



Twilight of the Self



THOMAS KEATING

My heart is solitary now.
It finds no companionship anywhere
And no wish to find any.

My sole desire is You,
And you are always absent.

Can one love absence so intensely
That even Your presence
Seems like an intrusion?

I move around in aimless circles
Rituals and sacred symbols,
Once treasured sources of relating to You,
Are meaningless to me now.

They communicate nothing of You,
Who are everything to me,
But for whom and from whom I feel no love,
Nor hope of fulfillment.

I am as one turned inside out,
And there is nothing there – not You, not me.
If this is union, there is neither two in One,
Nor One without another.

I long to relate to everyone
Yet lack the capacity to relate to anyone.

There is only Your boundless presence,
That treats me like a thing without a heart,
Except perhaps a broken heart.
For the God I thought I knew
No longer exists.

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The Greatest Adventure

MARY JANE YATES
ADMINISTRATOR



Centering prayer is a world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure.

Thomas Keating, *Open Mind Open Heart*, pg. 11

I have never experienced the truth of these words more deeply than in the past few months of being hired and now serving as your new administrator. As I wrote in my application letter to the search committee, "I would consider it the highest privilege of my career to be able to support your organization in the role of administrator." Seeing this dream come true certainly reminded me that the impossible can happen in this everyday life of Centering Prayer! The sense of living a great adventure has certainly continued during my first four months on the job. I would love to tell you a bit of my experience so far, and see if you agree with me that perhaps we truly are living in times when *our private self-made worlds are coming to an end; a new world is appearing within and around us, and the impossible is becoming an everyday experience.* (Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, pg 11)

First, as part of my orientation, I had the privilege of spending three wonderful days with our beloved Pat Johnson (now retired interim Administrator and current Board member), Julie Saad, Jenny Adamson (both Board members)

and Kathleen Gilgannon, our Financial Administrator and sister staff person. This was the first time I had travelled to Carbondale, Colorado, USA and being so close to our spiritual home at Snowmass in the company of these deeply wise and loving women was a gift beyond words. Spending time with them not only grounded me in the tasks I would need to do as part of my position but also in the *way of being and interacting* that is becoming the norm in this remarkable and evolving organism. Thank you Jenny, Julie, Kathleen and Pat for arranging this gift of welcome just in time before some of the Covid-19 travel restrictions were put in place!

In the months since I was in Carbondale, I have continued to experience an incredible outpouring of love and grace from our Contemplative Outreach family, especially during this challenging time of fear, "social distancing" and pandemic response. This grace has appeared through the explosion of online prayer groups and Zoom meetings that have enabled us to continue and even enhance our work to make the prayer accessible

to everyone during these difficult times. It has shown up in the gentle wisdom and commitment of Contemplative Outreach staff and board members who continue to meet weekly for prayer and support, and in the warmth of welcome I have felt from so many volunteers worldwide. Another sign of a "new world appearing" is in the enthusiastic response I received from young contemplatives from sister contemplative organisms interested to gather for reflection and sharing on how to further support each other during these precarious and transformative times. It has also shown up in the compassion and willingness of volunteers with Prison Contemplative Fellowship to ensure that this newsletter is delivered to anyone who wishes to receive it.

The stories could go on about how I have seen the "impossible" unfold through my work with Contemplative Outreach just these past few months. I hope that you too have been experiencing this adventure in your daily life and that we can continue to explore this new world together for many years to come! ☸

Mary Jane Yates is the new administrator of Contemplative Outreach. She comes to us from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She has been a part of Contemplative Outreach for 12 years, serving our organism as a prayer group facilitator, Introductory Workshop presenter and retreat leader.

A Governing Board Member's Journey

NICHOLAS COLE

What a wild ride it has been to be a Governing Board member for six years during this current evolution of Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. In 2014 I was invited to join the board under a new board structure including term limits and a separation of staff and board that was formed in anticipation of Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler's retirement. After her long and faithful service as Executive Director, Gail retired at the end of 2016.

Pat Johnson graciously agreed to serve as Interim Administrator until a new Administrator could be hired. She served from September 2016 until January 2019 when Denis Sheehan was appointed. Denis served for one year during which time significant progress was made in streamlining operational processes, closing the Butler, NJ office, and having all employees working remotely.

In August of 2016 the board met with the Denver Center for Contemplative Living community at Benet Pines Retreat Center near Denver. They served us lunch and shared some of what they had learned in their own evolution after Sr. Bernadette Teasdale retired. Out of that experience we decided to meet three times per year in different locations in the United States. During these five-day meetings we spend time with local chapter members with the intention of listening and responding to their needs. This practice has resulted in growing communication and trust between leadership and the grassroots.

Contemplative Outreach has been international in scope since the early days and now has members in over 50 countries. In January of this year a Canadian, Mary Jane Yates, was appointed Administrator of the organism. A recent Cynthia Bourgeault Zoom Conference co-sponsored with the South African chapter of Contemplative Outreach had 3,900 registered participants from 59 countries.

The board is indebted to Extensión Contemplativa Internacional (ECI), our Spanish and Portuguese

sister organism, for the letter they wrote in August 2014, challenging Contemplative Outreach to be more attentive and responsive to the voices of volunteers in the community. The courage and love expressed in their letter continues to guide the Board to this day. In January of this year we met with the leadership council of ECI in Orlando during a Board meeting in central Florida. This time together was a manifestation of the solidarity, respect, and love that has been borne from our shared commitment to the prayer.

Another major influence on the Board has been a book discovered by Thomas Keating called *Reinventing Organizations* by Frederic Laloux. This seminal work presents an evolutionary model to structure and manage non-profits like ours. This model is collaborative and "soulful" rather than traditionally hierarchical. This book, coupled with the Vision, Theological Principles, and Guidelines for Contemplative Service are guiding the organism on an evolutionary path toward a more contemplative, transparent, and communal operational structure.

At our Denver International Conference in September 2019, the conference team did an outstanding job presenting aspects of Laloux's model relevant for Contemplative Outreach alongside Fr. Thomas' vision for our organism. The synergy between the two was palpable, and all those who attended returned home with renewed energy to "live life more abundantly."

Someone has said that the difference between an adventure and an ordeal is attitude. As my transformational adventure on the Contemplative Outreach Governing Board comes to an end, I can attest that this endeavor has been a continuing invitation to evolve and grow personally alongside the organism. I am grateful beyond words to have had the privilege to serve with faithful and fun Board members, the indefatigable staff, and all the wonderful volunteers who make up the organism known as Contemplative Outreach UN-limited. Cowabunga! ☸

Guard of the Heart

BOB MISCHKE



“If you do Centering Prayer and don’t bring it into active life – like the active prayer phrase, the Welcoming Prayer, and Guard of the Heart – you will have trouble.”

Thomas Keating, 2016

Some fifteen years ago, I asked Fr. Thomas to explain the practice of Guard of the Heart to me – more than what I had found in *Open Mind, Open Heart* and *Invitation to Love*. Something was drawing me to this practice. Several years later I asked Fr. Thomas if he would go through those explanations again with me and let me record his descriptions so we could perhaps write them up and share them with others. Seventeen revisions and two years later we got it done. I learned that this was how Fr. Thomas worked, with scrupulous attention to every word and comma until his carefully crafted words reflected some nuances of his deep understanding, and as much as possible, the ineffable. He wanted this description of Guard of the Heart to be as helpful to us as possible. I encouraged him to publish it in our Contemplative Outreach newsletter but before that happened, he gracefully joined the Communion of Saints, continuing, I believe, to assist us. So finally, here is Fr. Thomas’ description of Guard of the Heart.

Guard of the Heart

One practice to bring the effects of contemplative prayer into daily life is traditionally known as “Guard of the Heart.” “Heart” is the deep self or seat of motivation. It refers to our

inmost intention. If we want to get to our destination, which is abiding inner peace, we have to keep our intention on course. This consists of letting go of every emotional disturbance as it arises and before we start *thinking* about it.

When something arises independently of our plans, we spontaneously try to modify it. Our first reaction, however, should be openness to what is actually happening so that if our plans are upset, we are not upset. This method is more sophisticated than dismantling the emotional programs for happiness because it deals with the whole of life. It expresses our ongoing intention to be with God in the present moment and sustains it. Guard of the Heart is based on the sense of interior peace that comes when our human will is united by intention with God’s will.

The fruit of Guard of the Heart is the habitual willingness to modify our plans at a moment’s notice. It disposes us to let go of personal likes and dislikes and to accept painful situations as they arise. Then we can decide what to do with them and whether to modify, correct or improve them. In this way, the ordinary events and ups and downs of daily life become the focus of our practice. Monastic structures are not the path to holiness for lay folks; the routines of daily life are.

Contemplative prayer is aimed at transforming daily life with its never-ending round of ordinary activities and to remain in God’s presence no matter what is happening.

Whenever our basic sense of peace is disturbed, we need to reaffirm our intention to be united with God by some simple and appropriate act or acts. Our intention to abide in constant union of our will with God’s will might be compared to a radio beam that used to guide an airplane. If the plane moved off course a signal would warn the pilot to readjust his direction. If the plane veered too much to the right, he would get a signal like “beep, beep, beep.” If the plane went too far to the left, he would get some other sound. If he was on course, he would hear nothing. Our warning signal in Guard of the Heart is the loss of peace, which could be large or small, depending on how far off course we actually have drifted.

The intention of Guard of the Heart is to be in God’s loving Presence both in prayer and action, either working to carry out God’s will, or just loving God in silent attentiveness. The Holy Spirit plans the itinerary. If we remain on course, there is no sound. If we hit a strong headwind that blows us off course, we hear “beep, beep, beep,” announcing the need to refocus our intention.

Never grieve over being off course. Just return to your original direction by renewing your intention, which is a movement of the heart to be with God and surrendered uninterruptedly to God's will. Once you return to your original intention, the warning noise will stop.

This is a relatively simple but reliable practice. You don't have to go through steps like listing your possible motives for getting off-course. In heavy weather or turbulence, as for example when you are talking too much or get into an argument or similar straights, you may bounce around a bit. Airline pilots call this turbulence. You will then have to give more *attention* to your *intention* because your silent on-course direction has been interrupted. You lost it through nobody's fault. It was just bad weather.

The following are three ways of keeping yourself on course in everyday affairs. The first is to place disturbing thoughts as soon as they arise into God's lap, or to give them to God as a gift. The second is to apply your attention to whatever you are actually doing, concentrating on the activity or duty of the moment. Third, if you find you are unoccupied when disturbing thoughts arise, pick up a book or take up some prearranged project. All three methods can help to avoid the commentaries that reinforce interior turmoil.

Jesus in his teaching seems less interested in raising us to highly enlightened states of consciousness than in becoming one with us in our experience of ordinary daily life. To relive the sacred mysteries of his earthly life in each of us is his plan and desire; to share every moment of our lives with him is the practical living out of divine union. His presence manifests in every action, however trivial from our point of view. We are invited by grace to have no movement of body, mind, and heart except from the Spirit, who wills to take us over entirely and inspire all our thoughts, words, and actions.

(Fr. Thomas Keating, 2017)

I have come to love this practice. It is the closest thing in my experience in our Centering Prayer world to what Eckhart Tolle calls Presence Practice – staying in the present moment with awareness. The desert fathers called it “watchfulness.”

Fr. Thomas refers to Guard of the Heart as a practice a little more advanced. It's a beautiful and powerful complement to Centering Prayer which teaches us about the inner room. Then, as he says, we ask Spirit to extend the walls of our inner room to all of our life. The active prayer phrase quiets internal commentary. The Welcoming Prayer releases false-self programs.

Then when our hearts are “on course” the “beep, beep, beep” signals us to release inevitable false-self emanations and stay on course. Our heart is our governor, our homing device.

When Rabbi Rami Shapiro asked Fr. Thomas how he was preparing to die, he “cupped his hands and said ‘Every time Thomas comes up, I let Thomas go.’” This is shared from the Divine Indwelling – a poignant description, in my view, of Guard of the Heart practice.

I give thanks to Fr. Thomas for this practice and all the wealth it gives us. I suspect he had me, for one, in mind when he smilingly closed with this comment: “You have to choose the one that helps you most. You don't have to be serious about this – you can experiment with one or the other.” ☸

“It is not enough to do the practice itself even if this is done twice a day, unless at the same time one carries into daily life the effects of the humility ...

as time goes on the Divine Therapist extends the walls of our office,

so to speak, our inner room, to the whole of life

so that everything becomes a process of purification, of healing, and of releasing the unconscious.”

Thomas Keating,

Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ video series



BOB MISCHKE: My Centering Prayer journey began in 1993 after reading *The Cloud of Unknowing* in South America while on a spiritual retreat. I had just left my medical practice of ear surgery early to find a deeper form of healing. I looked up Fr. Thomas Keating and his work, and have been involved in Centering Prayer ever since with the Center for Contemplative Living in Denver. I was fortunate to be able to visit with Fr. Thomas regularly all the years he resided at St. Benedict's Monastery.

I currently serve on the Center for Contemplative Living Advisory Council, and present Introductory Workshops, Welcoming Prayer, Guard of the Heart and our 9-month course called Contemplative Living Experience program. I am a member of the Contemplative Outreach Facilitator Training Team and attend annual retreats at St. Benedict's monastery.

CONTEMPLATIVE WILDERNESS

STEPHEN HATCH

through all things, I envisioned being immersed in the ancient forests of Olympic National Park.

When an anonymous fourteenth-century English monk wrote of dwelling within the “cloud of unknowing” during contemplative prayer, I imagined being immersed in mist high on a ridge at Mount Rainier. And when his German contemporary - Meister Eckhart - encouraged spiritual seekers to enter into “the silent desert of God’s simple nature” and into his “solitary wilderness and vast wasteland,” I imagined the desert spaces of Arches or Canyonlands National Parks.

I met Fr. Thomas Keating in 1981 at St. Benedict’s Monastery, shortly after he resigned as abbot of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. He was the guestmaster at the time, and he taught me the method of Centering Prayer over the course of several visits to Snowmass. The physical setting of the monastery – surrounded by sagebrush-covered ridges, with the 13,000-foot Mount Sopris looming to the west - elicited a sense of peace that helped me enter my inmost center where God dwells.


I discovered that Fr. Thomas often used physical imagery when teaching Centering Prayer. He talked of moving into the depths of our being, or of finding the still point in our inmost center. He spoke of our everyday thoughts being like boats crowded so close together in a harbor that we forget about the water on which they are resting. He said that the practice of silence causes the inner boats to spread out, allowing

awareness of the water or the harbor depths to gradually come to the fore.

Sometimes Fr. Thomas used more explicitly wilderness-based imagery in his teachings, and this piqued my interest in the practice. He spoke of being like a fish resting in the deep waters of silence, with thoughts acting like a fisherman’s hook as they descend into the depths in their attempt to draw us back out to the surface. And he talked about letting go of all concepts in an interior sort of night that resembles being inside a dark cloud.

I followed the path of Centering Prayer for six or seven years and found it to be very healing as I felt increasingly grounded in my innermost center, a deep self that could never be grasped, controlled or understood. But as I spent more time practicing this form of prayer while out in the wilderness, I began to realize that, at least for me, the images Fr. Thomas used were not just metaphors. They were an integral part of my own contemplative experience. I became increasingly aware that it was the wilderness images – especially those that involved being at the bottom of a riverbed or canyon or ancient forest at night - that had attracted me to Centering Prayer in the first place.

While some traditional mystics would say that contemplative prayer takes us beyond the world into the transcendent presence of God, I realized that for me, this transcendence empties itself out continually in love into a very “worldly” place: the landscapes of the natural world. I also understood



My initial interest in Christian mysticism – which began in earnest in the early eighties – was founded on the traditional use of landscape metaphors employed by contemplative writers to describe their inner spiritual lives. I have always experienced the deepest intimacy with God while hiking, camping or journaling in the Great Outdoors.

When Gregory of Nyssa spoke in the fourth century of being “hemmed in on all sides by divine darkness” during his experience of union with God, I pictured the intimacy of a starry night spent at Zion National Park between canyon walls looming on either side. When twelfth-century German mystic Hildegard of Bingen talked about “greenness” as God’s life flowing

that the wilderness I valued so passionately in Nature corresponded to the interior wilderness of my own being. For God is emptied there as well. Henry David Thoreau once said that “the landscape is the lining of my inmost soul exposed,” and as I practiced Centering Prayer I could now begin to feel this very truth.

I worried at first about creating an idol out of the ancient forests and canyons that ushered me into my inner depths, as though I might make them a substitute for the transcendent God who exists beyond any understanding or concept. But then I remembered what Syrian mystic Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite said in the sixth century. Like him, I realized that although I don't know what exactly the essence of God is, I do know the places where he dwells in the great wilderness spaces of the world and of the wild places that reside within the human mind and heart. Dionysius had written that the contemplative “does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells” in the dark night of pure faith.

On various camping trips to the U.S. Pacific Northwest beginning in the '90s, I discovered that one of the most meaningful places to receive an added boost for my Centering Prayer practice was in an old-growth forest. I remember gazing up at trees towering over me, my back against a massive trunk at night on a hillside in Redwood National

Park, with half-dozen trees looming beside me extending to the floor of the meadow down below. As the final color faded from the yellow sunset clouds, a few stars began to appear. Then, hundreds came out, and then the entire Milky Way. I loved the solitude I felt in this ancient grove. Taking a deep breath, I reveled in the contemplative peace I experienced while gazing up at the sky.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to sink into depths of awareness, pulled by the gravity of love deep within my being. Deeper and deeper I sank into the silence, descending into my inner space as though along a redwood trunk sliding toward the forest floor far below, embraced by an intimate darkness in the arms of the night and of the redwoods enclosing me on all sides, expressions of the all-encompassing presence of God welling up from within. My thoughts seemed to vary endlessly, but I made a practice of viewing them as stars twinkling or branches waving far above the ground of my innermost soul and then letting them go, sinking once again into the depths of the interior forest.

I spent the next twenty minutes like this, embraced in faith by an obscure, silent Presence luring me toward the depths, supported by the darkness of the nighttime grove looming all around. I found in fact that the depths of interior silence were actually made more vivid by the stars, meteors and branches of my ordinary thoughts circulating

incessantly far above me. I realized that if there were no light from the stars, the darkness would be all-engulfing, and there would be no way to appreciate it. Fourteenth-century Belgian mystic John Ruusbroec once put it this way: “Here an ample light, shining from out of God's Unity, reveals to us darkness, bareness, and nothingness. We are enveloped by the darkness and are pervaded by a simple resplendence, while we overcome God and become one spirit with him.” It seems that I only know things because their opposites are also present. This is definitely true in my experience of Centering Prayer. I am able to appreciate the deep silence because I also hear my thoughts chattering in the distant background. I become aware of the darkness of the inner abyss only because of the light of my thoughts twinkling like stars and radiating like moonlight from the inner sky spread out above. Contemplation, like all aesthetic experience, arises in part from this sort of harmony of contrasts.

Whenever I teach Centering Prayer, I begin by using a scene such as this time spent in the redwood forest. It serves as a sort of vestibule for entering God's presence welling up from within, but eventually fades once I have entered the abode of Silence. Students routinely tell me that using this type of imagery helps them enter more quickly and deeply into Centering Prayer as it has definitely been the case for me over the past thirty-five years of my own spiritual journey. ☸



Stephen Hatch trained with Fr. Thomas Keating in the 1980s and has lived a contemplative life ever since. His life work involves discovering and practicing the connection between Nature and contemplation. Stephen teaches two Christian Mysticism courses at Naropa University and is the author of *The Contemplative John Muir: Spiritual Quotations from the Great American Naturalist* (2012), *Wilderness Mysticism: A Contemplative Christian Tradition* (2018), and *Rocks and Waters are Words of God: Reflections on John Muir's Ecological Reading of the Bible* (2020). He lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, and hikes, camps, backpacks and practices contemplative photography whenever he can.

What Does a Contemplative Church Look Like?

The Benedictus Experience

SARAH BACHELARD

Since the beginning of 2012, I have led an ecumenical contemplative worshipping community in Canberra, Australia called Benedictus Contemplative Church (www.benedictus.com.au). I've been asked to share something of our story, what we're seeking to be and offer, and something of the view from here. But like the stories of our lives, there are different ways this could be narrated. There are the "facts" – when we started, what we've done, the ways and means of our gatherings and governance. Then there's what you might call our "soul" story – the deeper life, the sense of call and orientation to which we seek to be true, the mysterious dynamic of something unfolding beyond and around us. Both stories matter; they interweave and inflect each other.

The idea for Benedictus was born from recognising the necessity of contemplative practice for responding to the spiritual hunger of our times, and further motivated by difficult experiences of ecclesial immaturity in our context. Rowan Williams has spoken of how, without the transformation wrought through contemplative prayer, the church comes "to look unhappily like so many purely human institutions, anxious, busy, competitive and controlling," and this was our situation. Despite ubiquitous talk of "transformation," we had become acutely aware that people can spend their whole lives "going to church" without being offered any real way to grow. We wanted to explore something deeper, to allow commitment to the journey

of transformation to shape our way of being a community of disciples

A Church in and of Practice

The cornerstone of a contemplative church is commitment to contemplative practice – particularly the discipline of meditation. This means not simply talking about meditation as part of our teaching, but actually practicing meditation together and allowing everything else to emerge from that ground. Our weekly service might therefore be seen as a cross between public worship and a meditation group. It involves a liturgical gathering, music, scripture reading, a sermon or reflection, intercessory prayer and, at the heart of the service, a 15-minute period of silent meditation. Every three weeks, we share Holy Communion; the other two weeks out of three, it's an Evening Liturgy.

Benedictus is ecumenical and open to all seeking to deepen their spiritual journey. We did not conceive ourselves to be in competition with other churches, and because we meet on Saturday evenings, those who come are able to continue worshipping in their Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, Baptist and other communities on Sundays. There are members of Benedictus who continue in this way as "dual citizens," and there are others for whom Benedictus is their only church.

We committed to being ecumenical in the contemplative sense too. When we introduce the practice of meditation and offer

a method, we suggest the way taught by John Main and the World Community for Christian Meditation. At the same time, people who come with a different existing practice are encouraged to continue with theirs. We thus have members who are part of Contemplative Outreach as well as the World Community, together with those who use the Jesus Prayer and other forms of silent meditation.

Our simple (often Celtic-inspired) liturgies express a sense of the importance of framing silence with meaningful and beautiful words, and the sermon – a theological reflection on scripture – seeks to connect deepening understanding of our faith tradition with life experience. Music and communal singing, led by members of the congregation, is also a vital part of our shared life, helping open hearts and affective ways of knowing, quickening energies and creating community.

Essentially, however, whether it's word or silence, music or speech, the basic intention of our worship is to keep us close to the ground and open to God. We take care that we say what we mean and mean what we say – not repeating tired formulae, but writing prayers and responses that speak of our lived experience, spaciouly holding paradox and complexity, naming what is unresolved, painful and confusing. Simone Weil said that "it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because,

before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.” Our worship hopes therefore to be true, as we listen for the truth of our lives and the truth of God.

The Vocation of a Contemplative Church

In keeping with our commitment to the work of discernment, we were clear we did not want to impose a model of what a church “ought” to offer, nor simply replicate what other churches were already doing (Sunday School, Youth Group, programs of social action). Instead, we sought to listen for what was arising and emerging organically. This led us to wonder about the distinctive vocation of a contemplative church. What is it we might offer that other communities are less able to share? Always we came back to commitment to the work of “transformation.” We did not want to create activities to reassure ourselves we were busy and relevant, or to suck people into being preoccupied with church, but to discern offerings that might enable people to deepen their journey and support them in their vocations in the world.

Over time, various groups have emerged from this listening, some of which have been initiated and led by other members of the community. They include such things as formation in contemplative action, a gathering for sharing spiritual practices and personal stories, and a regular quiet afternoon for primary school aged children, which involves a time of meditation, reflective gathering, story-

telling and art. We’ve also discerned some additions to the liturgical calendar, which reflect both our inheritance from the contemplative tradition and allow us to mark the seasons of our southern hemisphere year. In July, the Australian winter, we celebrate Dark Night of the Season, inspired by John of the Cross; and in spring, it’s “Viriditas: a celebration of holy greening” inspired by Hildegard of Bingen.

What, then, are we learning about being a contemplative church, seeking to serve the spiritual needs of our time? I have always been struck by John Main’s insistence that “the church can only proclaim what it is in the state of experiencing.” The church “can only proclaim what it is.”¹ First and foremost, I think, our experience of Benedictus is confirming for us the necessity of being continuously grounded and re-grounded in the reality of which we speak, through our practice of silent meditation. This prayer really is transformative, and we see members of Benedictus being changed as they participate in it and in the offerings that flow from it.

In terms of the life of the community, this shared practice is also powerfully connecting. It goes deeper than our beliefs or intellectual understandings of God, and is more stable than our intentions to be “good” Christians. Where there is conflict and people rub each other the wrong way, the practice itself calls people to adulthood. Of course, the community is not perfect, but it does seem significantly more

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Examples of Contemplative Churches

St Columba • Inverness, CA
<https://www.stcolumbasinverness.org>

Church of Conscious Harmony • Austin, TX
<https://consciousharmony.org>

Contemplative Communities:

Reach out and let us know where you are!
isabelle@coutreach.org

mature, unthreatened and open than other church communities I have known. Our contemplative practice helps us all to see each other more as God might see us, to look for the person beneath their annoying habits, and to hold less tightly to our own perspective and sense of righteousness.

We are living in difficult times. It’s hard to know exactly what small communities of faith have to offer in such a context, except that, by faith, we hold that orienting ourselves to the transforming love of God makes a difference. We do not know exactly what the next phase of our life as a contemplative church looks like. We do know that as we seek to practice stillness and silence in community, we are steadied and empowered to go into our vocations and life circumstances in a spirit of simplicity, truth-telling and non-anxious presence. Our hope is that this is the spirit that will continue to infuse our common life, for the blessing of many. ☸

¹ John Main, *Community of Love*, Continuum, New York, 1999, p. 6.



Rev. Dr Sarah Bachelard is a theologian, retreat leader and priest in Anglican Orders, based in Canberra, Australia. She is the founding director of Benedictus Contemplative Church and a member of the World Community for Christian Meditation. Sarah has taught contemplative prayer nationally and internationally, and participated in the New Contemplatives Exchange at Snowmass in 2017 with Thomas Keating, Laurence Freeman, Richard Rohr and Tilden Edwards. She is the author of *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis* and *Resurrection and Moral Imagination*.



The Second Sit: A Big Boost to the Practice

PAT JOHNSON

I was reflecting recently on my experience of serving 10-day Intensive retreats at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado over a 30-year period. My service at those meditation retreats included cooking the main meal of the day, leading an hour and a half sit in the afternoon, and doing soul friending for a few hours each day. My reflection took me deep into the core of my being, as these years had formed me and were responsible for whom I had become.

I'm only going to focus on one part of those three lines of serving — being the staff person leading the afternoon prayer period of three 30-minute periods separated by a contemplative walk. My own daily practice is one hour per day of sitting in silent meditation, but during the 10 days that I spent at the monastery every month, my practice would increase

to 2½ hours per day. I began to notice how my clarity and patience increased with my SELF and my shadow side. This monthly increase in my practice shed light on what was hidden, what was forgotten, what was lost, or what was in pain. This practice of sitting in silence has a two-armed embrace. The second arm completes that embrace by extending love and compassion on what we are seeing in ourselves that had been hidden.

Thomas' teachings about sitting in prayer twice a day came directly out of his experiences of prolonged practice. My witnessing retreat after retreat, year after year, of hearts cracked wide open by having the opportunity to sit three periods three times per day for a 10-day period convinced me like nothing else could of the value of this prayer increase. Because many of these 10-day retreatants come back year after year, I was able to witness the transformation in each of them. Having experienced what happened to them on an intensified retreat, they continued their increased practice when they went home.

We don't seem to have problem with the early morning practice as for most of us it has become the way to start our day. It is also the time when distractions are few. "Need determines function" is one of my favorite sayings. I feel that when the time comes to increase to a second sit a day, the Holy Spirit enters and gives each of us a creativity to design how that second sit is going to occur. So there can be as many different ways of including that second sit as there are human beings to host it. Trust that movement.

I was lucky enough to be in a work situation where the afternoon prayer practice was an integral part of my work. How fortunate to have the outer work match the inner work of my being. Thank you, God. Thank you, Thomas Keating. Thank you, St. Benedict's Monastery. ☸



Pat Johnson: Married to Bob Johnson for 66 years and Mom of 9 children, grandmother to 13 and great grandmother to 9, soon to become 11. This being so, I am a person who strongly believes life is all about relationship. That relationship includes our relationship with the Universe, our God, all things. I met Thomas Keating in 1982 at the Lama Foundation where I lived. This relationship led me and my family to moving to close proximity of St. Benedict's Monastery in order to start doing 10-day Intensive Meditation retreats teaching Thomas Keating's version of the Spiritual Journey. I worked and administrated these retreats from 1984 until 2018. This work was an incredible match for me where the inner work matched the outer work. I also have served off and on the Governing Board of Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. and also serve on the Board of Contemplative Outreach of Colorado.

Rediscovering Contemplative Spiritual Practices

PETER TRABEN HAAS

So that we may present everyone mature in Christ ...

Colossians 1.28-29



The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all. ¹

Karl Rahner



*But because I ask for silence,
don't think I'm going to die.*

*The opposite is true;
it happens I'm going to live.*

Pablo Naruda ²

Rediscovering the contemplative dimension of Christianity has given me a new, yet ancient way of being a *practicing* Christian. The contemplative dimension of spiritual practices, in addition to a twice-daily Centering Prayer practice, gently began to answer my *how* questions:

How can I abide with God in Christ?
(John 15.4).

How can I cultivate the mind of Christ within me?
(1 Corinthians 2.16).

How can I become a participant in the divine nature?
(2 Peter 1.4).

How can I die to self and live to God?
(Galatians 2.20).

I call spiritual practices *the rhythms of silence singing love into the still space of grace within me*. Perhaps I'm not the only one who needs to sing and hear this song. It has been my experience as a pastor and in my own inner journey that when meditative prayer is *also* paired with select spiritual practices something very special can happen to and within our life and faith communities.

Practices are habits of *doing* that shape *being*. Practices are a patterned way of life; they are traditionally described as *a rule of life*. Brother Rodger's *The Rule of Taizé* provides a more modern and contemplative rule of life than the better-known *St. Benedict's Rule*.³

The importance of monastic practices, or a rule of life, is based on several interrelated ideas:

We become what we do.

We can, by God's grace, change.

When we can't do, we can ask for help.

The contemplative tradition wisely sums up these ideas with the simple maxim, *action sequitur esse*, "action follows being."⁴ Or, as another wisdom teacher expresses it, *our being draws our life*.⁵ Increasingly, monasteries provide the wider church with a compelling model for how to shape, form and develop our being, and in so doing, help us to see what is possible through the rhythms of being a *practicing* Christian community.

No community is perfect. All living systems are in process and subject to the forces of entropy. Yet, monasticism, long forsaken by the Protestant impulse, has again returned to help us, and perhaps we them.⁶

The menu of spiritual and contemplative practices that I suggest here is not exhaustive, but I believe that these seven core monastic and contemplative practices can help deepen our spiritual lives and flourish in our churches.⁷

Lectio Divina

Lectio divina is spiritual reading or sacred reading. In *Lectio divina*, the reader listens to a brief scripture or text slowly and prayerfully. There are four dynamic stages: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying) and *contemplatio* (contemplating)

Prayer of the Hours

Gathering alone or as a community of faith for morning and evening prayer has long been the foundation of a deepening spiritual life – *The Prayer of the Hours* provides the liturgical superstructure of the monastic day which can also be followed by lay community and individuals. The traditional seven

hours of the daily office were inspired from Psalm 119.164, where the Psalmist affirms, “seven times a day have I praised you.”

Self-Observation

Self-observation helps us tend to our soul by honestly and non-critically watching our thoughts, feelings, sensations and the provocations or events that precede those thoughts and feelings. The practice of self-observation, or paying attention to oneself, or cultivating the inner witnessing presence, has less to do with navel gazing and more to do with heeding Jesus’ invitation to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane to keep watch and pray so as not to fall into temptation.

Silence

Exterior silence supports the grace of interior silence, wherein we may discover something more true and real about ourselves and about God’s energy toward us.

Simplicity

The practice of simplicity is a chief monastic value that supports the primary contemplative practices of solitude, stillness and silence.

Solitude

Solitude is the intentional disposition to remove distractions from our sphere of perception and presence so to be confronted with who we are in any given moment. In solitude and stillness we can more fully discover ourselves, and, more importantly, become more aware of the presence of God.

Stillness

Interior quiet and stillness attunes us to the prayer of the heart. The prayer of the heart is often a fruit of the *Jesus Prayer*. As in Centering Prayer, it is not passivity, but more an intentional waiting upon God.

These seven practices can change and deepen our being by grace and by work. Grace describes the experience of being given the help we need without deserving it or doing anything to get it. For many, grace is the experiential basis of our spiritual life, a pure gift. Something happens that can’t be explained, but changes our life for the good. The sacrament of communion is an example of such a transforming

grace, as the Eucharist conveys the presence of Christ. Beauty is Grace. The beauty of a mountain sunrise comes to us and moves us; we do not create that view, we just receive it and are blessed by it. Grace comes to us in many ways. Perhaps the sweetest graces are the ones we least expect.

Effort, or work, describe the conscious choices we make. The word “work” describes *doing* certain things as well as *not doing* certain things. Work requires efforts, choices and acts of will, especially, when we are seeking to change our inner thoughts or desires.

When our *doing* shifts, our being *can* change. When our *being* evolves, our entire life can be transformed. When our life changes our community does too. When our community changes for the better, our world can too.

Systems are comprised of parts and parts shape the whole. Families are shaped by individuals. When one person changes, the whole system can shift. We each matter. Our presence is important. Each person’s impact is unique. We should not discount the effect our individual and group *doing* can have on our individual and communal *being*. The impact our being can have on the world is not just a concept. The world is a living organism comprised of individual beings influenced by others’ way(s) of being in one interconnected whole – the Mystical Body.

The call to partake in the wisdom of spiritual practices comes very early in the Christian tradition. Listen to this injunction, from one of the early desert fathers,

“Take flight every day! At least for a moment, which may be brief, as long as it is intense. A ‘spiritual exercise’ every day – either alone, or in the company of someone who also wishes to better oneself ... Try to get rid of your own passions, vanities, and the itch for talk about your own name. Avoid backbiting. Get rid of pity and hatred. Love all ... become eternal by transcending yourself. This work on yourself is necessary...”⁸

This counsel is very similar to the saying attributed to the fifth century monk, Abba Arsenius, who in a mid-life spiritual crisis, cried out to God for help, and then heard this compelling imperative back: “Flee, be silent, pray always.”⁹ It also echoes St. Paul’s call to

early Christians to live in a different way. In the Letter to the Ephesians we hear an urgency to the invitation:

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ... [B]e kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:22-27, 29, 32).

Much of this wisdom is a call to *actively* engage in the transformative process. While the passage doesn't explicate *how* to get there, it does clearly call us to work and act and “be” in a whole new way. To “be” and “do” life in a different way – the Christ way. To be by doing. If the church of the future is to be different, we are invited to learn from the past. The wisdom of the tradition invites us to change our way of being by doing a few key practices. Those monastic practices answer the missing *how* question. And many of these have been updated for our times.

The point is that flourishing just doesn't happen on its own. We participate in the experience. In the New Testament, the word for flourishing occurs in 2 Thessalonians 1.3. The Greek word used there is ὑπερ-αυξανει (hyper-auxanei), translated variously, as ever-growing or exceedingly increasing. We can detect a familiar word in the root stem; the English word “hyper.” As in, hyper-drive. Or hyper-active. In the case of 2 Thessalonians 1.3, the word literally means

hyper-growth. Overflowing growth. Flourishing. Notice that their faith flourishes and their love is full. Both convey ongoing development and movement in depth and breadth.

Our ever-growing, flourishing faith may not always feel like we are growing. There are seasons where no fruit or growth is seemingly visible, and yet the roots are strengthening in silence and stillness, hidden to our perception. These may also be seasons of intense pruning, where the edge of suffering seems to cut away all that which is false within us. Suffering may even temporarily take away our sense of God's felt presence.

Nevertheless, flourishing is something we get to participate in, partly because we become what we do. If we give our attention to the practices that nurture our flourishing, we will flourish. Perhaps not in the way we think, but in unexpected ways. Perhaps not in the timeframe we expect, but in timely ways. Inward ways. Ways of the Spirit, whose fruit are unmistakable: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, and such. ☩



Rev., Dr. Peter Traben Haas was born in Traben-Trarbach, Germany and grew up in Brookfield, Wisconsin. He is an ordained teaching pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and serves as minister of a non-denominational contemplative Christian community in Austin, Texas called The Church of Conscious Harmony.

¹Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 22.

²Pablo Naruda, “I Asked for Silence” in *Extravagaria*, trans. Alastair Reid (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 17.

³*The Rule of Taizé in French and English* by Brother Rodger (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013).

⁴*The Contemplative Path: Reflections on Recovering a Lost Tradition*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1995), 12.

⁵Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, Vol. 1* (Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 1996), 154.

⁶By again, I am thinking of Thomas Cahill's wonderful book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, which makes the point how the monastic communities safe-guarded the western intellectual tradition, while the rest of Europe dissolved in the so called dark ages.

⁷A more complete list would expand to at least these: *Fasting, Humility, Lectio Divina, Prayer of the Hours, a Rule of Life, Self-Observation, Silence, Simplicity, Solitude, Spiritual direction and friendship, Stability, Stillness, Work*, which are technically related to the threefold classic vows of *Obedience, Poverty and Chastity*.

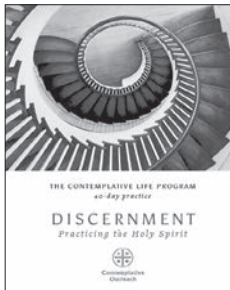
⁸Georges Friedmann, *La Puissance et la Sagesse* (Paris: Galimard, 1970) 359 cited in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 81.

⁹Benedicta Ward, ed. *The Saying of the Desert Fathers* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1975), 8.

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NEW

Discernment Praxis: Practicing the Holy Spirit



This new 199-page booklet uses a discernment practice inspired by the teachings and being of Sr. Meg Funk, a long-time Centering Prayer practitioner, teacher, spiritual director and colleague of Fr. Thomas Keating. The booklet reviews the five movements of a contemplative discernment practice and invites participants to use their own real-life questions during this 40-day praxis.

Each day includes a beautiful image, Scripture passages, brief readings and a suggested practice, as well as space for notes. The booklet ends with an invitation to engage contemplative discernment as a way of life, bringing all matters small and large to the Holy Spirit and living with a disposition of deep listening and inner stillness. *Book: \$20 USD • Digital download (PDF): \$10 USD*
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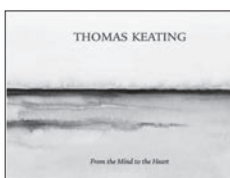
The Secret Embrace



Fr. Thomas Keating wanted to include a poem he had written in the next printing of Peter Jones' other book, *From the Mind to the Heart*. Peter encouraged his Uncle Thomas to submit more poems, and from that request, seven additional poems are the centerpiece of this beautifully-designed book.

What emerges from the core of Fr. Thomas' thinking is an alternate way of articulating high spiritual concepts inside short interconnected verses that provide an ambience in which to absorb them. Charlotte Frieze, author and artist, has contributed her watercolor paintings depicting the sea, forever in a state of transformation and transcendence. *Book: \$25 USD*

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This beautifully illustrated book with the paintings of Charlotte M. Frieze, comes from the conversations Fr. Keating had with his friend John Osborne in 2010 for the film, *The Rising Tide of Silence* and three years later for the new film, *From the Mind To The Heart*. Fr. Keating's thoughts about silence and contemplation, power and the false self, and humankind's shifting relationship with God have emerged in the film and this companion book. *Book: \$25 USD*

True Freedom: The Spiritual Path of Centering Prayer with Thomas Keating



This DVD features 10 videos on how Centering Prayer supports prisoners, giving them a freedom that transcends prison walls. It is helpful for volunteers, prison chaplains and incarcerated people. Included are talks and visits by Thomas Keating in the late 1990s to groups of prison inmates, and a Centering Prayer session led by Fr. Thomas at Folsom Prison. Also included is a current video of Ray Leonardini, Director of Prison Contemplative Fellowship on Centering Prayer: The Spirituality of Restorative Justice.

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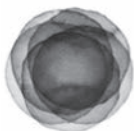
Prison Ministry Videos Playlist

This playlist contains 11 videos, an audio history of Centering Prayer at Folsom by Mike Kelley, two new videos by Ray Leonardini, Director of *Prison Contemplative Fellowship*, and four newly-edited videos of Fr. Thomas talking with inmates at Folsom Prison.

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The conceptual background of Centering Prayer grounds
and supports the growing silence and stillness of contemplation.

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