



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Practice

After Dad went to the rest home his chair was my favorite place to sit. It had worn brown upholstery and sat under a south window next to a bookcase. On my visits home I parked my bag of reading material and laptop there. Sometimes I looked through the books on the shelf – poetry, lots of Robert Frost, bird guides, wood carving books, National Geographic Magazines, his notebooks of Henry County history, and the Bibles.

I was seven years old when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible came out. Discovering that the King James Version had mistaken translations in it was a wondrous revelation to my history loving father. The study and research of archeologists, linguists, and Biblical scholars made available in a revised version of the Bible was important news at my house. I have that Bible on my bookshelf now, as well as my mother's childhood King James Version. Both Bibles are held together with worn duct tape.

Dad read his Bible every day until his brain forgot what a Bible was and how to turn the pages. Before he became ill, I woke many mornings to find him sitting in that chair quietly reading. Every night as long as he was able, he knelt beside his bed for prayer. Mother sang and whistled hymns as she did housework and

expressed her faith in poetry and art. Every week Dad put on his suit. Mom dressed up with hat and gloves. Dad waited out in the car, hollering to my sister, brother, and I, "Don't bring up the cow's tail!" until we all piled into the old Chevy. My parents had no idea that they were engaged in spiritual disciplines, and would have laughed and rolled their eyes, if I had told them that was what they were doing.

Spiritual disciplines are those practices which help us to be more open and aware of the Spirit. They range from keeping Sabbath, worship, scripture study, to discernment, hospitality, various forms of prayer, fasting, spiritual guidance, movement, music, and more. Such practices mold us into the image of Christ, fill us with love for God, and empower us for service to the world. These disciplines are kept, corporately, within a community of faith, and individually, as well.

This issue of *Holy Ground* in our series on Contemplation examines contemplative prayer as a spiritual practice or discipline. The spiritual practices of my parents are far removed from the experience of many people today. Our fast paced, must-have- it-now culture offers little space or time for recognizing and nurturing our need for God.

What inspires and draws one to a spiritual practice is desire, the flickering light in

your heart seeking something which may be hard to name. Desire may be felt as a longing, dissatisfaction, a deep ache, or sadness. Something within you signals, or tugs you toward, as St. John of the Cross put it, *I know not what*. One of my teachers often advised us as we turned to silent prayer, “Focus on your desire for God. And if you can’t find a desire for God within yourself, then go with your desire to desire God.”

The life of a good Christian consists of nothing else but holy desire.

- St. Augustine

Spiritual practices are our responses to that desire and longing. A life steeped in the joy of God is a gift. It is not attained through our effort. Our task is to receive the gift. Spiritual practices simply place us in the path of that grace. They predispose us to being open, available, and yielding to the Potter who molds us into the particular likeness of divinity God chooses for us. Using the substance of our being – personalities, bodies, intelligence, talents, life circumstances, weaknesses, failures, sin, and environment God changes, forms, and reforms us from one degree of glory to another.

“By contemplative prayer,” writes Evelyn Underhill, “I do not mean any abnormal sort of activity or experience. Still less a deliberate and artificial passivity. I just mean the sort of prayer that aims at God in and for God’s self and not for any gifts whatever, and more and more profoundly rests in God alone: what St. Paul, that vivid realist, meant by being rooted and grounded.”

Spiritual practice, whatever form it takes, establishes and nurtures that intricate network of roots, those tough fibers spreading deep and wide, which feed the tree, nourish, strengthen, and hold it secure and upright. Much of the root system, our practice, is hidden in the depths of the element of the Spirit and largely unseen by those around us. What we show the world are our branches, the home we make for other creatures, the shade we offer, and the fruit we bear.

... it is surely of the first importance . . . to determine that nothing shall interfere with the development and steady daily practice of loving and adoring prayer; a prayer full of intimacy and awe. It alone maintains the soul’s energy and peace, and checks the temptation to leave God for God’s service. Think that if you have only have as little as a half an hour to give each morning to your private prayer, it is not too much to make up your minds to spend half that time in such adoration. For it is the central service asked by God of human souls; and its neglect is responsible for much lack of spiritual depth and power.

– Evelyn Underhill

Why Practice?

Contemplative prayer nourishes and replenishes your whole being. It releases fear, forgives, heals, and establishes you in peace. It teaches both self- knowledge and knowledge of God. It cleanses your perception, clears your vision, and centers you in the purposes of God. It bears fruit through the release of your creativity, service, love, and compassion.

Consistent and intentional practice of contemplative prayer asks something of us. It

requires us to step out of our self-absorption. It moves us from expecting others to supply our peace and well-being to assuming personal responsibility and engaging in particular activities which expose us to God directly.

Contemplative prayer often emerges in a person's life, uncalled for and unrecognized. A person may feel drawn to go for walks in nature, to listen to a particular kind of music, to pick up a Bible for the first time in a long time, to go to church, to pray, to sit in stillness.

The Lover of our Souls is continually summoning us to deeper communion and intimacy, but our busy, distracted lives prevent us from responding in the ways my parents and my grandparents did. The Bible recognizes that deepening faith requires discipline and practice. Faith, hope, and charity are virtues given to us in the context of a relationship, which must be continually renewed and deepened.

Spiritual exercises have long been part of the work of the people of God. We find them described and illustrated in scripture. In addition we have a treasure trove of wisdom and guidance written by saints and teachers over two thousand years about spiritual practices and how faith develops.

Finally, we practice, because the things we do over and over shape us. Our habits form us into who we become. Skill development requires training and practice. Musicians, electricians, heart surgeons, teachers, and athletes all devote hours to practicing the skills needed for their profession.

Accountability and community are essential to our spiritual practice. Seek out someone to be accountable to for your practice, a guide,

spiritual director, or person who cares about you and your growth and who will keep you honest. Your community is where you work out the practical implications of your practice, find correction, support, and a life of faith shared together.

The most important reason to practice contemplative prayer is love. Transformation comes to us, not through what we carry in our minds, but through who we know and with whom we spend time. What changes us is our contact with Jesus, with the Divine Creator, and with the Holy Spirit. Our prayer is an act of love. This practice has no end or purpose other than love and sharing your being with the being of God.

Contemplation is the awareness of God known and loved in the core of one's being.
- Cloud of Unknowing

How do I practice contemplative prayer? Are there books I can read?

My parents did not discuss their spiritual lives. They just lived them in unassuming ways. In contrast to the simple spirituality of my parents, the current marketplace of spirituality leaves me a bit overwhelmed.

I think mom and dad might be both admiring and bewildered by all the internet courses, websites, books, training programs, graduate degrees, and experts on spiritual practices. They loved to learn, were always reading, and often attended workshops and lectures on various topics. I think they would be pleased to see the work I do, but also that they would not quite get the point of it.

I sympathize with them. I can no longer read every new spiritual book or keep up with trends. I currently have a dozen books and issues of journals I simply do not have time to read, and I confess, in many cases, nor the desire to read. I am finding I need to limit my consumption. It has become a spiritual discipline for me to not gorge myself on the many worthy writings on faith and spirituality. I tend to get bloated and spend all day burping clichés, sound-bites, and lose the simple abiding in Christ that really nourishes. Dear patient reader, I do not miss the irony of my putting here before your eyes, yet another piece of such writing.

Though Mom and Dad experienced hardship, they lived with generosity and compassion. They knew their need, their vulnerability, and the weakness of humans. They understood they needed God like they needed food in order to sustain a life and raise a family in this world. Each day they took their need and their love to God and were fortified and strengthened for the task of being human. The practice of their faith was so internalized that it flowed seamlessly from their lives without question.

My parents did not have an urgent or self-conscious faith. They did not know their enneagram number or take internet tests on their stage of faith development. They felt no need to save anyone or impose their beliefs on others. Their ancestors had already suffered too much from the imposition of state sponsored religions and various other Christian groups. My mother's Quaker ancestors left England for the religious liberty promised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Many of the Mennonite and Amish Anabaptists of my father's family were massacred by Catholics, Lutherans, and the followers of John Calvin when he was Mayor of Geneva. Others were driven out of

Switzerland to Alsace in France, where they lived side by side in ghettos with Jews, also persecuted by the same groups. In a twist of religious irony and reconciliation, John Calvin was one of the founders of the church my parents joined after their marriage, Presbyterian Church (USA).

In the world today religious intolerance is rampant. Are there safe places where faith may be practiced and nurtured? My children live in a different world from my parents'. "Last semester when I was taking all those classes, I was so stressed, Mom," my daughter told me on the phone. "I kept trying to find a quiet place, a room somewhere on campus where I could go and meditate, but someone would always walk in or be making a lot of noise in the hall. I could never find it."

My daughter was telling me about her plan for a performance piece for her sculpture class. She is constructing a tent which she will install in a busy part of campus at the University where she studies. She will lead her class to where the tent is constructed. Then she will take off her shoes and light the candle outside the tent. She will go inside, where there is a prayer stool, which she built out of wood from the back panel of a piano. Attached inside the tent is a wooden shelf with some sage. She will sit there a while, then leave the tent, put on her shoes, and walk away. The tent will remain for the class to respond to as they will.

When she told me about her ideas, I thought of all the tents she and her sister made as children. They draped blankets over tables and clotheslines, covered up dolls and pets, and made tunnels and caves for themselves into which they hauled their Barbies, stuffed animals, and books. I recognized that primitive need we have for enclosure, quiet, and safety.

Remember Moses' tent of meeting?

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

Exodus 33:7-11a

Keeping a spiritual practice is like setting up a tent in the midst of a busy life and sitting down in it. Contemplative prayer is a spiritual enclosure we may consecrate by sage or song, candle flame or prayer shawl. It is a place in our lives we mark as holy and say, "Here now in this tent I will meet the Mystery of my life."

But what if I don't want to? I have monkey mind.

Can't I just have God without doing things I do not always want to do? Can't I have my spirituality without disciplines? Sure I want more holiness in my life and more peace, but I am too busy for that right now. I experience God in the midst of my life. I am not good at establishing habits and practices. My mind always wanders. I get bored.

The fullness of contemplation is a sheer gift from God, which God generally gives to a

person only in the later stages of growth. We may have hints and glimpses – periods of contemplative awareness along the way. But it is fully established by long disciplined practice. His disciples spent nearly every day with Jesus for three years and even after the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, they still had things to learn. The steadfast turning and returning to the Holy One to listen to the Teacher requires surrender, waiting, stretches of boredom, more waiting, possibly discomfort. Sometimes it hurts like the dickens. And we almost always resist in one way or another.

I have been praying and meditating for over sixty years. With all this experience, not to mention the reading and study I have done, I am quite an expert on ways to avoid it.

Get my coffee. Heat up my coffee. Let the dog out. Let the dog in. Adjust the light. Get a shawl. Check my calendar. Light a candle. Make a list of things to do today. Settle down. Oh! Go answer that phone message. Read scripture. Read a commentary on that text. Read a book on spiritual practices. Doodle. Go to the bathroom. Oh, my coffee is cold.

Why do we resist? Prayer involves a death of the self, the officious, anxious, prideful ego, who is convinced of its God-like powers and superiority in actually accomplishing anything of value in your life. Contemplative prayer is a radical act of faith in God over against our culture's worship of the individual and the self-made person. Spiritual practice is based on faith in the unseen and a belief that out of this time of prayer, out beyond my control, something will occur which serves the purposes of God in this world and beyond. Contemplative prayer believes that healing and change, which I could never accomplish on my

own, will come to pass through prayer, whether I am conscious of it or not.

Distractions are a given in the practice of contemplation; our practice cannot deepen without them. What changes over the course of time is our relationship with them.

Martin Laird

The hard work is keeping our focus. The task is to keep at it even with the distractions and wandering mind without self-condemnation or discouragement, but rather, with compassion and curiosity. God begins to show you how your mind works, what it chews on, hashes over, how it hangs onto the past, worries about the future. The goal here is not a blank mind, but intimacy with a loving God who dwells within you.

For it is not tomorrow, or when you get your to-do list done, or when you have solved all your problems that you will be filled with the fullness of God, but it is here now in each new moment that Jesus is knocking on your door. Contemplation is hearing the knock and making the effort to go open the door.

One can instantly recognize those people who spend time in spiritual practices, whether that is what they call them or not. You see it in the softness of their faces, the warmth in their eyes, and the joy in their laughter. These are the ones, whose lives are hidden with Christ in God, who change the world.

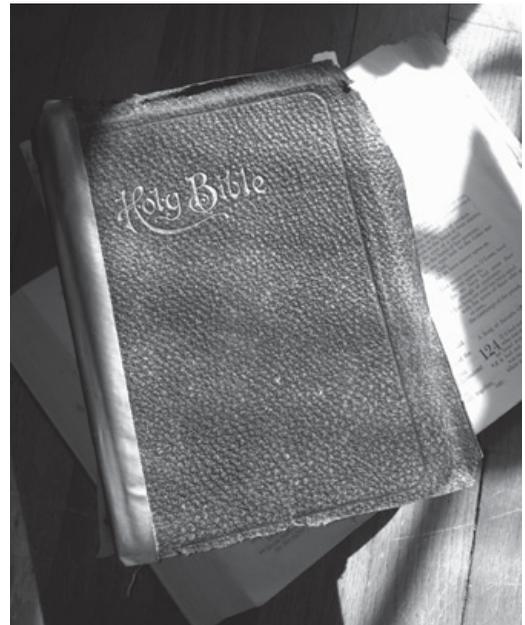
Richard Foster had not even heard of the internet thirty years ago, when he wrote, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The

doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

Depth comes from practice.

Just do it.

Loretta F. Ross



Works cited: Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline – The Path to Spiritual Growth*; Martin Laird, *A Sunlit Absence – Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation*. Richard Rohr, *Yes, And . . . Daily Meditations*.

There are many good books and websites on spiritual practices and contemplation. Here are a few: Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast – An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (1995); Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land – A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, and www.spiritualityandpractice.com

Author's note to readers:

People often ask how often should I practice contemplative prayer. More frequent and longer periods of prayer will take us deeper into the life of Christ. Some suggest twenty to thirty minutes twice a day.

If you cannot manage that much time, consistency is what is most important. Do some time every day.

When one is tired or rushed it is easy to say, I will pray tomorrow. Try, instead, to set your timer for five minutes. Do five minutes, rather than nothing at all.

Do not allow your narrow sense of time obstruct God's opportunity to fill you in five minutes with enough serenity to last all day. And do not measure God's power or your success by how you felt in that five minutes.

The value of contemplative prayer is not measured by our opinion on its effectiveness. It is our love, our desire for God that matters. It is showing up, not showing off.

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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

This is one good thing that silence and waiting have taught me:
our lives are always usable by God. We need not always be
effective, but only transparent and vulnerable. . . silence is the
necessary space around things that allows them to develop and flourish
without my pushing.

Richard Rohr



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