



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

Vol. 24, No. 2 • Summer 2013

Slow Down

While the world sleeps, a monk in the French Alps, kneels in his dark cell, head bowed, motionless. Several minutes pass. Then he lifts his head, extends his arm, reaching across to the small wood burning stove and adjusts the damper. He returns to his prayer.

Through a half opened door we see a figure standing in the chapel, waiting. Then at the appointed hour arms raise. Hands grasp a thick rope and pulling downward with all his weight, the man awakes the bell. The deep metallic tone echoes abroad, reverberating off stone walls and surrounding mountainsides, startling the chill air, summoning his brothers to prayer.

Water trickles from fingers dipped in the font. A flame bows and dances in the darkness.

White robes swinging, brothers move down the cloister walk at measured pace, file into their choir stalls, and draw their cowls up over their heads as faces recede into shadows.

Dawn breaks dimly through steadily falling snow. In the barn six cats groom themselves, waiting to be fed.

A monk with a bushy white beard, shoulders bent, climbs six flights of stairs to his tailor shop. Here he makes habits and vestments for his brothers in the Carthusian order at the Grande-Chartreuse

Monastery in the French Alps. Before the cutting table, he rolls out a bolt of white wool cloth and smooths the surface with his palms. He tugs the cloth to get the edges even. He measures. He lays out the pattern and marks the cloth with a thick pencil. He runs his hands over the cloth again, then with large shears cuts precisely along the pattern's edge.

There is no sound. No other activity in the room. Only a solitary man focused on his task with care. A life-sized statue of Mary, holding out her baby boy, stands in a corner.

High above a tiny jet moves noiselessly across the blue sky. A monk reads, turns the pages of the book open on his desk. Light filters through the window, catching dust motes turning in the still air.

No one is in a hurry here. Men, vowed to silence and solitude, have been praying in this place since 1089, except for a period of about 28 years, when the monastery was closed by the French government. During those years the monks continued their rule of life in Italy, until it was safe for them to return to their home in the Alps.

Description of scenes from the award winning documentary, *Into Great Silence*, a film by Philip Gröning.

In the series of Holy Ground issues on contemplation we began with *definitions of*

contemplation, and, in subsequent issues, focused on characteristics of contemplative prayer: *attention, awareness, and stillness*. In this issue we *slow down* to consider the wisdom and grace that comes to those with the courage and will to intentionally choose to live at a slower pace.

We say we want to. We know we need to. We envy those who do. We fantasize about doing it. We may even put it on our calendars: *time off, a weekend of nothing, a trip to the lake*. Our friends and family may encourage us to take a break. Our bodies beg us to slow down with various cues and signs. Even the universe may remind us. When I needed to slow down in my life, I got speeding tickets on more than one occasion. Maybe you become forgetful, have trouble thinking clearly, miss an appointment, get heartburn, headaches, high blood pressure, become irritable and resentful, lose your joy. You know the signs.

Yet we also betray, devalue, or deny our need. “Not right now, not yet, maybe tomorrow, gotta run, you know. So busy! Catch you later.”

The tremendous issues that we as individuals, communities, nations and a global society are facing cry out for responses from thoughtful minds of depth and breadth. Managing chaos and constant change requires leaders with emotional and spiritual maturity. Solutions for the problems looming before us wait for those among us with seasoned intelligence, flexible minds, and the capacity for imagination, creativity, and hope. Likewise, our theological conversation as we discern the tasks and direction of Christ’s church in the 21st century requires mature, loving, humble wisdom that develops through years of prayer and following Christ.

My concern is that the human characteristics needed to respond wisely to the crises we face will not be developed by multi-tasking, frenzied lifestyles, and breathless, brief encounters with one another and our God. The fundamental characteristics of spiritual, emotional, and cognitive maturity are being eroded. Our brains’ capacity to solve the problems we have created is being compromised by our life styles and the effects of the digital age on how we think and process information.

Like water bugs we skim over the surface of our experiences, the information we take in, and our relationships. We flit from one task or commitment or relationship to another. In our hurry we may fail to enter the rich depths of our life together on this tiny planet.

Who takes the time and space to savor a meal, a chance encounter, a phone call, email message, a piece of music or art, or the beauty we pass on the way to work? Who lets the subtle flavors of each moment roll over the tongue, as we feel their weight and texture, and give ourselves time to digest, assimilate, and integrate each day’s events and impressions?



light to say and to see grace?

Who are the children and archeologists among us who are willing to dig for the buried treasure of each new moment? Who pauses before a trip to the grocery store, cutting wood, or turning out the

Where is the monk in yourself, carefully smoothing out the rumpled fabric of your life? Where is the hope, the faith, and the sheer guts

to live fully conscious of the infinite Wonder emerging and unfolding its wings out of the cocooned mystery of each second of existence?

Some of us are living The Reader's Digest Condensed Version of The Good Life. We delete the long narratives and descriptive passages, pare away the layered nuance, complexity, ambiguity, and mystery and settle for simplistic black and white summaries of the news of the day.

Is this what informs our opinions and understanding of our lives together? The often banal content of our internet newsfeeds, the TV news ticker crawling along the bottom of the screen, the fifteen seconds advertisers tell us that we will give to an internet article, or headlines, sound-bites, slogans, and tweets?

In some settings religion and spirituality may also become abbreviated. The mystery and depth of the story of God's compassion and love are watered down to brief talks, power point presentations, and a movie clipping. Here worshippers arrive expecting entertaining delivery, fast paced services, to get "their tanked filled" for another week, and that nothing disturbing will be brought to their attention. What seems to be overlooked in such settings is that the object of worship is worship of God, who will not be confined to our puny conceptions, personal convenience, or preferences.

So why don't we slow down?

It is almost as if we have lost the ability, as though we are locked bumper to bumper on an endless freeway with no shoulders and no exits.

The reasons we keep running vary and may be complex. Sometimes our circumstances simply prevent a change of pace. Sometimes our

circumstances demand swift, immediate action. Most of us can easily come up with a list of why it is impossible to slow down. I have also observed how when I am moving too fast that my perspective becomes blurred, and my sense of what is necessary becomes distorted. I fall into tunnel vision where some things take on exaggerated importance, while others fade from my awareness. I lose the ability to discern what is really important and what is not.

That knotted clot of responsibility, guilt, fear, and threatened self-worth tightens in the pit of your stomach, a sense of impending doom overshadows you. The pile of papers on the kitchen table, the dust balls gathering in the corners, the cluttered garage, the friend you don't have time to meet for lunch, the pile of untended mail lean menacing in our minds, as signs of our failure to get more done, our failure as housekeepers, parents, spouses, as employees, and in accomplishing our goals.

Sometimes our pursuit of perfection is a shield we wear over a painful self-contempt and failure to love ourselves. We chain our self-esteem to what we think others will think of us and to impossibly high expectations for ourselves, until our perception of our life and world around us is no longer as a blessed gift from God, but has become a constant affront and a sign of some shortcoming in ourselves everywhere we turn.

Finally, some of us simply cannot stop. Period. We no longer have the ability to stop, to choose a different way of being. Our brains prevent us. Our brains have lost the capacity to slow down.

Jordan Grafman, who is head of the cognitive neuroscience unit at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, explains that the constant shifting of our attention when

we're online may make our brains more nimble when it comes to multi-tasking, but improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively. Gaining skill in multitasking does not result in more creativity, inventiveness, and productiveness. Grafman says, "The more you multitask, the less deliberative you become, the less able to think and reason out a problem." You become, he argues, more likely to rely on conventional ideas and solutions, rather than challenging them with original lines of thought. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows – What the Internet is doing to Our Brains*

"Research also shows that even as we become better at multitasking we will never be as good as if we just focused on one thing at a time. What we are doing when we multitask is learning to become skillful at a superficial level," writes Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows*.

The evidence is in and a major cause of our inability to slow down is internet use, including television and other media, which are changing the structures and capacity of our brain to pay attention. As Carr writes, "Try reading a book while doing a crossword puzzle; that's the intellectual environment of the internet."

According to Dutch clinical psychologist, Christof van Nimwegen, who began a study of computer aided learning in 2003, as we "externalize" problem solving and other cognitive chores to our computers, we reduce the brain's ability "to build stable knowledge structures"- schemas, in other words – that can later "be applied in new situations." (Carr, *The Shallows*)

I delight in many of the sweeping changes of the digital age. However, I do not believe that the changes that deeply affect how we

communicate and the very structure and function of our brains should come at the expense of our capacity for sustained thought and the development of wisdom. Nor do they need to.

But an alarm must be sounded. Journalists, neuroscientists, educators, psychologists, philosophers, theologians, and sociologists are engaged in research and study on how the internet is changing us. There is growing evidence for the losses accruing, as well as obvious gains, in the effects of digital communication in our lives and relationships. What I am particularly interested in is how digital communication is shaping our spiritual lives and our capacity for compassion, hope, unselfish love, forgiveness, responsiveness to others, and sense of commitment to and connection with others and something larger than our personal needs. Is the sense of self expanding or contracting? Are we becoming humbler, wiser, more giving and trusting?

Historically, massive changes in communication have been accompanied by cultural, sociological, economic, and political changes. The movements from oral to written tradition, to the printing press, telegraph, radio, television, and the internet have all impacted societies in significant ways. In the case of Christianity these changes have been expressed from church architecture, worship content and style, our attitudes toward work and justice, our understandings of God, how we interpret scripture, how we talk about God, and how we teach and respond to human needs.

How can we help ourselves?

Practice, practice, practice. And start small.

We can learn to slow down. Our brains are

highly trainable. Just as digital communication changes our brains, so also meditation changes our brains. Concurrent to the research on the effects of digital communication and the internet, is a growing body of research on the effects of meditation on the brain and our emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being.

Here is a place to start. Do what the monks do.

Statio

In the Christian monastic tradition, the practice of *statio* invites slowing down and pausing in the transitions of our daily activity. *Statio* honors the spaces between each task and calls us back to ourselves and the present moment. *Statio* is the Carthusian monk waiting before the rope before pulling it to sound the bell to prayer: Stop what you are doing. Let go. Prepare. Bring your whole being now to prayer, or to the task before you.



In her book about Benedictine spirituality, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, Joan Chittister explains that members of the community stop outside the chapel for a few minutes before entering for prayer. *Statio* is a Latin word, which means to stand, from which we get the words station and stationary. “The practice of *statio* is meant to center us and make us conscious of what we’re about to do and make us present to God who is present to us. *Statio* is the desire to do consciously what I might

otherwise do mechanically. *Statio* is the virtue of presence,” writes Chittister.

Bringing our whole being and awareness to each task or action is also advised by Brother Lawrence, who found God in his kitchen, amid his pots and pans. Mother Teresa told her nuns to see Christ in every dying person they tend. The French priest, Jean Pierre de Caussade, taught that God is in each moment.

Select a task you perform multiple times a day. It might be turning a door knob, turning on a faucet, or brushing your teeth. Use this action as a signal for *statio* – to stop briefly and attend fully to the task before you. One semester in seminary I decided that I would look in the eyes of every person I encountered on campus. It slowed me down. I saw how absorbed I was in myself and how intimacy blossomed in that moment of vulnerability when eyes meet. In those moments I had to let someone into me as I was given access to them. I saw how eye contact conditioned the kind of greeting we exchanged. This *statio*, stopping to intentionally look someone in the eyes, pulled me from mindless self-centeredness to focus on the present moment of each particular interaction.

Try this. If you find yourself rushing ahead of yourself, feeling frenzied and overwhelmed, deliberately slow your pace, take some deep breaths, and focus totally on the task before you with all the awareness you can bring to it. They are many mindfulness practices that help us stay with Jesus, God Incarnate, in each present moment and avoid rehearsing the past or rushing ahead into the future.

Where is the church?

Sociologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, educators, and the medical community are

teaching methods to slow down, focus the mind, and the techniques of contemplative prayer and meditation. Though a large body of writing and deep understanding of how such prayer develops in a person have been available in the church for centuries, it is now the scientific, education, and business community who are discovering these practices and are actively teaching and using them.

A group gathers in the rehab center to practice meditation to help manage chronic pain. A nurse practitioner attends a three year training program in mindfulness meditation to prepare herself for introducing this tool to those addicted to pain medications. The organization for research on the use of meditation in higher education gathers for their annual conference. A group of CEOs practice contemplation at a Franciscan monastery. A Buddhist group goes into prisons to teach meditation to death row inmates. Kindergarten teachers learn how to teach mindful living practices to children.

If it takes a scientific study to get someone to sit down, be still, learn to pay attention, and focus his mind, it is fine with me. For one who has calmed and quieted her own soul will be in the presence of Peace Itself, which passes understanding. I am grateful for the work of secular disciplines in this area, for on the whole the church has failed to develop and teach its own tradition of contemplative prayer. Franciscan priest, writer, and teacher, Richard Rohr, has observed that both the Catholic and the Protestant churches threw out the contemplative tradition in Christianity at the Reformation. Today educators and scientists share research documenting the effects of digital communication on the brain, as well as the positive effects of mediation.

The awareness and practice of various forms

of contemplative prayer have been growing by leaps and bounds over the past thirty years, as well as programs in spiritual direction, and spiritual formation. Yet to a large degree contemplative practice remains on the fringes of most congregations.

Those who seek a deeper faith and relationship with Christ may supplement their church membership with online programs, retreats, spiritual direction, and the many books and other media now available on nurturing a contemplative prayer life. Some pull away altogether from the local church. They may try out other churches, join with friends who feel estranged, start book clubs, attend retreats together, simplify their life styles, and find opportunities for service in their communities.

A large percentage of my spiritual direction practice is comprised of people like this. In my view these people are not abandoning church, but are simply extending its reach. They have grown through the nurture of a church beyond that church's own self definition of what Christian life should look like. It is not so much that the church has failed as it has exceeded beyond its own expectations and understanding of God's ways with an individual soul and its own ability to feed these sheep.

Prior to the digital age, N. Gordon Cosby, prophetic voice for church renewal and founding minister of The Church of the Saviour, wrote, "If men and women today began, by the thousands, experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ in a transforming way, there would simply be no place for their expression of experience to fit into present-day straitjackets of Christianity. Protestant or Catholic, neither one is structured to contain a mass of devoted people who long for spiritual depth. We are structured towards infancy."

Cosby saw fifty years ago in the very structures of the institutional church factors which inhibited deepening maturity in Christ. And so he set out to foster ways of being church, which focused on more radical commitment to Christ and intentional practices to enhance the spiritual life of members.

When a culture values pragmatism, efficiency, and speed over contemplation, life thins out. We do not allow ourselves time for our experience and thoughts to simmer and sink into the deeper levels of our consciousness, which synthesize, remember, make connections, and hold stories and images. Here in the land of intuition and contemplation words like *Shazam! Eureka, You are freed of thy affliction*, and *He is risen!!* are set free to break open the thickest darkness and most impenetrable impasses of our century.

Loretta F. Ross



Two journalists who have written about some of the impacts of the digital age: Maggie Davis, *Distracted – The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, and Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows – What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*.

The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
Revelation 22: 2-3

The Praying Life

Hearsay and Rumors about the Beloved

A blog about contemplative living

Read and comment at
www.theprayinglife.wordpress.com

You may also read *The Praying Life* at
The Topeka Capital Journal Online's
faith page, www.holyground.topeka.net



*Stay in touch. Discuss.
Share information.*

[Subscribe or Renew Your Subscription Here](#)

[Read Back Issues of Holy Ground Here](#)

[Donate to The Sanctuary Fund. Your tax deductible gift will see that others find holy ground.](#)

[Become a fan of The Sanctuary Foundation on Facebook Here](#)

[Follow on Twitter Here](#)

Your subscription renewals, gifts to the The Sanctuary Fund, and prayers are deeply appreciated. Your generosity is making a difference as we work to offer the love and compassion of Christ to people all over the world.

Copies of Holy Ground are available at \$2.00 each, 10 copies for \$15.00, 20 copies for \$30.00. Shipping included.

The seduction of virtual universes, the addictive allure of multitasking people and things, our near-religious allegiance to a constant state of motion: these are markers of a land of distraction, in which our old conceptions of space, time, and place have been shattered. This is why we are less and less able to see, hear, and comprehend what is relevant and permanent, why many of us feel that we can barely keep our heads above water, and our days are marked by perpetual loose ends. ... We are on the verge of losing our capacity as a society for deep, sustained focus.

Maggie Davis, *Distracted – The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, p 14



Holy Ground, formerly titled *making Haqqodesh*, is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer, a not for profit charitable organization.
1600 SW Campbell Ave., Topeka, Kansas 66604 785-354-7122
www.fromholyground.org info@fromholyground.org

Copyright © 2006, 2007 Loretta F. Ross. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher.



1600 SW Campbell St.
Topeka, KS 66604

Return service requested

PRSR STD
US Postage
PAID
HOLTON, KANSAS
Permit No. 70