awareness, self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-love that enables them to move deeper into the Divine. The people who have asked me to be their spiritual guide have blessed me with their requests, their trust, their self-disclosures. These too, are my teachers.

I have two contemplative communities. The larger one is the Association of Contemplative Sisters, of which I have been a member almost from its beginnings in 1969. In this sisterhood I have found some of my dearest and deepest friendships. In ACS I have been affirmed, loved, accepted, challenged and transformed. I need my contemplative sisters to mirror and model for me their unique contemplative life styles. In this sisterhood I have prayed and played, sang and danced, laughed and cried, shared deeply and sat in silence. I have served ACS in regional leadership roles for ten years.

In 1996 I was a candidate for national ACS President. Minutes before the discernment process that would decide who would be the next President, I felt misgivings well up inside of me: Someone else could do the work. I tasted, in some small way, Christ's bitterness in the Agony in the Garden, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Then a member of the ACS came up to me and said, "I can't imagine anyone being President... except you." Her comment startled me. Was she an angel sent into my garden? The misgivings dissipated. "Thy will be done." If I was elected I would embrace the office wholeheartedly. If not, fine. Through the whole discernment process I was at peace. My ego was sitting like a "weaned child on its mother's lap." Now, several months into the office, I realize why I had misgivings. The office of President was not for my glory, but for my growth. Being ACS President would transform me--is transforming me.

My other contemplative community is quite small, comprised of two humans, Sue and I, and three cats, Bo, Fro and LadyBug. Sue and I have lived and grown together for the past twenty-four years. We have quite different personalities. This difference has provided fuel for comfort and confrontation, compassion and challenge, for life-giving sharing, praying and companionship one another in our contemplative journeys.

Our home--a log house in the woods on a lake--is a dream fulfilled. The woods are home to a multitude of forest dwellers. In winter I ski and walk on the lake. In spring, summer, fall, I canoe the lake, venturing out in the early morning fog to await sunrise. In the morning light I have watched kingfishers diving and blue heron stalking the shoreline for breakfast. I have watched red-winged black birds guard their nests among the cat-tails; seen turtles of all sizes crawl out of the lake onto rocks and logs to sun themselves; witnessed loons teach their young to dive for fish. In the multicolored hues of sunset I have experienced dragonflies feasting on mosquitoes that hum around me. I have observed a mother duck leading her newborn chicks around the tall, safe grasses. I have been surprised by beaver slapping their tails on the water to protest my presence, the shotgun-like sound startling the deer that have come down to the lake to drink. I have learned to feel the drumming of grouse on a hollow log. I know how to remain absolutely still while a family of bear ambles toward a blueberry marsh. I have frightened numerous waterfowl and caused otter to slip into the water as I slowly made my way through the narrow half mile tributary that leads to another lake. I know where to find the bright yellow marsh marigolds covering swampy ground. I know where to discover blood root, trillium, Indian pipe and every kind of wildflower that grows in these woods. I have found blackberries and raspberries and know how to pick my share, leaving the rest for the forest dwellers. Night is special anytime of year. I have

counted falling stars, traced the Milky Way, have been surprised by a bolide, heard a meteor sizzle overhead and stared at dancing Northern Lights until I thought my neck would break from looking up so long.

These woods call me, again and again, to take my shoes off, for I am on sacred ground. Nature is my daily contemplative guide revealing to me the splendor hidden within my ordinary time.→

LONELY VALLEYS AND STRANGE ISLANDS:

CONTEMPLATIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH THE "OTHER"

by Mary Frohlich

*My beloved is the mountains
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes . . .*

These words from John of the Cross's Spiritual Canticle are a hauntingly beautiful evocation of contemplative experience. Yet just as watching an artfully-prepared travelogue about the depths of the Amazon jungle is very different from being lost there, so actually to traverse the "lonely valleys and strange islands" of the contemplative journey often seems painfully different from reading about it. One soon discovers that the contemplative life is a sort of wilderness safari in which survival depends on rootedness in the wisdom of others who have lived it deeply and who have been given the charism of guiding others with their teachings.

In the past, most Christians who were drawn to a contemplative life sought and found initiation into an integral tradition that offered teachers, companions, and fairly detailed guidelines for the journey. Yet today, many contemplative seekers find themselves without the benefit of such a single integral tradition. Meanwhile, we are presented with

unprecedented breadth of access to an array of spiritual practices, movements, and texts from both past and present. The riches of our own Christian past are an obvious source of nourishment for the aspiring Christian contemplative, yet many are repulsed when they encounter attitudes toward such matters as embodiedness, sexuality, gender, sin, penance, authority, and secularity that are profoundly at odds with the contemporary mentality. At the same time, through written materials, tapes, traveling teachers, and the internet, the wisdom and practices of all the world's religions are knocking on our doors. Mixed in with these ancient traditions--and sometimes not clearly distinguishable from them--are hundreds of "new" spiritualities. Ecological spiritualities, bodywork practices, women's and men's spiritualities, along with the not-so-new practices of the occult such as astrology, crystals, and psychic travel, beckon with promises of fresh and fulfilling approaches. It is a rare spiritual seeker today whose journey does not involve engagement with some or many of these spiritual expressions from beyond the "orthodox" Christian way.

All this is taking place within the context of the accelerating shift from "modern" to "postmodern" culture. Modernity was characterized by an optimistic belief in progress and in the possibility of rational--usually technological--solutions to all the world's ills. Postmodernity is characterized by the collapse of this optimism, accompanied by a radical destabilization of much of the normal human sense of rootedness in place, tradition, and conviction. The postmodern spiritual seeker is faced with multiple and fragmenting religious options, and more often than not has little guidance in how to discern and make choices among them.

THE DIVINE CONVERSATION

These times, then, are difficult--but they are also rich with possibility. Thomas Merton spoke of contemplative transformation

in terms of being freed from the machinations of the "false self" and letting the "true self" who lives with complete simplicity in God shine forth. No matter what the era or culture, the "false self" is always seeking to clothe itself with identity and prestige in terms of the standards of the world around it. The "true self," on the other hand, is naked, humble, and without prestige; it has absolutely nothing except God's love. Today's spiritual confusion may actually open a space for the shining forth of the true self; our poverty of certainty about the path may be the door to its unfolding;

A helpful metaphor for the life of the true self is that of "divine conversation." In this perspective we can view the contemplative journey as the gradual opening up of one's entire being to conversation with divine Spirit in any and all circumstances. This conversation, however, is deeply imbued with paradox. In its depths, the communion of God and the true self is beyond speech--indeed, beyond any expression other than the ineffable pouring out of self in love. Yet at the heart of its speechlessness the true self is overflowing with speech; it is called forth, commanded, to speak. While the false self rushes to speak in order to force its own imprint upon the world, the true self falls, sinks, is slain into speechlessness and rises up crying out--"a voice in the wilderness" commissioned to announce the coming of the Lord, and yet knowing its unworthiness to compose even a single syllable adequate to what it has seen.

It is from this divine conversation, with its dynamic of speechlessness and impelled speech, that the great religious classics are brought forth. These texts, rituals, practices, bear in their hearts a node or navel of strangeness: the touch of the divine mystery which cannot be spoken, the memory of the face of God which the merely human cannot see and live. And yet the great religious classics are also human compositions; the authors and redactors have made use of available resources of rhetorical flair, compositional skill, appeal to cultural expectations, and political string-pulling to enable their speech to be heard. Thus when we, from a great distance in time and culture, approach such a text in hopes of being invited

into its divine conversation, we usually cannot do so in the attitude of what Paul Ricoeur calls "first naivete"--that is, the assumption that we can immediately hear and respond to God's voice as our untutored ears hear it speaking through the written or enacted expression. Rather, we must strive for Ricoeur's "second naivete": a chastened attentiveness that trains mind and heart to trace a path in and through all the human factors--which, inevitably, include manifestations of sinfulness, foolishness, and oppression--in search of that of node of divine strangeness where for a timeless moment we stand in the communion that cannot be spoken.

CONVERSATION WITH THE "OTHER"

The notion of the human person as a "conversational self" is important in significant streams of contemporary philosophy and psychology. Human persons become who they are in interaction with others, especially through linguistically-shaped expression. In this chapter we are claiming this notion as the core of a spiritual anthropology--that is, an understanding of the human person in relation to God. An implication of the perspective being presented here is that the "divine conversation" is taking place in all sorts of interactions--not only those in which a person has a clear understanding of a "relationship with God." Indeed, the premise of this chapter is that often the conversation progresses through our encounters with seemingly alien "others" who shock us, fascinate us, seduce us, infuriate us, or otherwise rattle our most cherished assumptions. Each such encounter challenges us to discern the voice of God within it, and to respond appropriately. It is through these very concrete interactions, in which our deepest personhood is called into both speechlessness and speech, that the true self gradually builds its nest.

An example will illustrate. A few years ago I participated in a traditional Zen retreat of the Korean Kwam Um school

during which we were trained in how to take our meals according to a highly stylized ancient ritual. The prayers and gestures preceding the meal, the number and arrangement of bowls and utensils, the foods and the way they were served, the procedures for eating and for cleaning up--every detail had meaning and was to be done "just so." Despite my best efforts to enter into the ritual, I remained mystified by much of what was being done. Nevertheless, the experience had a significant impact on me; I gained a kind of primal insight into the life-world of Korean Zen, in a way that would never have been possible simply from reading about Zen or even from just doing Zen meditation practice apart from its traditional context. Indeed, for some weeks afterward I was aware that the frame through which I viewed my everyday world had been shifted by that experience, in ways that were difficult to articulate and yet quite significant. The best I can say is that I was awakened to a dimension of ritual and rhythm and solemnity pervading and deeply grounding my being in the world. At the same time, many aspects of the experience still struck me as strange, antiquated, and uncomfortable.

In this example, I "conversed" with the Zen ritual as I tried both to act with integrity within my pre-established perspective on the world, and to be open to engagement in the very different values, hopes, assumptions, and relationships that this meal-ritual embodies. Yet the difficulty and confusion of the encounter points to the need to enter into such conversations with more sophisticated tools of analysis and reflection. The remainder of this chapter explores the value of developing a repertoire of several different such modes of approach to the spiritual "other."

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION

Conversations come in many varieties, ranging from uncommitted chit-chat to deep and long-term interactions that draw upon many different dimensions of our personhood. The approach I am proposing is more like the latter. Its assumption is that

we desire to enter into the conversation with a "strange" spiritual tradition with a considerable degree of seriousness and commitment. This means giving the conversation enough time and enough focused attention to allow its real potential to unfold. The seriousness of our commitment, of course, includes the possibility that at some point we may recognize that it is time to withdraw from a conversation that is not bearing fruit or that is moving in a direction which we cannot in conscience follow.

As we move into the initial stages of the conversation, it is a good idea to do a bit of clarifying reflection on some very basic questions.

-- What is my primary identity as I enter this conversation? Am I coming as a disciple? A seeker? A scholar?

A tourist? A challenger?

-- Who do I belong to? What commitments, relationships, shared belief-systems, etc., shape the world from which I enter the conversation?

-- Why am I in this conversation? What goals, desires, agendas do I bring to it?

-- Who am I in conversation with? What commitments, relationships, shared belief-systems, agendas, etc. shape the other's world and way of speaking?

It is good to ask these questions at the beginning--and to come back to them from time to time as the conversation progresses.

The conversation itself, if it is a deep one, will change our answers to each of these questions. We will most likely discover new, previously unheeded dimensions of our "belonging," and we may even see shifts in our sense of who we belong to. We will surely learn much more about the world of the other--and in some cases, we will discover that our initial response to the

question of "Who am I in conversation with?" involved a great deal of misconstrual of the reality of our conversation partner.

For example, perhaps someone finds herself drawn to an engagement with the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, a twelfth century Umbrian (a region in what is now central Italy). Reflecting on the above questions, she notes that she is coming as a spiritual seeker (rather than as a scholar or a critic), that her own religious "home" has been shaped by the writings of Thomas Merton as well as those of contemporary feminists and ecologists, that she hopes to find nourishment for her own discovery of God in nature, and that what she knows about St. Francis is that he wrote the "Canticle of Brother Sun" and that he lived joyfully and generously in relation to the natural world. Her main immediate access to Francis' spirituality is through an anthology of his writings that she has obtained from the public library.

After reading a few texts, including the "Admonitions" and some of Francis's letters, she realizes that the world he presents there is more frequently concerned with issues such as devotion to the eucharist, penitential practice, and reverence for the clergy than with joy in nature. She also realizes more clearly how far she has moved from identification with these aspects of her own Roman Catholic roots. If she is going to pursue this conversation further, she will have to be open both to listening deeply to what Francis has to say about these topics, and to doing her best to articulate responsibly her own questions and doubts about how this can be related to the aspects of Francis's spirituality that had originally attracted her. Indeed, a fruitful next step might well be to seek out others who have been engaged in this conversation for a longer time--present-day members of the religious communities that carry on Francis's heritage, for example. Yet even by having entered this far into the conversation, she has been changed--she has grown in awareness of the truth both of who she is and of who another is.

FOUR WAYS OF ENGAGING

We can engage in human and divine conversations in more than one way. The following are four approaches that we can take to engagement with the spiritual "other":

1. We can enter the world of the other with reverence and the expectation of being taught, like a disciple.
2. We can seek to know the world of the other as objectively as possible.
3. We can resist and critique the world of the other.
4. We can "play with" the world of the other, creatively reinterpreting it and then letting it creatively reinterpret us as well.

Very often we will find ourselves naturally coming into a conversation from one of these positions, with little awareness of, or openness to, the alternative positions. Many of us have an ancestral tradition, a favorite saint, or a special practice that we almost unconsciously approach from position one--reverence and an attitude of discipleship. For me, this is the Carmelite tradition of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. When I am preparing to teach an academic class, however, even if my topic is the Carmelites I will most likely be leaning toward position two--understanding as objectively as possible. At other times I may approach a new practice or text with the adversarial attitude of position three--either because I am coming with a critical method in hand that I want to try out, or because I already know that it embodies something that offends my sense of value and propriety. Finally, when I am searching for a creative way to resolve a problem in my life or in the life of my ecclesial community, I may find myself naturally in position four--a playful and creative interaction with a spiritual expression as I let it open up new vistas of possibility for me.

Even though we typically find a "natural" stance in relation to spiritual traditions in one of these positions, we often

create problems for ourselves when we make the assumption that this position is the only possible one. For example, perhaps I see the only available stance toward the Desert Fathers and Mothers as one of discipleship. When I read in paragraph #6 of Athanasius's Life of Antony that after many efforts to tempt Antony the evil power henceforth presented himself "in the visage of a black boy," I may respond to this as a racist statement and regard my only options as either to repress my anger or to put the text aside in disgust. A stance of resistance and critique may indeed be needed, yet if once again I take that as the only appropriate stance I may never allow myself to glimpse the potential depth of spiritual wisdom that this great classic manifests. Use of contextualizing scholarship (position three), on the other hand, could help to explain the cultural genesis of Athanasius's image, while imaginative reflection (position four)--perhaps drawing upon the Jungian insight that the "shadow" or repressed dimension of a white person is often represented in dreams as a black person--could explore more positive meanings to balance the distasteful ones.

In short, we need the perspectives of all four positions if we are to engage fully in the conversation with spiritualities that are "other" in relation to ourselves. Let us, then, explore each of these positions more fully, and look at some examples of how they might enrich the living of a contemplative vocation.

Discipleship

In the first position, my primary identity as I approach the conversation is that of a disciple who belongs to (or wishes to belong to) the tradition or community of this spiritual expression. I come with a deep eagerness and openness to being formed by it. I believe that I can trust the world into which it invites me, and I allow myself to be vulnerable to it. The story above about the Zen meal ritual illustrates how deeply this kind of trusting participation can affect one, even when the tradition participated in is

an "alien" one.

Closer to home, the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* ("holy reading") is an example of an approach to a spiritual text as a disciple. In lectio one reads slowly, attentively, prayerfully, pausing frequently to ponder and to enter deeply into the movements of mind and heart that are inspired by the text. One may spend an hour, or even many hours, with a single paragraph--just as one would joyfully "waste" time in attending to someone one loves deeply. In Christian tradition it is scripture, above all, that deserves the time, trust, and tenderness of lectio. To shift into an analytical or critical mode would be antithetical to this mode of prayer. If questions do arise, one trustingly brings them to prayer rather than allowing them to distract one from one's singlehearted purpose of hearing the Lord speak through the text.

This reckless pouring out of the precious ointment of time, combined with a constant and singlehearted focus on the Beloved, is profoundly countercultural in today's world of tight schedules and short attention spans. One who submits regularly to the discipline of such a conversation will find a deeper, more attentive, more gentle self being shaped by it.

An attitude of discipleship is obviously not appropriate if one does not have a sense of trust and an eagerness to be instructed by the given spiritual expression. On the other hand, in many cases it may be difficult even to gain an inkling of the potential that is present if one is not able to enter into this attitude at least tentatively. An example is a Western Christian approaching an icon--a core spiritual expression from Eastern Christianity. The natural tendency may be to regard the icon as "just a picture" or as on a par with other works of art with which one is familiar. Until one learns how to gaze with a deep openness and an expectation to "see the Lord," one remains uninitiated as to the true nature of the icon. No amount of study or reflection about the history, theology, or artistic techniques of the icon can replace the insight gained from a single moment of experiencing the inflow of divine life in the presence of the icon--an experience unavailable unless one approaches with the

reverence of a disciple.

The attitude of discipleship has traditionally been the stance of aspiring contemplatives toward the practices, teachings, and texts of their own spiritual community. It is the attitude within which one may allow oneself to be vulnerable enough to let go of words and sink into speechless communion. Yet, in the postmodern context, spiritual seekers frequently are not in a position of full discipleship; they may be exploring a new or alien spiritual tradition, or they may be experiencing discomfort and distrust even within their own native tradition. The postmodern contemplative usually cannot rest in Ricoeur's "first naivete," in which the given account of the world is accepted without questioning. Let us explore some other stances that may assist our eventual arrival at a chastened "second naivete" that has faced and accepted the ambiguities introduced by critical scholarship.

Contextualizing Scholarship

A second stance, typical of the modern world, is that of the student or scholar seeking knowledge about the historical and cultural setting of the spirituality one hopes to engage with. Here the "community" to which one belongs (whether explicitly or only implicitly) is that of the scholar. The goal of entering the conversation in this way is to understand the details of what is said and why it is said in relationship to scholarly knowledge of its context of origin. In doing this, one consciously moves away from the natural but naive tendency to interpret another's expression in terms of one's own worldview.

For example, sometimes Euroamericans who are attracted to Native American spirituality only perceive and affirm those aspects that correspond to needs within Euroamerican culture. These needs, which are valid in themselves, may include the desire to get closer to the natural world, to move at a slower and more sensitive pace, and to be energized by

communal rituals such as dancing, chanting, sharing the ceremonial pipe, or entering the sweat lodge. Many Euroamericans have enthusiastically embraced Native American spiritual teachers, but too often this is done while ignoring or misconstruing important dimensions of the cultural, historical, and religious framework from which the Native Americans speak. At worst, this can result in serious distortion and exploitation of Native American culture and religion.

Let us look briefly at some of the influences that lie behind the proclamation of the Sioux prophet *Lame Deer*.

Eighty years ago our people danced the Ghost Dance, singing and dancing until they dropped from exhaustion, swooning, fainting, seeing visions. They danced in this way to bring back their dead, to bring back the buffalo. A prophet told them that through the power of the Ghost Dance the earth would roll up like a carpet, with the white man's works--the fences and the mining towns and their warehouses, the factories and the farms with their stinking, unnatural animals, the railroads and the telegraph poles, the whole works. And underneath this rolled-up white man's world we would find again the flowering prairie, unspoiled, with its herds of buffalo and antelope, its clouds of birds, belonging to everyone, enjoyed by all.

I guess it was not time for this to happen, but it is coming back, I feel it warming my bones. Not the old Ghost Dance, not the rolling up--but a new-old spirit, not only among Indians but among whites and blacks, too, especially among young people.^{xliv}

To fully appreciate *Lame Deer's* spirituality and the practices he recommends, it is helpful to know something about the nineteenth century context of the original Ghost Dance as well as about the present-day context and promoters of his prophecies. Many aspects of the Ghost Dance movement and its accompanying prophecies have remarkable parallels in the responses of native peoples elsewhere in the world to their invasion and oppression by technologically superior whites. One scholar notes that the nineteenth century Native American prophetic movements were "influenced by Euroamerican models . . . including Christian biblical sources, missionaries, enthusiastic conversion, and the Great Awakening with its characteristic apocalyptic and millennial expectations."^{xlv} The original prophetic movements were ethnocentric, intended to revitalize the

Native peoples over against the whites. Today's prophets--including Lame Deer--operate in a very different context, however; important influences on them include the New Age and ecology movements, and they often are promoted by whites as much as by Native Americans.

Thus, scholarly study of history (political, economic, and cultural as well as religious), of the psychology of domination and oppression, and of cross-cultural patterns in religious experience can considerably change our perspective on what Lame Deer is saying. This kind of information may not carry an immediate charge of spiritual excitement for us, but it is essential if we are going to enter an exchange with him on the basis of reality rather than on the basis of romanticized or prejudiced assumptions. This type of study by no means needs to belittle Lame Deer's stature as a spiritual teacher; rather, it is a necessary part of our really allowing him to be a teacher for us. Rather than conforming his words and practices to a comfortable shape within our world, we can allow him to share with us the contours of the world in which he actually lives.

One does not necessarily have to learn highly specialized scholarly methods and skills in order to relate to a spiritual expression in this way. In approaching written texts, the non-specialist can learn a great deal simply by practicing what is called "close reading." Close reading involves reading very carefully and alertly, with specific questions and interests in mind. One notes any details or patterns that might be relevant to one's quest, as well as new questions that are stimulated by the reading. Often one returns to read certain sections a second or third time--not, as in *lectio divina*, to immerse oneself in their spiritual meaning, but to build up a clearer and more objective picture of the setting and meaning implied by the text. A similar method of close, alert observation in search of specific kinds of information or insight can be applied to non-textual aspects of spiritual traditions.

It is often remarkable how much can be learned from this sort of practice, even before making use of secondary

literature. We can take as an example the following paragraph from Jerome's "Life of Marcella," in which he describes in detail the virtue and holiness of this great lay contemplative of the early fifth century.

While Marcella was thus serving the Lord in holy tranquility, there arose in those provinces a tornado of heresy which threw everything into confusion . . . Next came the scandalous version of Origen's book On First Principles, and that "fortunate" disciple who would have been indeed fortunate had he never fallen in with such a master. . . . You will say, what has this to do with the praises of Marcella? She it was who furnished witnesses first taught by them and then carried away by their heretical teaching. She it was who showed how large a number they had deceived and who brought up against them the impious books On First Principles, books which were passing from hand to hand after being "improved" by the hand of the scorpion. She it was lastly who called on the heretics in letter after letter to appear in their own defence. They did not indeed venture to come, for they were so conscience-stricken that they let the case go against them by default rather than face their accusers and be convicted by them. This glorious victory originated with Marcella, she was the source and cause of this great blessing. You who shared the honour with her know that I speak the truth. You know too that of many incidents I only mention a few, not to tire out the reader by a wearisome recapitulation. Were I to say more, ill-natured persons might fancy me, under the pretext of commending a woman's virtues, to be giving vent to my own rancour.^{xlvi}

Close reading of this passage provides us with a quite detailed picture of a major feud among early Christians. We learn that--at least from Jerome's point of view--Jerome and Marcella were closely allied, and that they were heatedly opposing proponents of Origen's teachings. We glimpse the venom of Jerome's personality, and the intelligence and power of Marcella's. We hear veiled allusions to specific persons and incidents that we could undoubtedly track down in secondary sources if we wanted to. We also gain some new questions: What is the other side of this story? Why was this holy woman devoting so much energy to this feud? What really was the character of her relationship with Jerome, from her point of view? We could research such questions; but even if we do not, they can open up many new insights into Marcella's life as a lay contemplative struggling with the cultural, political, and theological currents of her own era.

On first glance this stance, with its home in the world of academia, may not have such an obvious relevance to the

contemplative quest. In fact, however, the very alienness of the spiritual expressions one encounters often demands that one enter upon at least a minimal degree of this type of study. It is uncomfortable, and at times even inauthentic, to take a stance of discipleship towards something that one does not understand well. As questions of fact or meaning arise, the sincere seeker wants to clarify the matter in order to know how to respond appropriately. Movement back and forth between the stance of discipleship and the stance of contextualizing scholarship can be enriching to both, as insights emerge in each stance that can be explored further in the other. It is important, however, to be aware of the distinct character of each, and--in Bernard Lonergan's astute phrase--"to know what you are doing when you are doing it." Otherwise one's scholarship may be mushy and one's discipleship shallow.

Critical Analysis

The need for yet another stance arises because there are occasions when a spirituality comes across to us not as merely puzzling, but as actually offensive. This third stance can be characterized as that of a critic who belongs to (or stands in solidarity with) an oppressed or marginalized element of humanity. The goal of conversation from this stance is to find a way to resist and reorient the oppressive implications of the expression. Often, when we find ourselves taking up this stance unreflectively--that is, when we have an immediate "gut reaction" of anger, disgust, or another negative emotion--our next move is to reject or belittle the phenomenon that we are criticizing. Yet in doing so we may lose the opportunity not only to have an impact on the other, but also to be enriched by what it does have to offer.

A reflective and methodical approach to critique typically involves applying a form of analysis that is not native to the world of the expression itself, so that its problematic hidden assumptions can be brought to light and criticized. An example is

William Beers' detailed psychoanalytical interpretation of rituals of blood sacrifice in terms of male narcissistic needs to separate from and control women.^{xlvii} Beers works with this interpretation in relation to both Melanesian pig sacrifice and Episcopalian eucharistic sacrifice. The unveiling of psychological parallels between such diverse rituals--one very "foreign," the other quite familiar--can be unsettling, but it can also open up much-needed, realistically-grounded reflection on the arduous and lengthy work that will be needed if we are ever to change such oppressive patterns.

As with the contextualization stance, there are many specialized approaches to critical analysis. Feminist, Jungian, and liberation theology methods are all examples of approaches that have gained considerable popular appeal in recent years. Here is an example of an analysis of Teresa of Avila's writings that employs the methods of both feminist and rhetorical criticism.

The assertion that Teresa "wrote like a woman" needs to be made with numerous qualifications. We can no longer accept notions of a "deliciously" feminine style, that is, the assumption that her linguistic patterns reflect an innate feminine mystique. Teresa consciously adopted, as a rhetorical strategy, linguistic features that were associated with women, in the sense that women's discourse coincided with the realm of low-prestige, nonpublic discourse. Teresa's feminine rhetoric was affiliative, but this does not mean that it was especially tender or delicate. Rather, by selectively adapting features from the language of subordinate groups, Teresa hoped to create a subversive discourse that was at once public and private, didactic and supportive, authoritarian and familiar. Her strategy was of necessity duplicitous. Teresa's rhetoric for women was an ironic rhetoric, used, first of all, to gain access to her audience and, secondly, to reinforce the bonds of a small interpretive community. As that community grew, Teresa proved that she was capable of modulating her strategy and her ironically feminine style.^{xlviii}

Once again, the question arises as to how such critical analysis can be related to growth as a contemplative. A contemplative seeks gentle openness to interior depth, whereas this approach is often aggressively analytical and oriented to an agenda of social and political change. It is certainly true that not all critical analysis is of assistance to contemplative development. It

can be, however, if the larger conversation within which the need for critical analysis arises is one that seeks to clear obstacles from the path of deeper openness to truth.

The divine conversation is not only a call to discover God's presence in the depths of interior solitude; it is also a summons to recognize God's presence in the world, and especially in the neglected, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Full openness to the divine conversation includes a desire to have the scales taken from our eyes so that we can see, name, and respond appropriately to the ways in which the world's structures benefit some and cause suffering for others. Critical analysis aims to do this systematically. It is very much a part of the total picture of contemplative formation.

Imaginative Reflection

The fourth stance illustrated here is in some ways the freest. It involves entering the conversation with a kind of playful and yet practical attitude that seeks to discover a fresh, creative way of being and acting. Whereas each of the other three stances discussed here place the main focus on attending to the world of the other--whether by entering it, understanding it, or criticizing it--in this stance the main focus is on giving the other a place in one's own world.

Some aspects of what is today called "theological reflection" have something in common with this approach. In relation to contemplative formation, theological reflection may be especially appropriate for those who have ministering roles--perhaps teaching or leading others in contemplative practice--and who want to discover the creative and empowering potential of a given spiritual expression for the community. There are a variety of methods of theological reflection that have been developed for use by pastoral ministers. A typical approach is that spelled out by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John DeBeer in their book, The Art of Theological Reflection. They suggest four steps:

1. Focus on some aspect of experience.
2. Describe that experience to identify the heart of the matter. (Often the "heart of the matter" can be summed up in a rich image.)
3. Explore the Heart of the Matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage.
4. Identify from this conversation new truths and meanings for living.^{xlix}

In approaching an unfamiliar spiritual tradition or practice through this method of theological reflection, one begins by attending closely to the experience that is stirred up by one's initial contact. One looks especially for a catalyzing image that seems to express the central character of the experience. This image leads into reflection on related themes from theology or from spiritual traditions that are more familiar. When this reflection stage is culminating, one searches for the implications in terms of changed beliefs and behaviors.

For example, a Christian encountering the practice called "Transformational Breathing" is led through a series of relaxation and breathing exercises until he enters a balmy state of blissful feelings. Bringing this experience to theological reflection, he searches for a catalyzing image. Perhaps the words that seem to him to capture the gentleness, coolness, and sacredness of his experience are "holy breezes." Moving on to dialogue with Christian theology and spirituality, he reflects on the biblical imagery of breath and wind, and is especially struck by the story from 1 Kings 19 where Elijah hears God's call in a gentle breeze. He does some reading on the theology of the Holy Spirit and on the mutual indwelling of God and the human soul. The culmination of the process for him is a rather subtle shift in his way of envisioning God's presence to him: God breathes from deep within, rather than simply being close by. The transformational breathing method, which is not in itself a Christian practice, is integrated into his Christian spirituality.

An important reason for placing this stance last is that it can easily be a temptation for contemporary people to begin and end here, in a rather light and free appropriation of the "other" according to the needs of the moment. Yet there can also be a poignant seriousness about conversation in this mode. In the midst of our play a flash of divine light sometimes breaks through the pretensions of the false self, taking us by surprise with the simplicity of its truth.

CONCLUSION

The Sufi poet Rumi¹ offers this playful wisdom on the joys, confusions, and necessary discernments in our pursuit of "divine conversation":

THE MANY WINES

*God has given us a dark wine so potent that,
drinking it, we leave the two worlds.*

*God has put into the form of hashish a power
to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.*

*God has made sleep so
that it erases every thought.*

*God made Majnun love Layla so much that
just her dog would cause confusion in him.*

*There are thousands of wines
that can take over our minds.*

*Don't think all ecstasies
are the same!*

*Jesus was lost in his love for God.
His donkey was drunk with barley.*

*Drink from the presence of saints,
not from those other jars.*

*Every object, every being
is a jar full of delight.*

*Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.*

*Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,*

*the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."*

*Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when it's been untied,
and is just ambling about.*

On one level, it is in poems such as this one and the one that introduced our reflection that we find the most profound guidance for the contemplative journey. John of the Cross and Rumi traveled the whole distance of this way; it is such as they who can speak with authority on its farther reaches. Yet as they remind us, no matter how well prepared we are we will nevertheless sometimes find ourselves lost in a lonely valley, abandoned on a strange island, or drunk on a confusing wine, with none of our maps or strategies seeming to be of any assistance.

In such times, we learn in ever-deeper ways how true it is that for the contemplative, the stance of discipleship remains the primary one. It is there above all that one cultivates the interior depth of openness within which the springs of

God's life will eventually flow in abundance. In times of lostness and desolation, there is often little that can be done except to affirm one's faith in the Divine Teacher and to trudge forward in emptiness and hope.

Yet discipleship can never be directed only to the transcendent God; it also must have a human face. Within the contemporary context, the question of how, when, and with whom to open oneself trustingly to discipleship is often complex. Living the contemplative life within the circumstances of the postmodern world--especially outside of a monastic context--will require of us the ability to know how and when to employ each of the four stances discussed here, and others as well. Contemplative discipleship lived in the midst of, and on behalf of, the whole created world's painful struggle toward the reign of God necessarily is that of Ricoeur's "second naivete," in which one returns to radical openness and teachability having fully integrated the exercise of one's human capacity to understand, to criticize, and to act.

LONELY VALLEYS AND STRANGE ISLANDS:
CONTEMPLATIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH THE "OTHER"

by Mary Frohlich

*My beloved is the mountains
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes . . .*

These words from John of the Cross's Spiritual Canticle are a hauntingly beautiful evocation of contemplative experience. Yet just as watching an artfully-prepared travelogue about the depths of the Amazon jungle is very different from being lost there, so actually to traverse the "lonely valleys and strange islands" of the contemplative journey often seems painfully different from reading about it. One soon discovers that the contemplative life is a sort of wilderness safari in which survival depends on rootedness in the wisdom of others who have lived it deeply and who have been given the charism of guiding others with their teachings.

In the past, most Christians who were drawn to a contemplative life sought and found initiation into an integral tradition that offered very specific guidelines for every aspect of the journey. Yet today, many contemplative seekers find themselves without the benefit of such a single integral tradition. Meanwhile, we are presented with unprecedented breadth of access to an array of spiritual practices, movements, and texts from both past and present. The increasingly accessible riches of our own Christian past would seem to provide an obvious source of nourishment for the aspiring Christian contemplative. Yet many encounter serious obstacles to drawing on these classical expressions, finding in them attitudes toward such matters as embodiedness, sexuality, gender, sin, penance, authority, and secularity that are profoundly at odds with the contemporary mentality.

Thus, even if the seeker stays "home" within the Christian tradition, he or she does not escape the experience of strangeness and even alienation.

At the same time, through written materials, tapes, traveling teachers, and the internet, the wisdom and practices of all the world's religions are knocking on our doors. Mixed in with these ancient traditions--and sometimes not clearly distinguishable from them--are hundreds of "new" spiritualities. Ecological spiritualities, bodywork practices, women's and men's spiritualities, along with the not-so-new practices of the occult such as astrology, crystals, and psychic travel, beckon with promises of fresh and fulfilling approaches. It is a rare spiritual seeker today whose journey does not involve engagement with some or many of these spiritual expressions from beyond the "orthodox" Christian way.

All this is taking place within the context of the accelerating shift from "modern" to "postmodern" culture. Modernity was characterized by an optimistic belief in progress and in the possibility of rational--usually technological--solutions to all the world's ills. Postmodernity is characterized by the collapse of this optimism, accompanied by a radical destabilization of much of the normal human sense of rootedness in place, tradition, and conviction. Faced with multiple and fragmenting religious options, some seekers may be blessed with finding a spiritual teacher from whom they can regularly receive individualized guidance. It is not unusual, however, to find oneself having to patch together the required wisdom by trial-and-error mining of a variety of traditions, texts, and practices.

THE DIVINE CONVERSATION

These times, then, are difficult and confusing ones for the contemplative seeker; yet they are also rich with possibility. Thomas Merton spoke of contemplative transformation in terms of being freed from the machinations of the "false self" and letting the "true self" who lives with complete simplicity in God shine forth. No matter what the era or culture, the "false self" is always seeking to clothe

itself with identity and prestige in terms of the standards of the world around it. The "true self," on the other hand, is naked, humble, and without prestige; it has absolutely nothing except God's love.

A helpful metaphor for the life of the true self is that of "divine conversation." In this perspective we can view the contemplative journey as the gradual opening up of one's entire being to conversation with divine Spirit in any and all circumstances. This conversation is not, however, a cozy chat on one's own home ground. Like Christ, who had nowhere to lay his head, we repeatedly find ourselves feeling dislocated, confused, even abandoned, as the context and language of the conversation shift around us. Over and over again, the Spirit refuses to settle down permanently in any of the tents we put up.

In this perspective, the great gift that the postmodern situation of fragmenting traditions offers--if one can bear it--is that it frequently and forcefully requires us to say goodbye to our favorite tents as we learn how to live as pilgrims, open to the foreign tongues, disorienting silences, and radical demands of the divine conversation within which our true self is eternally being called into being.

CONVERSATION WITH THE "OTHER"

In the journeys of contemporary contemplatives fascinating, and yet also troubling, encounters with "otherness" are common. A few years ago I participated in a traditional Zen retreat of the Korean Kwam Um school during which we were trained in how to take our meals according to a highly stylized ancient ritual. The prayers and gestures preceding the meal, the number and arrangement of bowls and utensils, the foods and the way they were served, the procedures for eating and for cleaning up--every detail had meaning and was to be done "just so." Despite my best efforts to enter into the ritual, I remained mystified by much of what was being done. Nevertheless, the experience had a significant impact on me; I gained a kind of primal insight into the life-world of Korean Zen, in a way that would never have been possible simply from reading about Zen or even from just doing Zen

meditation practice apart from its traditional context. Indeed, for some weeks afterward I was aware that the frame through which I viewed my everyday world had been shifted by that experience, in ways that were difficult to articulate and yet quite significant. The best I can say is that I was awakened to a dimension of ritual and rhythm and solemnity pervading and deeply grounding my being in the world. At the same time, many aspects of the experience still struck me as strange, antiquated, and uncomfortable.

This is an example of how the "divine conversation" discussed above does not take place only interiorly. Our God addresses us through the many "others" who shock us, fascinate us, seduce us, infuriate us, or otherwise rattle our most cherished assumptions. Each such encounter challenges us to discern the voice of God within it, and to respond appropriately. It is through these very concrete interactions, in which our deepest personhood must both listen and speak, that the character of who we are in the world is shaped and reshaped until only the simplicity of the true self remains.

Indeed, the notion of the basic character of the human person as being a "conversational self" is a very significant theme in contemporary philosophical and psychological thought. The model of the conversational self proposes that the self is fundamentally both internally centered and radically relational. The self, like a partner in conversation, has an interior point of view and at the same time is vulnerable to change in relation to those with whom it interacts. The conversational self is always in interaction and always changing, and yet it is not merely "knocked around" by events. The authenticity of the conversational self is marked by attentive openness to others' communications, by truthfulness, discernment, and responsibility in one's communications to others, and by the capacity for responsive change without forsaking one's own integrity. Here, the model of the conversational self is presented not simply as a theory for the sake of argument, but as the basis of some practical suggestions for how the contemporary religious seeker can interact authentically with traditions, texts, and practices that derive from seemingly alien life-worlds.

In the above example, I could be said to be "conversing" with the Zen ritual as I tried both to

act with integrity within my pre-established perspective on the world, and to be open to engagement in the very different values, hopes, assumptions, and relationships that this meal-ritual embodies. Yet the difficulty and confusion that one often experiences in such encounters points to the need to enter into the conversation with greater conscious attention to how one is doing so. The remainder of this chapter explores the value of developing a repertoire of several different such modes of approach to the spiritual "other."

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION

Conversations come in many varieties, ranging from uncommitted chit-chat to deep and long-term interactions that draw upon many different dimensions of our personhood. The approach I am proposing is more like the latter. Its assumption is that we desire to enter into the conversation with a "strange" spiritual tradition with a considerable degree of seriousness and commitment. This means giving the conversation enough time and enough focused attention to allow its real potential to unfold. The seriousness of our commitment, of course, includes the possibility that at some point we may recognize that it is time to withdraw from a conversation that is not bearing fruit or that is moving in a direction which we cannot in conscience follow.

As we move into the initial stages of the conversation, it is a good idea to do a bit of clarifying reflection on some very basic questions.

- What is my primary identity as I enter this conversation? Am I coming as a disciple? A seeker?
A scholar? A tourist? A challenger?
- Who do I belong to? What commitments, relationships, shared belief-systems, etc., shape the world from which I enter the conversation?
- Why am I in this conversation? What goals, desires, agendas do I bring to it?
- Who am I in conversation with? What commitments, relationships, shared belief-systems, agendas, etc. shape the other's world and way of speaking?

It is good to ask these questions at the beginning--and to come back to them from time to time as the conversation progresses. The conversation itself, if it is a deep one, will change our answers to each of these questions. We will most likely discover new, previously unheeded dimensions of our "belonging," and we may even see shifts in our sense of who we belong to. We will surely learn much more about the world of the other--and in some cases, we will discover that our initial response to the question of "Who am I in conversation with?" involved a great deal of misconstrual of the reality of our conversation partner.

For example, perhaps someone finds herself drawn to an engagement with the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, a twelfth century Umbrian (a region in what is now central Italy). Reflecting on the above questions, she notes that she is coming as a spiritual seeker (rather than as a scholar or a critic), that her own religious "home" has been shaped by the writings of Thomas Merton as well as those of contemporary feminists and ecologists, that she hopes to find nourishment for her own discovery of God in nature, and that what she knows about St. Francis is that he wrote the "Canticle of Brother Sun" and that he lived joyfully and generously in relation to the natural world. Her main immediate access to Francis' spirituality is through an anthology of his writings that she has obtained from the public library.

After reading a few texts, including the "Admonitions" and some of Francis's letters, she realizes that the world he presents there is more frequently concerned with issues such as devotion to the eucharist, penitential practice, and reverence for the clergy than with joy in nature. She also realizes more clearly how far she has moved from identification with these aspects of her own Roman Catholic roots. If she is going to pursue this conversation further, she will have to be open both to listening deeply to what Francis has to say about these topics, and to doing her best to articulate responsibly her own questions and doubts about how this can be related to the aspects of Francis's spirituality that had originally attracted her. Indeed, a fruitful next step might well be to seek out

others who have been engaged in this conversation for a longer time--present-day members of the religious communities that carry on Francis's heritage, for example. Yet even by having entered this far into the conversation, she has been changed--she has grown in awareness of the truth both of who she is and of who another is.

FOUR WAYS OF ENGAGING

There are actually a series of distinct stances from which we can enter such a conversation. Each in its own way can contribute something important to contemplative development. I would propose the following as four important ways in which we may converse with the spiritual "other":

1. We can enter the world of the other with reverence and the expectation of being taught, like a disciple.
2. We can seek to know the world of the other as objectively as possible.
3. We can resist and critique the world of the other.
4. We can "play with" the world of the other, creatively reinterpreting it and then letting it creatively reinterpret us as well.

Very often we will find ourselves naturally coming into a conversation from one of these positions, with little awareness of, or openness to, the alternative positions. Many of us have an ancestral tradition, a favorite saint, or a special practice that we almost unconsciously approach from position one--reverence and an attitude of discipleship. For me, this is the Carmelite tradition of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. When I am preparing to teach an academic class, however, even if my topic is the Carmelites I will most likely be leaning toward position two--understanding as objectively as possible. At other times I may approach a new practice or text with the adversarial attitude of position three--either because I am coming with a critical method in hand that I want to try out, or because I already know that it embodies something that offends my sense of value and

propriety. Finally, when I am searching for a creative way to resolve a problem in my life or in the life of my ecclesial community, I may find myself naturally in position four--a playful and creative interaction with a spiritual expression as I let it open up new vistas of possibility for me.

Even though we typically find a "natural" stance in relation to spiritual traditions in one of these positions, we often create problems for ourselves when we make the assumption that this position is the only possible one. For example, perhaps I see the only available stance toward the Desert Fathers and Mothers as one of discipleship. When I read in paragraph #6 of Athanasius's Life of Antony that after many efforts to tempt Antony the evil power henceforth presented himself "in the visage of a black boy," I may respond to this as a racist statement and regard my only options as either to repress my anger or to put the text aside in disgust. A stance of resistance and critique may indeed be needed, yet if once again I take that as the only appropriate stance I may never allow myself to glimpse the potential depth of spiritual wisdom that this great classic manifests. Use of contextualizing scholarship (position three), on the other hand, could help to explain the cultural genesis of Athanasius's image, while imaginative reflection (position four)--perhaps drawing upon the Jungian insight that the "shadow" or repressed dimension of a white person is often represented in dreams as a black person--could explore more positive meanings to balance the distasteful ones.

In short, we need the perspectives of all four positions if we are to engage fully in the conversation with spiritualities that are "other" in relation to ourselves. Let us, then, explore each of these positions more fully, and look at some examples of how they might enrich the living of a contemplative vocation.

Discipleship

In the first position, my primary identity as I approach the conversation is that of a disciple who belongs to (or wishes to belong to) the tradition or community of this spiritual expression. I come with a deep eagerness and openness to being formed by it. I believe that I can trust the world into

which it invites me, and I allow myself to be vulnerable to it. The story above about the Zen meal ritual illustrates how deeply this kind of trusting participation can affect one, even when the tradition participated in is an "alien" one.

Closer to home, the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* ("holy reading") is an example of an approach to a spiritual text as a disciple. In *lectio* one reads slowly, attentively, prayerfully, pausing frequently to ponder and to enter deeply into the movements of mind and heart that are inspired by the text. One may spend an hour, or even many hours, with a single paragraph--just as one would joyfully "waste" time in attending to someone one loves deeply. In Christian tradition it is scripture, above all, that deserves the time, trust, and tenderness of *lectio*. It would be antithetical to this mode of prayer if one shifted into an analytical or critical mode. If questions do arise, one trustingly brings them to prayer rather than allowing them to distract one from one's singlehearted purpose of hearing the Lord speak through the text.

This reckless pouring out of the precious ointment of time, combined with a constant and singlehearted focus on the Beloved, is profoundly countercultural in today's world of tight schedules and short attention spans. One who submits regularly to the discipline of such a conversation will find a deeper, more attentive, more gentle self being shaped by it.

An attitude of discipleship is obviously not appropriate if one does not have a sense of trust and an eagerness to be instructed by the given spiritual expression. On the other hand, in many cases it may be difficult even to gain an inkling of the potential that is present if one is not able to enter into this attitude at least tentatively. An example is a Western Christian approaching an icon--a core spiritual expression from Eastern Christianity. The natural tendency may be to regard the icon as "just a picture" or as on a par with other works of art with which one is familiar. Until one learns how to gaze with a deep openness and an expectation to "see the Lord," one remains uninitiated as to the true nature of the icon. No amount of study or reflection about the history, theology, or artistic techniques of the icon can replace the insight gained from a single moment of experiencing the inflow

of divine life in the presence of the icon--an experience unavailable unless one approaches with the reverence of a disciple.

The attitude of discipleship has traditionally been the stance of aspiring contemplatives toward the practices, teachings, and texts of their own spiritual community. The difference in the postmodern context is that the seeker knows that discipleship is not the only necessary stance. The postmodern contemplative usually cannot rest in the position that Paul Ricoeur termed "first naivete," in which the given account of the world is accepted without questioning. Ricoeur spoke of the possibility of eventually arriving at a chastened "second naivete" that has faced and accepted the ambiguities introduced by critical scholarship. In view of this, let us explore some other stances for our conversations with spiritual expressions.

Contextualizing Scholarship

A second stance, typical of the modern world, is that of the student or scholar seeking knowledge about the historical and cultural setting of the spirituality one hopes to engage with. Here the "community" to which one belongs (whether explicitly or only implicitly) is that of the scholar. The goal of entering the conversation in this way is to understand the details of what is said and why it is said in relationship to scholarly knowledge of its context of origin. In doing this, one consciously moves away from the natural but naive tendency to interpret another's expression in terms of one's own worldview.

For example, sometimes Euroamericans who are attracted to Native American spirituality only perceive and affirm those aspects that correspond to needs within Euroamerican culture. These needs, which are valid in themselves, may include the desire to get closer to the natural world, to move at a slower and more sensitive pace, and to be energized by communal rituals such as dancing, chanting, sharing the ceremonial pipe, or entering the sweat lodge. Many Euroamericans have enthusiastically embraced Native American spiritual teachers, but too often this is done while

ignoring or misconstruing important dimensions of the cultural, historical, and religious framework from which the Native Americans speak. At worst, this can result in serious distortion and exploitation of Native American culture and religion.

Let us look briefly at some of the influences that lie behind the proclamation of the Sioux prophet Lame Deer.

Eighty years ago our people danced the Ghost Dance, singing and dancing until they dropped from exhaustion, swooning, fainting, seeing visions. They danced in this way to bring back their dead, to bring back the buffalo. A prophet told them that through the power of the Ghost Dance the earth would roll up like a carpet, with the white man's works--the fences and the mining towns and their whorehouses, the factories and the farms with their stinking, unnatural animals, the railroads and the telegraph poles, the whole works. And underneath this rolled-up white man's world we would find again the flowering prairie, unspoiled, with its herds of buffalo and antelope, its clouds of birds, belonging to everyone, enjoyed by all. I guess it was not time for this to happen, but it is coming back, I feel it warming my bones. Not the old Ghost Dance, not the rolling up--but a new-old spirit, not only among Indians but among whites and blacks, too, especially among young people.^{li}

To fully appreciate Lame Deer's spirituality and the practices he recommends, it is helpful to know something about the the nineteenth century context of the original Ghost Dance as well as about the present-day context and promoters of his prophecies. Many aspects of the Ghost Dance movement and its accompanying prophecies have remarkable parallels in the responses of native peoples elsewhere in the world to their invasion and oppression by technologically superior whites. One scholar notes that the nineteenth century Native American prophetic movements were "influenced by Euroamerican models . . . including Christian biblical sources, missionaries, enthusiastic conversion, and the Great Awakening with its characteristic apocalyptic and millennial expectations."^{lii} The original prophetic movements were ethnocentric, intended to revitalize the Native peoples over against the whites. Today's prophets--including Lame Deer--operate in a very different context, however; important influences on them include the New Age and ecology movements, and they often are promoted by whites as much as by Native Americans.

Thus, scholarly study of history (political, economic, and cultural as well as religious), of the

psychology of domination and oppression, and of cross-cultural patterns in religious experience can considerably change our perspective on what Lame Deer is saying. This kind of information may not carry an immediate charge of spiritual excitement for us, but it is essential if we are going to enter an exchange with him on the basis of reality rather than on the basis of romanticized or prejudiced assumptions. This type of study by no means needs to belittle Lame Deer's stature as a spiritual teacher; rather, it is a necessary part of our really allowing him to be a teacher for us. Rather than conforming his words and practices to a comfortable shape within our world, we can allow him to share with us the contours of the world in which he actually lives.

One does not necessarily have to learn highly specialized scholarly methods and skills in order to relate to a spiritual expression in this way. In approaching written texts, the non-specialist can learn a great deal simply by practicing what is called "close reading." Close reading involves reading very carefully and alertly, with specific questions and interests in mind. One notes any details or patterns that might be relevant to one's quest, as well as new questions that are stimulated by the reading. Often one returns to read certain sections a second or third time--not, as in *lectio divina*, to immerse oneself in their spiritual meaning, but to build up a clearer and more objective picture of the setting and meaning implied by the text. A similar method of close, alert observation in search of specific kinds of information or insight can be applied to non-textual aspects of spiritual traditions.

It is often remarkable how much can be learned from this sort of practice, even before making use of secondary literature. We can take as an example the following paragraph from Jerome's "Life of Marcella," in which he describes in detail the virtue and holiness of this great lay contemplative of the early fifth century.

While Marcella was thus serving the Lord in holy tranquility, there arose in those provinces a tornado of heresy which threw everything into confusion . . . Next came the scandalous version of Origen's book On First Principles, and that "fortunate" disciple who would have been indeed fortunate had he never fallen in with such a master. . . . You will say, what has this to do with the praises of Marcella? She it was who furnished witnesses first taught by them and then carried away by their heretical teaching. She it was who showed how large a number they had deceived and who brought up against them the impious books On First Principles, books

which were passing from hand to hand after being "improved" by the hand of the scorpion. She it was lastly who called on the heretics in letter after letter to appear in their own defence. They did not indeed venture to come, for they were so conscience-stricken that they let the case go against them by default rather than face their accusers and be convicted by them. This glorious victory originated with Marcella, she was the source and cause of this great blessing. You who shared the honour with her know that I speak the truth. You know too that of many incidents I only mention a few, not to tire out the reader by a wearisome recapitulation. Were I to say more, ill-natured persons might fancy me, under the pretext of commending a woman's virtues, to be giving vent to my own rancour.^{liii}

Close reading of this passage provides us with a quite detailed picture of a major feud among early Christians. We learn that--at least from Jerome's point of view--Jerome and Marcella were closely allied, and that they were heatedly opposing proponents of Origen's teachings. We glimpse the venom of Jerome's personality, and the intelligence and power of Marcella's. We hear veiled allusions to specific persons and incidents that we could undoubtedly track down in secondary sources if we wanted to. We also gain some new questions: What is the other side of this story? Why was this holy woman devoting so much energy to this feud? What really was the character of her relationship with Jerome, from her point of view? We could research such questions; but even if we do not, they can open up many new insights into Marcella's life as a lay contemplative struggling with the cultural, political, and theological currents of her own era.

On first glance this stance, with its home in the world of academia, may not have such an obvious relevance to the contemplative quest. In fact, however, the very alienness of the spiritual expressions one encounters often demands that one enter upon at least a minimal degree of this type of study. It is uncomfortable, and at times even inauthentic, to take a stance of discipleship towards something that one does not understand well. As questions of fact or meaning arise, the sincere seeker wants to clarify the matter in order to know how to respond appropriately. Movement back and forth between the stance of discipleship and the stance of contextualizing scholarship can be enriching to both, as insights emerge in each stance that can be explored further in the other. It is important, however, to be aware of the distinct character of each, and--in Bernard Lonergan's astute

phrase--"to know what you are doing when you are doing it." Otherwise one's scholarship may be mushy and one's discipleship shallow.

Critical Analysis

The need for yet another stance arises because there are occasions when a spirituality comes across to us not as merely puzzling, but as actually offensive. This third stance can be characterized as that of a critic who belongs to (or stands in solidarity with) an oppressed or marginalized element of humanity. The goal of conversation from this stance is to find a way to resist and reorient the oppressive implications of the expression. Often, when we find ourselves taking up this stance unreflectively--that is, when we have an immediate "gut reaction" of anger, disgust, or another negative emotion--our next move is to reject or belittle the phenomenon that we are criticizing. Yet in doing so we may lose the opportunity not only to have an impact on the other, but also to be enriched by what it does have to offer.

A reflective and methodical approach to critique typically involves applying a form of analysis that is not native to the world of the expression itself, so that its problematic hidden assumptions can be brought to light and criticized. An example is William Beers' detailed psychoanalytical interpretation of rituals of blood sacrifice in terms of male narcissistic needs to separate from and control women.^{liv} Beers works with this interpretation in relation to both Melanesian pig sacrifice and Episcopalian eucharistic sacrifice. The unveiling of psychological parallels between such diverse rituals--one very "foreign," the other quite familiar--can be unsettling, but it can also open up much-needed, realistically-grounded reflection on the arduous and lengthy work that will be needed if we are ever to change such oppressive patterns.

As with the contextualization stance, there are many specialized approaches to critical analysis. Feminist, Jungian, and liberation theology methods are all examples of approaches that have gained considerable popular appeal in recent years. Here is an example of an analysis of Teresa

of Avila's writings that employs the methods of both feminist and rhetorical criticism.

The assertion that Teresa "wrote like a woman" needs to be made with numerous qualifications. We can no longer accept notions of a "deliciously" feminine style, that is, the assumption that her linguistic patterns reflect an innate feminine mystique. Teresa consciously adopted, as a rhetorical strategy, linguistic features that were associated with women, in the sense that women's discourse coincided with the realm of low-prestige, nonpublic discourse. Teresa's feminine rhetoric was affiliative, but this does not mean that it was especially tender or delicate. Rather, by selectively adapting features from the language of subordinate groups, Teresa hoped to create a subversive discourse that was at once public and private, didactic and supportive, authoritarian and familiar. Her strategy was of necessity duplicitous. Teresa's rhetoric for women was an ironic rhetoric, used, first of all, to gain access to her audience and, secondly, to reinforce the bonds of a small interpretive community. As that community grew, Teresa proved that she was capable of modulating her strategy and her ironically feminine style.^{lv}

Once again, the question arises as to how such critical analysis can be related to growth as a contemplative. A contemplative seeks gentle openness to interior depth, whereas this approach is often aggressively analytical and oriented to an agenda of social and political change. It is certainly true that not all critical analysis is of assistance to contemplative development. It can be, however, if the larger conversation within which the need for critical analysis arises is one that seeks to clear obstacles from the path of deeper openness to truth. Contemplative truth is not only God's presence in the depths of interior solitude; it is also God's presence in the poor and oppressed. Openness to the latter dimension of truth requires a desire to have the scales taken from our eyes so that we can see how the world's ways benefit some and impoverish others. Critical analysis aims to do this systematically, so that a way can eventually be found to remedy the injustice.

Imaginative Reflection

The fourth stance illustrated here is in some ways the freest. It involves entering the conversation with a kind of playful and yet practical attitude that seeks to discover a fresh, creative way of being and acting. Whereas each of the other three stances discussed here place the main focus on attending

to the world of the other--whether by entering it, understanding it, or criticizing it--in this stance the main focus is on giving the other a place in one's own world.

Some aspects of what is today called "theological reflection" have something in common with this approach. In relation to contemplative formation, theological reflection may be especially appropriate for those who have ministering roles--perhaps teaching or leading others in contemplative practice--and who want to discover the creative and empowering potential of a given spiritual expression for the community. There are a variety of methods of theological reflection that have been developed for use by pastoral ministers. A typical approach is that spelled out by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John DeBeer in their book, The Art of Theological Reflection. They suggest four steps:

1. Focus on some aspect of experience.
2. Describe that experience to identify the heart of the matter. (Often the "heart of the matter" can be summed up in a rich image.)
3. Explore the Heart of the Matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage.
4. Identify from this conversation new truths and meanings for living.^{lvi}

In approaching an unfamiliar spiritual tradition or practice through this method of theological reflection, one begins by attending closely to the experience that is stirred up by one's initial contact. One looks especially for a catalyzing image that seems to express the central character of the experience. This image leads into reflection on related themes from theology or from spiritual traditions that are more familiar. When this reflection stage is culminating, one searches for the implications in terms of changed beliefs and behaviors.

For example, a Christian encountering the practice called "Transformational Breathing" is led through a series of relaxation and breathing exercises until he enters a balmy state of blissful feelings. Bringing this experience to theological reflection, he searches for a catalyzing image. Perhaps the words that seem to him to capture the gentleness, coolness, and sacredness of his experience are "holy

breezes." Moving on to dialogue with Christian theology and spirituality, he reflects on the biblical imagery of breath and wind, and is especially struck by the story from 1 Kings 19 where Elijah hears God's call in a gentle breeze. He does some reading on the theology of the Holy Spirit and on the mutual indwelling of God and the human soul. The culmination of the process for him is a rather subtle shift in his way of envisioning God's presence to him: God breathes from deep within, rather than simply being close by. The transformational breathing method, which is not in itself a Christian practice, is integrated into his Christian spirituality.

An important reason for placing this stance last is that it can easily be a temptation for contemporary people to begin and end here, in a rather light and free appropriation of the "other" according to the needs of the moment. Yet there can also be a poignant seriousness about conversation in this mode. Perhaps it is best to end this section by offering a poem by the Sufi poet Rumi^{lvii}--a playful poem that will surely make a home for itself in each reader's world in a different way, and yet may indeed have a profound impact.

THE MANY WINES

*God has given us a dark wine so potent that,
drinking it, we leave the two worlds.*

*God has put into the form of hashish a power
to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.*

*God has made sleep so
that it erases every thought.*

*God made Majnun love Layla so much that
just her dog would cause confusion in him.*

*There are thousands of wines
that can take over our minds.*

*Don't think all ecstasies
are the same!*

Jesus was lost in his love for God.

His donkey was drunk with barley.

*Drink from the presence of saints,
not from those other jars.*

*Every object, every being
is a jar full of delight.*

*Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.*

*Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,*

*the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."*

*Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when it's been untied,
and is just ambling about.*

CONCLUSION

On one level, it is in poems such as those that begin and conclude this reflection that we find the most profound guidance for the contemplative journey. John of the Cross and Rumi traveled the whole distance of this way; it is such as they who can speak with authority on its farther reaches. Yet as they remind us, no matter how well prepared we are we will nevertheless sometimes find ourselves lost in a lonely valley, abandoned on a strange island, or drunk on a confusing wine, with none of our maps or strategies seeming to be of any assistance.

In such times, we learn in ever-deeper ways how true it is that for the contemplative, the stance of discipleship remains the primary one. It is there above all that one cultivates the interior depth of openness within which the springs of God's life will eventually flow in abundance. In times of lostness and desolation, there is often little that can be done except to affirm one's faith in the Divine Teacher and to trudge forward in emptiness and hope.

Yet discipleship can never be directed only to the transcendent God; it also must have a human face. Within the contemporary context, the question of how, when, and with whom to open oneself trustingly to discipleship is often complex. Living the contemplative life within the circumstances of the postmodern world--especially outside of a monastic context--will require of us the ability to know how and when to employ each of the four stances discussed here, and others as well. Contemplative discipleship lived in the midst of, and on behalf of, the whole created world's painful struggle toward the reign of God necessarily is that of Ricoeur's "second naivete," in which one returns to radical openness and teachability having fully integrated the exercise of one's human capacity to understand, to criticize, and to act.

ENDNOTES

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT IN A PROGRAM FOR LAY CONTEMPLATIVE FORMATION?

A Summary of Responses to a 1992 ACS Survey

In 1992 and 1994 the Association of Contemplative Sisters received a small grants from the Lilly Endowment to conduct and collate a survey of its members regarding programs for lay contemplative formation. A task force was formed, consisting of Mary Frohlich, Judy Fulcher, Ginny Manss, Jan Strong, Wendy Wright, and Sue Zilisch. The task force met several times to formulate, administer, and report the survey.

One of the survey questions asked ACS members to articulate what they are looking for in a formation program. No prompting suggestions were provided; people were left free to respond in any way according to their own insights and priorities. About 120 people filled in this part of the survey. Some of them wrote only a few words; others wrote essays. This brief report collates and reflects on

these responses.

First, a word about the limitations of this report. Our survey was not done in a "scientific" manner; people were simply asked a very broad-based question to which they could reply in any form. When it came time to do the collating, three task force members (Mary Frohlich, Judy Fulcher, and Sue Zilisch) divided up the response sheets and summarized responses as we found appropriate. Finally Mary took these summaries and—with frequent references back to the original sheets—did the final totalling and organizing. Still later, in preparation for this book, Mary revised the materials and added some additional commentary.

This is clearly not "quantitative" research, which would involve the use of precise questions, quantifiable responses, and statistical reporting. Nor does it fulfill professional standards for "qualitative" research, which would demand very carefully designed questions administered to a clearly delimited research population. Thus, while the report may give a fairly good sense of what people's concerns are, it should by no means be construed as a definitive statement.

It is noteworthy that a large percentage of the responses expressed strong appreciation for the fact that the issue of formation for lay contemplatives is being addressed, as well as hope that the overall research project would help to fill a gap that has been so painful for many. In that spirit we offer this report, with all its imperfections.

I. CONCERNS ABOUT ORIENTATION, TRADITION, OR VISION

Seventy-seven responses made comments that dealt in some way with a concern about a formation program's general orientation.

a. *Christian orientation* (total: 26)

- Christian, but also incorporates insights/practices of other world religions 10
- Christian 4
- Based in scripture and gospel values 4
- Orthodoxy and balance in relation to Christian tradition 3
- Based in Catholic church and doctrine 3
- Ecumenical—includes all Christian denominations 2

- b. *Balance of tradition and freshness* (total: 18)
 - Teaches classic masters and traditions 11
 - Teaches current as well as past masters 5
 - Balance of rooting in history and new directions 2

- c. *Clarity of vision* (total: 13)
 - Clarity about what orientation or tradition it is rooted in 8
 - Has a "vision" 3
 - Clarity about its understanding of contemplative prayer 2

- d. *Other desirable aspects of orientation* (Total: 20)
 - Feminist thinking 9
 - Diversity 7
 - Avoid "New Age" and other bizarre approaches 2
 - Creation spirituality as center 1
 - Not overly "ecclesiocentric" 1

A significant number of people brought up, without prompting, a desire for an explicitly Christian orientation. It should be noted that our research population consisted of persons of Christian—in fact, largely Roman Catholic—heritage, although some may regard themselves as "post-Christian" at this point. Many of these respondents expressed a desire also to be exposed to the contemplative traditions of other world religions. Concerns for a balance of the "old" and the "new", as well as the desire for a program to manifest clarity of vision, were also significant.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS OR DIRECTORS

Sixty responses gave input on what background and qualities are desired in those who will lead a program of lay contemplative formation.

- Spiritual directors rooted in contemplative prayer 24
- Training, expertise, learning on part of directors 21
- Holiness, integrity, competency of leaders 9
- Both female and male leaders 2
- Leaders trained in psychology and mental health 2
- Strong leadership 1
- Leaders are religious, preferably vowed 1

It is clear that a major concern of our respondents is the spiritual preparation and authenticity of those who will guide them. As task force member Wendy Wright put it at one of our meetings, people are looking for "Ammas and Abbases"—women and men of deep contemplation and wisdom.

III. PROVISION OF HUMAN SUPPORT THROUGH SPIRITUAL DIRECTION, COMMUNITY, AND ONGOING CONTACT

Sixty-four responses referred to specific needs and desires for support and guidance on the human level, through spiritual direction, companionship, faith sharing, community life, and/or long-term support.

a. *Includes spiritual direction* (total: 13)

- A spiritual director, mentor, or "master" relationship is provided 6
- Personal direction and help in discerning one's call 5
- Guidance on finding and developing a relation with a spiritual director 1
- Includes both individual and group spiritual direction 1

b. *Includes human relationships and community experience* (total: 30)

- Includes a community experience of living contemplatively 7
- Shared prayer and liturgy 4
- Evident emphasis on love of neighbor 4
- Sharing of experiences 3
- Based in an ongoing community 3
- Participants are accountable to others, not "lone rangers" 3
- Silence together as well as sharing 2
- "Family-style" instead of institutional 2
- Develops listening skills for small and large groups as well as one on one 1
- Monasteries open to lay persons living in, with additional association and formation outside the monastery 1

c. *Includes ongoing support* (total: 21)

- Follow-up with periodic meetings for support, sharing, prayer, etc. 14
- Includes ongoing sharing with others; "support groups" 3
- Gathering in community at least once a year 1
- Ongoing spiritual direction 1
- Program that can be repeated 1
- Ongoing study 1

In addition to the longing for holy and experienced spiritual directors, many of our respondents have a clear sense of the need for other forms of human support. A significant number specifically called for formation to take place in a community format, and to include opportunities for various forms of spiritual sharing. The need for long-term support, relationships, and guidance is also a significant theme.

IV. EVIDENCE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHENTICITY

Forty-four responses dealt with issues related to the quality of spirituality manifested in the program.

a. *Soundness and depth of spirituality* (Total: 28)

- Sound theology and spirituality 12
- Gospel values and simplicity 5
- Depth in wisdom traditions of great Christian contemplatives 3
- Encourages spiritual growth through prayer 3
- Helps one grow in self-knowledge and radical surrender 3
- One knows it is a "safe place" 1
- It has "the ring of the genuine" 1

b. *Openness, flexibility, freedom* (Total: 16)

- Open, creative, and flexible; not "cookie cutter" 4
- Flexibility according to individual experience and need 4
- Open to God's direction of the individual 3
- Respect for uniqueness and privacy needs of individual 3
- Sense of freedom and humility 1
- Common sense, or the desire for it 1

The previously mentioned longing for holy and experienced guides carries over to the qualities desired in the entire program. Our respondents clearly have an "eagle eye" for spirituality that is authentic and—in that sense—rigorous. At the same time they are very concerned that there be an attitude of openness, flexibility, and common sense rather than a rigid formula applied to all persons and circumstances.

V. EVIDENCE OF HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY

Fifty-one respondents referred to the desire for a spirituality that offers balance and integration in regard to prayer, work, global justice, and psychological health.

a. *Balance of prayer and activity* (Total: 16)

- Balances and integrates prayer and everyday life 7
- Not a problem to have an outside job, even in a residential contemplative community 4
- Does not require separation from one's everyday setting 2
- Balance of prayer and other activities 1
- Prayer and ministry are connected 1
- Adaptability to lay life 1

b. *Awareness of larger world issues* (Total: 18)

- Includes ecological and global perspective 6
- Aware of current events; not separated from "world" 4
- Peace and justice awareness 4
- Consciously works against racism 2
- Practices listening to God in the lives of the poor 1
- Community provides for itself instead of living on donations 1

c. *Psychological health and sensitivity* (Total: 17)

- Holistic; the whole person taken into consideration 8
- Knowledgeable about psychology, dysfunctions, etc. 4
- Program is stable, emotionally sound, etc. 2
- Covers psychology and spirituality of "dark nights" 1
- Not fundamentally therapeutic 1
- Does not place emphasis on mystical phenomena 1

This set of concerns points toward desire for a spirituality that in no sense turns away from "the world," the body, and secular responsibilities. For lay contemplatives, the need and desire to integrate action and contemplation is clear. Our respondents also have social justice concerns and see this as important in their manifestation of the contemplative life. They are sensitive to questions of psychological health, and recognize the need for a program to deal explicitly and responsibly with these in order to foster the fullness of spiritual growth.

VI. OTHER DESIRED ASPECTS OF CONTENT OR STRUCTURE (66 responses)

This category includes a variety of specific interests that were not summed up within the earlier sections.

a. *Silence and solitude* (total: 21)

- Adequate time for silence and solitude 17
- Retreats offered 2
- Private rooms 2

b. *Experiential approach* (total: 15)

- Experiential approach primary; intellectual study serves it 12
- Not "workshops," but a full-fledged experience of contemplative living; an "apprenticeship" 3

c. *Training in contemplative prayer* (total: 15)

- Clear training in how to pray 5
- Some history and theory of kinds of contemplative prayer 4
- Exposure to various contemplative traditions 3
- Solid method of meditation 2
- One classic discipline in depth, instead of eclectic approach 1

d. *Good input* (total: 10)

- Reliable training in contemporary Catholic theology, pastoral care, etc. 5
- Good background in scripture and theology 4
- Good speakers and input 1

e. *Discipline* (total: 4)

- Discipline 2
- A rule of life 2

f. *Other desirable aspects* (total: 8)

- Daily mass with an ordained Roman Catholic priest 2
- Body work (yoga, dance, movement, running, etc.) 2
- Devotion to Mary and the Rosary 1
- Holistic health and organic medicine awareness 1
- Dream work and other "inner work" 1
- Journaling 1

VII. THE CREDENTIALS, BACKGROUND, AND REFERENCES OF THE PROGRAM

Fourteen responses referred to the value of having good information and references about a potential program.

- Good track record; well recommended; good reputation 6

- Opportunity to interview previous participants 6
- Sponsored by an ongoing, stable, permanent group 1
- Opportunity for trial visit 1

VIII. LOCATION, ACCESSIBILITY, COST, ETC. OF A PROGRAM

Twenty-seven responses mentioned very concrete concerns that would affect their ability to participate in a program.

a. *Who can participate* (Total: 22)

- Availability to average person in terms of time, costs, etc. 12
- Clear information given about time requirements 5
- Various levels of entrance, for those with more or less background 2
- Screening for participants 1
- Open to all 1
- No age limits 1

b. *Geographical issues* (Total: 5)

- Geographical location 3
- Isolated natural setting 1
- Accessibility by public transportation 1

The question of inclusiveness, and very specifically of cost, was important to a number of our respondents. They emphasized that programs need to provide good preparatory information to potential participants, as well as appropriate screening. A few also had specific interests in relation to the location of the program, such as that it be close by or that it be in a natural setting.

SUMMARY

Some of the most striking findings of this survey include:

- The largest number of responses focus on the desire for holy, experienced, well-trained spiritual guides.
- A related theme is the awareness that contemplative formation requires a base in relationships and community. Solitude and silence are very high values, but so are sharing and mutual

support.

- There is a great longing for a spirituality that clearly manifests its authenticity, and that is well-grounded in theology and classic traditions.
- Those surveyed are quite committed to the idea that a contemporary contemplative spirituality should be one that balances contemplation and action, maintains involvement in larger world issues, and is psychologically astute.
- Many express the sense that contemplative formation must be flexible, open, creative—and that ultimately, it is God who "directs" the truly contemplative individual.
- A Christian orientation is central for our constituency, but a significant number want this integrated with practices from other world religions.

In reviewing the report, the task force noted that while this provides an interesting snapshot of the lay contemplative movement, we would not want to have it construed as "market research" intended to help someone develop a program to match "consumer demand." Rather, we see it as a way of trying to listen to where the Spirit is moving among the People of God. A group that is thinking about developing a program for contemplative formation needs to balance the freshness of that kind of listening with attentiveness to the deep wisdom enshrined in living contemplative traditions and in the best of contemporary theology. While the contemplative journey will never be a completely "smooth ride," we can rightfully aspire to make the gifts we have received a bit more readily accessible to the next generation.

INTRODUCTION- RESEARCH SITES

Preliminary research for this project began three years prior to the actual visitation of research sites. The Association of Contemplative Sisters, acting as sponsors for the project, conducted a survey among its 500 members. Within the survey ACS members were asked to send names, addresses and information on places of lay Christian contemplative formation with which they were acquainted through their own experience. As a result of the positive response to this survey, a list was compiled of some 150 places across the United States. A follow-up survey requesting more detailed information was then sent to those sites that seemed appropriate for further study.

Realizing that it would be impossible (and not even beneficial) to visit each one of the sites recommended in the survey, an attempt was made by a steering committee to put some order into the list by categorizing the suggested places according to what was termed, "representative models. This categorization was simply to serve as an aid in the selection process of visitation sites so that the different and various approaches to lay Christian contemplative formation would be examined. As a result of its efforts, the steering committee created eleven different categories or representative models. They were as follows:

- ù Secular Orders/Associate Groups of Canonical Communities
- ù National/International Networks
- Communities with Formal and Informal Support Networks
- ù Retreats, Courses and Workshop Offerings
- ù Monastic Communities with Structured Live-ins
- ù Long-term Residential Opportunities
- ù Home Study Programs with Intensives
- ù Local Support Groups
- ù Ashrams
- ù Hermitages
- ù Houses of Prayer

An additional qualifying note. Many of the sites selected for a visit fell under more than one of these categories. The significant factor is that, of the 27 sites visited by the research team, all of these models are represented at least once.

As the reader will discover, there are many approaches to contemplative formation existent within the United States today. While an objective of this project was to be as broad-based as possible, the final product ended up being but a first step in mapping the landscape of lay Christian contemplative formation within this country. Hopefully, this first step creates an invitation to others to etch out more of this landscape in the future.

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The reader will also discover that the term "contemplative formation" has been used in its broadest sense in relation to this project. In this way not only sites with very structured formal programs could be included but also those sites where contemplative seekers would informally come into contact with rich formative influences by way of their association with contemplative communities or by way of their immersion in intense silence and solitude

Another objective of the study was to include research sites from a variety of Christian denominations. The end product resulted in 21 of the 27 visitation sites having a Roman Catholic base. Whether this is indicative of the proportion of Catholic to other Christian contemplative formation sites in the country or merely a reflection of the limitations of ACS's prior survey remains an open question. In any case, all but one of the sites visited were open to contemplative seekers of all denominations.

The research team began its work in January, 1996. In one calendar year the team visited 27 sites including networks, programs, houses of prayer, lay

communities, monasteries, and secular orders. The team interviewed founders and staff and entered into the rhythm of the programs as much as possible. Admittedly, their research offers but an introduction, a taste, of some of the programs and environments available for a spiritual seeker or journeyer looking to deepen the contemplative dimension of his/her life.

As the year progressed it became increasingly apparent to the research team that their study could not be entirely objective or comprehensive. How does one, in one hour, or one day, or even three days, capture the rhythm and spirit of a place or program of prayer that has been in existence for 25 years? How does one in a mere sliver of time express the ebb and flow of seasonal prayer, of nature, of the qualities and experiences of those founders who embody the spirit of their life's work? In addition, the time limitations of both directors of sites as well as the research team necessarily affected the fullness of observation. At some of the sites all three members of the team were able to be present; at quite a few places there were two members present; and at the remaining places, only one member could visit. This, in turn, affected the vision and breadth of each of the reports. Finally, all three members of the research team were Roman Catholic women, bringing with them their own limitations and biases (some of which were unconscious) and no doubt coloring their attempts at objectivity.

Having considered the limitations of an undertaking of this nature, it's beneficial, as part of this Introduction, to turn to the research members and discover what they learned from visiting so many sites of lay Christian contemplative foundation. Some of their summary remarks from the past year's experiences follow:

We learned so much during this year of journey and research. The beauty of the divine patterns at work through the men and women who founded these programs was powerful and awe-inspiring. A sense of timelessness and eternal sacred unfolding emerged as we listened and entered into their lives, vision and resultant practice in these places of contemplative space.

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We learned anew the wondrous physical beauty of this country of ours; from the deserts to the mountains to the cities, or wooded forests. "Getting there" was as much a part of the sacred experience as "being there." In fact "getting there" was a part of the whole of "being there".

We learned also that, although there are many programs available, there is still an untapped potential for ever new programs for lay contemplatives in the world, separate and distinct from adaptations of older historical monastic models. The lay contemplative, living in the "marketplace" not bonded by a physical center or support group, is still a relatively new phenomenon in the Church and world. We learned there is a need for new models and imaginative ideas.

We learned, or relearned, that the contemplative stance, as echoed by the people and places visited, is counter-cultural, or perhaps trans-cultural. The physical settings, whether urban or rural, the interiors, the architectural exteriors (where applicable) were deliberately understated, uncluttered,

natural, evoking an inner and outer harmony of place and interior being 7'he unspoken message was integrity, and "less is more. "

rinally, we learned, to our surprise, how exuberant and excited both staff and guests and residents were at the many places we visited about our missfon and project. It seemed uplifting to everyone we met that we were doing what we were doing! We drew strength and hope and gratitude from their very enthusiasm about us! We felt like spiritual Johnny Appleseeds; not only planting seeds from place to place, but being given ever more seeds to plant!

In conclusion, it is imponent to emphasize that all of the research resulting in this Guidebook was created primarily as a resource for the contemplative seeker. As you read through its pages, it is our hope that you will discover places of nourishment and suppOn for your own contemplative journey.

Research Team Members:

Ginny Manss is a 54 year old lay woman who is presently a member of a small lay contemplative community. Ginny spent 18 years as a member of a Roman Catholic religious order with 12 of those years within a cloistered contemplative community. When her community disbanded in 1978, she continued her orientation towards contemplative living but this time within the context of the lay world. She intuitively recognized that new expressions of contemplative life were being realized within the lay world, expressions not yet marked by formal structures but influenced by the influx of a greater Reality beyond form. Ginny affirmed her place within this movement as a lay contemplative. For several years she worked part time as an Assistant Director of Continuing Education at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio. Later she became Executive Director of EarthConnection, a newly organized environmental

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educational organization. In 1991 she obtained her Master's Degree in Theology from Xavier University. Presently she balances her contcmplative lifestyle with a ministry of caring for the elderly in Green Valley, Arizona. Ginny has been a member of the Association of Contemplative Sisters since its founding in 1969. In 1992 she was elected President of the Association, the first lay woman to hold that position.

Mary Bookser, 5C is Director of Initial Forrnation for the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. During several years as an adult counselor in the Women's Center of the College of Mount St. Joseph and instructor in Scripture Studies and Spirituality, she became more and more drawn to a contemplative mode of "sitting in the Center of the God Who sits in the center of her soul." Incorporated into her emerging spirituality has been a deep realization of the interconnectedness of all living beings in the Universe and a growing awareness of the wealth of wisdom found in her own Catholic tradition as well as spirituality emerging from the world's great religions. During her doctoral work in Women's Studies literature and spirituality, she explored the similarities between some of the great women mystics and the shamanic experience. Her desire to live deeply aware of her connectedness to all life is enhanced by her choice to live in a simple passive solar dwelling on the Sisters of Charity motherhouse grounds.

Deborah Gephardt is a laywoman, 60 years of age, wife of a retired newspaper editor, and mother of an adult son and daughter. She has been a member of the Roman Catholic Church for 40 years. She is a college graduate, majoring in Biology-Pre Med and was a Medical Technologist before her marriage. The primary credential for her being included in this research team, she concludes, was her near life-long attempt to comprehend and respond to the "Hound of Heaven", and her later search for spiritual teachers and guides to help validate and encourage the deepening contemplative orientation of her life. She struggled for years, and usually alone, to find teachers or programs that could help explain this new (to her) unitive, non-dualistic language which welled up from within and yet echoed the experience of the saints and mystics of all the great religious traditions throughout history. By trial and error, this search led to some of the programs reported in this research. In addition, she did some volunteer work in India as well as spending some time at the Ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths in India She is presently a member of the Association of Contemplative Sisters.

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PART II: GUIDELINES FOR GROWING AS A LAY CONTEMPLATIVE

1. "A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation" by Mary Frohlich
2. "The Formation of the Everyday Contemplative" by Stephen K. Hatch
3. "Lonely Valleys and Strange Islands:
The Contemplative Encounter with the 'Other'" by Mary Frohlich
4. "Guidelines for Discernment
of Lay Contemplative Formation Programs" by Wendy M. Wright

PART III: CENTERS FOR LAY CONTEMPLATIVE FORMATION

"Introduction to the Site Research Project" by Virginia Manss

This section includes approximately 25 reports on sites where lay contemplatives are receiving various kinds of formation. These reports have been prepared by the field research team, which was headed by Virginia Manss and also included Mary Bookser, SC, and Deborah Gebhardt.

APPENDICES

A. Additional Sites of Interest to Lay Contemplatives

B. "What Do People Want in a Program for Lay Contemplative Formation? (Data from ACS 1992 Survey, with brief narrative summary and interpretation.)

List of Contributors, and a page with basic information on ACS.

THE JOURNEY OF THE LAY CONTEMPLATIVE:
RESOURCES AND GUIDELINES

Edited by Mary Frohlich and Virginia Manss

Foreword by Tilden Edwards

Preface by Mary Frohlich and Virginia Manss

Introduction: "The Lay Contemplative Movement" by Mary Frohlich

PART 1: THE LAY CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCE

Introduction to the Testimonies" by Deborah Gebhardt

1. "Contemplation: Journey Inward or Journey Outward?" by Robert Durback
2. "Contemplative Living in Ordinary Time" by Barbara E. Scott
3. "The Call to Life on the Margins" by Kathryn Damiano
4. "Together on the Contemplative Journey" by Ruth and Mark Dunden
5. "God in Flesh and Spirit" by Ann G. Denham
6. "Daybreak" by Robert A. Jonas

FOREWORD

by

Tilden Edwards, Shalem Institute

In 1973 I found myself searching for help with my spiritual life. Very few of the resources I discovered then really fit the particular calling that I was sensing inside me. That calling is what this book names as contemplation in the ordinary world. The resources available for this calling at that time were

largely monastic. Even in the monastic communities I visited, though, I often sensed the beginnings of an enlarged appreciation of contemplative living in the non-monastic world. Since that time, some of the monks in these communities have been leaders in fostering new versions of contemplative practice for people living ordinary lives in the world.

If I were beginning to look for contemplative resources for contemplating living in the world today, I would find a lot more available to me. Unfortunately, though, these resources often are difficult to discover, and, if discovered, difficult to know exactly how they might be relevant to my situation. One of the great contributions of this book is the way it brings together for the first time a very practical description of a great many of these resources, based on first-hand visits by the authors. For lay people searching for assistance in deepening and supporting their contemplative calling, these carefully described resources can be an invaluable resource.

And there are many such lay people around today! The marks of the contemplative call, I believe, include such things as a sense of divine immediacy, a call to live out of that immediacy, and a sense of all things and events as transparencies for divine presence. Particular practices such as silence and solitude are meant to help us appreciate that presence through all interior and exterior phenomena. This graced appreciation is a hidden wellspring that helps cleanse the moment of the fears and grasping that obscure the divine presence. Then God's Spirit can more easily flow through us with its buoyant love and wisdom.

Such qualities of presence are desperately needed in our time today. Some people are gifted and called to cultivate these qualities in great depth, leading them to greater communion with God and with all that is of God in the world. I think everyone, though, is called at least to an occasional encounter with these qualities and their fruits. They belong to the very nature of our souls and reveal the deepest ground of our unity. As someone once said, a contemplative isn't a special kind of person, everyone is a special kind of contemplative. In this sense, as one of the chapters in the book points out, we are all lay people, part of the laos, people of God, before we're distinguished by particular callings. Some people, though, do find a special contemplative orientation at the very core of their daily lives. Hopefully the resources pointed to in this book will be of value to both "full" and "partial" contemplatives.

Lay contemplatives in the world often live and work among people who do not share their sense of contemplative orientation. Without an ordered community to affirm what

is important to them, the calling to be a contemplative in the world can be hidden and lonely on the human level. Such people often crave the company of others who are oriented as they are. I have seen people come to programs at the Shalem Institute who feel such an enormous relief to be able to speak freely

about their interior lives and yearnings without worrying that they may be seen as crazy or alien.

Besides the helpful descriptions of specific contemplative resource centers, the other special contribution of this book is the way it gives many mature lay people a chance to talk about their concrete experience of living contemplatively oriented lives in the world. Some of these offerings go on to provide deep insight into the nature and formation of a contemplative orientation in today's world. These contributions, along with the resource center descriptions, can be of great value to those many people who seek not only contemplative company, but further opportunities for support in responding to the ever-evolving call to drop deeper into the undefinable subtlety of the living Presence.

Lay contemplatives are hidden leaven scattered throughout the worlds of family, work, community, church, friendships, the arts and social action. Their influence as witnesses and transparencies for the larger Presence is a vital avenue of grace in the world. They deserve every kind of encouragement and support possible. This book is a great contribution to the recognition, affirmation, and resourcing of this motley band of precious people. Through them thousands of others become aware of that hidden contemplative streak that belongs to our inmost being.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING IN ORDINARY TIME

by Barbara E. Scott

Saturday afternoon, I'm the on-call chaplain at a local hospital. It's been a busy day. I responded to several calls; distributed Communion to the Catholic patients; followed up on patients I had seen yesterday, then sat, with aching feet, in the hospital chapel. I was too weary to make the Stations of the Cross as I had done the previous night, bringing the burdens of patients and their families to Jesus. I simply sit before the Eucharistic Presence allowing the people in my heart to spill out and fill the tiny sanctuary. There is John, in his late eighties, unable to hear me unless I shout, who asked if I would "pull up a chair, please" while he recited his litany of gratitude to his Creator. There is Martin, 48, who has battled brain cancer for six years. In these last days of his life Martin was brought to the hospital to receive medication for his constant seizures. With Martin are his wife and grown daughter. They appear to me as two fair-haired angels at Martin's side, each holding one of Martin's hands, each stroking his hand with tenderness, each speaking words of love and comfort while Martin endures yet another seizure. There is young Sue, married just five months, who survived a car accident that killed her husband. There is Emma, 94 years young, who can't wait to receive Jesus in Communion and wonders if I have time to hear "all" her prayers. There is Mike who died in ER. I am waiting for his family that lives three hours away. The chapel is filled with these people. These are your people, Jesus. I bring them to you. Give them your healing love and peace. I allow Jesus to heal me, to minister to me. "Be still, Barbara. You are mine. I will refresh you. I will restore your strength like the eagle's." And then there are no words, only a Presence.

Although I only work a few days a month as a hospital chaplain, this ministry is a major part of my contemplative journey. Being "on-call" is my contemplative fasting. Fasting from my own plans and desires, I am available to the needs of others. I am open and ready for the unknown. I surrender to the "I know not what." I respond to other's needs, not out of my strength and knowledge, but out of my nothingness. I become nothing so that Christ can become all. Surrendering, allowing, opening,

listening, setting myself aside to let another person and their needs occupy my heart; trusting, waiting, feeling my inadequacies before so much pain and suffering. Figuratively, I am always taking my shoes off. I am always on holy ground. The Divine IS close to the brokenhearted. And I am called to share this ground with the Divine and the Divine's beloved people. Each person I am called to be with, to remain with on this holy ground, becomes my teacher.

My contemplative abstinence comes from my work as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction requires me to abstain from my own insights, thoughts and ideas, to listen, really listen, with the directee to the Spirit working in the directee's life. I am only a guide. The real drama in spiritual direction is between the Spirit and the directee. I abstain. I set myself aside and wait upon another to disclose themselves to me until they have reached the place of greater self-awareness, self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-love that enables them to move deeper into the Divine. The people who have asked me to be their spiritual guide have blessed me with their requests, their trust, their self-disclosures. These too, are my teachers.

I have two contemplative communities. The larger one is the Association of Contemplative Sisters, of which I have been a member almost from its beginnings in 1969. In this sisterhood I have found some of my dearest and deepest friendships. In ACS I have been affirmed, loved, accepted, challenged and transformed. I need my contemplative sisters to mirror and model for me their unique contemplative life styles. In this sisterhood I have prayed and played, sang and danced, laughed and cried, shared deeply and sat in Silence. I have served ACS in regional leadership roles for ten years.

In 1996 I was a candidate for national ACS President. Minutes before the discernment process that would decide who would be the next President, I felt misgivings well up inside of me: someone else could do the work. I tasted, in some small way, Christ's bitterness in the Agony in the Garden, "...if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Then a member of the ACS came up to me and said, "I can't imagine anyone being President... except you." Her comment startled me. Was she an angel sent into my garden? The misgivings dissipated. "Thy will be done." If I was elected I

would embrace the office wholeheartedly. If not, fine. Through the whole discernment process I was at peace. My ego was sitting like a “weaned child on its mother’s lap.” Now, several months into the office, I realize why I had misgivings. The office of President was not for my glory, but for my growth. Being ACS President would transform me—is transforming me.

My other contemplative community is quite small, comprised of two humans, Sue and I, and three cats, Bo, Fro and LadyBug. Sue and I have lived and grown together for the past twenty-four years. We have quite different personalities. This difference has provided fuel for comfort and confrontation, compassion and challenge, for life-giving sharing, praying and companioning one another in our contemplative journeys.

Our home—a log house in the woods on a lake—is a dream fulfilled. The woods are home to a multitude of forest dwellers. In winter I ski and walk on the lake. In spring, summer, fall, I canoe the lake, venturing out in the early morning fog to await sunrise. In the morning light I have watched kingfishers diving and blue heron stalking the shoreline for breakfast. I have watched red-winged black birds guard their nests among the cat-tails; seen turtles of all sizes crawl out of the lake onto rocks and logs to sun themselves; witnessed loons teach their young to dive for fish. In the multicolored hues of sunset I have experienced dragonflies feasting on mosquitoes that hum around me. I have observed a mother duck leading her newborn chicks around the tall, safe grasses. I have been surprised by beaver slapping their tails on the water to protest my presence, the shotgun-like sound startling the deer that have come down to the lake to drink. I have learned to feel the drumming of grouse on a hollow log. I know how to remain absolutely still while a family of bear ambles toward a blueberry marsh. I have frightened numerous waterfowl and caused otter to slip into the water as I slowly made my way through the narrow half mile tributary that leads to another lake. I know where to find the bright yellow marsh marigolds covering swampy ground. I know where to discover blood root, trillium, Indian pipe and every kind of wildflower that grows in these woods. I have found blackberries and raspberries and know how to pick my share, leaving the rest for the forest dwellers. Night is special anytime of year. I

have counted falling stars, traced the Milky Way, have been surprised by a bolide, heard a meteor sizzle overhead and stared at dancing Northern Lights until I thought my neck would break from looking up so long.

These woods call me, again and again, to take my shoes off, for I am on sacred ground. Nature is my daily contemplative guide revealing to me the splendor hidden within my ordinary time.

A ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

by Mary Frohlich

I. A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

The term "contemplative" is far from univocal. Many dimensions contribute to a person's affirmation that he or she has a contemplative calling. Components may include contemplative experiences, contemplative practices, a contemplative identity, a contemplative lifestyle--each of which may be manifested in widely varying ways. With the raw material of gifts, opportunities, and choices, each individual mixes these components in a unique way to create a personal contemplative way. Thus, there is no one face of the "contemplative"; contemplatives may look, act, talk, think, and pray very differently from one another.

There is, however, an underlying theological principle that is essential if we are to begin making any sense of this confusing diversity. That principle, which forms the heart of a contemplative theological anthropology, is the affirmation that human beings are created with a contemplative core. We are created to love God, to know God, to be in union with God. Our truest and most original being lives in deepest intimacy with God, wholly transparent to God and wholly motivated by divine love. Theologically, there is a sense in which every human being is created to be a "contemplative"--that is, one who

lives in complete openness to God in every dimension of his or her being. On the basis of this theological principle, we will explore the various dimensions of the contemplative vocation: experience, practice, identity, and lifestyle.

Contemplative experience

We can define contemplative experience as awareness--whether fleeting or habitual--of that most foundational, most original depth of being. Contemplative teacher William Shannon, for example, describes contemplative experience as conscious awareness of the being-in-God's-presence that we are.^{lviii} We always are, always have been, and always will be in God's presence, and if we were not we would not be at all. Because this is our most foundational reality, contemplative experience is potentially available to every human being, at all times and in every circumstance. It can, and does, "happen" to people without any preparation and while they are engaged in pursuits that are not concerned with seeking it. It is always a grace--that is, it is God who gives Godself, not we who grasp God.

Contemplative practice

As is obvious, we are not always aware of this most fundamental reality of our existence. The obstacles to this awareness include some for which we are culpable ("sins") and some which simply are there, without our knowing why. While contemplation is essentially a grace, a discipline of contemplative practice is also a significant factor in preparing the way and making it possible for it to become an established dimension of an individual's spiritual life. Contemplative practices of prayer are based on the principle that waking up to contemplative awareness is not a matter of focusing on God as an object, but rather of emptying out and opening up to the gift of at-oneness with God that is always being given at the ground of our

being. Since it is a gift, we cannot make it happen; yet it does seem as if long-term fidelity to spiritual practices that assist in the emptying out of object-focused consciousness and the opening up of deeper, more silent dimensions of one's being prepares the way for such moments.

This interplay of grace and discipline means that it is difficult to make hard and fast statements about how, when, and where people will experience contemplative prayer. Some may experience many moments of conscious contemplative awareness with seemingly little discipline, while others may practice much discipline and yet apparently have little of the grace of such breakthroughs. Probably the most common pattern, however, is for an individual to practice a moderate discipline of an object-focused type of prayer (for example, reflective, imaginative, or devotional modes) for some time, with occasional refreshing glimpses of contemplative awareness. Then a time comes when something changes. The ways of prayer that have been so satisfying begin to seem dry and empty. A period of painful struggle ensues, eventually followed by a more consistent experience of a contemplative, non-object-focused form of prayer.

Within the contemplative traditions efforts have been made to identify the characteristics of such a time when a shift is occurring from an experience of prayer that is object-focused to a more contemplative way. John of the Cross spells out three signs to look for:

The first is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses upon subjects which formerly provided satisfaction. . . .

The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties [intentionally] upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. . . .

The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, memory and will; and that he prefers to remain only in the general, loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned, without any particular knowledge or

understanding.^{lix}

In the understanding of John of the Cross, these signs are likely to be observed during the period that he terms the "active night of the spirit." This time is characterized by a wrenching process of letting go of attachment to all that has previously occupied one's mental and emotional attention. The active discipline of such letting go, however, is fruitless if the person has not really arrived at the point of passage to contemplation; for unless one's emptying-out is filled by the grace of contemplative awareness of being-in-God, it remains barren.

Once again we are reminded to remain humble in our efforts to systematize the interplay between grace and discipline. Nevertheless, John's careful discussion makes the point that not every Christian--and not even every Christian who is serious about cultivating the spiritual life--undergoes this passage into a more consistent experience of contemplative prayer. Every human being is potentially open to the contemplative dimension; many people have had sporadic conscious experiences of it; among these, some (but not all) experience the transition to a form of prayer that is more or less consistently contemplative.

At this point we have to thicken the plot a bit by acknowledging a difficulty with the way I have so far presented contemplation. The problem is that words such as "experience" and "awareness" are not entirely adequate to the reality of contemplation. The reality of being in God's presence is so fundamental to our existence that it is far more--and less--than an experience. Ultimately the core of contemplation is faith, which may be accompanied by total or near-total affective and intellectual darkness. In this sense, the person who lives totally in faith may be more rooted in contemplation than the one who has a great many profound feelings and insights related to being in God's presence. Therese of Lisieux is an example of a

contemplative who spent the last years of her life in this kind of spiritual darkness. The transition of which John of the Cross speaks is in some ways more a passage to "unknowing" than to "knowing."

Contemplative identity

What, then, does it mean to "be a contemplative"? Because of the ambiguity of contemplative experience, there is little value--and much danger--in attempting to pin down who is "more contemplative" at the level of experience. It is more accurate simply to say that some individuals discover and claim a contemplative identity that becomes central in their self-understanding and their way of being in the world. Psychologist Erik Erikson has spoken of identity as having two core dimensions: first, an inner sense of one's own firmness, centeredness, and historical continuity; second, an outwardly-focused sense of having a place, a role, a set of skills and competencies, within a specific sociocultural environment.^{lx}

A person who claims an identity as a contemplative is affirming that in both the interior and the social realms, his or her sense of selfhood is centered around experiences and/or practices of contemplation.

Contemplative lifestyle

Although related to identity, contemplative lifestyle is still another distinct dimension. A contemplative lifestyle might be defined as one in which choices about daily schedule, participation in ecclesial communities, engagement in ministry, way of earning a living, and other significant life issues are shaped by the priority of the contemplative dimension. Concretely, the ways in which a lay contemplative lifestyle is being expressed vary widely. Some establish hermitages in remote areas; others live with spouses and children in cities or suburbs. Some hold demanding jobs; others find a way to earn a sparse living

quietly. Some seek others of like mind with whom to associate; others guard their solitude more carefully than gold. Some individuals practice their contemplative lifestyle very quietly and unobtrusively, while others are called to make it a public witness. While there are no absolutes as to how such a lifestyle has to be played out--that is, not all involve celibacy, not all take place in cloisters or other quiet locations, etc.--the contemplative lifestyle does involve giving an identifiable priority to availability for contemplative experience and practice.

Even though it is not appropriate for lay contemplatives to imitate the lifestyle of religious, there is still much to be learned from the wisdom of past contemplatives. For example, the 13th century "Rule of St. Albert," which forms the foundation of the Carmelite way of life, includes a phrase that is a classic distillation of basic principles for a contemplative lifestyle: "The brothers will remain in or near their cells, meditating on the word of God day and night, unless called forth by some other just occupation."^{lxi} Recent commentators on the Rule note that the "cells" where this solitary practice takes place are the units of a common life in which an oratory for daily eucharist forms the physical center, and there are also other shared buildings and functions. Thus, the context of this summary statement is a description of a community life of mutual service centered around the eucharist.^{lxii}

While the specifics will differ, many lay contemplatives can resonate with this injunction of a preference for solitude, a commitment to daily contemplative practice, and the flexibility of a charitable heart that responds to the real needs of others--all taking place within some form of community life. In the case of the lay contemplative the latter may be the parish or a religious community house, but it is also likely to find an equally important center in family, neighborhood, friendship circle, or support group.

Traditionally, the Christian contemplative lifestyle has been deeply woven with the liturgical and sacramental rituals

of the Church. More often than not this takes a significantly different form for the lay contemplative. As lay theologian Elizabeth Dreyer put it in a recent interview, for the laity (and increasingly for all people today) God and God's action are first found in the world and in the mundane activities of daily life. Ecclesial liturgy and sacraments are experienced as celebrating and enhancing this permeating divine presence, rather than as being its primary point of entry into human life.^{lxiii} At the same time, many lay contemplatives develop a deep sensitivity to symbol and ritual, and often they are at the forefront of efforts to create new ways to weave them into the everyday lives of family and community.

As indicated earlier, these four dimensions of contemplative being (experience, practice, identity, lifestyle) present themselves in a unique mix in each contemplative's life. For example, some may have a great deal of contemplative experience without an urgency to structure contemplative practice or to claim a contemplative identity or lifestyle; others may practice in a disciplined way and strongly claim contemplative identity and lifestyle, yet rarely be gifted with contemplative experience. Since the core of all aspects of contemplative being is the grace of God who created us to share divine life and who gives the fullness of that gift to each in unique ways, no particular combination of the dimensions should be regarded as a cause for either shame or glory; each is simply gift.

II. AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

At this point, it will be helpful to introduce a second theological principle that is essential to understanding the contemplative vocation. This is a core principle of ecclesiology: namely, that the persons we are created and called to be exist not only in relationship of love with God, but also and equally in a relationship of love with our fellow human beings. Whatever gifts we receive through both nature and grace are intended to be used to build up the communion of all human beings in and with God.

Hence, contemplative experience, practice, identity, and/or lifestyle are elements of an individual Christian's unique charism--his or her particular gift of grace for the upbuilding of the church.

It is sometimes mistakenly presumed that the contemplative way is inherently an individualistic one, focused primarily on one's own development in relationship to God. Indeed, just as every profession or lifestyle has "occupational hazards," it may be true that a leaning toward individualism can easily creep into a contemplative's life. For Christians, however, a gauge of the authenticity of one's spiritual experience is the degree to which it leads one more deeply into commitment to building up the community in love. If this is not the direction in which one is moving, it may be evidence that one is not growing in union with the God who, in Christ, has been totally poured out in love on behalf of the whole people of God. Teresa of Avila, for example, wrote:

I see, Sisters, that if we fail in love of neighbor we are lost. . . . When you see yourselves lacking in this love, even though you have devotion and gratifying experiences that make you think you have reached this stage [of union], and you experience some little suspension in the prayer of quiet, . . . believe me you have not reached union.^{lxiv}

The question of the character and role of the laity in general, and of the lay contemplative in particular, must be considered within this basic framework. Whatever the phenomenon of lay contemplation may mean when viewed in sociological or cultural terms, within a Christian theological framework its meaning only comes into focus in relation to how God is building up the Church through the charisms and offices that are being given to particular Christians. A charism, by definition, is not given to everyone. Just as some members of the body of Christ build up the communion by being preachers, others by being teachers, others by being administrators, and still others by joining contemplative religious communities, so some may do so by being lay contemplatives.

As with "contemplation," many theological and ideological currents swirl around the question of the "laity." One aspect of this is the difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of this terminology. For some Protestants the term "lay" is little used within church conversations, since structurally-defined distinctions between Christians in official ministerial roles and others are minimal. For other Protestants there is a distinction between ordained and non-ordained, but both groups share the lifestyle of marriage and participation in all aspects of the secular world. Within Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, celibacy and priesthood are closely bound together, and there is the additional category of celibate "religious" who also have a lifestyle different from that of the majority of Christians. In common parlance among Catholics "laity" has most often referred to those not belonging to these celibate groups. Yet with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) a major revision of this mentality began shaking up old assumptions. It is this theology that will be briefly reviewed here.

After the Council a basic debate ensued over whether the term "laity" properly refers to all the faithful as members of the "people of God," or whether it refers to a category of Christians that should be carefully distinguished from the categories of "clerics" and "religious." An examination of biblical and early Christian usage reveals that the tension between these different meanings has deep roots. In Greek translations of the Old Testament, *laos* clearly referred to God's chosen people as distinct from the *ethne*, the heathen nations; the term *laos* was never used to refer to the latter. This basic usage was carried over into the New Testament, for example in 1 Peter 2:9 where all Christians are described as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people (*laos*) who are God's own possession." In Greco-Roman society in general, however, *laos* seems to have meant the people as opposed to their leaders. This shade of meaning also appears in early Christian usage. In addition, the adjectival form *laikos* (belonging to the people) sometimes meant non-sacral--that is, not dedicated to God in worship; this too

was taken up into Christian thought.^{lxv} Hence biblically the most basic theological meaning of "laity" is "member of the people of God," but the connotations of "not a member of the leadership group" and "involved in secularity rather than worship" also are present at the period of Christianity's origins.

An even stronger biblical argument for a radically egalitarian ecclesiological vision derives from the fact that the most theologically rich terms used for the followers of Jesus, including "disciples," "elect," "saints," and "believers," do not make any distinctions of categories--all Christians are included. The terminology of distinctions, on the other hand, such as "servant" (*diakonos* or deacon), "elder" (*presbyteros* or presbyter) and "supervisor" (*episkopos* or bishop), takes up cultural terminology that was not originally theologically based.^{lxvi}

One approach to dealing with this somewhat ambiguous evidence, then, is to level the distinctions; another is to sharpen them. In relation to the question of contemplative life, the egalitarian tendency may tend to reject any reflection on distinct needs or gifts of "lay contemplatives"--thus short-circuiting efforts to articulate a theological basis for new ways of living a vocation to contemplation. The distinguishing tendency, on the other hand, may so emphasize defining the different characters of contemplative life inside and outside of the canonically-established cloister as to cast doubt on the validity of one or the other. Often the latter reflection is tainted by a defensive instinct, either on the part of those dedicated to canonical cloistered contemplative life or on the part of those who have rejected this way for themselves.

Subsequent to the Second Vatican Council, Edward Schillebeeckx examined its documents and concluded that it had included all of the above elements in its theological definition of the layperson. First, the layperson is positively defined as a member of the people of God and a participant in the total mission of the church. There is a fundamental *koinonia* or communion of all Christians, within which the distinction of laity from clergy is secondary. Laypeople are as responsible for

the life and mission of the church as clergy are. Second, the layperson is negatively defined as a non-office-bearer. Thus, lay responsibility in the church is in non-official capacities; it must avoid tendencies to clericalism. Third, there is a positive specificity to the layperson's role: it is a "christian relationship with the secularity of the world" and a call to the "setting in order of temporal society."^{lxvii}

Schillebeeckx notes that the Council envisioned the Church as having a single primary mission--that of announcing, symbolizing, and enacting salvation--but that this mission includes within itself a secondary mission of participating in the basic human vocation to humanize the material and secular world. He wrote, "The first aspect of this one but twofold mission is concerned with the order of salvation itself, whereas the second aspect, which is the inner consequence of the first, is concerned with the orientation of the secularity of the world towards salvation." Because this latter dimension is theologically an essential part of the church's mission, it is appropriate to include all aspects of engagement in the secular world within the theological definition of the layperson.^{lxviii}

A 1988 article by Giovanni Magnani, in which he propounds an essentially egalitarian view as the foundation for making clarifying distinctions, deepens this perspective.^{lxix} He affirms that differentiations among Christians, including those which create clergy and religious, are secondary and are on a different logical level from the inclusive category of "laity."^{lxx} Despite his clear rejection of the approach of assigning different tasks to different categories of Christians, however, Magnani does not abandon the quest to articulate a "specific character" of the laity. The Council's larger agenda, he believes, was to clarify that the primary work of the whole Church is "the task of ordering temporal things toward God, of taking them up to transform them in Christ, and of the recapitulation that involves the whole of the created order."^{lxxi} This affirmation that the Church's chief role is to serve the transformation of the temporal and created order is a fairly radical paradigm shift from

previous models, and it has a profound effect on how the role of the laity is viewed. Simply put, full and intense engagement in that task is the "specific character" of the member of Christ's faithful, that is, the layperson.

The layperson, then, is one in and through whom this primary work of the Church--the work of lifting up and transforming the whole created world--can reach its fullness. The laity are placed at the center of the Church, as those within whom God's transformation of the created world is most intensely being realized. Creation itself, as well as the secular activities involved in governing and developing its potential, is viewed positively as the realm within which God is at work. Magnani notes that this is quite different from earlier eras, in which:

The theology of creation and of Christ as being all in all were largely stifled by a theology and a spirituality that were guided by clerics and monks who in turn were biased in favor of a theology of redemption that therefore appears rather unbalanced, concentrating as it does more on the "not yet" of the kingdom and a certain flight from the world rather than on a proper appreciation of the lay state.^{lxxii}

It is important to emphasize that the newness in this theology is not meant to be simply a reversed elitism, so that whereas in earlier theologies it appeared "better" to be a cleric or a religious, now it is "better" not to be. Rather, the clerical and religious states are now seen as subsequent specifications of the more fundamental "layness" of the Christian faithful. Clerics and religious, like all Christians, participate in the transformation of the world in ways appropriate to their particular offices and charisms; but their clerical or religious state does not, *per se*, afford them any greater or more important role.

As is evident, these considerations do not entirely resolve the practical problem of how to use the terms "lay" and "laity." In what follows I try to use the terms "lay" and "laity" to refer inclusively to the Christian people as called to active presence within all aspects of the created world, prior to any ecclesiastical distinctions such as sacramental orders or canonical

vows. While this definition does not exclude members of the clergy and religious institutes, the intended emphasis is on Christian life that is not inserted within those categories. Inevitably, there is a certain degree of unresolved tension remaining in this use of language; this tension is well deeply rooted both in ancient sources and in present-day ecclesial politics. The best we can do, perhaps, is to attempt to enhance the creative dimensions of these tensions, while minimizing their destructive potential.

To sum up what we have suggested so far in our attempt to understand the lay contemplative vocation: lay contemplatives are Christians who experience a call to give concerted attention to the contemplative dimension, within a theological and practical framework of openness to the world and active engagement in its transformation. While this way of living the contemplative life does not change the practical reality of the need for certain times and places of silence, solitude, and separation in order to develop contemplatively, it places this need within a theological framework that is oriented toward participation in the secular world rather than withdrawal from it.

III. A CHRISTOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

Any Christian way of life is a discipleship of Jesus. To be a disciple is in some way to follow, to imitate, to be conformed to, one's teacher. Yet exactly who Jesus is, and what being his disciple asks of us, have been understood in a great many different ways within Christian tradition. The Introduction to this volume briefly reviews some aspects of the history of Christian spiritualities, concluding that a major paradigm shift is occurring in our own time. Here we will reflect on some of the implications of that shift for how we can envision Christ as the paradigm for the lay contemplative life.

A 1987 article by Joe Holland on John Paul II's theology of the laity will help to set the stage for these reflections on

Christology.^{lxxiii} Holland contrasts two basic perspectives on how God operates in the world. In the classical view, God is envisioned as masculine and is transcendent over nature, which is envisioned as feminine. Within the Church, clergy share in the masculine, transcendent character of God while the laity (and non-ordained religious) have a feminine, submissive character. In the secular world, however, the laity (this time, not including non-ordained religious) are called to participate in God's masculine transcendence over the natural and historical world.

This classical view leads to a Christology in which both Christ's maleness and his hierarachical dominance are central. Christ is the "head" who makes all decisions and hands them down to subordinates through a chain of command that passes from pope to bishops to priests to laity. A good disciple is above all obedient within this chain of command. A lay disciple is called to accept a peripheral and submissive role within the Church, while taking an active role in the transformation of nature and history.

While this classical theology does not exclude the possibility of a lay contemplative vocation, it also does not encourage it. Contemplation is pure "feminine" receptivity to the transcendent God. Its proper place is in the religious life. The laity's proper vocation, on the other hand, is active, "masculine" transformation of the world. In some rare cases these vocations may be mixed, but this is seen as more like an "exception that proves the rule" than as an emerging new paradigm.

Holland calls the contrasting perspective the "American post-modern view." He describes it this way:

The American post-modern perspective proceeds from the bottom up in a framework of immanence, adds the dimension of God as symbolically feminine giving life from below, proceeds to the unfolding creativity of the universe's ecological dynamism, and lastly comes to humanity as the emerging consciousness within nature, all perceived in a framework of ecological, human, divine communion.^{lxxiv}

In this perspective, God's immanence within nature and history is as central as is God's transcendence. The fullness of God's life is manifested in a mutual embrace of immanence and transcendence, rather than the dominance of one over the other. The full equality-in-difference of male and female is a crucial symbol of this mutual embrace.

The Christology that emerges within this perspective is very different from that of the classical one. Here, emphasis shifts from Christ's role as representative of the transcendent God to his identity as the human being within whom divinity and materiality embrace in radical fullness and mutuality. Rather than being the head of the Church who makes all its decisions, he is the loving heart within whom all--body and soul, sinner and saint--are welcomed and joined together in the great communion of the Church.

To belong to Christ, then, is not so much to take up one's place in a chain of command as it is to give oneself wholeheartedly over to co-creating this welcoming communion with him. The Christ to whom the Christian becomes a disciple is not so much concerned about setting up boundaries and structures as about healing all divisions so that the whole creation is reconciled in love. Each office and charism in the Church accomplishes this in a different way, but none has an inherent primacy; rather, "If anyone wishes to rank first, [they] must remain the last one of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

In this Christology, the contemplative vocation is an intense degree of intimacy of participation in Christ's life and work. This fullness of intimacy with Christ does not demand separation from secular life, since his work is to bring all creation together in love. In this view, it makes sense that people from every walk of life will be called to the contemplative vocation--for only in this way can every nook and cranny of creation be directly touched and reconciled by a member of Christ's body.

IV. ELEMENTS OF A SPIRITUALITY FOR LAY CONTEMPLATIVES

As there was in Jesus' life, there is both an emptiness and a fullness in the contemplative way. The emptiness can be imaged in Jesus' words, "I am the gate" (John 10:9). To be a gate or a doorway for others is to become empty so that no obstacle stands in the way of others' entry into fullness. Contemplative emptiness is a sharing in Jesus' self-emptying, which came to a climax on the cross. There is a deeply interior dimension of this emptiness, but more often than not it also has ramifications for the contemplative's physical, psychological, and social life as well. For many lay contemplatives, it may take shapes such as misunderstanding and scorn from some of one's closest compatriots, or neverending urgings (interior and exterior) to dissipate one's energy through all sorts of "important" activities, or simply the drain of the inner turmoil that inevitably accompanies certain passages of the spiritual life--all borne without the security of an assured title or the support of a canonically-bolstered discipline of life.

Contemplative fullness, on the other hand, is allowing one's whole being--physical, psychological, social as well as spiritual--to be re-created into a capacious dwelling place that, like Christ, embraces all within a loving communion. Sacramental practice and imagination, which are especially well-developed within the Roman Catholic communion, offer rich resources for this graced project of allowing the whole creation to be a place of God's presence. Some form of participation in ritual, symbol, and sacrament are essential to the development of this contemplative fullness. Yet the lay contemplative, whose lifestyle normally includes full engagement in the secular world, is also called to develop this dimension of the contemplative vocation in new ways.

A window into some implications of the emerging perspective is to observe the shift in perspectives on the human

body. Many classical Christian spiritualities tended to take an athletic approach to controlling the body, operating out of the belief that without severe discipline the natural tendencies of the body are opposed to contemplative development. In a spirituality such as that being outlined here, a basically different assumption prevails. The natural tendencies of the body are believed to be toward radical fullness of life and contemplation; what opposes that development are artificial and pathological repressions that paralyze or distort the delicate positive potentialities of human embodied life. Christ, who lived, died, and rose as an embodied human being, is model and guide for a complete reconciliation of the body to fullness of life. Hence, spiritual discipline is not understood so much in terms of ascetic control of the body as of liberating therapies.

To some degree the actual bodily practices may be similar: fasting, silence, solitude, meditation, and many other traditional contemplative disciplines can be practiced within either framework of meaning. The new mentality, however, also opens the door for many other forms of bodywork to become a significant dimension of the contemplative journey. Yoga, breathwork, martial arts, massage, jogging, and many other approaches to lessening bodily rigidity and opening up more subtle dimensions of bodily experience are frequently advocated by serious spiritual seekers today.

A major change in attitude toward sexuality accompanies this shift in attitudes toward the body. It is no longer assumed that celibacy is the only or best way to pursue the contemplative life seriously. Rather, the deep relational potential of the marital relationship, including its physical sexual expression, is seen as a contemplative way in itself. While most likely a significant number of contemplatives will still experience a call to celibacy as the best context for developing their contemplative experience, this may no longer be the most common scenario of contemplative development.

On a broader scale, contemplative life today is much more likely than it was in generations past to be envisioned as integrally linked with action on behalf of social justice or ecology. This too is connected to the change in attitudes to the

body: the bodies of the poor, the oppressed, the tortured, and finally the body of the earth itself are affirmed as having sacred value, both in themselves and in relation to the contemplative vocation. A positive valuing of one's own body, which has its origin, its particular characteristics, and its ongoing nurturance from its connections with the physicality of the earth and of other people's bodies, opens out to a spirituality of solidarity, compassion, and care. While the concrete actions flowing from this will take different forms in the lives of different individuals, it is noteworthy that today there is often a significant overlap between those committed to a contemplative life and those committed to action on behalf of social and ecological justice.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above developments in the theological understanding of Christian life, the contemporary movement of lay contemplation takes on a new significance. Rather than defining it negatively, as if its primary character were a rejection of earlier ways of living the contemplative life, it can be defined positively, as a development of a theology of the transformation of creation and the temporal world through the action of Christ in his people. Whereas previous spiritualities were usually deeply imbued with an assumption that the best way to dedicate oneself entirely to God was through withdrawal (to the degree possible) from secular and material engagements, contemporary theologies affirm "the world" as the locus of God's presence and action. Contemplative development, then, has everything to do with a deepening of one's responsible presence in and for the world. The lay contemplative movement, which this book seeks to explore and foster, is an integral expression of this emerging new paradigm.

ENDNOTES

A ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

by Mary Frohlich

I. A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

The term "contemplative" is far from univocal. Many dimensions contribute to a person's affirmation that he or she has a contemplative calling. Components may include contemplative experiences, contemplative practices, a contemplative identity, a contemplative lifestyle--each of which may be manifested in widely varying ways. With the raw material of gifts, opportunities, and choices, each individual mixes these components in a unique way to create a personal contemplative

way. Thus, there is no one face of the "contemplative"; contemplatives may look, act, talk, think, and pray very differently from one another.

There is, however, an underlying theological principle that is essential if we are to begin making any sense of this confusing diversity. That principle, which forms the heart of a contemplative theological anthropology, is the affirmation that human beings are created with a contemplative core. We are created to love God, to know God, to be in union with God. Our truest and most original being lives in deepest intimacy with God, wholly transparent to God and wholly motivated by divine love. Theologically, there is a sense in which every human being is created to be a "contemplative"--that is, one who lives in complete openness to God in every dimension of his or her being. On the basis of this theological principle, we will explore the various dimensions of the contemplative vocation: experience, practice, identity, and lifestyle.

Contemplative experience

We can define contemplative experience as awareness--whether fleeting or habitual--of that most foundational, most original depth of being. Contemplative teacher William Shannon, for example, describes contemplative experience as conscious awareness of the being-in-God's-presence that we are.^{lxv} We always are, always have been, and always will be in God's presence, and if we were not we would not be at all. Because this is our most foundational reality, contemplative experience is potentially available to every human being, at all times and in every circumstance. It can, and does, "happen" to people without any preparation and while they are engaged in pursuits that are not concerned with seeking it. It is always a grace--that is, it is God who gives Godself, not we who grasp God.

Contemplative practice

As is obvious, we are not always aware of this most fundamental reality of our existence. The

obstacles to this awareness include some for which we are culpable ("sins") and some which simply are there, without our knowing why. While contemplation is essentially a grace, a discipline of contemplative practice is also a significant factor in preparing the way and making it possible for it to become an established dimension of an individual's spiritual life. Contemplative practices of prayer are based on the principle that waking up to contemplative awareness is not a matter of focusing on God as an object, but rather of emptying out and opening up to the gift of at-oneness with God that is always being given at the ground of our being. Since it is a gift, we cannot make it happen; yet it does seem as if long-term fidelity to spiritual practices that assist in the emptying out of object-focused consciousness and the opening up of deeper, more silent dimensions of one's being prepares the way for such moments.

This interplay of grace and discipline means that it is difficult to make hard and fast statements about how, when, and where people will experience contemplative prayer. Some may experience many moments of conscious contemplative awareness with seemingly little discipline, while others may practice much discipline and yet apparently have little of the grace of such breakthroughs. Probably the most common pattern, however, is for an individual to practice a moderate discipline of an object-focused type of prayer (for example, reflective, imaginative, or devotional modes) for some time, with occasional refreshing glimpses of contemplative awareness. Then a time comes when something changes. The ways of prayer that have been so satisfying begin to seem dry and empty. A period of painful struggle ensues, eventually followed by a more consistent experience of a contemplative, non-object-focused form of prayer.

Within the contemplative traditions efforts have been made to identify the characteristics of such a time when a shift is occurring from an experience of prayer that is object-focused to a more contemplative way. John of the Cross spells out three signs to look for:

The first is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses upon subjects which formerly provided satisfaction. . . .

The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties

[intentionally] upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. . . .

The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, memory and will; and that he prefers to remain only in the general, loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned, without any particular knowledge or understanding.^{lxxxvi}

In the understanding of John of the Cross, these signs are likely to be observed during the period that he terms the "active night of the spirit." This time is characterized by a wrenching process of letting go of attachment to all that has previously occupied one's mental and emotional attention. The active discipline of such letting go, however, is fruitless if the person has not really arrived at the point of passage to contemplation; for unless one's emptying-out is filled by the grace of contemplative awareness of being-in-God, it remains barren.

Once again we are reminded to remain humble in our efforts to systematize the interplay between grace and discipline. Nevertheless, John's careful discussion makes the point that not every Christian--and not even every Christian who is serious about cultivating the spiritual life--undergoes this passage into a more consistent experience of contemplative prayer. Every human being is potentially open to the contemplative dimension; many people have had sporadic conscious experiences of it; among these, some (but not all) experience the transition to a form of prayer that is more or less consistently contemplative.

At this point we have to thicken the plot a bit by acknowledging a difficulty with the way I have so far presented contemplation. The problem is that words such as "experience" and "awareness" are not entirely adequate to the reality of contemplation. The reality of being in God's presence is so fundamental to our existence that it is far more--and less--than an experience. Ultimately the core of contemplation is faith, which may be accompanied by total or near-total affective and intellectual darkness. In this sense, the person who lives totally in faith may be more rooted in contemplation than the one who has a great many profound feelings and insights related to being in God's presence. Therese of Lisieux is an example of a contemplative who spent the last

years of her life in this kind of spiritual darkness. The transition of which John of the Cross speaks is in some ways more a passage to "unknowing" than to "knowing."

Contemplative identity

What, then, does it mean to "be a contemplative"? Because of the ambiguity of contemplative experience, there is little value--and much danger--in attempting to pin down who is "more contemplative" at the level of experience. It is more accurate simply to say that some individuals discover and claim a contemplative identity that becomes central in their self-understanding and their way of being in the world. Psychologist Erik Erikson has spoken of identity as having two core dimensions: first, an inner sense of one's own firmness, centeredness, and historical continuity; second, an outwardly-focused sense of having a place, a role, a set of skills and competencies, within a specific sociocultural environment.^{lxxvii} A person who claims an identity as a contemplative is affirming that in both the interior and the social realms, his or her sense of selfhood is centered around experiences and/or practices of contemplation.

Contemplative lifestyle

Although related to identity, contemplative lifestyle is still another distinct dimension. A contemplative lifestyle might be defined as one in which choices about daily schedule, participation in ecclesial communities, engagement in ministry, way of earning a living, and other significant life issues are shaped by the priority of the contemplative dimension. Concretely, the ways in which a lay contemplative lifestyle is being expressed vary widely. Some establish hermitages in remote areas; others live with spouses and children in cities or suburbs. Some hold demanding jobs; others find a way to earn a sparse living quietly. Some seek others of like mind with whom to associate; others guard their solitude more carefully than gold. Some individuals practice their contemplative lifestyle very quietly and unobtrusively, while others are called to make it a public witness. While

there are no absolutes as to how such a lifestyle has to be played out--that is, not all involve celibacy, not all take place in cloisters or other quiet locations, etc.--the contemplative lifestyle does involve giving an identifiable priority to availability for contemplative experience and practice.

Even though it is not appropriate for lay contemplatives to imitate the lifestyle of religious, there is still much to be learned from the wisdom of past contemplatives. For example, the 13th century "Rule of St. Albert," which forms the foundation of the Carmelite way of life, includes a phrase that is a classic distillation of basic principles for a contemplative lifestyle: "The brothers will remain in or near their cells, meditating on the word of God day and night, unless called forth by some other just occupation."^{lxxviii} Recent commentators on the Rule note that the "cells" where this solitary practice takes place are the units of a common life in which an oratory for daily eucharist forms the physical center, and there are also other shared buildings and functions. Thus, the context of this summary statement is a description of a community life of mutual service centered around the eucharist.^{lxxix}

While the specifics will differ, many lay contemplatives can resonate with this injunction of a preference for solitude, a commitment to daily contemplative practice, and the flexibility of a charitable heart that responds to the real needs of others--all taking place within some form of community life. In the case of the lay contemplative the latter may be the parish or a religious community house, but it is also likely to find an equally important center in family, neighborhood, friendship circle, or support group.

Traditionally, the Christian contemplative lifestyle has been deeply woven with the liturgical and sacramental rituals of the Church. More often than not this takes a significantly different form for the lay contemplative. As lay theologian Elizabeth Dreyer put it in a recent interview, for the laity (and increasingly for all people today) God and God's action are first found in the world and in the mundane activities of daily life. Ecclesial liturgy and sacraments are experienced as celebrating and enhancing this permeating divine presence, rather than as being its primary point of entry into

human life.^{lxxx} At the same time, many lay contemplatives develop a deep sensitivity to symbol and ritual, and often they are at the forefront of efforts to create new ways to weave them into the everyday lives of family and community.

As indicated earlier, these four dimensions of contemplative being (experience, practice, identity, lifestyle) present themselves in a unique mix in each contemplative's life. For example, some may have a great deal of contemplative experience without an urgency to structure contemplative practice or to claim a contemplative identity or lifestyle; others may practice in a disciplined way and strongly claim contemplative identity and lifestyle, yet rarely be gifted with contemplative experience. Since the core of all aspects of contemplative being is the grace of God who created us to share divine life and who gives the fullness of that gift to each in unique ways, no particular combination of the dimensions should be regarded as a cause for either shame or glory; each is simply gift.

II. AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

At this point, it will be helpful to introduce a second theological principle that is essential to understanding the contemplative vocation. This is a core principle of ecclesiology: namely, that the persons we are created and called to be exist not only in relationship of love with God, but also and equally in a relationship of love with our fellow human beings. Whatever gifts we receive through both nature and grace are intended to be used to build up the communion of all human beings in and with God. Hence, "being a contemplative" is a charism--a gift of grace for the church.

It is sometimes mistakenly presumed that the contemplative way is inherently an individualistic one, focused primarily on one's own development in relationship to God. Indeed, every profession or lifestyle has "occupational hazards," and it may be true that a leaning toward individualism can easily creep into a contemplative's life. For Christians, however, a gauge of the authenticity of one's contemplative experience is the degree to which it leads one more deeply into

commitment to building up the community in love. If this is not the direction in which one is moving, it may be evidence that one is not growing in union with the God who, in Christ, has been totally poured out in love on behalf of the whole people of God. Teresa of Avila, for example, wrote:

I see, Sisters, that if we fail in love of neighbor we are lost. . . . When you see yourselves lacking in this love, even though you have devotion and gratifying experiences that make you think you have reached this stage [of union], and you experience some little suspension in the prayer of quiet, . . . believe me you have not reached union.^{lxxxii}

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As with "contemplation," many theological and ideological currents swirl around the question of the "laity." One aspect of this is the difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of this terminology. For some Protestants the term "lay" is little used within church conversations, since structurally-defined distinctions between Christians in official ministerial roles and others are minimal. For other Protestants there is a distinction between ordained and non-ordained, but both groups share the lifestyle of marriage and participation in all aspects of the secular world. Within Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, celibacy and priesthood are closely bound together, and there is the additional category of celibate "religious" who also have a lifestyle different from that of the majority of Christians. In common parlance among Catholics "laity" has most often referred to those not belonging to these celibate groups. Yet with the Second Vatican

Council (1962-65) a major revision of this mentality began shaking up old assumptions. It is this theology that will be briefly reviewed here.

After the Council a basic debate ensued over whether the term "laity" properly refers to nothing different from the biblically preferable "people of God" (that is, all the faithful), or whether it refers to a category of Christians that should be carefully distinguished from the categories of "clerics" and "religious." An examination of the biblical and early Christian evidence, in fact, finds that sometimes the Greek *laos* or "people" did indeed refer inclusively to all the people without distinction, but that in other places it referred contrastively to the people as distinct from their consecrated leaders.^{lxxxii} A stronger biblical argument for a radically egalitarian ecclesiological vision derives from the fact that the most theologically rich terms used for the followers of Jesus, including "disciples," "elect," "saints," and "believers," do not make any distinctions of categories--all Christians are included. The terminology of distinctions, on the other hand, such as "servant" (*diakonos* or deacon), "elder" (*presbyteros* or presbyter) and "supervisor" (*episkopos* or bishop), takes up cultural terminology that was not originally theologically based.^{lxxxiii}

One approach to dealing with this somewhat ambiguous evidence, then, is to level the distinctions; another is to sharpen them. In relation to the question of contemplative life, the egalitarian tendency may tend to reject any reflection on distinct needs or gifts of "lay contemplatives"--thus short-circuiting efforts to articulate a theological basis for new ways of living a vocation to contemplation. The distinguishing tendency, on the other hand, may so emphasize defining the different characters of contemplative life inside and outside of the canonically-established cloister as to cast doubt on the validity of one or the other. Often the latter reflection is tainted by a defensive instinct, either on the part of those dedicated to canonical cloistered contemplative life or on the part of those who have rejected this way for themselves.

A 1988 article by Giovanni Magnani, in which he propounds an essentially egalitarian view as the foundation for making clarifying distinctions, offers a perspective that I find helpful for our

purposes.^{lxxxiv} After carefully analyzing the key references to "lay" and "laity" in the documents of Vatican II, Magnani concludes that fundamentally the Council rejected making "laity" into a category of Christians contrasted to clergy and/or religious. Rather, the documents reveal an effort to identify the "layperson" as equivalent to the *christifideles* or "member of Christ's faithful"--in short, the Christian. In this perspective all Christians are first and foremost laypersons--that is, members of the "people of God" (*laos*). Differentiations, including those which create clergy and religious, are secondary and are on a different logical level from the inclusive category of "laity."^{lxxxv}

Despite his clear rejection of the approach of assigning different tasks to different categories of Christians, Magnani does not abandon the quest to articulate a "specific character" of the laity. The Council's larger agenda, he believes, was to clarify that the primary work of the whole Church is "the task of ordering temporal things toward God, of taking them up to transform them in Christ, and of the recapitulation that involves the whole of the created order."^{lxxxvi} This affirmation that the Church's chief role is to serve the transformation of the temporal and created order is a fairly radical paradigm shift from previous models, and it has a profound effect on how the role of the laity is viewed. Simply put, full and intense engagement in that task is the "specific character" of the member of Christ's faithful, that is, the layperson.

The layperson, then, is one in and through whom this primary work of the Church--the work of lifting up and transforming the whole created world--can reach its fullness. The laity are placed at the center of the Church, as those within whom God's transformation of the created world is most intensely being realized. Creation itself, as well as the secular activities involved in governing and developing its potential, is viewed positively as the realm within which God is at work. Magnani notes that this is quite different from earlier eras, in which:

The theology of creation and of Christ as being all in all were largely stifled by a theology and a spirituality that were guided by clerics and monks who in turn were biased in favor of a theology of redemption that therefore appears rather unbalanced, concentrating as it does more on the "not yet" of the kingdom and a certain flight from the world rather than on a proper appreciation of the lay state.^{lxxxvii}

It is important to emphasize that the newness in this theology is not meant to be simply a reversed elitism, so that whereas in earlier theologies it appeared "better" to be a cleric or a religious, now it is "better" not to be. Rather, the clerical and religious states are now seen as subsequent specifications of the more fundamental "layness" of the Christian faithful. Clerics and religious, like all Christians, participate in the transformation of the world in ways appropriate to their particular offices and charisms; but their clerical or religious state does not, *per se*, afford them any greater or more important role.

As is evident, these considerations do not entirely resolve the practical problem of how to use the terms "lay" and "laity." In what follows I try to use the terms "lay" and "laity" to refer inclusively to the Christian people as called to active presence within all aspects of the created world, prior to any ecclesiastical distinctions such as sacramental orders or canonical vows. While this definition does not exclude members of the clergy and religious institutes, the intended emphasis is on Christian life that is not inserted within those categories. If the reader finds a degree of unresolved tension remaining in this use of language (as I confess I do), it is probably a reflection of the tensions continuing to operate at the level of our ecclesial experience and practice. The best we can do, perhaps, is to attempt to enhance the creative dimensions of these tensions, while minimizing their destructive potential.

To sum up what we have suggested so far in our attempt to understand the lay contemplative vocation: lay contemplatives are Christians who experience a call to give concerted attention to the contemplative dimension, within a theological and practical framework of openness to the world and active engagement in its transformation. While this way of living the contemplative life does not change the practical reality of the need for certain times and places of silence, solitude, and separation in order to develop contemplatively, it places this need within a theological framework that is oriented toward participation in the secular world rather than withdrawal from it.

III. A CHRISTOLOGY OF LAY CONTEMPLATION

Any Christian way of life is a discipleship of Jesus. To be a disciple is in some way to follow, to imitate, to be conformed to, one's teacher. Yet exactly who Jesus is, and what being his disciple asks of us, have been understood in a great many different ways within Christian tradition. The Introduction to this volume briefly reviews some aspects of the history of Christian spiritualities, concluding that a major paradigm shift is occurring in our own time. Here we will reflect on some of the implications of that shift for how we can envision Christ as the paradigm for the lay contemplative life.

A 1987 article by Joe Holland on John Paul II's theology of the laity will help to set the stage for these reflections on Christology.^{lxxxviii} Holland contrasts two basic perspectives on how God operates in the world. In the classical view, God is envisioned as masculine and is transcendent over nature, which is envisioned as feminine. Within the Church, clergy share in the masculine, transcendent character of God while the laity (who, within this theology, are those who are neither ordained nor in religious vows) have a feminine, submissive character. In the secular world, however, the laity are called to participate in God's masculine transcendence over the natural and historical world. This classical view leads to a Christology in which both Christ's maleness and his hierarchical dominance are central. Christ is the "head" who makes all decisions and hands them down to subordinates through a chain of command that passes from pope to bishops to priests to laity. A good disciple is above all obedient within this chain of command. A lay disciple is called to accept a peripheral and submissive role within the Church, while taking an active role in the transformation of nature and history.

While this classical theology does not exclude the possibility of a lay contemplative vocation, it also does not encourage it. Contemplation is pure "feminine" receptivity to the transcendent God. Its proper place is in the religious life. The laity's proper vocation, on the other hand, is active,

"masculine" transformation of the world. In some rare cases these vocations may be mixed, but this is seen as more like an "exception that proves the rule" than as an emerging new paradigm.

Holland calls the contrasting perspective the "American post-modern view." He describes it this way:

The American post-modern perspective proceeds from the bottom up in a framework of immanence, adds the dimension of God as symbolically feminine giving life from below, proceeds to the unfolding creativity of the universe's ecological dynamism, and lastly comes to humanity as the emerging consciousness within nature, all perceived in a framework of ecological, human, divine communion.^{lxxxix}

In this perspective, God's immanence within nature and history is as central as is God's transcendence. The fullness of God's life is manifested in a mutual embrace of immanence and transcendence, rather than the dominance of one over the other. The full equality-in-difference of male and female is a crucial symbol of this mutual embrace.

The Christology that emerges within this perspective is very different from that of the classical one. Here, Christ's role as representative of the transcendent God is less significant than his identity as the human being within whom divinity and materiality embrace in radical fullness and mutuality. Rather than being the head of the Church who makes all its decisions, he is the loving heart within whom all--body and soul, sinner and saint--are welcomed and joined together in the great communion of the Church.

To belong to Christ, then, is not so much to take up one's place in a chain of command as it is to give oneself wholeheartedly over to co-creating this welcoming communion with him. The Christ to whom the Christian becomes a disciple is not so much concerned about setting up boundaries and structures as about healing all divisions so that the whole creation is reconciled in love. Each office and charism in the Church accomplishes this in a different way, but none has an inherent primacy; rather, "If anyone wishes to rank first, [they] must remain the last one of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

In this Christology, the contemplative vocation is an intense degree of intimacy of participation in Christ's life and work. In this view, it makes sense that people from every walk of life will be called to the contemplative vocation--for only in this way can every nook and cranny of creation be directly touched and reconciled by a member of Christ's body.

IV. ELEMENTS OF A SPIRITUALITY FOR LAY CONTEMPLATIVES

As there was in Jesus' life, there is both an emptiness and a fullness in the contemplative way. The emptiness can be imaged in Jesus' words, "I am the gate" (John 10:9). To be a gate or a doorway for others is to become empty so that no obstacle stands in the way of others' entry into fullness. Contemplative emptiness is a sharing in Jesus' self-emptying, which came to a climax on the cross. There is a deeply interior dimension of this emptiness, but more often than not it also has ramifications for the contemplative's physical, psychological, and social life as well. For many lay contemplatives, it may take the shape of misunderstanding and scorn from some of one's closest compatriots, neverending urgings (interior and exterior) to dissipate one's energy through all sorts of "important" activities, or simply the drain of the inner turmoil that inevitably accompanies certain passages of the spiritual life--all borne without the security of an assured title or the support of a canonically-bolstered discipline of life.

Contemplative fullness, on the other hand, is allowing one's whole being--physical, psychological, social as well as spiritual--to be re-created into a capacious dwelling place that, like Christ, embraces all within a loving communion. Sacramental practice and imagination, which are especially well-developed within the Roman Catholic communion, offer rich resources for this graced project of allowing the whole creation to be a place of God's presence. Some form of participation in ritual, symbol, and sacrament are essential to the development of this contemplative fullness. Yet the lay contemplative, whose lifestyle normally includes full engagement in the secular world, is also called to develop this dimension of the contemplative vocation in new ways.

A window into some implications of the emerging perspective is to observe the shift in perspectives on the human body. Many classical Christian spiritualities tended to take an athletic approach to controlling the body, operating out of the belief that without severe discipline the natural tendencies of the body are opposed to contemplative development. In a spirituality such as that being outlined here, a basically different assumption prevails. The natural tendencies of the body are believed to be toward radical fullness of life and contemplation; what opposes that development are artificial and pathological repressions that paralyze or distort the delicate positive potentialities of human embodied life. Christ, who lived, died, and rose as an embodied human being, is model and guide for a complete reconciliation of the body to fullness of life. Hence, spiritual discipline is not understood so much in terms of ascetic control of the body as of liberating therapies.

To some degree the actual bodily practices may be similar: fasting, silence, solitude, meditation, and many other traditional contemplative disciplines can be practiced within either framework of meaning. The new mentality, however, also opens the door for many other forms of bodywork to become a significant dimension of the contemplative journey. Yoga, breathwork, martial arts, massage, jogging, and many other approaches to lessening bodily rigidity and opening up more subtle dimensions of bodily experience are frequently advocated by serious spiritual seekers today.

A major change in attitude toward sexuality accompanies this shift in attitudes toward the body. It is no longer assumed that celibacy is the only or best way to pursue the contemplative life seriously. Rather, the deep relational potential of the marital relationship, including its physical sexual expression, is seen as a contemplative way in itself. While most likely a significant number of contemplatives will still experience a call to celibacy as the best context for developing their contemplative experience, this may no longer be the most common scenario of contemplative development.

On a broader scale, contemplative life today is much more likely than it was in generations

past to be envisioned as integrally linked with action on behalf of social justice or ecology. This too is connected to the change in attitudes to the body: the bodies of the poor, the oppressed, the tortured, and finally the body of the earth itself are affirmed as having sacred value, both in themselves and in relation to the contemplative vocation. A positive valuing of one's own body, which has its origin, its particular characteristics, and its ongoing nurturance from its connections with the physicality of the earth and of other people's bodies, opens out to a spirituality of solidarity, compassion, and care. While the concrete actions flowing from this will take different forms in the lives of different individuals, it is noteworthy that today there is often a significant overlap between those committed to a contemplative life and those committed to action on behalf of social and ecological justice.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above developments in the theological understanding of Christian life, the contemporary movement of lay contemplation takes on a new significance. Rather than defining it negatively, as if its primary character were a rejection of earlier ways of living the contemplative life, it can be defined positively, as a development of a theology of the transformation of creation and the temporal world through the action of Christ in his people. Whereas previous spiritualities were usually deeply imbued with an assumption that the best way to dedicate oneself entirely to God was through withdrawal (to the degree possible) from secular and material engagements, contemporary theologies affirm "the world" as the locus of God's presence and action. Contemplative development, then, has everything to do with a deepening of one's responsible presence in and for the world. The lay contemplative movement, which this book seeks to explore and foster, is an integral expression of this emerging new paradigm.

ENDNOTES

GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT

OF LAY CONTEMPLATIVE FORMATION PROGRAMS

By Wendy M. Wright

In third century Rome the wealthy widow Paula, inspired by the teaching of Christendom's most famous scholar-ascetic, Jerome, determined that she was called to the contemplative life. After several years of practicing "house asceticism" with like-minded Roman matrons, Paula set off for the holy land. She took with her one daughter who, like her mother, was to vow herself to chastity and a life of communal prayer and penance. Paula had recently buried another daughter, a victim of ascetic zealotry whose fasting had become self-starvation. One child, a little boy, she left in Rome in the care of relatives. As the boat bearing his mother and sister sailed eastward to the far-off land of Christianity's beginnings, the little boy stood on the quay and said his last, tearful goodbye.

For a variety of complex reasons, Christians of earlier centuries held that the contemplative life must necessarily be a life of radical withdrawal. The story of Paula and her children illustrates this early Christian conviction that to practice contemplative prayer one had to abandon home and family, join a monastic community, take up a hermit's staff, or enter an anchorhold. Contemplation was the charism, or gift, of a few--the spiritual elites--called to a life removed from "the world."

Contemplation is still today a call that some Christians come to feel is particularly their own. It is still conceived as a charism, a gift, whose cultivation is meant, not simply for personal enhancement, but for the flourishing of the whole body of Christ. It is one of many gifts bestowed by the Spirit. Today, however, we prefer not to rank the various gifts as "higher" or "lower," but rather to see each of the gifts bestowed by the Spirit of God as contributing to the mutual building up of the body. For this and many other reasons, we no longer want to equate the contemplative life with monastic withdrawal.

In this essay my goal is to offer some assistance to those who do not live in monasteries, but who nonetheless are beginning to discover in themselves some inklings of this contemplative

charism. After some exploration of what contemplation is, I will reflect on how one might discern whether this is indeed one's calling. Then I will look at the question of why one might seek something called "formation" in relation to this calling. In the latter part of the chapter I will focus explicitly on the use of discernment in making choices about specific formation programs.

What is Contemplation?

What is the gift, the call of contemplation? How does one discern or distinguish the movement, the texture, the dynamic of such a call? How does one go about nurturing that gift? It will be helpful to begin with a quick overview of the history of Christian understanding of contemplation.

Through much of the patristic and medieval eras, contemplation was a term rather broadly employed. Gregory the Great, Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux, among others, used it to refer to a simplified, holistic way of approaching reality. In this understanding contemplation is a way that tends to wordlessness and the unification of thought, feeling and desire so that the energies of the whole person are gathered into focus in an attentive, waiting awareness.

The discipline of prayer that most typically embodied this contemplative approach during the first millenium, when monasticism was the predominant Christian spirituality, was *lectio divina*, "divine reading." Lectio involves the cultivation of a distinctive sort of listening awareness that probes to the point where the complexity and cacophony of reality gives way to simple silence, and time's relentless activity yields to the stillness of God. In lectio one becomes a receptive vessel, allowing the Word to enter and transform one.

While still retaining something of this holistic meaning, over the centuries the term contemplation took on narrower, more highly defined connotations. Contemplation came to be divided into two phases, "acquired" and "infused," the first of these referring to the type of non-discursive interior prayer that can be actively cultivated. Infused contemplation, on the other hand, was seen as a type of non-discursive interior prayer that is a supernatural gift of grace, beyond

the initiation or control of the one who prays. This approach was most clearly articulated during the sixteenth century by the Spanish mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Implicit in this definition was the idea that contemplation, in either of its forms, is primarily the work of those who live an ascetic life withdrawn from "the world." Implied too was a hierarchy of those who prayed. All leading the canonically-established contemplative life were closer to God than those not leading that life. Those granted the special favors of infused contemplation were closer still. This Carmelite-inspired notion of contemplation dominated the Catholic world up until Vatican II. Most of the influential writers and scholars of the spiritual life accepted it as normative.

Since Vatican II there has been a return to the older, more holistic concept of contemplation, with the difference that now we no longer assume that contemplative living occurs solely or even primarily within cloister walls or in the solitude of a desert hermitage. While these venues retain their significance because articulate spokespersons for the contemplative life continue to speak from them, it is not true that they exhaust the possible ways in which a contemplative life may be pursued.

Contemplation in the present era is conceived both as a specific practice of non-discursive interior prayer and, more broadly, as an approach to life born out of a cultivated contemplative attitude. Some of the specific practices are culled from the ancient Christian tradition. "Centering Prayer", for example, is an adaption of the practice outlined in the fourteenth century English classic, The Cloud of Unknowing. A contemplative approach to life may issue from many different specific practices, but it is not limited to them. The contemplative approach orients to reality not as a problem to be solved, analyzed or manipulated but as mystery that elicits our reverence, claims our deepest desires, and calls forth responsive love. It is a dynamic approach that teases us into transformation and asks us to be remade over and over so that we might image more closely the God in whose image we were made.

Essential to the process of re-making is the cultivation of an interior spaciousness. "Becoming a vessel" one might call it, or "emptying oneself," or "creating an inner cell," so that one

may be filled and changed by God. Such a spaciousness has often been described by the quality of listening that goes on there--a listening that is responsive, receptive, integrative. Perhaps one of the distinctive characteristics of such an orientation is that, without ignoring the essential role played by human agency, the emphasis is upon divine agency acting, prompting and transforming. As we shall see, this attitude of listening and openness in readiness to respond to God is the foundation of any process of discernment.

Frequently, persons who feel drawn to a contemplative approach find themselves called to specific locales that encourage that inner, responsive, listening spaciousness--monasteries, desert landscapes, retreat centers and the like. They go there not simply because they are attracted by an exciting program offering or in the hope of finding a community of like-minded individuals. Rather, they go because they are aware of a central, inner space that aches to be emptied out and freed from the noisy clutter that diverts attention from what Blaise Pascal is said to have described as "the God-shaped hollow in each of us that only God can fill." Often it is during such a time of deep, yearning listening that one begins seriously to consider the question of a contemplative vocation.

Do I Have a Contemplative Calling?

The call to intentionally cultivate a more contemplative life comes from persistent inner prompting. One cannot take up this path simply because a neighbor, a spiritual friend, a present day holy person or a long-ago saint has done it. Quite simply, some are called on this way. Others may find another path of intentional Christian living more fruitful. This is not to reassert the old elite mentality that used to surround contemplation, but to suggest that many other ways of Christian prayer and life are viable. They too are gifts, charisms, bestowed by God for the building up of the entire body. Immersion in activities designed to promote social justice, engagement in faith-sharing groups, parish ministry, devotional practices (such as the rosary), art or music pursued as prayer, theological investigations, recitation of the daily office--these and a thousand other paths are ways to follow the

prompting of God's Spirit.

In terms of prayer proper, there are likewise a multitude of paths. Prayer may be conversational, imaginative, meditative, kinesthetic, vocal, liturgical, ritual, petitionary, visual, intercessory, short and spontaneous, formal and time intensive, and so forth. Individuals may have a general predisposition toward a particular style or practice of prayer, or they may find themselves drawn to different forms at differing periods of their lives. In short, the contemplative path is one among many and may not be for everyone. Yet neither is it necessarily the special reserve of only certain "holy persons." What is more, one following that path does not necessarily eschew all other prayer forms.

What is most important is to pay attention to your own faith story. How have you met God in the course of your life? How have you prayed in the past? How do you feel drawn to pray at the present time? In other words, where is the Spirit leading you? Especially, how do you experience that you have been gradually led over the last few months or years? You may discover that you are being called in the direction of a more distinctly contemplative path and desire to nurture it. Or that the prayer you have been practicing is basically contemplative. Or that you yearn for a network of support on the contemplative path you have long been practicing. Or that you desire to go deeper and more surely into the hidden ground of love and are searching for guides to accompany you. Any of these may be signs that a more wholehearted commitment to the contemplative path is being asked of you at this time in your life.

At the same time, it is also essential to be clear-eyed about the larger context of your life. On a practical level, what do you need at the present time? And what is possible given the context in which you find yourself? Do you feel an insistent need of several months or a year or two of intense immersion in contemplative practice? Do you need an approach that can be integrated more gradually and incrementally over a longer period of time? Realistically, how far and how often can you travel at the present? Do you have children, spouses or aging parents to factor into your

deliberations? What about integrating your contemplative practice into the work you are already doing, or into your life as it is presently structured?

Beyond reflection on the direction of your prayer and the context of your life, the initial discernment also requires some consideration of the issue of community and support. There is a certain solitaryness about the contemplative path, whether that solitude is physical or not. Yet guidance, encouragement and support are essential. Contemplation is not about isolation or privatization. In a Christian context, contemplation is seen as a charism, a gift, called forth by a trinitarian God whose essential being is relational. The body of Christ, the Church, is an organic, dynamic communion of persons whose sharing of both gifts and vulnerability creates an interdependent spiritual whole. Individual contemplation in such a context is never simply for the sake of self-fulfillment or personal salvation. It is always, ultimately, for the community.

Thomas Merton spoke of the monk as the "marginal man" in the sense that the monk situated him or herself not only on the geographical margins of society but on the hinterlands of the spiritual as well--in the wild, empty spaces where the ultimate questions come to constant birth. From there, a fresh perspective is possible, a transformed self can be forged. There is a sense in which Merton's claim is true for all embarked on the contemplative path, especially in terms of the solitary's relationship to the whole. Contemplative prayer brings into the whole community the awareness of the ground of love undergirding all reality. It probes the foundational empty openness of the human person, that "God-shaped hollow only God can fill." Thus the prayer of contemplation is not something a person does for his or her own perfection, actualization or enhancement. It is something into which one enters, with head covered and feet unshod. This most intimate, individual entering is at one and the same time an act of solidarity with and on behalf of the whole created world.

Ideally, such an act is undertaken with the support and encouragement of others. It is thus worth considering the concrete communal context in which you find yourself as you enter more deeply upon the contemplative journey. Are you in need of essential community support? If so,

where can you find that? Frequent presence, shared celebration, the interweaving of lives--are these things you need? Or is your need more clearly to deepen or actualize a gift which you can then bring back to a strong, already established network of spiritual support?

The texture and rhythm of your contemplative practice should ideally be suited to the situation in which you find yourself. While in some cases the Spirit may be prompting to some radical change--changing employment, relocating, embracing a downwardly mobile lifestyle--in other cases a gentler adjustment may be asked. In either case, a contemplative life does not necessarily look the same in all persons. A retired, single woman may easily be able to structure a day to accommodate ample periods of seated meditation. A financially solvent pastor of a willing congregation may find that week or month-long mini sabbaticals at a distant retreat center are feasible. A young mother of several pre-school age children, on the other hand, may discover that scheduled times of reflection are impossible, but that a middle-of-the-night nursing session or prayers with a toddler before bedtime or pushing a stroller through the park are opportunities for a deep, unfettered attention to the whispered invitation of God.

Too frequently, Christians are convinced that they do not know how to pray or that they could never pursue a contemplative life, because they cannot imagine leading the sort of life they stereotypically assume is prayer-ful or contemplative. A married pastor with small children whose wife carries the bulk of the financial burden for the family, thus leaving him with much of the childcare, carpooling and household chores, reads The Cloud of Unknowing and becomes convinced that God is calling him to leave his family because that ancient manual (most likely written originally for hermits) insists that the contemplative life necessitates vast expanses of uninterrupted time in which "a cloud of forgetting" is cast between the pray-er and the concerns of daily life. A working mother of five school age children is dispirited because she attends a class on prayer given by a noted Jesuit author who insists that anyone serious about prayer must set aside an hour and a half for spiritual journaling each day at a fixed time. An older widow consults a spiritual director and

confesses that she has "never known how to pray" because all the priests and nuns she has ever met have tried to instruct her in saying the rosary or doing a Forty Hours devotion--and all she can manage when she sits down to be before God is a wordless, joyfilled gratitude. A new wife and mother goes to a parish bible study and asks some wellmeaning women--some of whom are oblates in a Carmelite third order--about contemplative prayer. It is never suggested that she begin to pray out of the experience of holding her newborn in her arms; instead, she is told that the spiritual life requires radical detachment from all that is "of the flesh."

In sum, a genuine call to contemplation is an intimate personal invitation and will ask very different things of different people. While some may need to make a radical break with the past, others are called to develop a new contemplative awareness precisely in the context of life as it is presently configured. Even for the same person, the call will take different forms at different life stages.

Why Is There a Need for Formation?

The narratives found in the book of Genesis assert that human beings were created in the divine image and likeness. The Christian community understands those same narratives to depict the prototypical human beings as "fallen" from their original state of created innocence. It is within the framework of this overarching story--of the intended grandeur of humanity, imaging God as it somehow does, and its failure to accurately reflect that grandeur--that Christians have for centuries devised practices and elaborated disciplines that can re-form humankind.

Various denominations have taken differing theological positions on how this re-forming might be accomplished and how much is dependent on divine initiative--or, indeed, whether such an enterprise is even possible. Be that as it may, for many in the Christian community, past and present, some sort of intentional shaping or formation has been seen as necessary in order for women and men to become what God intended them to be. That shaping has been understood as involving more than

ethical or intellectual instruction. It has been conceived, to use the biblical metaphor, as making straight a pathway for God, as readying the person, both outer and inner, for the oncoming of the spirit that will lead and inspire a life. For centuries, the “spiritual life” with its innumerable techniques of asceticism, devotion, prayer and good works, was seen in such a way: as the intentional effort to recreate a man or woman into the pristine divinized image which he or she potentially mirrors.

The history of Christian spirituality is littered with tales of scores of individuals and communities who took the notion of formation seriously. Desert hermits fled to the Egyptian and Palestinian deserts to be transformed in the forge of silence and solitude. Seekers flocked to monastic havens, “schools for the Lord’s service,” where under the discipline of obedience to the Rule they were refashioned in an image not of “this world.” Devout believers went on pilgrimage, fasted, scourged themselves, engaged in countless forms of prayer and devotional activities, gave up sleep, chanted the psalms, became voluntarily poor, gazed on devotional images, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, worshiped, cultivated vision states, eschewed all action except an interior abandonment to God’s will. The list is nearly endless. The point is that making room for, and then responding to, God’s leading Spirit, however that is conceived, has been an impassioned pursuit since the inception of the Christian tradition.

In twentieth century America we have a somewhat more free-ranging conception of the spiritual life. Most people today tend to see the human person as intrinsically spiritual. To put it another way, we tend to see the whole person as composed of many dimensions: biological, psychological, intellectual, and so forth. The spiritual is one of these. It is a dimension that requires a certain attention or nurturing in order for us to be whole--that is, to be what we potentially are able to be.

Whether operating within the classical framework or that of today, common wisdom is that some sort of guidance or formation in how to effect a transformation is usually necessary. And whatever the philosophical or theological imperatives that prompt an individual to look for a

formation program, common sense and observation on the state of the world are evidence enough that some new shaping needs to occur.

The perspective that formation is a transformational process has certain implications, which may or may not be self-evident. First is that, although you may find yourself very interested, indeed fascinated or entranced with the notion of contemplative formation, it is probably safe to say that formation cannot be taken up in the same way as one engages in pleasurable recreational pastimes or hobbies that serve creative or entertainment needs. Second, it is not fair to expect a formation program to resolve problems--psychological, relational or otherwise. Finally, such a program is not best conceived as an attractive product--something to be purchased--of which one can avail oneself in today's open market of experiences, adventures and events.

Any program in contemplative formation is probably more accurately approached when its essential transformational character is acknowledged. It will require commitment, time, a willingness to embark on a venture whose outcome is not always clearly evident. Most importantly perhaps, a Christian contemplative formation program, while intensely personal, implies a community dimension. The call to contemplation, while sometimes solitary, never ends with the isolated self. The charism of contemplation is one of many Spirit-led gifts offered up for the entire church, indeed for the entire world.

What is Discernment?

Seen in this wider context, the selection of a program is recognized as more than a personal choice. Instead, it is best to make such a selection by a conscious, intentional process of discernment. Discernment is a venerable term and practice in Christian history. Basically, it refers to the process of discriminating between the various "spirits" that seek to lead us. The classic discrimination is between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the "evil one". Today we might want to distinguish between various "voices" that cry out both exteriorly and interiorly for attention. What is the origin

of a particular voice, perspective, or consideration? Does it proceed from your own psychic baggage (“old tapes”, negative patterns of thought, what “everyone else” thinks you should do, old fears, your “inner child”, your compulsions and so forth)? Does it proceed from the prevailing collective opinion (only priests and nuns take courses in contemplative prayer; such courses are "flakey," self-indulgent, nonsense, etc.)? Does it proceed from positive self-interest? From clear-eyed, informed consideration? From a more diffuse, questionable source? From what seems to be God’s prompting?

The point in discernment is to learn to pay attention to the various sources from which spring the many considerations that go into any decision. In other words, it is not merely a matter of problem-solving, of lining up the pros and cons and weighing them to see which side wins out. Instead, attention to the texture and quality of the voices is necessary. One of the classic systems of Christian discernment, enunciated by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century, indicates that, at least for persons already embarked on a journey toward God, the voice of God’s Spirit will usually produce an affect or feeling of consolation, peace, certitude, joy, rightness, while the opposing spirit(s) will usually produce feelings of desolation, confusion, anxiety, dread. This greatly oversimplifies Ignatius, but it is not a bad rule of thumb. Especially as observed over a fair length of time, consolation and desolation can be guides to identifying the inspirited voice of God amidst the chatter of the many voices that inform us. Not that affect is always unmixed; in fact, any discernment that comes with absolute unwavering clarity, fully formed out of the sky, is probably best allowed to rest for some length of time to see how it "wears." But in general, whether the overall effect of heeding the voice is consolation or desolation is a helpful guide.

Although discernment at its core involves this sort of inner attentiveness, it is nonetheless not an undertaking best done in isolation. We must also be attentive to the witness of scripture, to the advice of trusted spiritual advisors, to the *sensus fidelium* (the collective sense of the faithful), to the best of ancient and contemporary thinking and the teachings of the cumulative Christian tradition, as

well as to the concerns of those closest to us. Gather. Consider. Feel the texture. Assess the weight. Listen to overtones. Feel the quickening. Follow the deepest drawing of the heart. See where the plumb line falls.

It is helpful too to have some sense of the possible pitfalls that may confront one during any discernment. For some people, it is easy to confuse the longings of the heart with a tendency to seek spiritual highs. Constant intense consolation can be very seductive, yet, tradition tells us, the spiritual life is not always a matter of intense, exciting experience. Some find themselves on a restless search for new spiritual excitement, moving from one technique or program to another, dissatisfied when the way becomes arid or routine. Unable to forge a more mature level of praxis on an established path, they are continually entering new ones.

Others may find that they are plagued by what the old manuals term “scrupulosity”--a sort of paralysis born of fear of imperfection or of being wrong, or a need to control every outcome. Perfectionism, a more familiar modern term, comes close to what the ancient term implies. A vital discernment requires, on the one hand, a vigorous confidence in our own power to discriminate authentically with the help of God's grace. And, on the other hand, a certain modest flexibility is needed--the gift to be able to modify or even give up our sense of the “right” discernment should new information or obstacles arise. Neither too timid about one's own capacities, nor too cynical about God's, nor too overinflated a belief that one knows the entirety of God's will: these are helpful qualities to cultivate when in a discerning mode.

What Questions Should I Ask About Specific Programs?

Not all programs in contemplative formation are the same. Nor do they all necessarily exist in the same universe of discourse. There are a few fundamental questions you will probably want to ask about the programs you are considering, beyond the obvious questions of program attractiveness, suitable location and affordable cost. Here are some considerations you might want to make.

Where does this particular program fit on a continuum of tradition and innovation? This is a question about both contemplative praxis and ecclesiastical style. Some programs teach prayer forms that are very traditional both in content and in language. Other programs may have roots in ancient traditions but adopt its literature and instruction to twentieth century psychology or religious diversity. Centering Prayer, for example, is a contemporary adaptation of medieval eremitic prayer found in The Cloud of Unknowing. Still other programs may be quite eclectic, borrowing elements from ancient Christian traditions and melding them with spiritual praxis from, say, Eastern religions. The late Jesuit Anthony de Mello's approach is a case in point.

Specific religious communities, even within the same family, may exist at both ends of a very wide spectrum. For example, a program given by one house of a religious order may utilize primarily classic literature written by and for members of the order. The literature may use terms that assume a sharp division between the soul and the body, the contemplative and the world. It may assume a life of withdrawal or severe asceticism. Yet a program given by another house of the same religious order may be very different. It is important to ask the question: tradition versus innovation--to what are you drawn? What is right for you, in your present situation?

Community and solitude is another continuum you will want to consider. In terms of the community dimension of a given program, you will want to consider how much shared praxis you find valuable or that you are able to engage in. A group that expects regular participation in the daily office or monthly meetings or ongoing covenant (faith sharing) circles is different from a group that sponsors once-only workshops. Usually it is unrealistic to expect a program to offer the spiritual network that up until now life may not have provided. Nor is it fair to anticipate that a program will serve as a safe haven from a crumbling marriage, a disappointed religious vocation, or a thwarted career. Rather, one needs a clear-eyed assessment of the state of one's network of spiritual support, and a thoughtful consideration of the way in which any program undertaken enhances that network.

Does the program offer training that is essentially solitary? Does it intentionally promote

community beyond initial formation? Does it offer instruction that you can carry back into your life away from the program? Or do you desire some ongoing commitment, a continuity of fellow travelers who will accompany you on your journey? Are you interested in a weekend workshop format or might you be called to a long term relationship such as you will find in the third order or associate program that many religious orders--the Benedictines or Franciscans, for example--now offer?

One more continuum: freedom and discipline, both personal and communal. Some programs, as well as the specific practices they teach, are highly structured. They ask not only a high level of commitment (any genuine formation implies that) but a specific structured application. Intensive Vipassana meditation assumes the availability of, as well as compatibility with, long periods of silent, seated meditation. Other programs may introduce practices that are more spontaneous or liable to individual interpretation.

A further consideration will be along the action-contemplation continuum. Although all of the formation programs described in this book are basically contemplative in orientation, they will differ in their assumptions about the life styles that participants adopt, as well as in the extent to which they see contemplation as issuing in intense social involvement. Some programs will see contemplative prayer as primarily intercessory, others will appeal to those drawn to the hermit life, others will view contemplation as a necessary component in the struggle for justice and assume its members to be actively engaged in that struggle.

Alongside these continua of tradition-innovation, community-solitude, freedom-discipline, and action-contemplation, will be the faith orientation of the program. This will overlap some with the tradition-innovation scale in the sense that certain programs will be led by and attract persons whose Christian faith is very traditionally articulated, others by those who find innovation and adaptation comfortable. These differences will no doubt revolve around many of the highly visible issues in religion today: for example, the role of women, the use of inclusive language, the nature of

religious authority, and so forth. While one would hope that any contemplative praxis would provide an arena in which differences of perspective on these issues might be transcended, nevertheless, programs, like people, have conceptual frameworks out of which they operate.

Again, one would hope that choice of a program would not be made solely along ideological lines, dividing Christian from Christian, nonetheless, one must have a certain compatibility with the world view out of which a program emerges in order to be able to thrive and grow. For this reason, denominational and interfaith issues need attention in any discernment. While the sad divisions that segment Christian churches ought not to prevent interchange between Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Eastern orthodox or UCC, there are real theological orientations and “styles” of faith expression that mark us as Episcopalians, Presbyterians or Melkite Catholic. Formal or informal, emotionally expressive or restrained, silent or full of song, convinced of the reality of the dark powers or the incapacity of human initiative, assured that participation in sacramental ritual is sufficient, untroubled by any thought that evil might have an autonomy or that human beings might lack everything they need to know God fully in this life . . . the list is endless. The question is: does a specific program allow you to integrate the denominational specificity you enjoy into your practice?

Similar questions must be asked about interfaith experiences. How does the program draw upon the wisdom of religious traditions other than Christianity? Does it teach yogic postures or sufi dancing or whatever? How are these integrated into your present faith orientation--or, if they are not, do you have the personal resources to do your own integration? Programs will differ in the extent to which they are exclusively Christian in their methods and assumptions, basically Christian but utilizing insights or methods from other traditions, or full fledged interfaith experiments where the doctrine, metaphysics, and world views of other traditions are taught along with particular contemplative methods. You will need to determine where you want to situate yourself along the spectrum.

The same consideration should be given to programs that draw deeply upon the insights of

some of the psychological disciplines. Transpersonal, Jungian, Depth--these and other schools of personal growth and development may or may not be woven tightly into the fabric of a formation program's working assumptions.

What Qualities are Needed in Contemplative Guides and Mentors?

A final reflection you will want to make is upon the backgrounds of the program's personnel. There is no easy way to judge the qualifications of instructors in contemplative praxis. But you might want to bear in mind two criteria: training and experience. Training may be certified--an instructor has completed a specified period of instruction at a given program and has been deemed to have successfully completed it and qualified to instruct others. Or training may be effected in the process of living a contemplative life, say, in monastic community. Yet neither certification nor contemplative affiliation is in itself a guarantee that an individual is a qualified spiritual guide.

Such a position of guidance is, in fact, a charism, a gift that is nurtured either through formal instruction or through long experiential trial and error. It is a charism that requires honing and fine tuning, but it is a charism nonetheless. In looking at any program, it is important to consider both the credentials (formal or "grandmothered") and the length of experience of the personnel. Have most on the staff been doing this for some time? Has the program a credible history? Does the staff seem concerned about questions of accountability (seeking supervision and updating themselves, or maintaining some internal system of evaluation)? Do they seem closed in on themselves or open to a constant evaluating of what they are doing and how they are doing it? Is humor and good will and a buoyant sense of life perceptible among those who staff and attend the program? Do faith, hope and love seem alive there?

A pitfall for some may come in the guise of charismatic spiritual leaders. An attractive, compelling personality may head a program or advocate a practice and individuals may find themselves seduced by personality rather than drawn by a genuine compatibility with the approach.

Indeed, strong magnetic personalities abound in specialized spiritual communities. It is essential to be clear that the goal of any spiritual path is God, not fidelity to an instructor, adulation of a mentor or obedience to a guru. In the end, any viable program must bring a particular individual closer to God whether or not that program has or has not accomplished this for an admired acquaintance or a well meaning friend.

Finally, especially with contemplative programs, it is helpful to examine both ourselves and our potential guides for any subtle or overt tendencies to elitism. As has been suggested, there are many gifts of prayer and ministry bestowed upon those in the Christian community. Contemplation is one of these. To teach or to study a contemplative way primarily because one considers it a higher or more advanced or more holy form of prayer is probably a risky business.

Conclusion

In the last analysis any discernment, whatever its complexity, is ultimately judged by its fruits. The Christian tradition names them three: faith, hope, and love. In the end, the discernment of a contemplative formation program is less like solving a mathematical equation or fitting together the pieces of a puzzle. It is more like the turning of a sunflower to the sun, the intuitive hunch of a scientist seeking a creative resolution for unexplainable, contradictory observations, the longing of a heart searching for a lost beloved, or the artistry of a musician, sculptor or choreographer delineating in sound, stone, or the human body, the emergent, self-propellant, rightful line that says "yes."

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