



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

35: The False Self in Action, Part 2-Continued



P. Karl Stradler, *Resurrection*

I sleep but my heart is awake.
- Song of Songs 5:2

We will again explore the active prayer as a neutralizing factor of largely unconscious commentaries that habitually repeat themselves in the walking around state, particularly in afflictive states.

"If you've noticed that whenever you're upset by your emotional programs, or challenged, not only does the frustrating emotion arise (... envy, anger, lust, ... greed, ...) immediately the imagination provides a commentary. ... The commentary always arises with the emotion. And so, if we had another phrase, a sentence, worked into the unconscious ... it has the effect of a cassette-tape eraser. ... It reduces the force with which the emotional turmoil begins. Because if there's no commentary, then the emotion can be handled by reason and judgment. In other words, if you get in there fast enough, the process of getting into emotional turmoil through feeling and commentary doesn't take place, and that gives you a neutral zone in which you can decide what to do without being compulsively pushed into an emotional reaction, and then the binge, when you get caught by the hunters, roasted and eaten by the emotions! ...

"You might think of choosing a sentence of maybe eight to twelve syllables ... And the reason for choosing a longer one for daily life is because in daily life you are usually thinking in sentences. ... You gradually work it into your subconscious by saying it again and again when you're not doing something else. ... Most of us spend about two hours a day getting ready to do something else or doing nothing. So, for instance, while you're in the shower ... or doing the dishes, or driving the car, or walking ... waiting. ...

"If you said the same phrase again and again, and used the same one because it's easier then to work it into the subconscious ... after about six months or one year ... [you] erase the old tapes in the subconscious. ...

"That is freedom! And it's to get to that place of neutrality where we can decide what to do ... that all these practices are ordered. Try [it]! "

- Thomas Keating, excerpts from Session 35 video

The active prayer sentence creates a "neutral zone" in our minds and liberates our consciousness from the black hole of habituated reactive patterns of the afflictive emotions, the interior dialogue and the obsessive thinking. Consequently, there is a more awakened consciousness to spend in the present moment. It is one of the most powerful, yet simple practices to engage "after the bell" so to speak, that is, in-between our periods of Centering Prayer in the midst of ordinary life. It is at once both ancient and yet useful to contemporary contemplatives.

A Meditation

"For some there comes a time when the Jesus [active] prayer 'enters the heart' so that it is no longer recited by a deliberate effort, but recites itself spontaneously, continuing even when a person talks or writes, present in his dreams, waking him or her up in the morning.

- Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*

To Practice

- Reflect on "what the first thing to pop-out of your mouth when you would, for example, splash hot coffee into your lap, bash your head on the car door or, with company sitting at the dining table, your soufflé deflates as you open the door to the oven? ... In this true story, a woman was rear-ended by a semi-truck. In a nanosecond she found herself as the target of a shooting gallery of

cross-traffic cars. Banged this way and that way, in the slow motion of the shock, she heard herself saying, "Lord, have mercy on my soul!" It was her active prayer sentence of many years. When this kind of spontaneous use of your active prayer sentence emerges, you know it has moved into the depths of your being and rooted you in God, regardless of the outer circumstance of life."

- from "Active Prayer" *The Contemplative Life Program, 40-Day Practice*

- You might try pausing several times in the day and noticing the commentaries running through your thoughts. Do these commentaries serve the aims you've set for your spiritual journey?

- Consider how the atmosphere of your world – our world – would be so different if we all adopted the active prayer practice.

- The active prayer: Try it!

*I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall always
be in my mouth.*

- Psalm 34:1

Notes and Reflections: