



Greg Hildenbrand

Living a Contemplative Life

# Contemplative Life

## *Philosophy, Paths, and Practices*

Greg Hildenbrand



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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the core faculty of the Center for Action and Contemplation's *Living School* during my time there: Fr. Richard Rohr, James Finley, and Cynthia Bourgeault. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude for, nor describe the serendipitous impact of their selfless, self-emptying onto and into my life.

My sincere appreciation and admiration also go to the devoted staff of the *Living School*, without whom the faithful transmission of the perennial wisdom would not happen so seamlessly or effectively.

*Namaste.*





## Table of Contents

Preface	11
Introduction	13
<b>Part I: Contemplative Foundations of Contemplation</b>	<b>15</b>
1 A Contemplative Life	17
2 Living Beyond Words	20
3 Knowledge and Experience	23
4 Action and Contemplation	26
5 The Seen and Unseen	29
6 Ego and Essence	32
7 Dying Before We Die	36
8 The Contemplative Symbolism of the Cross	40
9 Uncertainty	43
<b>Part 2: Contemplative Paths</b>	<b>47</b>
10 Seven Paths to God	49
Silence	50
Stillness	51
Solitude	52
Simplicity	54

	Surrender	55
	Service	56
	Spirit	57
	Seven Paths, One Experience	58
	<b>Part 3: Contemplative Practices</b>	<b>61</b>
11	Contemplative Practices	63
	Contemplative Space	65
	Contemplative Postures	66
	The Breath	68
	Recitations and Invocations	72
	Prayer	74
	Chanting	83
	Body Prayers	86
	Heart Prayers	89
	A Sample Daily Practice Itinerary	93
	A Contemplative Rhythm of Life	94
	Contemplative Practices Summary	96
	An Invitation	97
	Endnote	99
	About the Author	101

# Preface

This is my third formal attempt to present a contemplative life in detail, as well as describing why it might be of interest and how to go about integrating contemplative practices into one's already-full days.

My initial attempts, *A Primer on a Contemplative Life*, Editions 1 and 2, are now out of circulation in favor of the current edition, retitled as *Contemplative Life: Philosophy, Paths, and Practices*.

My obsession in writing, rewriting, and sharing about the contemplative life grows out of the transformational changes I experience from integrating regular contemplative practices into it. My hope is others will find this material helpful, particularly those seeking a deeper life experience, as well as those beginning on or well into a contemplative journey. You are not alone or misguided. The Spirit calls us to this journey, unawares, when it knows it is time to traverse it.

As I continue evolving in my spiritual formation, additional topics and improved ways of presenting them may spawn future editions. This work contains numerous edits to the initial attempts as well as a wealth of information previously not included.

Of course, on the contemplative journey, home is not a destination, as such, but is the very journey we find ourselves on. We do not *travel* as much as we *awaken* to the fact that we have been traveling since long before taking our first breath on earth. In the company of engaged beings past and present who guide us physically and spiritually, we will arrive in spaces of greater understanding and acceptance of this mysterious call we have received. On the contemplative journey, questions are numerous and answers are few. There is a peace in unanswered questions, however, and so we learn to live with the questions, to hold their tension, and to trust our journey is guided by loving forces beyond our comprehension or understanding. In the words of Thomas Merton, "...as soon as you stop traveling you have arrived."<sup>1</sup>

May it be for you as it has been for me.

Greg Hildenbrand  
January 2023

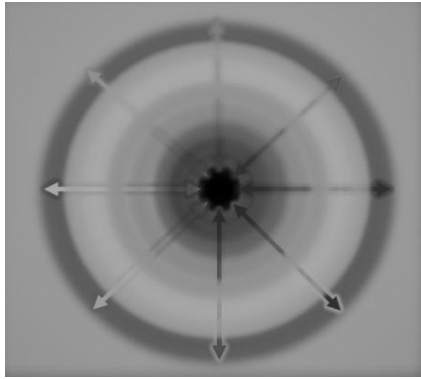
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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, Harcourt Publishing, 1953, p. 28.



## Introduction

### *Inside Out and Outside In*



On the front cover of this book is an imperfect, two-dimensional, color representation of how God's creation manifests and how all of creation is interconnected. The illustration is reproduced in black and white above. It falls short of the reality in so many ways, yet I hope it helps illustrate a few important points. The black center represents God and the creating energy from which God creates. It is important to understand that black is not darkness or a lack of light, nor is it evil or a lack of good. Rather, black is an energy that includes *all* colors, just as God is inclusive of *all* good, including that which has yet to mature as good (which we typically consider as evil). What we perceive as black is only that part of reality our senses cannot yet differentiate. Where we see a lack of light and goodness is better understood as unconsummated and immature, as opposed to anything apart from God.

The colored circles emanating from the center show the color changes, as we perceive them, as the vibrations from the source begin to slow and cool, growing denser and becoming more physical. The different colors do not differ in essence, only in their vibratory rates and how they are perceived by us.

The variously-colored arrows emanating from the center represent all created things – people, bugs, rocks, plants, mountains, clouds – existing on and beyond the earth. The arrows result from the movement or impregnation of God’s spirit into the finite material of the earth (the outer circle), resulting in infinite varieties of being. Spirit not only animates the otherwise inert materials of the earth but also connects us to God and, through that connection, with each other. There is continual movement back and forth along these arrows, although that movement occurs almost entirely beneath our conscious awareness. At birth, the unique manifestation of the Spirit that manifests as *us* impregnates, gathers, and gives life to the earthly elements required to form the physical body we recognize as ourselves.

That animating Spirit is our soul. It is our true self. It is our connection to God and, through God, to each other and all other parts of creation. Contemplative practices help us consciously *look back* to where we came from, to the Divine Center. They *ground* or *center* us in the reality from which we arose, from which we live, move, and have our being, and to which we will return when our life on earth as we know it is finished.

Perhaps the most profound lesson of the illustration is that as one follows one’s lineage (arrow) back to God, one draws into closer proximity not only to God, but to all created beings. Traversing the lineage of our true self back to its source shows that we are literally One with everything in creation, intricately interwoven and inseparably interconnected. This is the Oneness of which Jesus speaks in John 17. As we draw our conscious awareness toward *God-in-us* through contemplative practices, we better understand the similarities and inseparable intertwining between us and everything else. We learn that all of creation arises from the same source, and in our connection to that source we find our true selves – the part of us we recognize as the best version of ourself, where we feel most like the unique creation we are, and the part we most wish to portray to others. Our Oneness comes not in the elimination of our uniqueness but in the recognition that our differences weave the fabric of the life we know. We are important. We are unique. We are beloved. As is every other created being.

I include this illustration as a visual aide to enhance the reader’s ability to picture their relationship to God and others, at least as I understand and present it.

# Part I

## Philosophical Foundations of Contemplation

Greg Hildenbrand



# 1

## A Contemplative Life

*For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. Isaiah 30:15*

What is a contemplative life? How does it differ from a non-contemplative life? Most of our lives are too busy to add anything new so where is contemplation supposed to fit? Contemplative practices, though, do not simply guide our formation as physical *and* spiritual beings but also reset our priorities in ways more conducive to efficiently and effectively discerning and doing what is uniquely ours to do.

*A contemplative life is a life of prayer, where prayer is the continuous, conscious awareness of God's presence.* I will develop these themes in the following pages.

First, a contemplative life is not a silent, inactive life of naval-gazing. Rather, most contemplative people are active and involved in seemingly ordinary ways that positively impact the life and lives around them in extraordinary ways, not all of which are easily apparent. In addition, a contemplative life is not an *escape from* life's activities, but a conscious intent to become increasingly and effectively *present to* life's moments. Typically, we find ourselves stuck in our thoughts, mired in endless loops of past regrets and future worries. Contemplative practices help us become increasingly focused on each moment so we give less attention to the past and future.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul describes a contemplative life when he writes, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."<sup>2</sup> This may sound like a way of life for someone who has no life. Rejoice always? Pray without ceasing? Give thanks in all circumstances? For many of us on most days, that is simply laughable. Laughable, that is,

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<sup>2</sup> Thessalonians 5:17.

when we are focused outside of the moment. Contemplative practices focus us. Even our most ordinary, hectic, and stressful daily activities can become acts of prayer that we perform *with* God. We cease feeling that life is being *done to* or *forced upon* us. We acknowledge the presence and action of the Spirit in all things and at all times. Knowing that God works in and through us provides context and purpose to everything we experience, regardless of the circumstances.

Most of us were taught that prayer is a special time set aside to be with God. Some of us learned techniques for praying “correctly.” Prayer before meals required a bowed head, closed eyes, and folded hands. Prayer before going to sleep at night occurred at the bedside, on our knees, hands folded on the bed. Prayer at church meant being quiet, eyes (mostly) closed, hands folded in one’s lap. When these images comprise our total understanding of prayer, it is little wonder that to pray without ceasing seems like an impossible task, not to mention being boring and pointless.

Instead, a contemplative prayer life is incorporated into and becomes an integral part of the rhythm of our days, not something outside of it. *How* we pray is less significant than *that* pray. We pray continually as we become *increasingly and consciously aware of God’s presence with us*.

A contemplative life, then, is one unbroken prayer, both in our actions and our reflections. It is a life that does not settle for learning *about* God but strives for experiences *of and with* God. It requires a willingness to expose ourselves to the Divine in naked surrender and honest acknowledgement of our imperfections, our failings, and everything we do that may not meet the threshold of what we have been taught is expected of us as spiritual people. We learn that God responds to faithfulness and persistence -- not on what we accomplish but on our continued efforts. We come to understand that God is and has been with us every step of every day, no matter where we have been, what we are doing, or who we are with. *And* that God loves the pure and raw essence of who we are *regardless*. God rejoices when we rejoice, God weeps when we weep. There is no magic to having God join us in our everyday moments. In fact, we cannot *not* have God join us. We can only choose to live in knowledge or ignorance of that Presence.

The key to living life as a prayer is the conscious knowledge that that God *is* with us in our everyday moments, whether we recognize it or not. When we know we can never fall out of God’s love, and that God will never reject us, we can embrace and fully experience the moment, regardless of the circumstances. We can even laugh at our absolutely flawed

## Living a Contemplative Life

and frail humanness, knowing God finds even our most annoying quirks endearing.

A contemplative life does not separate being with God from anything else. Rather, it brings God into every part of our life. We cannot hold God at arm's length, so why pretend we can? Three traits of a contemplative life named in Isaiah 30 are *rest*, *quietness*, and *trust*. Serendipitously, these are exactly what we need on our most difficult days. Rest, quietness, and trust are the fruits we seek to integrate into our days. Conscious, contemplative practices help to get us there.

## 2

# Living Beyond Words

*You insist on explaining everything as if the whole world were composed of things that can be explained...Has it ever occurred to you that only a few things in this world can be explained your way?* Don Juan Matus<sup>3</sup>

It is common to have a narrative running nonstop in our heads. Most of us are more present to the *descriptions* of our experiences than we are to the *actual* experiences, and we are not even aware of it. The problem is obvious: our descriptions are at least one step removed from the realities they describe or interpret. In addition, descriptions can only imperfectly capture limited portions of experiences.

Language is one of the first things we are taught as we grow, and by the time we reach adulthood we have fallen hook, line, and sinker for the detached and partial reality our words describe. We forget that words are metaphors. They point to, describe, or interpret something, but they are not the thing itself. For example, the familiar words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm speak of lying down in green pastures and resting beside still waters. Comforting words, yes, but they are only mental representations of the experiences they describe. God meets us in our experiences, not in our descriptions.

In the book of Exodus, as Moses and God conversed on Mount Sinai, Moses told God the Israelites would want to know God's name. God answered, "I am who I am."<sup>4</sup> The people wanted a *description* of God, a box within which they could place God, some way of limiting God's nature to something tangible, understandable, and controllable. Many sacred writings throughout the ages have affirmed that God cannot be known; only

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality: Conversations with Don Juan*, Washington Square Press, 1971, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:14.

experienced. The same is true of our lives on earth – they cannot be *lived* by description. A contemplative life, in particular, seeks to enter the actual experience that inspires the description – the life beyond words, or more accurately, the life preceding the words.

God experiences life in and through us. In other words, God experiences you through me and me through you, which is not to say either of us are God. The true self within – the best, purest, and most holy self we know we can be – is the spirit of God that created and animates us. Some call it our *soul*. It is the part of us that was never born and will never die. It is the part that will live on when our earthly body gives out. Souls are the arrows connecting the center with the exterior in the cover art of this book. They connect us to God, others, and all created things. This true self is not, however, cause for feeling superior because what is true of you and me is true of everyone else, too.

Our words, however, mislead us by implying we are not equal and that we are separate beings. Our life descriptions, reinforced by our egos, tell us we are better than this person, although maybe not as good as another. Descriptions necessarily compare, divide, and define this and that. We assess things not by their similarities but by their differences. By the time we enter adulthood we are so convinced we are independent beings, separate from everyone else, that ignoring our neighbors, leaving family members to work out their own problems, and not flinching at the tragic conditions present across the globe become the accepted norm. Because we do not see our interconnectedness, and because the words that describe our lives are inadequate to capture any semblance that we are truly one body and one life, we lose the lived experience and responsibility of oneness – one with God and one with each other.

Our words separate all kinds of things that are actually of the same essence, and we are deceived when we equate words with the essential nature of anything. For example, we define light and dark, day and night, north and south in relation to each other, by what we consider their opposite. In reality, dark is not the opposite of light but a condition of lesser light. Light and dark are different gradations or expressions of the same reality. The same is true for Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, we are all one in Christ.<sup>5</sup> Our oneness is *not* metaphorical, even if the words we use are. Even good and evil are stages of the same process of becoming and maturing. No process

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:28.

of growth occurs without some measure of pain and suffering, which is often interpreted as evil when not seen in its larger context.

We are not our descriptions of ourselves, nor are we as others describe us. Our true essence resides where our experiences meet our conscious oneness with God. Of these experiences, contemplative teacher James Finley writes, “What is so extraordinary about such moments is that nothing beyond the ordinary is present. It is just the primal stuff of life that has unexpectedly broken through the mesh of opinions and concerns that all too often hold us in their spell. *It is just life in the immediacy of the present moment before thought begins.*”<sup>6</sup> Once we find that place – the immediacy of the present moment before thought begins – if only briefly, we awaken to our true, indescribably rich life. That life, however, resides beyond our words. Contemplative practices are designed to take us there.

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<sup>6</sup> James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*. Sorin Books, 2000, pp. 24-25

### 3

## Knowledge and Experience

*Should the wise answer with windy knowledge, and fill themselves with the east wind?  
Should they argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which they can do no good?*  
Job 15:2-3

I am a lover of knowledge and learning. There are always several books on my nightstand and on my desk, with magazines, newsletters, and articles scattered throughout the house and on my computer with which I actively engage. My interest in the spiritual nature of creation has dominated my curiosity since early adulthood. I am not as interested in organized religion as I am in the connection between spirit and body, the point where the tangible and visible merges with the ethereal and invisible into one unified whole. That point is the nexus from which conscious enlightenment arises. In the cover illustration, that nexus is the center.

A thirst for knowledge in the written word, however, cannot provide the *experience* the words describe. By overly focusing on intellectual knowing, we neglect our other primary centers of intelligence – the heart and the body, in particular. It is common to focus on one of the three – most often the head in the West – and arrive at a less-than-complete understanding because of it. Too often, I anchor myself to head knowledge at the expense of the rich, emotional knowledge of the heart and the visceral, sensual knowledge of the body. By doing so, my learning is restricted. For a well-rounded life experience, we must attend to mind, heart, *and* body. Book-knowledge alone cannot accomplish that.

An example of this occurs in today's religious discussions when God's living, dynamic Word is treated as synonymous with the words of the Bible. While the writing of the Bible was inspired by God, it is *not* the creating, living Word of God. The creator of all things is necessarily beyond the words of human language. If we do not allow God's Word to permeate our

mind *and* heart *and* body, we come to know the words on the page but never the living experience the words point toward.

The anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> Century mystic and author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, wrote, “I encourage you, then, to make experience, not knowledge, your aim. Knowledge often leads to arrogance, but this humble feeling never lies to you.”<sup>7</sup> This author makes the *not-so-subtle* accusation that knowledge *lies* to us but experience does not. It is not that what knowledge provides is not true, but that intellectual knowledge only provides *part* of the truth. We miss much when we live in our heads. An example is the difference between reading about the fragrance of a rose and actually holding the thorny stem between our fingers and smelling the sweet fragrance of the flower. The former is only a description of the actual experience – perhaps not a lie, but certainly not the whole truth and certainly not the experience it describes.

There is another slap in the face to knowledge-obsessed folks like me from this author: “Knowledge often leads to arrogance.” This sentiment is echoed in the passage from Job in this chapter’s epigraph and is rampant in the halls of our institutions of higher learning. We can obtain an intellectual grasp of written materials and believe we have *mastered* what they describe. We feel we *own* them and know everything about them. In reality, we cannot master, own, or know anything *in its essence*. The more we *experientially* learn about something or someone *at its core*, the more we realize there is actually very little we can put into words. Contemplative author, James Finley, teaches that we can say a lot about someone we do not know well. But once we’ve known someone for a very long time we do not know what to say about them. Words cannot adequately convey the depth of such knowledge. Deep and sustained experiences humble us, and words only misrepresent the experience.

The fact is that head knowledge is a collection of words, and words are metaphors with no immediate contact with reality. Words represent something, but they are not the thing itself. While they are important and necessary, words provide only partial truths.

Head knowledge without heart or body knowledge is an intellectual exercise that quickly becomes shallow and deceptive. On the other hand, bodily experience without intellectual context or loving guidance from the heart can lead to all sorts of heathen, abusive tendencies. Living from the heart without intellectual context or bodily grounding leaves us in

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<sup>7</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counsel*, trans. Carmen Acevedo Butcher. Shambhala Press, Boston. 2009, pp. 224-225.



## Living a Contemplative Life

emotional turmoil, paralyzed by the seeming insensitivity of the world around us. A contemplative life actively works toward the conscious integration of mind, body, *and* heart.

A contemplative life, then, is a balanced life. It helps us consciously experience our current reality with the head, heart, *and* body, requiring that we sometimes pause to allow one or more of the intelligence centers to weigh in. In my case, my head easily jumps to conclusions without consulting my heart and body if I am not intentional about being present with the entirety of my being. The purpose, meaning, and beauty of our human incarnation is found in the total *experience*, which is also where we find God.

## 4

# Action and Contemplation

*We need a contemplative mind in order to do compassionate action.*<sup>8</sup>

When we consider a contemplative life, some people mistake that to mean a life of inactivity, of extended meditation, or one of gazing aimlessly into empty space. The contemplative life we strive for, however, is one of action *guided by* contemplation. The paths of action and contemplation are complimentary, not contradictory. In religious terms, contemplation strengthens our *faith* which guides our *actions* which produce our *works*. Contemplation is a prayerful seeking that inspires and informs our active doing.

Ephesians 2:8 states that we are saved by faith and that faith is a *gift of God* so we cannot take personal credit for it. A contemplative life does not *create* faith but helps awaken us to the God-given faith already present in us. It fuels our faith. We were created so good works would be an outcome of our time on earth. Works are not a way to earn God's favor but a natural expression of who we are in the created order. They are manifestations of the acts of faith born of contemplative practices.

Regardless of our conscious awareness, our lives are a combination of action and contemplation. Even monks who choose a life of asceticism and silence have tasks around the monastery they are expected to accomplish. Our lives only differ by degrees. The typical Western life tilts heavily toward the action-side of the scale, focusing less on contemplation. The downside of this pattern is that our actions tend to become unconscious

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<sup>8</sup> The Second Core Principle of the Center for Action and Contemplation, [www.CAC.org](http://www.CAC.org).

## Living a Contemplative Life

*reactions* to whatever we experience, as opposed to consciously determined actions that display purpose, meaning, and resolve.

Yet, contemplation is more than planning and purpose. Contemplation *aligns* our conscious selves and our actions to the unique expression of God we are at the core of our being. It is about applying a *holistic knowledge* to our lives, utilizing the totality of our God-given centers of intelligence. Holistic knowledge arises from the compilation of information processed by our heart, body, and mind, as well as the other energy centers not discussed in this book.

While contemplation absolutely requires the intellect, the process only becomes contemplative when it is informed and guided by the entirety of our being. Heart knowledge is emotional intelligence, deriving information from the environment and expressing it emotionally. Head knowledge comes from thinking and processing what we experience. Bodily knowledge is attained through the senses – what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

For many of us, particularly males, bodily intelligence is our least developed intelligence center. Our body, however, is the primary center that remains grounded in the present moment. When we are fully focused on the information coming through our senses, we are in the moment. This is most intensely experienced by some during sexual intercourse.

The types of information processed by the body often express as *intuition*. We know something to be true, but there may be little emotional or intellectual evidence for it. Our head and heart centers easily fall prey to past longings and regrets, or future worries and anticipations, removing us from the present. Each center of intelligence takes in, processes, and responds to information from the environment in unique and important ways. People in close relationships often misunderstand each other because the primary center of intelligence they most rely on processes and responds to the same environmental cues in different ways than the primary intelligence center of their partner. One way is not necessarily better or smarter than the other, only different. Each center by itself, however, provides only part of the truth – a partial glimpse of reality – and limits the range of responses we might otherwise consider.

There is a saying among carpenters, “Measure twice, cut once.” It means to gather and check all of one’s sources of information *before* taking an action that may be difficult or impossible to undo. A practical contemplative life receives information from all centers of intelligence as it considers the most effective action to take. Awakening our lesser utilized

## Greg Hildenbrand

centers is part of what contemplative practice seeks to accomplish. Contemplative knowing is holistic knowledge that helps assure the actions we take will be consistent with our status as God's children and our respect and love for all created life. Contemplation and action are two aspects of our one life, given to us by God for the purpose of enhancing and advancing the life and lives around us.

## 5

# The Seen and Unseen

*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what is seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.<sup>9</sup>*

One of the afflictions Jesus often addressed was *blindness*. True, he apparently cured those whose eyes did not work properly, but physical blindness was likely not his primary concern. *Spiritual blindness* – a lack of awareness of the unseen realities within and around us – was a major focus of his teachings. “You have eyes but do not see,” was a common statement from Jesus. We are blind to vast swaths of reality in our typical day-to-day consciousness. In general, we focus on what is *seen* and ignore what is *unseen*. From imaginary playmates as children to the communion of saints as adults, if it cannot be seen, touched, heard, or smelled, we treat it as unreal or imaginary. A contemplative life expands one’s awareness of what is real and important to include both what is directly perceived by our senses, as well as that which is not.

When we gaze into the night sky, we see planets, stars, and constellations shining back at us. Many people from cultures past saw patterns, not in the visible lights of the night sky, but in the *dark spaces* between them. Indeed, as we ponder the spaces around us – the air, the open areas of our rooms, the distance between your body and this page – we assume there is nothing there. Indeed, there is *no thing* there if we limit *thingness* to that which we can see, touch, or hear. In so doing, we acknowledge only a small and incomplete portion of reality. Yet, even in

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

our limited ability to perceive what is happening around us, we experience much that we cannot see. We cannot see or touch the fragrance of a rose but we know it is real because we smell it. We cannot see the signals from our cellular phones but we know they are real because we communicate over vast distances through them. We consistently and grossly underestimate and ignore the magnitude and impact of the unseen world around us.

It is an interesting and humbling aspect of our physical senses that we are capable of perceiving only a limited range of the vibratory spectrums characteristic of the world around us. As a child, I remember someone with a dog whistle. I heard nothing when he blew it, but dogs nearby whimpered in misery. The sound of the dog whistle did not exist for me, but it was painfully real to dogs. Sound and light waves exist on an infinite spectrum of vibration, but we are capable of consciously perceiving only a tiny portion of that spectrum. We are continually immersed in sound waves, even when our senses tell us the world is silent. The same is true of what we experience as light. We perceive a very limited range of colors because our eyes only receive a small portion of the infinite range of possibilities. Indeed, modern science has proven that we have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear. How did Jesus know?

Through our senses and our early training, we think we are surrounded by mostly empty space in our immediate environment, from the atomic structures making up that environment to the galaxies surrounding our planet. The important point is not that we understand the physics behind the reality, but that we recognize the limitations of our senses. The *empty space* around us is not empty at all but is filled with a reality our senses cannot detect. Even so, these unseen realities impact our life experience as much or more than do the seen realities. Our world is vaster, more mysterious, and more beautiful than we can imagine. The incomprehensible nature of the universe is not cause for despair but for humility. Could this be the nature of the *fear-of-God* requirement the Bible states as the beginning of knowledge? Perhaps that sort of *fear* is not being scared as much as being *awed*.

A contemplative life looks beyond what is seen, trusting that the spirit of God is at work in all things and all situations, even and especially when that work is invisible to us. Such a life does not limit what is real or possible to the tangible information coming through our senses. As we mature into willing co-participants in God's work through us, we find joy

## Living a Contemplative Life

and purpose in whatever is, and we open ourselves to experience the kingdom of heaven on earth.

## 6

# Ego and Essence

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"<sup>10</sup>*

Who am I? And who is God? Francis of Assisi, a 12th Century Catholic Saint, pondered these questions regularly. Indeed, such questions hang over all our lives and are seemingly unanswerable. As infants, we completely identify with our support system – whoever feeds and cares for us. We consider ourselves one with that person, usually our mother. Our world is small, and we are vulnerable. As we grow and become increasingly independent, we realize we have a measure of free will – we can manipulate our environment to better meet our perceived needs. We increasingly find ways to gain a sense of control over our lives and cease to accept without question that which our support system offers. Thus begins a false sense of identification as a separate, independent being, along with an increasing assertion of our independence from our environment. That sense becomes our *false self*. As we reach adolescence, we become increasingly dissatisfied with those who provide for us. We want our freedom, we want to live life on our terms, and we no longer want to be *held back* by the seemingly *out-of-touch* demands of parents, teachers, and others who retain annoying levels of control over us. By the time we are in our late teens, most of us have developed a strong and entrenched *ego*.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 8:34-37.



## Living a Contemplative Life

Developing an ego is a necessary and natural part of human development. It helps us craft a place and purpose in the world around us. Our ego dreams of great things and envisions a perfect life, if only we could escape the tyranny of the oppressive others who stand in our way. The ego, however, unchecked by reason and experience, is a deceptive informant, especially when its primary guide is our false sense of a separate self. Egos are inherently insecure and narcissistic, protecting themselves at all costs. They portray our problems as the fault of others, so we look outside of ourselves for solutions to issues originating from within. Our ego categorizes everything and everyone as useful or useless to itself – *she* is popular, so I will befriend her; *he* does not dress nicely, so I will shun him. The ego is a harsh judge and a ruthless critic. In order for one thing to be good, something else must be bad. Our egos strive to carve a unique and superior niche in the world. Unfortunately, our egoic special place always comes at the expense of something or someone else.

When we follow the dictates of our ego, we find ourselves saying things, taking actions, and treating others in ways that are inconsistent with our created, interdependent nature. When we reflect on our words and actions, we know we can and should do better. There is a God-given *essence* within us – our *soul* – that the ego finds threatening and tries desperately to suppress. Many authors, Richard Rohr and Thomas Merton among them, refer to the ego as the *false self* and our essence or soul as our *true self*. The false self is so called because it only allows a small, self-centered portion of who we are to manifest. Our true self is the part of us that was created in the image and likeness of God. It is who we are at our core. Our true self is directly connected to God by an unbreakable bond, illustrated by the arrows in the cover photo. As we learn more about our essence, we simultaneously learn more about God. When our true self attempts to act or speak in ways that go against what is popular or culturally acceptable, however, the false self will seek to shut it down. Our egoic false self cannot bear criticism because it has an obsessive need to be right.

A contemplative life aims to allow the true self, the essential self or soul, to awaken – not to destroy the ego, but to put it in its rightful and subservient place. Our egos were designed to be the emissary, not the master of our larger life. We encourage this process of keeping the ego in check through contemplative practices. Our egos can be good servants, but they are tyrants as masters.

In order to contrast our ego and our essence, picture a vertical line extending infinitely in either direction, with ego as the lower portion and

essence as the upper. As human beings we are incapable of manifesting either pure ego or pure essence. Rather, we manifest varying degrees of each. In addition, we may act more from our ego in certain circumstances and more from our essence in others. I only characterize the two as separate in order to describe the hypothetical ends. In reality they only vary by degrees along the same continuum. Our ego manifests a part of our essence; our essence includes but *transcends* the ego. As our true self nudges us up the continuum toward maturity, our ego merges into our essence, taking its place inside of something larger, more inclusive, and less dualistic.

At the heart of our dilemma is that most messaging from our world affirms and supports the partial truths of the false self – that the life our senses detect is all there is, that we must live for ourselves and accumulate as much material wealth as we can with the limited time we have on earth, that ours is the most important life on earth. The common *wisdom* of the world tells us to deny the weaker parts of ourselves, hide our vulnerabilities, and put on a good face for those around us. Ultimately, our untamed ego leads us into a lifestyle that is not true to who we are, that is not conducive to mature spiritual formation, and that acknowledges and develops only a fraction of who we are. The person our ego pretends to be cannot sustain itself without creating and attempting to hold together a number of *false realities*.

This dilemma is a problem that is unique to human beings. Plants and trees make no discernable effort to be something they are not. Nor do rocks, streams, and clouds. Animals do not act in ways inconsistent with their created natures. Contemplative practices aid in reuniting our actions with our essence.

In his book, *Falling Upward*,<sup>11</sup> Fr. Richard Rohr identifies two halves of our lives. Our egoic or false self dominates the first half as we strive to build a name for ourselves, establish a profession, start a family, or otherwise enter adulthood. As we age we realize there is something incomplete in the self-image that has carried us to that point in life, which is when our true self may begin to assert itself. The ego's unchallenged influence over us begins to wane. As we did in infancy, we identify with our support system, although now we recognize God and the life and lives around us as our support system. We celebrate our interconnectedness and recognize that we build ourselves up by building others up, not by tearing them down. We begin to understand that salvation is communal, not

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*. Jossey-Bass, Hoboken, NJ, 2011.

## Living a Contemplative Life

individual – that we are in this life together with *all* of creation. We strive to be increasingly genuine and true to who God created us to become.

When Jesus talks about losing one's life for his sake, he refers to relinquishing our ego's control over the direction of our life. It can feel like dying; indeed, it *is* a type of death. We need to allow that small, selfish, and insecure part of ourselves to diminish in order to make room for our true self to emerge. Our essence was never born, nor will it ever die. It is our eternal self, and the pain and suffering of the material world cannot harm it. It is where our perfectly unique expression of God resides. Getting in touch with this aspect of our being is especially important as we approach physical death, as our true self is what will survive our passage out of material existence. Contemplative practices help awaken us to our essence. The practices also assist in recognizing the same essence in others, even when it is invisible to them. God in us sees and affirms God in others. We are one in God. This is love; and oneness in love is the prerequisite to achieving equanimity for ourselves and in the world.

## 7

# Dying Before We Die

*For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*<sup>12</sup>

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...*<sup>13</sup>

Many people fear death more than anything else, including spiders and snakes. This is understandable since the life we perceive through our senses is the only life we know with certainty. When a loved one dies, our senses no longer receive evidence of their presence, so we assume they either no longer exist or they have traveled somewhere far away from us. We do not know, and not knowing makes us uneasy. When someone dies, he or she is just gone, leaving us with grief and unanswerable questions. We feel sorrow for those who die young and celebrate those who live into their 90's and beyond, as if our physical existence were more about the quantity of days than their quality. We cannot get a logical handle on death because it defies logic. And that makes us squirm.

Christian mystics talk about death regularly. So did Jesus. Scientific, irreversible, physical death occurs once for us, and most of us go to great lengths to deny its nearness and delay its arrival. We are not excited to ponder the end of the only life we know. Which is exactly the shortcoming in our knowledge – *the life we know is only a small part of the life we are.*

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<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a.

## Living a Contemplative Life

The apostle Paul names two aspects of existence. In his letter to the Romans, as well as in other New Testament writings, Paul distinguishes between *the flesh* and *the Spirit*, making clear that both were present in his day, just as they are present today. The word *flesh* is Paul's chosen term for our ego's interpretation of the concrete world of the senses – what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. It is easy to read Paul in a way that assumes he condemns the world of the flesh, but that understanding is inaccurate at best. Paul wants us to know that our ego's view of the world of the flesh is only *one part* of our life. It is the impermanent, temporary part. It is also a beautiful, seductive part that can tempt us into actions that are inconsistent with and antagonistic to the larger, immortal, and invisible life, which is the realm of Spirit. Paul writes, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die." This is the death we know is coming, the death of the flesh. If we identify solely with our ego's experience of the flesh, our physical death will appear as the end of all we consider ourselves to be.

On the other hand, according to Paul, if we live by the Spirit, we will *live*. This poses a difficult dilemma to reconcile – the tangible pull of the flesh against the ethereal speculation about the Spirit. In fact, the dilemma cannot be reconciled; it can either be denied as foolishness or accepted on faith. Fortunately for us, dying to "the flesh" does not have to mean physical death. Paul encourages us to live in the flesh, tempered with the knowledge and perspective of the Spirit. Our physical existence is a material manifestation of the Spirit, so the two are not separate. The one (flesh) arises out of and is animated by the other (spirit). The flesh is not evil, nor is our ego, but both can be misleading. They cause much unnecessary pain and suffering, both to ourselves and to others. Paul says, "For those *who are led by the Spirit of God* are children of God" (emphasis added).

Dying before we die does not mean ending our life in the flesh before its time. Rather, it means letting go of our attachment to and identification with that which has no permanence. Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>14</sup> Dying before we die involves resetting our priorities, being intentional about what we choose to treasure, and letting go of that which serves no eternal purpose. In this way, our lives are made *whole* – body and spirit as one – and we become children of God in a conscious way. A contemplative life seeks an inclusive and interconnected balance between the flesh and the Spirit, experiencing and enjoying the

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 6:21.

pleasures of the flesh within the context and under the guidance of the Spirit.

It is said that Nature has no edges. Sharp, straight edges and clear lines of demarcation are human, not divine inventions. In my former work as a landscape designer, many of my efforts were to soften and blur the edges created by the human need for distinct lines of separation. As such, it should come as no surprise that dying is not a precise occurrence. The medical definition of physical death is the cessation of all vital bodily functions. Sometimes, however, people come back to life after having been pronounced dead. Some have quite interesting stories to tell of the experience. I was told after my father's death that some bodily functions would continue for a time, like nail and hair growth. I was blessed with the opportunity to spend a considerable amount of time with my mother and grandmother as they passed from this life. Both transitioned over a period of weeks and gradually withdrew from their material interests. Awakening and finding themselves still in this hard-lined reality was not always a pleasant experience for either of them. They were becoming familiar with the softer, edge-less landscape of their new destination and were ready to move on.

We are dying *all of the time*, even though our final, physical death may be many years away, because death is an on-going process. An estimated 50-70 million cells in our bodies die *each day* through a natural process called *apoptosis*. The inescapable cycle for all life on earth is birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth. Each stage is its own wonderful set of processes and occurs in its own time. And the stages overlap. We see and accept the pattern all around us, but we have difficulty seeing or accepting it for ourselves. Each new day births with a sunrise, matures its way to sunset, and dies into the night, and is reborn the next morning. The passing of a single day, however, does not diminish the total number of days. Seasons move deliberately from spring to summer to fall to winter to spring – birth, growth, decline, death, rebirth – only to repeat the cycle again and again. What we know from nature but deny in ourselves is that *death is never the end of life*. Rather, death allows life to move to its next phase. Death is transformational, not terminal. The cellular and structural combinations forming everything must decline and die so their elements can be reborn as something new.

Our souls draw physical elements from the earth in order to embody themselves for a time. When that time is complete, the soul releases the

## Living a Contemplative Life

physical elements back to the earth and both soul and elements move on to their next adventure. *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.* We cannot stop the sun from rising any more than we can stop our own maturation and decline. When we let an unhealthy addiction die, when we resolve an emotional wound, when we cease clinging to the tyranny of a painful injustice, we die before we die. We take control of something that has been controlling us. We recycle the energy that was required for the maintenance of the old and free it for something new. The season for *that* is over; now is the season for *this*. It is a natural part of the beautifully relentless cycle of birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth. Life is an endless series of second chances.

A contemplative life harmonizes itself to the natural rhythms of our physical and spiritual being through its contemplative practices. We assess the parts of our lives that are no longer useful, and in the spirit of dying before we die, we allow those parts to recycle. In this progressive and eternal context, there is nothing that is permanently good or evil because, together, *all things* are evolving toward the perfect consummation of God's creation. There is, however, much immaturity that we display and experience along the way. In the Revelation to John, Christ says, "See, I am making all things new."<sup>15</sup> Our pain, our suffering, the injustices of the world all work together, setting the course on which our collective life is relentlessly heading. Those combinations that move us toward a more inclusive and just existence are strengthened, and those working in the other direction weaken and are recycled. Nothing is wasted or lost. It may seem a slow process, but in the context of eternity there is no rush. Rather, *for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*

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<sup>15</sup> Revelation 21:5.

## 8

# The Contemplative Symbolism of the Cross

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.<sup>16</sup>*

To Christians, the cross symbolizes the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a sign of pain and suffering, yes, but it is also a sign of hope and transformation. God, in the person of Jesus, endured a horrific persecution, humiliation, and death on a cross. Because God experiences the worst of human suffering, God understands and empathizes with our persecutions, humiliations, and suffering.

Through our lives we witness countless innocent victims of human and natural violence, and the cross reminds us that God has experienced the futility of unjust suffering, just like the rest of us. Many believe Jesus had to die as payment for our sins, ending the bloody sacrificial system of atonement that had been in place for countless generations. Others believe Jesus on the cross showed how cruel, intolerant, and insecure religious folks can be. All of this and more comes to mind when reflecting on the cross.

It is said that by entering a moment we enter eternity. Fully entering any present moment opens a doorway to the eternal presence of God supporting the life we see on earth. The cross is a contemplative mandala for a mindful life. The horizontal line represents the time continuum of our physical existence on earth, stretching from past to present to future. Every point along that time-line is an eternal *moment*, and we can choose to *go deep* into any such moment. Doing so brings a vertical line into our awareness,

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18.



symbolizing our spiritual life. The vertical line stretches endlessly above and below our earth-time awareness, opening access to other dimensions of experience.

The spiritual dimension exists outside of time and space, which are only human-created accommodations of the horizontal line. Whenever we decide to become present to a moment, time loses its sequential nature. Past, present, and future become joined by common experience instead of by proximity in time. We may choose to go deeply into the moment of smelling a rose, closing our eyes, and entering the sweet fragrance. It may transport us back to a time in childhood when our father gave our mother a bouquet of flowers for Mother's Day. We may remember a walk through a rose garden, holding the hand of someone we loved. We may enter springtime, with the soft green grass and the rebirth and flowering of God's creation. All of these possibilities and more exist within that single moment of smelling the rose, but they exist in a dimension perpendicular to the time continuum in which we bring the petals to our nose.

Here is another example: When reading something that moves me, I can continue reading, or I can enter more deeply that which moves me. I can become a character in the story and place myself in the scene. Being present to a moment is *experiencing* the moment on a level deeper than simply reading about it. It is taking an experiential detour from the horizontal line in order to explore the vertical dimension of the cross. Otherwise, we simply float along the horizontal in surface-consciousness and sequential time. We cannot enter the moment without committing our awareness to it, whatever *it* may be.

Lest I paint an inaccurately restricted image, entering the moment is not about lamenting the past, projecting the future, or losing ourselves in daydreams. Rather, it is about entering a deeper dimension of a specific life experience happening *now* and recognizing that we are at the crossroads of infinite possibilities, which can be symbolized by the cross. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he was held at the intersection of the material (horizontal) and spiritual (vertical) worlds. When he invites us to take up our cross and follow him,<sup>17</sup> Jesus invites us to meet him at that intersection. When he says he goes to prepare a place for us,<sup>18</sup> the doorway into that place is at this intersection.

The cross not only symbolizes a passage into a deeper experience of the moments of our lives, but it also illustrates how to get beyond the

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<sup>17</sup> Mark 8:34.

<sup>18</sup> John 14:3.

trying times of our lives. When Jesus was on the cross, he was held at the intersection of body and spirit by nails. Just as he did not seek to be removed from his anguish, so we should not seek shortcuts around our suffering as it will only return to us in different forms. Rather, we must *go through* our suffering as if nailed to it in order for a transformation of our suffering to occur, symbolized by Jesus' resurrection.

This, then, is one reading of the contemplative symbolism of the cross. All of our opportunities for growth and transformation exist in the moment. When we surrender ourselves fully to the moment, new possibilities arise and unimaginable depths of experience open to us. Contemplative practices help us enter and experience the intersection of matter and spirit in a way that awakens us to the deep, loving, and pervasive presence of God.

## 9

# Uncertainty

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.* Thomas Merton<sup>19</sup>

What is required to feel confident in or comfortable with our life in this world? If God loves us; indeed, if God *is* love, why is life so unpredictable and hard? Why all the violence, sickness, injustice, insecurity, and misery? Why does the earth appear to be self-destructing from earthquakes, fires, climate change, glacier melt, species extinction, and other incomprehensible disasters? Everyone I know suffers in some way, consistent with their cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic realities. Most people strive for some predictability and control over their circumstances, but can we ever be certain about anything in life? The answer is an emphatic, *YES!* We can always be certain that life will be filled with uncertainty.

A portion of our uncertainty centers around the concept of fairness. One clear truth about life is that *life is not fair*. Another truth is that *life is absolutely fair*. How can both be true? Can life be fairer for some than others? There seems to be ample evidence of that possibility. Unfortunately, we are poorly equipped to determine what is and is not fair.

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 1958.

Our human perspective is too limited. Being human is about experiencing life's movements in excruciating detail. We lose ourselves so deeply into the forest that all we see are a handful of trees. We are unable to perceive a larger picture or a unifying purpose.

When we lack the ability to judge what should or should not happen in the grand scheme of events, our perception of fairness falls out of kilter, making life appear random and unjust. In the scope of the eternal life of the soul, our life on earth is but a grain of sand on a vast beach; but we are incapable of fathoming the beach. What can we possibly know about fairness, about justice, about love *in the eternal vastness of God's creation*? What if a particular soul – a specific manifestation of God – *chooses* to embody in a third world country in order to experience starvation or apartheid or a brutal civil war? That possibility puts fairness in a completely different context. If God experiences *in and through* all of creation, why would God *not* want to experience the good, bad, immature, and ugly of creation? Is that not what God experienced through Jesus on the cross? Certainly, every stage of human creation has painful parts of the process required for completion – the labor preceding childbirth, for instance. Our problem is that we judge the pain of the contractions as being separate from instead of a necessary part of the new life being created.

Even if a soul *does* choose to manifest in a certain painful time and space in order to experience a particular stage of creation, that does not relieve the rest of us from the obligation to relieve the suffering we can from the injustice, the oppression, or the unfortunate circumstance. Sometimes I wonder if souls embody in those situations to make me struggle with how *I* will respond. Part of the grace, perhaps the *only* grace in being a victim of unspeakable tragedy is to have another child of God notice and do whatever she or he can to address that suffering. The disadvantaged provide opportunities to allow God's grace to flow through us. One soul suffers, another soul relieves suffering – it is all part of the experience of God in and through us.

One additional certainty, aside from the certainty of uncertainty, is that we cannot fall out of God's love and care. God did not spare Jesus from his ghastly earthly suffering, so why would we expect God to spare ours? God did not leave Jesus alone on the cross, however, nor will God leave us alone on ours. God did not allow the pain of the cross to last forever, nor will God allow our pain to last forever. In modern parlance, the worst thing is never the last thing. God took the pain of the crucifixion and birthed something new and good for humankind, just as God transforms our

## Living a Contemplative Life

suffering into good. For reasons beyond our comprehension, however, none of this happens according to our desires or our timeline. We do not possess the perspective to judge the nature of events.

Our world is full of uncertainty because we are incapable of perceiving or fully trusting the fairness of God's unfolding plan. Yes, we should absolutely make every effort to do all the good we can in every situation we can to address the suffering of creation, but we cannot tie our willingness to work for good to the results we believe should immediately follow. That is God's business, not ours. The ultimate success of God's ceaseless activity will be uncertain to us. Contemplative practices help us accept and embrace the certainty of uncertainty, release our attachment to specific results, and free us to live, move, and have our being in and as the intimately interwoven part of God's greater life we were created to manifest.

Greg Hildenbrand

## Living a Contemplative Life

# Part II

## Contemplative Paths



## Living a Contemplative Life

## 10

# Seven Paths to God

*Be still, and know that I am God!*  
Psalm 46:10a

There are many paths to experience the creating, sustaining energy we refer to as God, Allah, and the Great Spirit, among other names by which the Divine is known. Many of the *Seven Paths to God* are familiar to and commonly practiced in contemplative circles but remain largely unknown outside of them. What I call *paths* are more accurately *practices* or *orientations* that align us in ways most conducive to an experiential encounter of the Holy. It is not that God is fickle and only responds when we practice or orient in specific ways. Rather, it is we who are incapable of consciously perceiving the Divine energy surging through us until we orient in a way that allows it into our awareness. Sometimes that orientation arrives unintentionally, as when we are unexpectedly consumed by great love or great suffering. Other times we prepare for the encounter intentionally. It is to assist in developing an intentional focus on experiencing God that I summarize these *Seven Paths*.

The *Seven Paths* are not separate from one another but are unique expressions of a single path – interrelated, interdependent, often inseparable and indistinguishable. They invite us into the present moment in a particular manner, into what is *now*, which is where we must be in order to deeply experience God.

The *Seven Paths* are *silence, stillness, solitude, simplicity, surrender, service, and spirit*. While most religious institutions teach *about* God, few lead us to an experience *of* God. Many churches do, however, have beautifully inspiring spaces that may enhance our journey along one or more of these paths. Nature provides excellent spaces to consciously awaken to God's presence. A quiet corner of a home or apartment works well, too. Ultimately, our focused intent to orient ourselves toward conscious receptivity to our

## Living a Contemplative Life

Oneness with the Divine energy is what matters. Striving for a continuous awareness of the presence of God into our daily routines is the goal.

The *Seven Paths* are not sequential, nor must we travel them all to find our way to God. We may explore all of them or find ourselves drawn to only one. There is nothing unholy about traversing the path most accessible at any given time. Once we catch a glimpse of the Divine, we unabashedly and unshakably know ourselves to be loved, connected, and intimately interwoven into the eternal life of God.

### *Silence*

The path of *Silence* orients us toward the reverential presence of the Source of creation. The late Father Thomas Keating, a pillar of contemporary contemplative life, wrote that God's first language is silence.<sup>20</sup> In the Bible's initial creation story, the author described the earth as a "formless void" with darkness covering the face of the deep.<sup>21</sup> This describes the pregnant silence existing prior to creation being *spoken* into being: "Then God *said*, 'Let there be...'"<sup>22</sup> This was the creating *Word* of God, which was the originating impulse of energy forming and animating every created thing. And that *Word* continues to create, radiating out from Divine silence.

Arguably, the most common and unappreciated experience we have of God is silence, as in the silence of God's apparent non-responsiveness. We ask a question in prayer and receive silence. We cry out in desperation and hear silence. We scale a mountain to connect with the Divine and hear only a deep, vast silence. For most of us, God is silent.

If life is created out of silence, however, we know there is tremendous potential residing within it. When a response to an inquiry of the Divine is silence, it may be an invitation to delve deeply into the question, as well as a clue to attend to what we sense and intuit in the days after asking. Typically, the formation of a response occurs subconsciously, which masquerades as silence to our conscious mind. Insights often come when we are not consciously seeking them, as we go about our daily activities.

One of the difficult lessons in any committed relationship, especially with God, is the importance of speaking less and listening more. Our internal chatter combines with the clamor of the world to inhibit a conscious experience of God and others in silence. Divine silence is an invitation to listen.

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God*. Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1994, p 175.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 1:2a, *NRSV*.

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 1:3a, *NSRV*.

Many of us fear silence because of the uncomfortable and seemingly unnatural vacuum it creates. Silence is uncomfortable because it puts us in a situation of not knowing what to think, say, or do. When we sit in silence with another we often worry what they are thinking or how they might be judging us. Silence creates internal tension because we are used to our minds being active, *describing and interpreting* our experiences in words, both to others and ourselves. Unfortunately, those descriptions separate us not only from our actual experiences, but also from the divine silence from which the experiences arise.

It is easy to confuse the apparent silence of inactivity with the deep silence from which God creates. We cannot simply turn off the television and our mobile devices and expect to enter silence. Silencing the noise of our external world is one thing, but silencing the noise of our internal world is the greater challenge. By attaining a sustained internal silence we experience the richness and depth of each moment of our lives, being present to the creative potential and creating reality occurring at all times and in all places. True silence provides the canvas upon which we consciously co-create the experiences of our lives with God.

Entering a state of internal silence is a skill developed with practice. A foundational tool is Centering Prayer, although there are numerous aides to entering silence, some of which are included in the next section of this book. Committing to a daily practice of quieting our internal chatter, preferably working up to 20 or more minutes each morning and evening, helps orient us to the pregnant silence of Divine presence. Silence is not inactivity; silence is creation preparing to manifest.

### ***Stillness***

The path of *Stillness* leads to a state of quietude. The Bible's 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm speaks poetically of stillness: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."<sup>23</sup> The Psalm draws an analogy between the way a shepherd watches over his or her sheep and the way we are cared for by God. "... (God) leads me beside still waters."<sup>24</sup> Still waters are important for sheep as they must drink but can easily drown in a strong current. A good shepherd makes sure the water quenches the thirst of the sheep while keeping stress and danger to a minimum. The lack of inner stillness stresses us, too. A hectic life feels like being caught in a whirlpool. We exhaust ourselves trying to keep our head above water.

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<sup>23</sup> Psalm 23:1a, *NRSV*.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 23:2b, *NRSV*.

## Living a Contemplative Life

Like silence, stillness has internal and external manifestations. Just because there is calm in our external environment does not mean there is stillness within. When our internal dialogue continues to judge and criticize, we are not still. When we rehash past regrets and entertain feelings of inadequacy for future challenges, we are not still. When we review the goals we have yet to accomplish, we are not still. Stillness is found in the present moment and cannot occur when our attention strays away from it.

Again, in the initial creation story of the Bible, we find a scene of anticipatory stillness, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”<sup>25</sup> The earth was not inert; the earth was *waiting*. Stillness is not inactivity. There is a heightened awareness and an invigorated aliveness to the stillness from which God creates. When we seek the Divine in stillness, there is a sense in which we surrender ourselves as a formless void of earthly potential, waiting to be shaped, embodied, and put to work.

New life is an ongoing process, and it arises out of stillness. Rebirth is relentless and unstoppable. Everywhere and in every moment, creative energy resides in anticipatory stillness waiting to spring forth in new and awesome manifestations. Lurking beneath the misery and hopelessness we sometimes experience in life is a spark waiting to blaze forth, remaking itself from the ashes of the old. We connect with that Holy energy when we are still.

Finding stillness in a busy life is challenging. A calm environment is helpful, but cultivating a deep *intention* to enter the anticipatory stillness of the present moment is vital. Slow, deep, attentive breathing is a good place to begin. As with silence, practicing the path of stillness on a regular basis is helpful in consciously reconnecting to and orienting ourselves in ways most conducive to experiencing God’s presence.

### *Solitude*

The path of *Solitude* is an orientation toward a particular type of environment. Entering contemplative solitude is not the same as being alone. Solitude does not always equate to isolation, nor does isolation necessarily bring solitude. True, there is a component of separation in solitude, but what we separate from is our lack of a conscious, *in-the-moment* focus typical to our daily routines. Most of us go through our days unconsciously, paying scant attention to the intricate life around us. In solitude we intentionally separate from our normal state of

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 1:1-2a, NRSV.

unconsciousness so we can consciously attend to the present moment. Sometimes such a state is more easily entered when we are alone or in nature, but true solitude is about entering whatever moment we find ourselves in, not necessarily about leaving the company of others. Solitude is an inner orientation or awareness more than a physical location.

Contemplative solitude teaches that we do not leave the chaos of our daily lives to enter a time of solitude and communion with God. Rather, we leave our solitude in God to enter the unconscious chaos of our daily lives. Solitude with God is the primary state of our being, not the chaos of the day. This is the nature of the solitude we seek.

When we lose contact with our solitude in God, we are quickly consumed by questions with no solid basis in reality: Am I dressed appropriately? Am I contributing properly to the conversation? Is my music too loud? Do others find me as dull as I sometimes find myself? Our internal dialogue compares our current situation against an imagined expectation. There is tremendous internal pressure in being around others, most of it self-critical, making it challenging to relax and attend to what is.

Contemplative solitude seeks an environment conducive to entering the present moment, regardless of the chaos around us. The reason so many of us feel isolated from God is that we live in a perennial state of *out-of-the-momentness*. We allow our attention to drift to the past, future, and other seductive distractions away from where we are right now. The gospels of the Bible record numerous instances of Jesus proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near.<sup>26</sup> We cannot perceive that kingdom except by finding solitude with the Divine in the present moment.

Traversing the path of contemplative solitude puts us in a position of minimal resistance to an experience of the moment with God, wherever that moment occurs. It requires an intentional focus away from our daily distractions and toward conscious awareness that the Divine energy is present with us always and everywhere. It allows God to experience creation *through* us as we connect with God *in* us. It is not being alone but being in communion with God, which is the goal and gift of contemplative solitude.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7; Mark 1:5; Luke 10:9, 10:11, 21:31.

### *Simplicity*

The path of *Simplicity* is the journey to a life less burdened by temporal and unsatisfying attention-grabbers, whatever that means for one's present situation. It requires a conscious intention to identify and mitigate whatever stands between us and full entrance into the present moment. The path of simplicity enhances contentment, regardless of our circumstances. We enter the world simply enough, needing only food, sleep, shelter, and love. We exit the world simply enough, leaving everything of the earth behind. In between, however, our lives become overly complicated. And those complexities stand as obstacles to the experience of our Oneness with God.

As we go through life we accumulate *stuff*, both physical possessions and all sorts of mental and emotional baggage. Unless we consciously and intentionally purge on a regular basis, our excess stuff overtakes our living spaces, reduces mental acuity, and negatively impacts our emotional well-being. There is a high cost to hoarding, and there are awareness-limiting consequences to retaining unnecessary mental and emotional burdens. Clearing our living spaces of whatever has not been needed for a year or more is a good start. A supportive social network is helpful for releasing emotional burdens, as is therapy for unresolved traumas. Spiritual direction is effective in simplifying and focusing our spiritual lives.

Of course, committing to simplifying our lives can, in itself, become unnecessarily complicated. Too many books, too many videos, and too much advice can create confusing and distracting roadblocks on our journey. Learning about the spiritual life and Oneness with God is important, but we should not confuse learning about something and actually attaining or experiencing it. Finding a reasonable balance between learning and living, doing and being, contemplating and acting is necessary.

Simplifying our life requires an intentional focus on and assessment of every aspect of our life with the question: Does this item, relationship, memory, or membership enhance or detract from my ability to freely enter the present moment? Whatever is not enhancing our moments should be eliminated or transformed.

In my limited experience in third-world countries I have marveled at the comparative lack of complexity of the individual lives there. Many people do not have cars, televisions, internet access, large living spaces, or multiple sets of clothing for different seasons and occasions. They also do not spend nearly as much time dusting, cleaning, mowing, and rearranging because they have less to dust, clean, mow, and rearrange. And many of

them live happy, fulfilled lives without the *necessities* of the West. Intimate and unhurried time with friends, family, and God are real and present parts of their daily lives, all made possible by a simpler lifestyle.

A simple life is one where there is freedom to engage with whatever the moment offers. Spending leisurely time in nature, reading an engaging book, or basking in the company of others are among life's richest blessings. Quiet time in the presence of God is also a blessing when we do not overcomplicate it by feeling we must prepare in a particular way, be in a particular place, or find the most eloquent words to say. Simple prayers. Simple pleasures. Simple life.

### ***Surrender***

The path of *Surrender* involves adopting a stance of open-minded humility toward everyone and everything. It is the willingness to avail ourselves of ideas, beliefs, and understandings other than our own, and a readiness to release whatever no longer serves a meaningful purpose. The ideas, beliefs, and understandings we adopt as our own remain our choice, but surrendering unbending certainty for curiosity helps open our awareness to the potential gifts offered through others in a given moment. Surrender encourages us to be curious about life by loosening our grip on how we define ourselves, what we think we know, the expectations of ourselves and others, as well as how we should behave. It recognizes that change is good, inevitable, and necessary.

The term *surrender* carries negative connotations, not all of which are fair. Particularly in the West, we are taught that if we try hard enough we can accomplish anything. In that context, surrender is failure and evidence of a weak will or some other personal inadequacy. In reality, surrender is a necessary path to moving forward because we cannot progress until we surrender what should be behind us. Far from a sign of weakness, intentional and thoughtful surrender is a product of our desire to grow and explore new depths of God's creation.

Surrender enhances a contemplative life by keeping us in an attitude of submission to the guidance of the Spirit. We are not all-knowing. Our intentions are not always pure, and our actions are not always consistent with the invitations of the moment. Remaining open to God's guidance, including cultivating a willingness to consider the approaches to life of companions and friends, is not surrender as in giving up. It is surrender in the sense of relinquishing our defenses against openly engaging with and



## Living a Contemplative Life

openly considering how the wisdom and experiences of others might be helpful for us.

The more deeply we enter contemplative life, the less need we have for firm answers, certainty, or being seen as the most enlightened person in whatever crowd we are among. We surrender to the reality that we are *not* God; rather, we are humble pilgrims seeking conscious Oneness *with* God. In that blessed state we do not need to know or possess anything because all things are available to us in God.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the familiar Serenity Prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.*<sup>27</sup>

The Serenity Prayer illustrates the type of surrender that does not negate the importance of hard work, resolve, and courage, but acknowledges that sometimes the mountains we think should be moved are not going to budge, at least not today. Surrender allows us to accept whatever reality presents itself in this moment.

### *Service*

The path of *Service* aligns us to God by recognizing and addressing the needs of God as manifested in creation. It affirms that salvation and spiritual growth are *communal* and not individual undertakings. Because everything and everyone is One in God, our journey to Oneness with God necessarily includes others. In what we call *The Golden Rule*, Jesus says to treat others as we want them to treat us.<sup>28</sup> It is an early call to community through servanthood, and one that Jesus modeled throughout his ministry. Serving others is not just a nice thing to do; it is also a necessary and natural part of spiritual formation. Most of us are prone to act in self-interested ways unless we are intentional about identifying and addressing the needs of those around us.

We are not only called to serve others in need, however, but to stand in *solidarity* with those we serve. It is important, but insufficient, to give money, fix a meal, do home repairs, or other acts of mercy for those who cannot otherwise meet their basic needs. When we provide mercy with an attitude of arrogance or superiority, however, we miss the greater blessing

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/serenity-prayer-applying-3-truths-from-the-bible.html>

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 7:12

of acts of service. Alternately, when we serve as equals in God's family there is no inferiority or lesser status, only our abundance making itself available for the need of another.

Being in solidarity with others means standing *shoulder-to-shoulder* with them in their situation, recognizing them as our brothers and sisters. We cannot act out of equality, however, without getting to know more than someone else's need – we also need to learn something about the person behind the need. I find it helpful to intentionally glance into the person's eyes, noting the color, and trying to imagine God looking back at me through them. It is far too easy to provide acts of mercy to simply help us feel less guilty about our abundance or to show others what a charitable, caring person we are. In such cases, we may assist others, but we miss the blessing of experiencing another unique expression of God whose life situation is different from, yet tied to our own.

One way to gain insight into our motives is to ask ourselves these questions: Can I serve another without expecting something in return? Will I resent helping this person if they do not say "Thank you" or offer any sign of appreciation? If I give them money and see them coming out of a liquor store a few minutes later, will I regret having tried to help them? If we cannot give unconditionally, our generosity may be more to meet our own needs and expectations than a sincere desire to serve God by serving others.

In his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for *God loves a cheerful giver.*"<sup>29</sup> It blesses us to give without expectation of a personal return, secure in the knowledge that there *will be* a return somewhere, sometime. No good deed is ever wasted. Ultimately, we benefit from whatever we do for others, and it cannot be otherwise. A contemplative life, seeking Oneness with God and all of God's creation, knows that whatever serves one part of life serves all of it.

### *Spirit*

The path of *spirit* is the focused intent to find the spirit of God in everyone, everything, and every situation without exception. A primary reason we live in an often lonely, isolated, and narcissistic society is our conviction that God is a distant God. A contemplative life acknowledges the immediate presence of the Divine, closer than our next breath and pervasive as the air we breathe. There is nowhere to wander away from God. Once we

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<sup>29</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:7, NRSV.

recognize God's loving, inclusive spirit anywhere, we are able to see it everywhere. Spirit is what connects us to everything. It is what weaves us as seemingly disparate threads into a beautiful tapestry inclusively spanning from the beginning of creation to the end of time as we know it.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes, "...the greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of *disconnection*. We feel disconnected from God, certainly, but also from ourselves, from each other, and from our world."<sup>30</sup> Everything we call *sin* is a manifestation of our sense of separation, of not understanding we are intimately interwoven with all of creation, and of not recognizing we exist in Oneness with God and the rest of creation.

For some, the path to the Holy is not in becoming more *religious*, at least not in the way it is typically practiced, but in becoming more *human*. Both body and spirit are essential to being human. As with all of creation, we are a product of the physical elements of the earth impregnated by the energy we call *spirit*. The conscious recognition of the animating energy moving within every part of creation is the path of spirit. When God's spirit in us consciously connects with God's spirit in others, we awaken to the truth that we are neither separate nor alone. We willingly give ourselves to others in love, knowing there is absolute safety in love infused with spirit.

How can we find spirit in others? Reflecting on a few simple questions can help: What is uniquely beautiful about this person or thing? What will be lost to my world should this person or thing disappear from it? In what ways does this person or thing mirror something within me? God created and loves this person or thing – why? What internal resistance hinders my willingness to love him, her, or it?

Our ability to grow the contemplative dimension of our life is enhanced as we recognize and affirm the Divine spirit in every detail and expression around us, spectacular and mundane alike. When we find God there, we find God everywhere.

### ***Seven Paths, One Experience***

The *Seven Paths to God* are practices and orientations that provide the least resistance to an experiential encounter of God. The *Seven Paths* are prayers. They are methods of integrating communion with God into every detail of our lives. Every breath becomes a prayer, as does every thought, action, and interaction with others. Separately or together, traversing the

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), May 7, 2019.

Greg Hildenbrand

*Seven Paths* is a journey of transformation that molds our life into one continuous prayer. Our prayer unites with the prayers of others in the Oneness we experience in God.

## Living a Contemplative Life

# **PART III**

## **Contemplative Practices**

## Living a Contemplative Life

## 12

# Contemplative Practices

*Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.*

1 Timothy 4:15

There are many types of contemplative practices. I will describe a variety that I find helpful and interesting, but I encourage the reader to explore the countless options available beyond the ones I list here. It is important to find practices that can be sustained and made a regular part of one's life, daily whenever possible.

Before I describe contemplative practices, I offer these cautions:

1. While many contemplative practices are relatively simple and can be self-taught, some are best learned from a teacher or an experienced practitioner, yoga in particular. There are important nuances to some of the practices that may be overlooked or learned incorrectly with self-teaching, resulting in an ineffective practice.
2. One of the ways contemplative practices aid in spiritual growth is by opening a channel from our subconscious levels of being to our consciousness awareness. While this is subtle and slow enough for most to process without difficulty, some people may experience a flood of difficult memories or unresolved traumas from the past. Should this happen, discontinue the practice and seek professional assistance.
3. One should not expect immediate results from contemplative practices. This is inner work, meaning most of the changes occur beneath of our conscious awareness. The growth achieved will result from patience and persistence in the practices over time.

Several years ago I felt a deep need to *experience* the presence of God in my life instead of simply reading another book about it. I was introduced to



## Living a Contemplative Life

contemplative practices, like those that follow, which are methods of consciously reuniting our physical being with our spiritual essence. These practices are not intended to add more superfluous *stuff* to our already busy days. They are about slowing down and going deeper into our most important life experiences, engaging with a moment or a narrative and exploring what it has to offer. Too often we try to *conquer* whatever we do instead of surrendering and allowing it to change us. We should not willingly trade the profound and transforming beauty of a moment deeply entered for an accomplishment we will likely soon forget.

Contemplative practices are not about getting from here to there but are about delving more deeply into the *here and now* – wherever we are, whatever our situation, at this very moment.

Contemplative practices do not have the same purpose as other types of practice. When we practice a musical instrument, we have a tangible goal of being able to play a song. We are certain that with enough practice we will have something tangible to show for our efforts, even something we can display for others.

Contemplative practices are different because the work is internal and the transformations are subtle. The only outward show of progress *might* occur if someone notices something different in our manner, something spiritual, peaceful, soothing, or healing, but neither they nor we will be able to concretely verbalize what that something different is.

Spiritual formation is often slow and mostly invisible to the outside world. In his book *The Inner Experience*, Thomas Merton wrote, “More often than not, the way of contemplation is not even a way, and if one follows it, what (s)he finds is nothing.” He continues, “One of the strange laws of the contemplative life is that in it you do not sit down and solve problems: you bear with them until they somehow solve themselves. Or until life itself solves them for you.”<sup>31</sup>

The justification for committing to regular contemplative practice is well-summarized by author Barbara Holmes: “(Contemplative) practices beckon earthbound bodies toward an expanded receptivity to holiness...Receptivity is not a cognitive exercise but rather the involvement of intellect and senses in a spiritual reunion and oneness with God.”<sup>32</sup>

Contemplative practices are not superficial self-improvement methods to help us avoid or ignore the unpleasant parts of life. Rather, the practices help to ground us *into* our days and experience *deeply* whatever the day

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*. Harper-Collins, New York. 2003, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Fortress Press, 2017, p. 3.

brings, pleasant *and* unpleasant, knowing and acknowledging it all as within the purview of God.

### **Contemplative Space**

It is necessary to identify an appropriate space for your contemplative practice. I find having a consistent area important as our practice *imprints* on its surroundings over time, embedding a type of contemplative memory, which will provide additional support and comfort for when practice is difficult. Claiming a quiet and private space is preferable, although with sufficient focus and intention one can bring silence and privacy to nearly any space. Having a journal nearby is vital. Lighting a candle invokes a symbol of the transforming and mysterious power of fire, which is also a symbol of Spirit, into the environment. Burning incense provides olfactory sensations that may assist one into a deeper contemplative state. Ringing a meditation bowl one to three times as one enters and leaves a time of practice can be an excellent centering aide. Follow the sound as it gently fades. Certainly, incense, candles, or meditation bowls are not necessary, nor are they helpful for everyone.

A practice space with minimal distractions is the key and requires establishing a delicate balance. On the one hand, having a space that feels spiritual and invites one to a deeper experience of life is helpful. On the other hand, a space that is crammed with icons, symbols, books, and seductive spiritual *toys* can make it difficult to focus on the actual practices. In general, and in my opinion, simpler is always better.

With that vague but hopeful backdrop, a sampling of contemplative practices follows.

## Contemplative Postures

The most important factor in effective contemplative practice is the *intent* with which we enter it. How we position our bodies, however, can assist or inhibit how the energies channeled by the practices move in, through, and out of us. Relaxed postures are appropriate for respite, while more erect postures are desirable for attentive and unimpeded energy flow.

It is important that a contemplative posture *not distract* from one's focus on being in the presence of God. If one's posture causes discomfort or can only be held for a short time or leads to frequent rearranging or squirming, one's attention will be to the discomfort instead of on proximity to God. One can learn to be comfortable in many different positions, but it requires time, patience, and practice to get there.

### *General posture guidelines*

- \*Eyes should be closed, if possible, because the most distracting elements in our environments are visual.

- \*Palms facing upward symbolize a desire to receive energy, while palms facing downward aid in grounding or centering.

- \*A bowed head is a sign of surrender or humility, while an upright head signifies attentiveness.

- \*Feet flat and firmly on the ground help energy to flow from the earth (or floor) into and throughout the body.

- \*Crossed hands, arms, or legs are fine when we need comfort or are feeling insecure, but the crossing of limbs impedes the free flow of energy through the body. Strive for uncrossed limbs. The exception is when sitting cross-legged, which is a stable position that enhances energy flow up and down the spine.

- \*Aligning the pelvis, spine, neck and head opens a channel for energy to flow most easily up and down the spine. In standing postures, create a relatively straight line of feet, knees, hips, spine, neck, and head for optimal energy flow. Shoulders should be relaxed and centered, meaning not slouched forward or forced back. Standing or sitting up straight against a wall can help one learn what an erect posture feels like.

## Greg Hildenbrand

\*In standing postures, feet solidly on the ground and hip-width apart provides a grounded stability for the practice.

\*Knelling at the bedside is a submissive posture, as is prostrating oneself on the floor or a mat. It is a position of humility.

## The Breath

Serious contemplative practices begin with conscious, intentional breathing. Paying attention to the breath helps orient us to the moment, drawing our attention away from distracting elements in our surroundings.

Breath, air, and spirit are the same word in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, *rauch*. Through our breathing we move the creating Spirit of God into and out of our physical body. When we breathe consciously and intentionally, we increase our awareness of the constant presence of God's Spirit within and around us – literally as close as our next breath.

There are several different methods of breathing and types of breathing practices, each with its own benefits. When using the breath as preparation to enter a contemplative practice, *pay attention to it*. Breathe consciously and with attention and intention.

Of course, breathing exercises are wonderful, effective contemplative practices, whether done as a preparation for something else or when done as a stand-alone contemplative practice.

### ***Types of Breath***

As a general rule, breath should enter through one's nose, unless congestion prevents nose breathing. Exhales can occur either through the nose or mouth. Exhaling through the mouth aids in relaxation, especially when each exhale is extended to last longer than each inhale, and should be used when tense or stressed.

\*A *deep breath* begins by gently expanding the area around the naval. This naturally draws air into the deepest parts of the lungs. Feel the expansion in the front, back, and sides of your lower abdomen. Deep breathing penetrates into and out of the depths of the lungs. This is the most effective type of breath for most of our daily tasks. It helps keep us centered and focused. With intentional practice, it will become our habitual way of breathing.

\*A *full breath* is one that fills the lungs completely with air where it can be consciously channeled to any part of the body. Each inhale has three stages:

- (1) Begin with a *deep breath*, as described above. This naturally draws air into the deepest parts of the lungs.
- (2) Expand the lower ribs, feeling the expansion all around your mid-chest. This naturally draws air into the middle portions of the lungs.
- (3) Fill the upper lungs, feeling the expansion completely around the upper chest and back. Feel a gentle rise of the shoulders as the lungs fill to capacity.
- (4) Once there is no more room for additional air in the lungs, gently and slowly exhale, usually through the mouth, to release the tension of a full chest into a relaxed emptiness.

Practicing a series of full breaths is an effective technique for entering a time of prayer or other contemplative practice, for beginning a task where focused attention is required, or for centering or calming oneself during times of stress.

\*A *shallow breath* is one that only moves air from the upper parts of the lungs, usually rapidly. It is the breath of extreme stress or hyperventilation. Sometimes it is the best we can do, but as we catch ourselves in shallow breathing we should strive to slow and deepen the breath for a healthier breathing rhythm.

## ***Breathing Practices***

The most straightforward breathing practice is simply to do a series of *full breaths*, followed by a series of *deep breaths*. This is an effective practice for relaxing, focusing, and letting go of whatever distracts us from our presence with God in the moment.

Imagine the breath traveling into all parts of the body, particularly to areas of tension or pain. In your mind's eye, picture the breath traveling from your nose, through your lungs, and spreading out into whatever part of the body needs relief.

## **Rhythmic Breathing**

The key to rhythmic breathing is to follow a repeating pattern that can be sustained through several cycles. I suggest a minimum of three cycles, but five or more is better. The practice needs to be intentional and unhurried.

## Living a Contemplative Life

One's focus should be on the air or Spirit entering, filling, and exiting the body.

The pattern for rhythmic breathing is *inhale, hold, exhale, rest*. It creates a contrast in tension between the *hold* and the *rest* phases that aides in relaxation and focus. Begin with a count of four at each phase and increase the count if and as you are able. I like to use a clock that has an audible tick with each second as a guide, one count for each tick.

- (1) Begin with a slow, *full breath* over a count of 4. Strive for evenness and ease until your lungs fill as completely as possible.
- (2) *Hold* the breath inside for a count of 4, feeling the tension and pressure as the Spirit pushes against the boundaries of the chest.
- (3) *Exhale* slowly, evenly, and completely for a count of 4. Feel your shoulders relax and your chest-space shrink. Strive to be as completely devoid of air as possible as your count ends.
- (4) *Rest* in the tension-free space between the exhale and inhale for a count of 4.
- (5) *Repeat* the pattern a number of times, striving for an ever-increasing awareness of the Spirit moving into, through, and out of the body.

As an alternate practice, extend your *exhale* to a count of six or eight if you can do so without strain. A longer, slower exhale enhances the relaxation and focusing benefits of rhythmic breathing.

### **Alternate nostril breathing**

Alternate nostril breathing involves blocking one nostril as you inhale/exhale through the other. It is a useful practice for grounding and focusing one's attention. Here is the process:

1. Sitting comfortably and upright, take a few slow, deep breaths.
2. With the thumb of your right hand, gently press down on your right nostril as you slowly inhale through your left. Pause.
3. Release your right nostril and close your left nostril with the ring finger of your right hand as you slowly exhale through your right nostril. Pause.
4. Keeping your left nostril closed, inhale slowly through your right nostril. Pause.
5. Release the left nostril and close off the right with your thumb as you slowly exhale.
6. Repeat the cycle several times, focusing on the breath entering and exiting through alternating nostrils.

The index and middle fingers of your right hand can rest comfortably on the bridge of your nose during this practice.

### **Ujjayi Breathing**

*Ujjayi Breathing* is a practice of slow, rhythmic breathing to help clear the mind of thoughts while relaxing the body. It helps ground us in the present moment. Here is the process:

1. In a quiet place with minimal distractions, close your eyes and begin with a few deep breaths.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose as you constrict the back of your throat to make a subtle noise, similar to the sound of an ocean wave.
3. As you exhale, keep the back of your throat constricted as you exhale through your mouth.
4. The constricted breathing massages the vagal nerve in the back of the throat, helping to achieve deeper states of relaxation.
5. Ground yourself to the sound of your breath and continue the practice as long as is comfortable for you.



## Recitations and Invocations

Recitations and invocations are sometimes helpful as one begins an exercise in spiritual practice. Recitations can focus our attention toward the presence of God we seek. Invocations affirm that the spiritual realm is not bound by the space and time limits of our physical bodies. They, too, can be helpful in directing our attention to God, as well as in acknowledging the guiding spiritual presences around us..

### Recitations

A contemplative recitation is the reciting of a passage of scripture or other meaningful writing to assist in zeroing in on the presence of God as fully as we are able. It can serve as a transitional *bridge* between whatever we were doing before and our entry into a contemplative practice.

Here is a recitation I use often as a prelude to contemplative practice, particularly with Centering Prayer. It is Psalm 46:10, repeated five times, each time dropping the last word or two off the previous line, as follows:

*Be still and know that I am God.*

*Be still and know I am.*

*Be still and know.*

*Be still.*

*Be.*

It is not necessary to do this sort of repetition or modification of the passage, but this particular passage lends itself well to that style of recitation. Another option would be the opening line to Psalm 23:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

This and other short passages may be more effective when repeated several times, perhaps changing the emphasis with each reading. For example,

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*The Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not want.*

*The Lord is my SHEPHERD, I shall not want.*

*The Lord is my shepherd, I SHALL NOT want.*

An effective recitation will be short, simple, grounding, and meaningful.

## Invocations

Contemplative invocations call on the spiritual essence of those known to and positively influential upon us, either through their writings, works, or a direct relationship. Those we invoke may be living or dead, they may be in the next room or across the world. The spiritual essence of everyone precedes and survives their physical body and is not bound to one physical location or any specific period of time.

Contemplative invocations serve at least three purposes:

1. *They acknowledge that spirituality is not bound by time or space.*
2. *They help us remember, and sometimes feel, the presence of those who have been important influences on our lives.*
3. *They remind us we are not alone.*

When churches acknowledge the *Communion of Saints*, they affirm their belief that deceased former members continue to be present to the congregation in non-physical ways. When Catholics pray to or invoke a Saint, they are performing an invocation, seeking the blessing of a saint, consistent with the gifts manifested by that saint.

One of the powerful, spiritual influences in my life was my paternal grandmother. I will sometimes invoke her name at the beginning or end of a practice, like this:

*Grandma Hildenbrand, pray for me.*

This invocation helps me remember my grandmother and my relationship with her, often bringing the sense that she is present beside me.

I will also sometimes invoke the name of one of my deceased parents. I commonly invoke the names of authors and teachers who have had profound influences on my life and spiritual formation. For example,

*Father Richard (Robr), pray for me. Or,*

*Thomas Merton, pray for me.*

One of my contemplative teachers, James Finley, typically invokes Mary, the mother of Jesus and archetypal mother of us all:

*Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for me.*

Invocations should be used carefully, in the sense of invoking someone you would be appreciative of and comfortable with having join in your practice. An overly critical parent or a harsh teacher would probably not be good choices.

## Prayer

Prayer is *communication or communion with God*. It may or may not involve speaking, but it always involves being attentive and attuned to God's presence. God *may* speak in a way we understand, but God is silent for most of us. We may sense God's presence in some tangible way, but we may also wonder if God is anywhere nearby. We may receive a clear inkling of God's presence, but our sense of that presence will likely be vague and indistinct.

Effective prayer is not only something we *do*, as in an action we take, but is also an orientation that underlies what we do. Prayer is an activity, yes, but transformative prayer is more than an activity. Prayer becomes the foundation upon which everything we do is rooted. As we progress in uniting our physical and spiritual natures, *everything* we do becomes prayerful. Make no mistake, that does not mean everything we do will be from our knees, nor will what we do always reflect our best self or be consistent with God-inspired action. Rather, it means whatever we do, we do in the knowledge that God is with us, whether or not our actions are always guided by that knowledge.

Earthly life is an experience of learning under often-difficult circumstances. We learn more from our failures than our successes *as long as we* take time to evaluate our opportunities for improvement. Prayer is a helpful way to conduct those evaluations, but should not create a sense of guilt, inadequacy, or shame. Rather, prayer should provide objective, loving direction in what is possible. It is recognizing and acknowledging a higher power willing to act through us if and as we allow it to do so.

The primary benefits of prayer come through regular and persistent practice. Only in retrospect do we see how God works in our lives because most of the Spirit's work occurs at levels beneath our conscious awareness. Over time, however, we can piece together how we have been led, how intricate pieces of "circumstance" fell into place to lead us to where we are today. And we know we could not possibly have made it happen alone. As we witness God's loving action on our life in the past, we learn to trust God's loving action on our present and in our future.

Incorporating prayer into one's life can be done in many ways, only a few of which are listed here. Experiment with different ways and find what

works best for you. Ultimately, *how* we pray is less important than *that* we pray.

### ***Spoken (verbal) Prayers***

Most of us are familiar with spoken prayers, if not from church, then perhaps from parents or grandparents before meals or at bedtime. Many people process thoughts and feelings in words, so verbal prayers come naturally for them. A healthy prayer life will include a combination of verbal *and* non-verbal prayers.

### **A Template for Personal Prayer<sup>33</sup>**

The following is adapted from a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to formal, spoken prayer by George Buttrick, a theologian of the last century. One can do it in its entirety, or pick and choose the parts most compelling as one settles in to pray.

#### *1. Preparation for Prayer*

- \*Find a quiet place to be alone with God.
- \*Sit up straight, hands resting comfortably.
- \*Take a few slow and deep breaths. Relax in God's loving presence.

#### *2. Thanksgiving*

- \*Name one thing, person, or event you are thankful for today. Be specific.
- \*Rest in silent appreciation for this thing, person, or event.

#### *3. Confession*

- \*Name one thing that weighs heavily on you today. Be specific.
- \*Identify and confess how you contribute to this burden.
- \*Ask for forgiveness and assistance in transforming this burden into a blessing.

#### *4. Intercession*

- \*Name something you wish for God to intervene in on your behalf. Be specific.
- \*Rest for a few moments in silent meditation.

#### *5. Petition*

- \*Name something you wish for God to intervene in on behalf of someone else.

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<sup>33</sup>George A. Buttrick, *Prayer*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1977. Adapted from *A Simple Regimen of Private Prayer*.

## Living a Contemplative Life

\*Rest for a few moments in silent meditation.

### 6. *Closing*

\*Express appreciation for this time together.

\*Exit the time of prayer slowly. Consider journaling about your experience.

## A Daily Prayer Rhythm

Developing a prayer rhythm throughout the day is an effective way to enhance and incorporate awareness of God's presence into one's daily activities. The purpose of this method of prayer is not usually to have extended conversations with God, but is used as a quick, easy, and regular reminder that God is always near.

This prayer can be practiced just about anywhere. It can be done while sitting at a desk, exercising, stopped in traffic (eyes open, please), or wherever we can spare 10 seconds to turn our attention to God.

The actual prayer should be short, easily memorized, and meaningful to the person praying. It can be done silently or spoken aloud. As an example, I sometimes use this prayer:

*Loving God, I remember and give thanks for your presence with me right here, right now, and always. Amen.*

One can repeat the same prayer-line throughout the day, develop several short prayers to alternate, or improvise as the Spirit moves. An effective daily prayer rhythm is done five times each day at regular intervals established by the person praying in a way that works seamlessly into their day. Setting alarms as reminders may be necessary early in the practice until it becomes habitual. Here is a timeline that can be modified as needed:

1. Pray upon waking in the morning.
2. Pray at breakfast.
3. Pray at lunch.
4. Pray at dinner.
5. Pray before going to sleep at night.

## The Examen

The *Examen* is a formal method of prayer developed as a part of Ignatian Spirituality.<sup>34</sup> It is often used to review one's day before bedtime.

1. *Ask God for light* to help see the events of my day through God's eyes. For example, "God, show me my day through your eyes."

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<sup>34</sup>See [IgnatianSpirituality.com](http://IgnatianSpirituality.com) for more information.

2. *Give thanks*, recognizing this day was a gift from God. For example, “*God, help me understand how this day has been your gift to me. Thank you.*”
3. *Review the day*, carefully looking back on the activities and feeling experienced. Remain open to promptings of the Spirit. It may bring up parts of the day you prefer not to remember. For example, “*Holy Spirit, review the experiences of this day with me. Where and in what ways did I sense your presence?*” Consider journaling your responses.
4. *Face your shortcomings*, not in a guilt-producing manner but as a learning opportunity to explore alternate behaviors for similar situation in the future. For example, “*In what ways and with whom was I less than loving today?*”
5. *Look toward the day to come*. Ask God to help guide you through any known or unknown challenges or celebrations coming tomorrow. For example, “*God, remind me to look to you and listen for your guidance tomorrow.*”
6. *Close the prayer*. For example, “*Thank you, God, for this time of reflection and introspection. For tomorrow, help me look to you frequently and remember your presence with me at all times and in all things. Amen.*”

### Welcoming Prayer

This is a prayer practice for use when feeling stressed or in pain. Once one is familiar with the process, the prayer can be done quickly and just about anywhere. The purpose is to remind us of God’s active presence and work with and within us, including in our pain. Here is a condensed version of the process, as outlined in *Welcoming Prayer: Consent on the Go*.<sup>35</sup>

1. *Feel and sink into* what you are experiencing this moment in your body.
2. *Welcome* what you are experiencing in the moment in your body as an opportunity to consent to the Divine Indwelling.
3. *Let go* by saying the following sentence: “*I let go of my desire for security, affection, control and embrace this moment as it is.*”

An alternate version of the welcoming prayer is a recitation, as follows:

**Welcome, Welcome, Welcome**

\*I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it is for my healing.

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<sup>35</sup> *Welcoming Prayer: Consent on the Go*. Contemplative Outreach, Wilkes-Barre, PA. 2016.

- \*I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.
- \*I let go of my desire for power and control.
- \*I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.
- \*I let go of my desire for survival and security.
- \*I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, or myself.
- \*I open to love and presence of God and God's action within me.
- \*Amen.<sup>36</sup>

### The Yahweh Prayer

As mentioned earlier (but it is worth repeating), the Hebrew word for spirit, breath, and wind is the word, *rauch*. In the symbolism of the Hebrew language, this signifies that all three are of the same essence. The *Yahweh Prayer* is a method of breathing the name of God, which some scholars believe may have been the only acceptable way for the early Hebrew people to intone the name of God (which was *not* to be spoken). Indeed, the first syllable, *yah*, mimics our inhalation and the first breath we took when we were born. The second syllable, *weh*, mimics our exhalation and the last breath we expel upon our death.

Yahweh is our western translation of YHWH, the name of God given to Moses on Mount Sinai at the burning bush.<sup>37</sup> It's literal meaning is *I am what I am*, or simply *I am*. Reciting the Yahweh Prayer can be helpful in awakening to our connection with the Divine. Here is the process:

1. Sitting comfortably and upright, take a few slow, deep breaths.
2. With your inhale, slowly breath the first syllable of the name of God – *Yah*. This sound should be an audible breath more than a spoken sound.
3. With your exhale, slowly breathe the second syllable of the name of God – *Weh*. Again, the sound should be one of audible breath more than a spoken word.
4. Repeat as desired.

### Lectio Divina (Lex'-ee-oh Dah-vee'-nah)

*Lectio Divina*, or sacred reading, is a four-step method for prayerfully studying sacred texts like the Bible. The intent is not to see how much of the text one can get through or how quickly, but to see how deeply one can enter into and experience the text. I often select a book of the Bible,

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<sup>36</sup> Loretta Ross, *Holy Ground*, Vol. 29, No. 1. 2018, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Exodus 3:13-15

reading it from beginning to end, one paragraph per day at a time. It often requires many months to get through a single book. I tend to focus on the four gospels, which can require a couple of years to get through, although any sacred texts of interest, biblical or not, can be effectively used. The four steps of *Lectio Divina* are: *Read*, *Reflect*, *Respond*, and *Rest*. Here is the process:

1. *Read* the selected passage slowly and aloud. Reading aloud allows one's body to *hear* the words instead of just thinking the words. Listen for a word or phrase that stands out or speaks to you.
2. Read the passage a second time and *reflect* on what touches you about it. Consider imagining yourself as one or more of the characters – what do you think, feel, or experience as your chosen character? Consider journaling your thoughts.
3. Read the passage a third time and *respond* with a prayer or expression of what you have experienced and/or what it may be asking of you. This step is a call to action – what action in my life does this passage inspire in me?
4. Read the passage a fourth time and *rest* in silence.

### **Praying at Will**

Although regular, rhythmic prayers are helpful and necessary in integrating prayer into our lives and developing a more comfortable relationship with God, impromptu prayers, or praying at will is also important. Sometimes we simply need to talk, be assured we are not alone, or ask for guidance or forgiveness in the moment.

*Praying at will* is simply expressing whatever we wish to express – saying whatever is on our heart in whatever manner we choose – whenever it needs expression. It does not need to be formal, long, or eloquent. Being genuine is more important than being politically or grammatically correct. Praying at will becomes easier as we develop a comfort level with praying in different ways.

### ***Silent (non-verbal) Prayer***

*Silent prayers* are a different genre of prayer that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable to many people. Praying with words is an intellectual exercise that involves expressing something *to* God; praying without words attempts to simply be *with* God.



## Living a Contemplative Life

The more we become comfortable with non-verbal prayer, the greater awareness we will develop of God's presence with us. God's presence is mostly silent, and non-verbal prayer allow us to join God in that silence.

### Centering Prayer

This is a form of prayer where we seek to quiet, or at least not attend to, the internal dialogue that otherwise runs non-stop in our minds. Because God's first language is silence, centering prayer is a method to participate in that silence. The *sole purpose* is to sit in the presence of God, to be in communion with the Divine. We are not seeking answers, enlightenment, or comfort. We do not submit our requests or complaints. We simply consent to be in God's presence. Here is the process:

1. Select a *sacred word* of one or two syllables that will symbolize your consent to God's presence and action within you. I often use "Be still." Use whatever word seems appropriate to you to symbolize your willingness to surrender to God's presence in this moment.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, take a few slow, deep breaths and softly whisper your sacred word.
3. When thoughts arise, as they will, gently repeat your sacred word to renew your intent to consent quietly to God's presence. Allow the thoughts to pass away as you say your sacred word.
4. When the centering prayer time has ended, remain in silence for a couple of minutes before resuming the activities of the day.

Two, twenty-minute sessions of centering prayer daily are recommended as an optimal practice. The time period can be extended, if and as desired. Shorter time periods can also be beneficial, although it is difficult for most of us to enter a deep silence in less than twenty minutes.

### Journaling

The practice of journaling is a silent form of prayer, although it typically uses words for expression (doodling, drawing, dancing, and painting can be beneficial forms of non-verbal journaling). It is as varied as are the people who practice it. The common element is expressing something from inside onto something external to ourselves. The primary goal of the practice is to express one's thoughts and feelings that might not otherwise find a safe path for expression. A side benefit of journaling, assuming we date our entries, is that we can review how our thoughts and feelings evolve over time.

A written journal should be a confidential collection seen only by the author and whomever she or he chooses to share it with, if anyone. As such, having a private, secure space in which to write and store one's journal is important. Being assured that our journal is ours alone allows us to write openly without a need to scrutinize or judge the possible acceptability to others of what or how we write.

A blank page in a journal should not be intimidating or pressure-inducing, but an open door to an inner adventure. If nothing arises, the empty page will wait patiently for another time.

For many of us, journaling is like a personal Ouija Board. We begin writing and find ourselves in a space where thoughts enter our awareness, often from places unfamiliar to our normal waking consciousness. We may wonder, "Where did *that* come from?" That is an indication that we have tapped into something from our subconscious that is seeking expression. If such thoughts are frightening or overly uncomfortable, put them away for another time.

My personal journaling discipline is to write something every day. Granted, some days my only entry is the date. Sometimes I simply enter a quote from something I read that touched me. The most effective journaling, however, comes when we open a channel to our inner being and capture what pours forth. Here are some ideas that may help inspire something to write:

1. What are my thoughts and feelings about something I read or saw today? What touched me? What made me uncomfortable? If I were addressing the same topic, how would I express it?
2. How do I feel about a situation I experienced today?
3. What three things am I most thankful for in this moment? Why?
4. What fears do I have at this point in my life? From where do these fears arise?
5. What memories are difficult for me to process? Why?
6. Describe a vivid dream and your thoughts about its possible meaning.
7. Describe an encounter with another. What was pleasant or unpleasant? Why? How do you think the other person experienced you?

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list of questions or ideas. Asking open-ended questions about very personal hopes and fears, thoughts and feelings, experiences and memories paves the way to explore the parts of oneself that otherwise remain hidden.

### **Walking Meditation**

This practice involves walking, but not as cardiac exercise or as a means to efficiently travel from place to place. Rather, the practice is intended to help strengthen our conscious awareness of our unbreakable connection with God as God's energy rises from the earth. Walking meditation should be done in a quiet, safe place, out of doors, if possible. Walking barefoot through the grass is a worthwhile sensual experience for those comfortable in doing so. Here is the practice:

1. After taking a few deep, meditative breaths, begin walking slowly and deliberately, savoring each step.
2. Quiet your mind by focusing on the contact between the bottoms of your feet and the earth (or floor or sidewalk).
3. Feel the energy of the earth rising up through your feet, into and through your body, loving you, embracing you.
4. Be present and unhurried. Each step *is* the destination.
5. Engage your senses: What do you see, hear, smell, or feel?

Engage in meditative walking for an extended time. Thirty minutes to an hour or more may be required to effectively quiet the mind and feel God's presence entering one's body through the earth, although shorter time periods can be helpful when that is all that is available.

## Chanting

Chanting is a contemplative practice that helps to quiet the mind by focusing one's attention on sounds and sensations. It can also be helpful in aligning the body's centers of energy. The power of chanting is in the rhythmic, mindless (non-thinking) repetition of simple melodies and phrases. The core elements of chanting are the breath, tone (vibration), intention, and attention. It is a type of prayer, although it is seldom used outside of monasteries. Chanting does not require special musical or vocal training since many chants use simple melodies of two or three notes. Having access to a pitch pipe, piano, or musical tone app on one's phone is helpful, especially when working to awaken or align the energy centers of the body by chanting at specific frequencies.

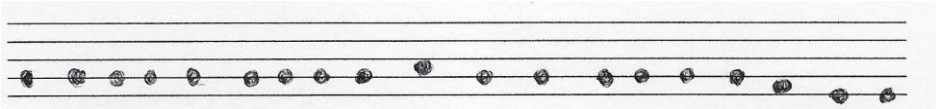
Chanting is sometimes done using Psalms, particularly in monastic settings, although any sacred text could probably be made to work. There are chant melodies and lyrics in most hymnals, often titled the *Psalter*. Most hymnals give instructions on how to chant the Psalms. Although the Psalms were written as hymns, they were not written in English, so they may sound awkward until expectations for chanting to sound like contemporary music with its rhymes and consistent rhythms are abandoned.

While related to singing, chanting is more about *listening attentively* and *feeling* what is being chanted, even when chanting alone. It is helpful to try to listen from one's heart and body instead of only from the ears.

Preparing for chanting is similar to preparing for any other type of prayer: Stand or sit up straight; release any tension in the face, shoulders, arms, back, or legs; then take several slow, deep breaths.

### A Simple Chant of Psalms

A simple way to chant nearly any text is to chant each syllable of a phrase on a single note until the last syllable or two and then raise the pitch by a step. Begin the next phrase on the same note you chanted the first phrase until the last two or three syllables and then go down one step and end another step lower. For example:



*The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

Repeat this pattern with the remaining phrases until you have finished what you intended to chant.

### A Simple Chant of Vowels

Chanting with vowel sounds helps keep one's attention focused on the sounds and sensations instead of being diverted to what the words of the chant represent. Like other forms of prayer, the possible variations are endless.

1. After preparing yourself with a stable posture and some deep breathing, select a musical note that is comfortable for you and that you can sustain through a line of chant before needing another breath.
2. On that same note, chant the following vowel sounds to the note, sustain each sound just long enough to get through all five sounds with one exhalation. Here are the vowel sounds to chant, with *A*, *E*, and *O* being long vowels, *ah* pronounced like a sigh, and *u* pronounced as one would in the vowel-sound in *through*, like *eww*:

A – E – ah – O – u

3. Repeat at least five or more times, pausing for a deep breath before each chant. Pay attention to the vibratory sensations in your body. You may notice that certain pitches resonate in different areas of the body.

### Chanting for Energy Alignment

1. With a pitch-pipe, piano, or sound app nearby, chant the same vowel-sound sequence as above, but on the note *C*. Repeat.
2. When finished, take a deep breath and chant the vowel-sound sequence on the note *D*. Repeat.
3. Repeat on *E*, *F*, *G*, *A*, and *B*, then repeat the sequence in reverse order, twice for each note.
4. Feel free to chant an octave above or below the note you are tuning to so it is comfortable for you. Your attention should be focused on the feeling of the vibration in your body, not on how difficult it is to hold a particular note.

## Greg Hildenbrand

Chanting should be relaxing, energizing, and freeing, so do not get too serious about or discouraged by it. Experiment with different chants and find vibrations and grooves that feel right for you.

## Body Prayers

Human beings are multifaceted, including but not limited to our intellect, our emotions, and our physical bodies. To work towards wholeness, we must awaken those parts of our being that usually exist in the background. Particularly in the West, the intellect rules supreme. We assume we are what we think. That assumption is not only incorrect but is antithetical to attaining the unity of being that enhances spiritual formation. We cannot think our way to spiritual maturity, nor can we verbalize a path to God in spite the vain attempts by many authors, myself included.

Our bodies are the storehouse of the unconscious. Our motivations, emotions, dreams, and feelings arise from the cells of the body, almost completely unbeknownst to and independent of our thinking mind. Body prayers help us tap into the wisdom of the body and open channels that allow its wisdom and memories to become more accessible to our conscious awareness.

### Yoga

Yoga is a generic term with a number of diverse manifestations. All, however, share the general goal of quieting our mind, reuniting our physical and spiritual natures, and releasing and balancing the energy flows throughout the body. As such, yoga can be an effective prayer practice in ways other practices are not because it works through the body instead of the mind.

Yoga practices help increase our awareness of our bodies through various poses, movements, and stretches designed to awaken and align the body's natural energy centers. This allows our bodies to take their place as integrated partners in the wholeness of our being, instead of as subconscious saboteurs of our daily activities. Yoga also strengthens one's core, aids in balance, and increases flexibility.

Certain yoga practices are extremely challenging for uninitiated bodies, so selecting a type of yoga that complements one's physical abilities is important. There are many levels of yoga practice designed for folks with differing levels of physical mobility.

Finally, it is important is to learn yoga practices under the tutelage of a trained instructor or experienced practitioner, so listing specific practices is beyond the scope of this book.

## Body Movement Prayers

Body movement prayers are related to stretching exercises and can be as varied as one's imagination and body allows. They can be energizing when one is stiff or has been sitting for too long. Body movement prayers can be designed to accommodate most physical limitations, so they can be done sitting or standing and with movement of limbs consistent with what one's body allows. Body movement prayers may stretch parts of the body, but they should not be practiced in ways that injure it.

Body movement prayers, in conjunction with attentive breathing, help move God's spirit and energy through the body while also relieving tension and aiding relaxation. They can also assist in directing spiritual energy to particular areas of the body that need attention.

What follows is a body movement prayer I practice frequently. It can be used as is or adapted according to one's own bodily capabilities. Once one understands the nature of a body movement prayer, customizing or designing prayers for one's needs becomes relatively easy.

### *Sample Bodily Movement Prayer*



#### *Position 1: Home.*

Standing or sitting in an erect position, join the hands at the heart in a praying posture. Close your eyes and relax. Begin with a few deep breaths, trying to let go of thoughts and tensions with each exhale.

As you prepare to move to the next step, release as much air from your lungs as possible.



#### *Transition 1.5: Positioning to inhale.*

When you feel a strong need to breathe in step 1, raise your arms above your head with palms still held together in their praying posture. Tilt your head back as if looking above, even though your eyes are closed.



#### *Position 2: Inhale.*

Let your straight arms fall to about a 45° angle as you inhale. Air should rush into your lungs as your arms fall into position. Keep your head tilted back as you fill your lungs as full as possible.



## Living a Contemplative Life



### *Transition 2.5: Pushing air into the body.*

Once you have taken in as much air as possible in Step 2, lower your palms as if pushing air down and throughout your body in one fluid motion toward Position 3. Hold your breath throughout this transition.



### *Position 3: Holding, then releasing the pressure.*

Stretch your arms straight out from your shoulders with palms facing out. Continue holding your breath here, feeling the pressure build as if a fire is being stoked within. When you cannot hold your breath any longer, release it, imagining it exiting through your hands and body, keeping your arms out. Imagine the energy built up in this position exiting into the world from all parts and sides of your body.



### *Transition 3.5: Emptying.*

When your breath is nearly gone from your lungs in Position 3, lower your arms to your sides as you release the last bits of air. Relax into the emptiness as your shoulders and body go limp.



### *Position 1: Home*

Return to the *Home* position and take a slow, deep breath in position 1 to center yourself as you refocus. Repeat the entire cycle several more times. When ending the prayer, bow in thanks from the home position before exiting the posture.

## Heart Prayers

Heart prayers are meditations directed to and from the heart area of the body, which is the center of love and emotional energy. Much more than simply pumping blood throughout the body, the heart area sends and receives non-verbal messages to and from the environment. When we feel anxious, upset, or angry, those around us can tell without us saying a word. Likewise, those around us can tell when we feel loving and accepting. It is not only our words or body language that give us away. Feelings are emitted from and received by our heart all the time. We are constantly exchanging unseen, non-verbal, nonphysical signals with others in our environment, and those signals are sent and received quite apart from and unbeknownst to our conscious thoughts.

Heart prayers, then, are conscious intentions to send positive, loving energy to those around us, as well as to transform negative energy around us into something more loving and positive. Heart prayers often use words to help focus our conscious attention to the heart area as well as to guide our intentions in the desired direction. But a heart prayer itself originates from and is received by the heart area in the middle of the chest, and it does so non-verbally.

### ***Breathing from the Heart***

Breathing from the heart is exactly as the name implies – consciously imagining your inhale as entering your body through the chest (as opposed to the nose or mouth) and exiting your body in the same way.

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable prayer posture. Take a few deep breaths as you calm your internal chatter.
2. Draw your attention from your head into your heart region. It may help to place a hand over the center of your chest as a focal point. If flexibility allows, place the other hand on the back of your chest and focus on a point between your hands.
3. Imagine drawing air directly into the chest as it expands on each inhale, and releasing air back into your environment through your chest with each exhale.
4. Continue this practice for a few minutes and observe how this type of breathing feels. The key is to *observe* or *feel* the practice as opposed to thinking about or describing the difference in your

## Living a Contemplative Life

head. Heart prayers always focus on feeling over thinking.

### ***Sending Loving Energy***

Depending on the specific situation, here are some ideas for sending loving energy to others, even across vast distances.

1. Begin by assuming an appropriate prayer posture and focusing your attention in your heart region, as described above.
2. Using *full breaths*, breath in the loving, accepting energy of God, feeling its power as it enters and permeates every corner of your being.
3. Infuse your own loving energy into the breath, holding the combined energies until it becomes uncomfortable to continue to hold.
4. Release the energy into the world or to a specific person or cause as God's energy, lovingly held and personalized by you, and given to others.
5. Repeat until you feel the energy has been received.

### ***Transforming Negative Energy***

When we find ourselves in a negative environment, we know we are in the presence of wounded people. When practicing heart prayers we should take care not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the wounded energy of others. Our first and best option, when possible, is to remove ourselves from a situation we feel is putting us in an uncomfortable or unhealthy state of being. When it is not possible to leave the setting, or when we feel it is in the best interest of ourself or others to remain within it, our next-best option is to attempt to transform some or all of that negative energy.

1. The first step in transforming negative energy is finding and attending to the wound, the pain, or the suffering. Most people are not inherently negative; rather, people project negative energy because of their woundedness, whether real or imagined. And we are all wounded.
2. When we know the nature of the wound, even if vaguely, we can begin sending loving energy to it. We might ask, "I sense something in you is hurting. Would you like to talk about it?" Important note: *if and when* they agree to talk, listen without judgement or interruption. Our presence will not be healing if we cannot accept how the person has arrived at their present hurt and respect that this is how this person experiences their pain *regardless of whether we*

*consider it legitimate.*

3. If the pain is deep, as it often is, we should not expect healing to come quickly. If we have listened attentively and respectfully, some measure of healing will have occurred and part of the negative energy will have been transformed simply by our being with the person in a non-judgmental, accepting way.
4. In the presence of the hurting person or when you are alone, imagine breathing healing energy from your heart into theirs, perhaps saying, "I see your pain. I am beside you in your pain. You need not suffer alone. Receive this loving energy as my gift."
5. Be willing and prepared to repeat this process over an extended period.

If we discover, as we often will, that the negative energy is coming from us, we should prayerfully ask: "Where is this negative energy coming from in me? What needs healing within me in order to transform this pain?" If and when you are ready to lovingly and respectfully address the source(s) of your pain, follow a similar process to how you would address the pain of another, as outlined above.

Clearly, severe and/or deep-seated pain and trauma is best addressed by someone professionally trained and licensed in the area of need.

### ***Tonglen***

The practice of *Tonglen*, or loving-kindness meditation, is one of sending and receiving prayerful, loving energy. It is a visual, mostly non-verbal practice where we lovingly accept the pain of another as we inhale and send whatever sort of loving energy we feel would be beneficial to the other as we exhale. It recognizes and honors that we send and receive energy with every breath and focuses on making our breath an intentional healing influence in the world.

1. We enter *Tonglen* the way we enter other prayers, with a time of deep breathing and quieting our minds.
2. Seek an internal space of stillness and openness, where you can calmly accept the suffering of another (or yourself) without judgment.
3. When performing *Tonglen* for another, if you sense sadness, inhale the sadness into yourself and exhale comfort to the other. If you sense shame, inhale the shame into yourself and exhale worthiness to the other.
4. When performing *Tonglen* for your own suffering, the process is

## Living a Contemplative Life

reversed. If you are feeling guilt, inhale forgiveness from the universe with a full breath, hold it briefly, then exhale your guilt back to the universe. If you feel pain in your lower back, breath healing energy from the universe into the lower back, hold that energy in place briefly, then release the pain into the universe.

5. Repeat as needed and desired.

## A Sample Daily Practice Itinerary

The following contemplative itinerary is offered as a sample for what contemplative practices integrated into one's day might look like. Actual times, length of time spent with each practice, and the contemplative practices utilized should be customized to the practitioner's interests, abilities, and other life-obligations. Remember, *one's faithfulness to and persistence in contemplative practice is more important than the actual practices chosen or the time spent with them.*

### *Morning Practice (45-60 minutes)*

- 0600 Enter your practice space (p. 65), light a candle and/or incense, and begin with deep breathing (p. 68) to focus your attention on the presence of God in this moment.
- 0605 Recite Psalm 46:10 (p. 72) as you enter a time of Centering Prayer (p. 80) for 20 minutes. If available, ring a meditation bell to enter your silent time with God.
- 0625 Invoke the names of three spiritual supporters/guides (p. 73) as you prepare to exit your time of Centering Prayer. For example:  
*Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for me.*  
*Thomas Merton, pray for me.*  
*Henri Nouwen, pray for me.*
- Ring a meditation bell to gently exit this time of Centering Prayer.
- 0630 Move into Lectio Divina (pp.78-79). Perhaps begin with John 1:1-5 (followed the next day by John 1:6-9, then John 1:10-13, and so on until completely through the Gospel of John).
- 0640 Journal your thoughts and insights, if any, from your morning practice.

### *Rhythmic Prayer Reminders*

Set alarms for mid-morning, mid-day, and late-afternoon for short prayers (p. 76) spaced throughout the day as quick reminders of God's presence with you.

### *End-of-Day Practice (30 minutes)*

- 2130 Enter a time of Centering Prayer (p. 80) for 20 minutes.
- 2150 Practice the Examen (p. 76-77) to review your day, journaling your thoughts and insights, if any.

## A Contemplative Rhythm of Life

Integrating contemplative practices into one's daily routine is the foundation for establishing a contemplative rhythm of life. The purpose is not to delay or avoid performing our daily tasks, nor add to the chaos of already full days. A contemplative rhythm of life does not rid us of the challenges of aging, abuse, sickness, or suffering, nor will it eliminate the stresses of parenting or work life. A contemplative rhythm of life will not necessarily make a person more popular or successful, at least not in the ways the world defines popularity and success. The purpose of establishing a contemplative rhythm of life is to wrap the activities of the day in regular reminders that God works in and through *every minute detail* of our lives. The practices do not bring God nearer to us, as God is already nearer than our next breath. Rather, contemplative practices help us remember, acknowledge, and draw upon God's constant presence, allowing us to carry out our daily activities from a more centered, trusting, and grounded perspective.

A common example of a rhythm of life practice is that of devout Muslims, who pray five times every day: (1) just before sunrise, (2) early afternoon, (3) late afternoon, (4) just after sunset, and (5) before going to bed at night. The practice is a habitual reminder of God's sovereign presence. When we forget that God is always present, we fall into all sorts of unhelpful and unhealthy activities – worry, stress, gossip, fear, overeating, and complaining, to name a few. One of Jesus' final instructions to us, given during the Last Supper, was to “do *this* in remembrance of me.”<sup>38</sup> The *this* he refers to is our routine, daily activities – everything we do is *this*. We are to remember God's presence with us in whatever we do. Establishing and maintaining a contemplative rhythm of life is an effective way to follow that instruction.

The philosopher, Socrates, said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” While I am not nearly so fatalistic, I believe the underlying sentiment is valid – that we benefit from time spent reflecting on our life on a regular basis. What did I notice today that caught my attention? What was annoying and why? Where did I find beauty? In what ways, if any, did I notice God's active presence in my life? In what direction do I feel God nudging me? These types of self-reflective questions are beneficial to

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<sup>38</sup> Luke 22:19.

consider in the contemplative practices making up our rhythm of life. If journaling is part of your daily practice, record your answers there. Our reflections guide us on our spiritual journey, even as the answers and insights change and evolve. Our responses to such questions are never adequately captured in words, but making the effort, as in journaling, inspires growth.

We establish a contemplative rhythm of life through habitual practice, keeping to as regular a routine as our life allows. *Remaining faithful to a regular rhythm is as or more important than the actual practices utilized*, in terms of personal transformation. Not unlike how the sunrise and sunset bookend the day and night, or the seasons mark the phases of a year, our rhythm of life contextualizes the activities of our daily routines with a contemplative circadian rhythm.

For me personally, the reoccurring part of my rhythm of life includes a time of study and prayer in the mornings and a time of reflection in the evenings. My current practice pushes me, and although I am inconsistently faithful to it, adhering to the plan as much as is reasonably possible is important – after all, we are trying to establish a *rhythm*. It is necessary to find a practice that assists us spiritually, but that also allows for our faithful attendance to our other daily responsibilities.

It can be frustrating to establish a rhythm of life that we practice for many years and notice only the subtlest of overt changes. Contemplation, however, is a way of life and not a destination. Like a blanket that covers us through the night, it does not assure more restful sleep or calmer dreams, but it is a constant, comforting, and dependable presence. In music, the rhythm of a song carries the music with a consistency from beginning to end. It provides the foundation upon which the rest of the song is built, even though its existence is almost entirely in the background. Lacking rhythm, a song would be little more than a random collection of notes. So it is with a contemplative rhythm of life. Our rhythm provides the secure foundation out of which the rest of our life grows.

A contemplative life is not a life without problems, but it is truer to and more harmonious with the life from which we were created – the life that was never born and will never die. It is where we awaken to the reality that our life is one with all of creation and one with God. That life is our eternal home, where we are known and loved as children of God.



## Contemplative Practices Summary

As is noted frequently throughout this section, there are countless forms of contemplative practices and numerous variations within each. My goal in these pages has been to introduce the scope of the practices along with brief instruction in getting started with some of them.

The reader is encouraged to research those practices of particular interest to them, experimenting with different variations, and customizing practices to their specific needs and abilities. The benefits of contemplative practice do not come so much from *what* is done or *how* it is done, but *that* it is done. Regularity in one's practice, along with the conscious intention held throughout, is of primary importance.

## An Invitation

A contemplative life is a calling that originates deep within our being, and not everyone is ready to embark on such a journey. No doubt, many people live perfectly contented lives, consistent with their God-given image, without becoming a contemplative. Anyone making it to the end of this or any other contemplative work has almost certainly received the call, however, because without that connection, these pages would hold no interest.

For those feeling nudged toward a contemplative life, I welcome you. You are in good company. The old saying, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears,” has proven true for me, as I trust it will for you. In the meantime, here are a few websites that may help scratch your contemplative itch:

[www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)  
[www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org)  
[www.contemplativelife.org](http://www.contemplativelife.org)  
[www.fromholyground.org](http://www.fromholyground.org)  
[www.gravitycenter.com](http://www.gravitycenter.com)  
[www.contemplativeway.org](http://www.contemplativeway.org)  
[www.cynthiabourgeault.org](http://www.cynthiabourgeault.org)  
[www.contemplatinggrace.com](http://www.contemplatinggrace.com)

Perhaps we will meet somewhere along the way. Regardless, I wish you every good on this never-ending, forever-surrendering, deeply-engaging, death-inviting, self-emptying descent to nowhere.

*Namaste!*

## Living a Contemplative Life

## Endnote

All Bible references are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.  
Abingdon Press, Nashville. 1989.

## Living a Contemplative Life

## About the Author

Greg Hildenbrand is a contemplative spiritual director, author, and songwriter living south of Lawrence, Kansas with his wife, Carrie. They have two adult children, Grace, and Reid. Greg is a volunteer leader of blended worship at the First United Methodist Church in Lawrence. He is a *sendee* of the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation and is certified in spiritual direction by the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Greg can be reached at [ghildenbrand@sunflower.com](mailto:ghildenbrand@sunflower.com).

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