

BECOMING CONTEMPLATIVE

by Donald Goergen, OP

As I approach the topic of contemplation, I feel inadequate. Who among us consider themselves contemplative? It seems presumptuous. Yet each of us is called to contemplation. Can it then be that extraordinary?

In coming to a deeper understanding of what it means to be contemplative, it is important to begin with ourselves. My sense is that many of us look for happiness in the wrong places. We seek finite satisfactions for what is an ache for the infinite, to use an expression of Amal Kiran's, a disciple of the Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo. There is nothing wrong with finite satisfactions. We just expect too much from them. They are very good and pleasant in their place, but they cannot quench our thirst for something more. If I am thirsty, it is not helpful for someone to say, "Let's go to a movie or let's go shopping." As good as they may be, they will not quench my thirst. When finite goods do not satisfy us, we delude ourselves into thinking that more of the same is what we need. But there is a deeper longing which we fail to acknowledge, of which Augustine spoke when he wrote in his Confessions, "Our heart is restless until it rests in You."

Contemplation and Time

It doesn't make any difference how fast we go if we are headed in the wrong direction. It doesn't help to increase the speed. That is what we often seem to be doing. Mohandas Gandhi said the same: "There's more to life than increasing its speed." The modern West assumes that this may solve our problems: better, faster and more. There is the story of an airplane pilot who announced to the passengers: I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we are moving faster than expected and have picked up speed. The bad news is that we are lost. More of the finite is simply more of the finite. More possessions lead to possessiveness not to happiness. Few things in life are truly significant and we easily become unaware of what really matters. Contemplation suggests taking another look at how we live.

"Contemplative" describes a way of living, a way of loving, a way of being, a way of seeing. Contemplation is not something we do at a particular time of the day. Contemplation is rather living here and now the day in which we find ourselves. Contemplation has to do with the everyday. It is not a question of withdrawing from the world but rather a way of being in the world. One can retreat from the world and still not attain contemplative presence. One can be headed in the wrong direction even in the desert. One can be hurrying to accomplish something even in a monastery. There can be a rush toward enlightenment. Contemplation doesn't have so much to do with "doing" as it does with "letting it be done unto me" (**Lk 1:38**). It means attentiveness to a different sense of time and timing.

Malidoma Somé, trained in the ancestral traditions of the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, West Africa, as well as in the West, indicates that the greatest shock of modern Western culture for indigenous peoples is the Western emphasis on speed. Among the Dagara there is no word for time. Its absence generates a mode of life whose focus is on spirit. "The elder sees those in constant motion (going places, doing things, making noise) as moving away from something that they do not want to look at or moving away from something that others do not want them to look at. When you slow down, you begin to discover that there is a silent awareness of what it is that you do not want to look at...." The frenzy of life, as manifest in a work-obsessed culture, is symptomatic of an illness almost too large to face.

The indigenous world, in trying to emulate Nature, espouses a walk with life, a slow, quiet day-to-day kind of existence. The modern world, on the other hand, steams through life like a locomotive, controlled by a certain sense of careless waste and destruction. Such life eats at the psyche and moves its victims faster and faster along, as they are progressively emptied out of their spiritual and psychic fuel.

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Malidoma Patrice Somé, Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community (Portland, Oregon: Swan/Raven & Co., 1993): 32-33.

2

Ibid., 34.

This is not intended to romanticize a pre-industrial era. As Ken Wilber points out, we ought not confuse the pre-rational with the trans-rational or with spiritual transformation. But the speed with which we live can starve the soul. Contemplation is the spirit or soul's yearning to regain space in the world. It is giving the human spirit a chance to breathe. The relationship between contemplation and time, or the loss of our ordinary sense of time, is manifest in the relationship between contemplation and art. Ken Wilber points out that great art suspends our desire to be elsewhere. We simply want to be there and we don't want it to end.

When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. While we are in this contemplative state, we do not want anything from the object; we just want to contemplate it; we want it to never end.

Contemplation and the Everyday

Contemplation, however, is a way of looking at ordinary life and seeing the extraordinary. It is finding God in the midst of the everyday. Great art, music, literature help us to transcend ordinary time. What we find there we find elsewhere if we have eyes that see and ears that hear. Contemplation transforms our way of being in the world, being there with a heightened awareness, being there by being here, now. Contemplation takes place in the midst of an active life whenever we are fully attentive to life. Contemplation is a fullness of presence and thus a vehicle for communion.

Contemplation often manifests itself as longing or yearning. Happiness consists in learning to live with that longing, with an emptiness at the heart of things, with emptiness being accepted and open to being filled. Our longing is for God, and God is no thing, and so the experience of God often feels like an experience of nothing. An experience of something is not yet an experience of God. Contemplation is companionship my own loneliness in such a way that it is no longer alone. It is now not I. Being in the world in this accompanying mode is something we learn, which means there is much that we must unlearn. We must let go of the fear of aloneness and see our Self as a friend to be embraced.

Attentive and Centered

The Latin word contemplari has as its root the Latin word templum which we ordinarily translate as temple. Originally it referred to a sacred space marked off by an altar as a space requiring acute observation, Thus contemplation suggests "being with" that "delineated space," attentive to it. That space may be without, a space which we enter or observe, or within, as when Paul speaks about our being temples of the Holy Spirit (**1 Cor 3:16; 6:19**), hence an inner temple or sanctuary within the human person. Contemplation requires a journey into our innermost being. Contemplation is associated with attentiveness, awareness, concentration, focus, and mindfulness. A contemplative person is aware, lives life mindfully, is able to focus, is not scattered but centered.

Am I centered? Upon what or whom am I centered? Centering, being focused, having a sense of what is significant and being able to attend to that is not easy in a highly paced society. I am pulled and pushed in a multitude of directions at once. I am defined as a consumer for whose attention many different forces are competing. The process of centering requires going beyond the superficial make-up of my life to that which makes my heart really beat. It is a process of getting in touch with my heart and soul and human spirit. This is what contemplation is all about, getting in touch with my truest, deepest self. It is a process of discovery. The deeper I go, I find a Self other than the self that ordinarily acts and thinks. It is now not I but someone other than I, an Other who is at the very heart of myself. Contemplation is being with that Other, that Self, my deepest innermost self, being there with a loving gaze and stillness. In that silent stillness I discover that I am loved.

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This is what Ken Wilber refers to as the pre/trans fallacy. See Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 1995): 205-208, 230-240.

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Ken Wilber, The Eye of Spirit (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 1998): 135.

You may have heard the story of the young children being guided through the church on a bright and sunny day as a part of their religious instruction. They were shown the sanctuary where the altar was explained, the baptismal font, and beautiful stained glass windows depicting different saints. That evening the mother asked her young daughter what she had learned at school that day and the girl told her about the church, the altar, and the saints in the windows. Her mother asked, "And what is a saint?" The little girl replied, "Those are the ones the light shines through." Contemplation lets the light shine through.

In contemplation we come to recognize that it is the same Light that shines through others as through ourselves. We can express love for "the other." Hence, the Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Israelis and Palestinians, Hutu and Tutsi, Hindu and Muslim, Americans and Afghans, the Western European world and Muslim Arab world all see the light shine through each other in their otherness.

A Way of Praying

Although contemplative refers primarily to a way of being in the world, it is a way of living that flows from a life of prayer. Prayer focuses our lives on God. Not all prayer is contemplative. The easiest way to talk about contemplative prayer is to think about human relationships and how we come to know one another and grow in friendship. Prayer is the way we become friends of God. Before we meet someone, we may have heard about them, even have some image of what they might be like. Yet we know there is a difference between knowing about someone and meeting the person. So likewise with God or Christ. In prayer we are not looking to learn about God but yearning to meet God.

Once the encounter has taken place, in human relationships or with God, it continues by our communicating with each other about things. We may talk about the economy or a movie or poetry or our jobs. We get to know each other by talking to someone about something. This is a reflective level in a relationship. In our relationship with God, this is reflective prayer. It may be vocal or mental. It may be petitionary, telling God about needs or asking God's help. It may be meditational, reflecting on the mysteries in the life of Christ or texts from Scripture. We are talking to God about our needs, gratitude, desire for forgiveness or events in the history of salvation.

A human relationship deepens when it moves from shared reflections to shared affections, when we say, "I love you." It is not that the shared reflections are no longer meaningful or even necessary, but they no longer reflect the depth to which the relationship has gone. Sharing now comes from the heart, requires fewer words, and is uttered from another level of depth within the person. It is like this in our relationship with God. Reflective prayer becomes affective prayer or prayer of the heart. We have met God and God has become our friend.

Relationships do not end here, although sometimes in our world we assume this is as good as they get. Love of friendship is not simply a question of feeling. We do not constantly feel affection in a relationship with spouse or friend. Feelings come and go. Take a couple who have shared years of relationship, with children raised, pains endured, joys celebrated. Picture them together without any need for words, simply sitting in a room. Each may be absorbed in something else such as reading a book. Yet they have come to a contemplative way of being together which means that the depth of the relationship is simply expressed in the desire to be in the other's presence. There is no need for words, although they may still come and at times are necessary or gratifying. One can say, "I love you" once more and it is important to do so. But those words no longer express the depth of the union which only silence communicates as each is aware of the other's presence.

We recognize this depth in a relationship when someone dies. At the level of appearances, little has changed in the landscape of one's life. At a deeper level everything has changed. The salt shaker is not the same; that person will not pass it. A meal is not the same; that person will not be sharing it. A contemplative relationship is one in which being with the other is all that is desired. Simple presence, real presence: that is contemplation, being fully present to another. And that is what contemplative prayer is, being present to God, an awareness of being in God's presence, simply the desire to be there. Contemplative prayer consists in two friends being fully present to each other.

A commonly asked question is how to pray. The disciples themselves asked Jesus to teach them to pray. There are many sources of spiritual guidance in our lives: Scripture, liturgy, the Lord's Prayer and other prayers, spiritual reading, theological study, a spiritual director, friends, people to whom we minister, as well as meditation and the practice of silence. When one is attempting to move one's life in a contemplative direction, the latter is highly recommended. I speak of meditation not in the sense of reflective prayer or discursive meditation but in the sense of placing oneself with awareness in God's presence: the practice of Christian meditation, centering prayer, Eastern forms of meditation, silence in solitude or before the Blessed Sacrament, the Jesus Prayer. These contemplative spiritual practices are ways of focusing our lives, getting a sense of its direction, discovering its meaning, letting go.

I myself, after living an active life as a Friar Preacher for twenty-nine years, discovered how little time there was in my life for prayer that was more than routine, how I was going faster and faster but not sure of where I was going. I discovered that many of the active religious in the church, including many monasteries, are not simply active but hyperactive. So in 1999, with permission, several of us established a Dominican ashram. We have limited outside ministry. Hospitality to guests who come to share our lives is a priority. But the time had come to face the truth. Either I was going to continue talking about God without time to listen to God or I needed to structure another way of living. St. Dominic encouraged his friars to speak only to God and about God. I had become good at handing on the fruits of contemplation (aliis tradere) but there was far less energy allocated to contemplation itself (contemplari) and so there was at least some question about what it was I was handing on.

Contemplative Prayer

Christian meditation is a spiritual practice available to all that allows us, in whatever circumstances of life, to be attentive, gain focus, and enter more deeply into the mystery of the life divine. The practice of silence, alone as well as in common, expresses the yearning of the human heart, the desire of the human spirit, to know God. Contemplative prayer is giving God time to quench at least momentarily our insatiable thirst for the divine. The practice of silence at a chosen time in a particular space requires discipline. Discipline alone, however, does not open us up to our deep connectedness to God and interconnectedness with one another. That happens through grace. Prayer is taking time to let grace work, which it does visibly and invisibly, although the Holy Spirit is obviously not confined to the times and places that we set aside. The wind blows where it will (**Jn 3: 8**). Disciplined silence is a way of allowing the Holy Spirit to be our guide. Once our awareness of the omnipresence of the Spirit has been heightened, we realize that we can pray always and anywhere. Time set aside for concentrated silence is an opportunity to focus more intensely on what permeates all the times and spaces of our lives.

Contemplation, meditation or prayer in all religious traditions are related to compassion. Although contemplative prayer, as a focused awareness of God's presence in our lives and world, involves a disciplined interior journey, it is a journey whose purpose is not confined to deepened levels of interior inquiry but rather a going inward so that we might be transformed in our outward lives, so that we might see our world and live in it differently. The fruit of contemplation is a diminished self-centeredness or self-preoccupation. We become more centered in order to discover that our true center is beyond us, that we are not the centers of the universe ourselves. I am led beyond ego to a deeper Self. Egolessness becomes the fruit of contemplation and true compassion the fruit of egolessness. We become contemplative in order to love more fully and wholeheartedly. Love of God and love of neighbor become two sides of one coin. One's personal transformation does not turn one away from the world's transformation but allows one to engage the world more deeply from within a deeper Source. Becoming contemplative, after all, is simply learning how to love.