

The Role of Contemplative Prayer in Spiritual Formation: One Man's Journey

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Based on the book *Experiencing God's Presence: A Personal Guide Through Six Spiritual Disciplines* by Dan McGee, Ph.D., © 2010

Introduction

What I will share with you today did not show up uninvited in these so called “golden years” of my seventieth decade. There were distinct traces of a contemplative life in my childhood, adolescence and young adult life as a minister. I did not discuss it with anyone that I can recall but I practiced it in the beautiful mountains of my north Georgia youth and the grand Colorado Rockies of my middle adult years. I found a God far greater than language could convey in the dynamic equilibrium of the cosmos and the microorganisms within my own body.

Eventually, I came to recognize more than the reality I could see, touch, smell, taste or hear.

1. **Reality of the Physical** (about science at the micro and macro levels—crucial to our physical survival)
2. **Reality of the Psychological** (about emotions, thoughts and behaviors, increasingly understood as a systemic part of the physical)
3. **Reality of the Social** (plays a critical role in our formation individually and, in turn, defines the ways in which we shape our environment; increasingly understood as a broader view of physical/psychosocial)
4. **Reality of the Spiritual** (drives the human need for meaning—accessible only by faith and becomes the reality out of which the follower of Jesus Christ lives)

As a human being experiencing life out of control and as a researcher studying the world of stress-related disorders I discovered the importance of homeostatic balance. My research identified psychological stress as the “mismatch between an individual’s coping skills and the demands of the environment.” As my knowledge of the body’s alarm system grew I learned that this was not so much a definition of stress as a description of the conditions under which the human stress response occurs.

In 1989 I was invited to join a group of people doing this kind of research at a seminar at Harvard Medical School entitled, “Advances in Behavioral Medicine.” Here I learned from renowned Harvard cardiologist, Herbert Benson, the incredible potential of the mind/body for harm or healing. As I applied this knowledge in inpatient and outpatient settings in the years to follow I began to understand better the connection between two of the body’s most important neurological functions found in the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems. Indeed, this process led to insight into how well integrated the mind/body is with the spiritual reality of the believer.

Reality of the Spiritual: “The Kingdom of God”

- A. Contemplative Prayer is about focus; “being still and knowing. . .”
 1. External: blocking out the overstimulation of the outside world which has us in its grip and so often influences or controls our thoughts and decisions; it is about shutting down input in order to focus on the Reality of the Spiritual
 2. Internal: gaining control of self-talk, the incessant chatter that is fed by our need to make sense of everything and ends up exhausting and depleting our creative energies. Using the mind/body’s own resources as a pathway to contemplative prayer
- B. Contemplative Prayer is about listening; “ears that hear. . .”
 1. Attuning to God’s Spirit
 - a. In “praying the scriptures”
 - b. In the tradition of *lectio divino*

2. Attuning to God's Spirit
 - a. In silence
 - b. In all forms of God's creation
 - c. In written/recorded venues and narratives of people and peoples
- C. Contemplative Prayer is about "*experiencing*" God's Presence
 1. By experiencing solitude
 - a. Physically separating from the world
 - b. Experiencing *solus* of the heart
 2. By "adoration" of God
 3. By "resting" in God
 4. By being "graced" and "embraced" by God
- D. Contemplative Prayer is about surrender
 1. To what is revealed by God's Spirit
 2. To whatever change is needed
 3. To whatever actions are required
- E. Contemplative Prayer is about living a Contemplative Life
 1. In Sensitivity to God's world
 2. In Service that emerges from God's Presence
 3. Through the disciplines of spiritual "re-formation"

Conclusion

Is the contemplative life for everyone? I don't know. Experiencing God's Presence is essential, and it is my opinion that God is at work in the heart of everyone, inviting us, and drawing us towards him. Are we always aware of God's Presence? Are we listening? Contemplative prayer became the process by which God got my attention long before I knew it by this name. The contemplative life is my focus and hopefully it will become the byproduct of contemplative prayer. I must admit that it scared me to death when I learned that people who describe their journey much like mine were known as "mystics!" It has become so integrated into my daily life that I can't imagine getting here or going from here any other way.

But it's not within my power to know by what means God chooses to draw one to him. How arrogant would it be of me to think I'm privy to the mystery of God's interaction with another? I remain a novice among novices. I can only say that for me it has been a lifelong process of quiet celebration and noisy pain. Henry Nouwen described this kind of solitude as "the furnace of transformation . . . the place where God remodels us in his own image." I described it in my book as "the crucible of our spiritual re-formation, where we bring our broken selves for healing . . . a place where God's vision for us stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing culture." I no longer I have the option of merely listening in these quiet times to the Voice I've chosen to follow. When action is called for, however, there is less and less fear and more and more peace.

When I began inviting Christian leaders to participate in spiritual formation retreats that embraced these and other disciplines I made a discovery. People are not standing in line to jump into the fiery furnace. Indeed, there seems to be a huge reality check at the front door. The biggest obstacle we found was that people are not willing to get involved in spiritual disciplines until they "hit the brick wall." As long as we think we are adequate—that our religious traditions and practices will get us there, that we just need to try harder, then we will not push the envelope. The unknown is always scary, but so is living without faith. My favorite quote from this book is, "It ain't faith if you can write a check for it!"

There has to be a deep hunger for God's Presence—a longing for intimacy with God—a restlessness that will not let us go (Jacob's ladder episode) until we are blessed by God's Presence. We don't really know what we are asking of God, we just know we are miserable. We have done it all right, by the book so to speak, burned ourselves out. We fall exhausted trying to find what God stands ready to give. . . once we are ready to listen to the right Voice.

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