

Contemplative Living

Bulletin Articles written by **B.J. Schlachter** – 2013-2014 Center for Discipleship

What is contemplative living?

James Finley – author, retreat leader, former Trappist monk – was quoted in a recent Richard Rohr Medicant Newsletter: “It would be so easy to be a mystic if only I didn’t have to live my life.” I shake my head in agreement with one student’s observation, “That’s my challenge – to live these teachings.”

Contemplative living is a springboard of foundational truths that launches you into God’s loving embrace, moment by moment, while on this rollercoaster ride called life. Getting a grip on these truths does not guarantee a smooth ride, but does offer meaning, joy, companions, challenges, and a higher awareness of the trip and destination.

What is the “springboard of truths” of contemplative living? Let me share just a few:

- God calls us to silence. “Be still and know I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)
- “In God, we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) God is an abiding presence of love everywhere, with everyone.
- Faith is a trust in surrendering our lives (being and purpose) to this God of Love, revealed to us by Jesus, the Christ.
- “... behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” The Indwelling Divine Presence is by our baptism, the Spirit of Jesus the Christ. Christ consciousness compels us to live the gospel values of peace, justice, compassion, and service to all.
- A contemplative mind is developed from practicing nonjudgmental, non-dualistic thinking and opening our hearts to the oneness of God and all the universe.

Welcome aboard the rollercoaster! Don’t be among the “living dead! Come alive! Enjoy God’s embrace... grab a front seat...don’t worry about falling... experience what the universe is offering you today!

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The Barna Research Group reports that approximately 75 million Christians go to church every Sunday. Yet fewer than a third of them feel they accomplish their main reason for coming: “to connect with God.” Barna concludes, “If congregations seem rather complacent about their faith and halfhearted in their commitment ... some of that reticence can be traced to the fact that they lack any personal intimacy with God.”

Is going to “church” fulfilling your needs? Here, at SJF, we hope coming together as a faith community meets some of your needs! Yet, many of us may still be hungering for more: a more personal relationship with God, more meaning and purpose in life, and more contentment with our lives. God is always the initiator so your desire/longing is already God wanting to be closer with you!

Unfortunately, our deepest longing for a God-centered life gets buried by our cultural trappings of busyness, materialism, individualism, consumerism, technology, and whatever else is the current trend. Are you ready to excavate yourself from “unreality” to knowing your True Reality?

The SJF Center for Discipleship invites you to explore and discover another way of being in this world – contemplative living.

This is not about increasing personal piety, but increasing your joy in meaningful, creative service to our needy world. Thomas Merton captures its essence in his words, “Let me rest in Your will and be silent. Then the light of Your joy will warm my life. Its fire will burn in my heart and shine for Your glory. This is what I live for.”

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“It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister.”

Thomas Merton

The path of Contemplative Living is not like other spiritual growth programs you may have signed up for in the past. You don't set out to learn more about the Bible, or make new friends, or challenge your beliefs about God, or plant trees, or choose to serve. There are no expectations! Yet God works in mysterious ways... you just need to be present in the now.

The first steps are 1) acknowledging your desire for a deeper, more personal relationship with God, and 2) deciding to daily sit in silence with God, as an expression of love, acceptance, surrendering, and emptying to God – Holy Mystery, Divine Presence, Jesus Christ, Spirit, whatever “name” suits you. (God is more than any one image.)

Centering Prayer advocates recommend a daily practice of 20 – 30 minutes of silence in the morning and in the evening. However, start with what you are willing to do. Get up an extra 10 minutes early if that is the commitment you can honor each day.

Contemplative prayer is not about learning a new prayer form – it is A NEW WAY to be with God, knowing DIVINE PRESENCE among us and within us. Sitting In silence, how hard could that be??

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So what are some suggestions on how to sit in silence?

Sit in an upright, relaxed position, feet touching the ground. Focus your attention on an icon or a candle light. Then close your eyes. Take deep breaths to a count of four. Sit in silence, opening your heart to Divine Love, and allowing the Divine Presence to touch your soul. God's language is silence that your heart will hear. Surrender yourself to Holy Mystery, emptying yourself so that Divine Presence can find a welcoming home in you.

To quiet your mind, you may want to focus on your breathing or repeat a sacred word/mantra – i.e. Jesus, Creator Spirit, “maranatha,” Lord have mercy, come Holy One. “Monkey minds” are not uncommon! Just allow thoughts, images, and emotions to pass by and not cling to them. If distracted, just continue repeating your sacred word or be aware of your breaths.

Do not be interested in seeing visions, gaining insights, feeling good, or finding purpose in all this. Surrender all expectations. The presence of Divine Love is enough. The fruits of Divine Love will unfold and evolve in your life.

“Silence is a source of great strength.”

- Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

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“God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

- Mother Teresa

By sitting quietly in nature, we can experience our natural essence of goodness, beauty, wisdom, and cosmic being. Nature mirrors back to us the simplicity and complexity of each creature and, at the same time, its “specialness” in all of creation. Silence and solitude gift us with this sense of oneness – a knowing of our connectedness with all creation.

Nature also mirrors back to us the Divine Presence that is within all. As we become awoken to that Divine Presence (i.e. God, Divine Spark, Holy Spirit, God-Energy, etc), we then can mirror back to others their own holiness, goodness, and creative talents. Until we find peace, forgiveness, compassion, and gratitude within ourselves, we cannot expand those God-qualities to our external world.

Therefore, look for and nurture silent moments of solitude in each day, preferably in nature or, at least, in awareness of your natural surroundings. For example, take a few minutes in the morning in your backyard garden. Or have a five-minute afternoon break away from everyone. And relish a “chilling out” time from the evening TV. No scheduling or lists to do. Just you, with you, loving you. Be renewed. God is there!

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At the heart of silence is prayer.

At the heart of prayer is faith.

At the heart of faith is life.

At the heart of life is service.

-- Mother Teresa

Fr. Thomas Keating, founder of the Contemplative Outreach Movement, emphasizes four pillars of contemplative living: Silence, Solitude, Solidarity, Service. (www.contemplativeoutreach.org)

Silence is a daily practice of surrendering ourselves completely to being present for God to love us, touch our souls, heal our unconscious. God calls us to prayer – TO A LOVE RELATIONSHIP. We are not sitting in silence to satisfy God’s need for worship. We empty ourselves, even of our thinking mind – moment by moment in silence – to acknowledge and be present to Indwelling Love.

Solitude is being alone consciously with ourselves. Being alone in nature often promotes our inner healing. At times, we need to turn off the “noises” of the world – the stresses, schedules, work, cultural messages, etc. Solitude helps us to awaken to who we actually are. Fr. Richard Rohr describes this as being your “True Self”. You are awoken to the Divine Presence that is within. Your “true self” listens to the stirrings (God-energy) within you – passions, talents, virtues, desires for peace/justice, creativity, generosity, receptivity to serve, etc. Silence and solitude help create a space for God to be heard in our innermost being.

“The divine indwelling is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer.” - Cynthia Bourgeault

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“In God becoming human in Jesus Christ, God has established solidarity with the human condition.” - William A. Dembski

There is a fundamental paradox operating with contemplative prayer. It would seem the daily practice of sitting in silence and solitude would remove us from the world and all the concerns of daily lives. We are to be alone with God in silence, letting go of all thoughts, and emptying ourselves of ego-related concerns. Yet if we practice contemplative prayer faithfully, we are drawn to solidarity and service to the world. How does this happen?

First, we begin a contemplative prayer time with a conscious intent to give consent to God’s presence and God’s actions. The rest is God’s grace. God will touch your soul (heart). Consciously, you may not be aware of anything happening during your silent prayer time. But wait -- God is active in your life.

One of the fruits of grace is a sense of “oneness” with God, with the universe, with all other creatures and humans; and, importantly, with your authentic self. When you are aware of a personal relationship with Divine Love, then all relationships are connected and inter-related to the Holy Mystery, Source of All Being. We become awareness of the Spirit-thread that binds us together as God’s beloved community. Cut the ropes and break the chains on all barriers to human unity!

“A state of mind that sees God in everything is evidence of growth in grace and a thankful heart.” - Charles Finney

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“The struggle we’re dealing with these days... is how do we define our humanity?” - Grace Lee Boggs

Recently, Grace Lee Boggs, a 98-year-old, Chinese-American Detroit activist, author, and visionary received a lifetime recognition award at the 2013 Great Lakes Detroit Bioneers Conference.

What an inspiring woman! Although she has lived through most of the catastrophic events of the 20th century, she spoke briefly of her hope for America’s future and, especially, Detroit’s new rebirth. She urged us to be reimagining a vibrant, sustainable Detroit, reenergizing our communities for this challenging work, and respiriting ourselves in order to carry change forward through future generations.

In her recent book, *The Next American Revolution*, she writes, “These are the times to grow our souls... . Because the problems seem so insurmountable and because just struggling for our own survival consumes so much of our time and energy, we view ourselves as victims rather than embrace the power within us to change our reality.” As we exercise the power within us to make gospel-valued choices in our ongoing daily and political lives, these choices can, ultimately, make a difference.

The key to sustaining transformative energy is a life grounded in the firm knowing of God’s love. All of us are carriers of the Divine. Together, we move beyond problems by listening and sharing to the suggestions and strengths of all individuals, groups, and communities. The “God-energy” within each of us longs to be a compassionate servant. Find your pathway to purposeful living.

“What is needed now for the universe’s unfolding story is not a new galaxy or a new star. What is needed now is a new form of human being.” -- Brian Swimme

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“The new scientific cosmology shows us a universe in which we have an origin, an inclusive home, and a meaningful destiny.”
- Paul Brockelman

This is a “Cosmic Calling” to come to a higher consciousness, aliveness, and compassionate awareness that all is “Oneness” in the universe. Centering prayer grounds us in the knowledge—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—that our loving God is always among us and within us. We are not alone in the ever-changing, evolutionary and emerging human life. We can embrace Jesus’ words, “... I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” John 10:10 (Jesus talking about life in terms of more fulfilling, purposeful, and rich in satisfaction.)

November is a month to have gratitude especially for our ancestors that have passed into eternal life with God. Looking back into the past in terms of thousands of years, then hundreds of years, and then just a few generations, our human ancestors all had to face the darkness of their times and dark personal suffering. Our COSMIC CALL is to embrace our oneness with all, be loving companions on this life journey, and be beacons of hope for now and forever.

The Journey

Come with us on the journey
From stardust to wonder.
No need for baggage;
Everything is within.

Wisdom is your compass,
Curiosity your spark!
Release your presumptions;
Step into the dark of the void.

It’s a mystery, a sacred mystery.
Awaken to the universe.
Surrender to the story
That’s unfolding for you and me!

-- Sophia Center

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The following are web site resources for learning more about contemplation and centering prayer:
The Center for Contemplation and Action
www.cac.org

“The Center for Action and Contemplation seeks to empower individuals to live out their sacred soul tasks in service to the world through educational programs and resources.” Fr. Richard Rohr, OSF, founded the center in 1986. The web site spotlights his writings, multi-media presentations, homilies, and conferences. You can sign up for his free e-mail daily meditations and CAC news.

Contemplative Outreach Community www.contemplativeoutreach.org

“Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel.” Three monks—Frs. Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington—began offering workshops and retreats on a method of Christian contemplation prayer they developed especially for laypeople, eventually called Centering Prayer. Today it publishes and distributes the wisdom teachings of Fr. Keating and other resources that support the contemplative life.

World Community for Christian Meditation

www.WCCM.org.

www.WCCM-USA.org

“The all important aim in Christian Meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are...” John Main, OSB (1926-1982) The web site describes the worldwide events and programs of WCCM now being directed by Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB, the successor to John Main. You can learn more about local meditation groups, inspirational information about meditation in the Christian tradition, their newsletter, and links to the worldwide WCCM community.

Contemplative-life.org

www.contemplative-life.org.

“Our mission is to present the best of contemplative teachings. Through contemplative awareness, one becomes open and present to the mystery of God in the

here and now –in the midst of life.” This on-line store sells a wide range of products from a large number of spiritual writers and practitioners.

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

www.Contemplativemind.org

Our Mission: “... transform higher education by supporting and encouraging the use of active learning and research environments that look deeply into experience and meaning for all in service of a more just and compassionate society.”

The web site offers information on programs, resources, contemplative practices, and events.

Spirituality & Practice

www.spiritualityandpractice.com

This is an online clearinghouse of resources for spiritual journeys. It is a source of information for those especially on a multifaith or spirituality independent path.

Sacred Space

www.sacredspace.ie/

This is a daily on-line prayer site.

The Painted Prayerbook

www.thepaintedprayerbook.com

This is a blog of Jan Richardson –artist, author, and United Methodist minister. This blog “explores the intersections of writing, art, faith, and more.”

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“Nothing is so like God as silence.”

- Meister Eckhart

Sitting in silence for 20-30 minutes in the morning (and, ideally, in the evening, too) are the “earpods” that communicate our intent to love God with our whole being. We surrender our whole selves to Love – our thoughts, emotions, agendas, schedules, everything. Just sitting with the Indwelling Presence. Repeating a sacred word or mantra to bring us back from distractions. In turn, the Divine touches our hearts and minds. Silence begins to form a contemplative mind. What is a contemplative mind?

Fr. Richard Rohr describes the contemplative mind as “non-dualistic thinking.” It is a transformation of consciousness from me/them –either/or –win/lose—success/failure mentality to an awareness of a “unitive reality” – the universal oneness of the Reign of God. To have wisdom is to let go of judgments, our control needs, and desires for certainty; and seek this oneness of all humanity and creation while also acknowledging, respecting and protecting the very real differences.

To embrace the contradictions and paradoxes of life IS contemplation in action. An authentic, active participation in God’s love moves us from meaningless life (also stress, despair, suffering, etc.) to the expansive vision of Jesus’ Kingdom of God. Divine union is the intent, not private perfection. Contemplation is not a spectator sport!

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“Prayer is commonly a willingness to say ‘I don’t know.’ We must not push the river, we must just trust that we are already in the river, and God is the certain flow and current.” - Fr. Richard Rohr

This quote by Rohr describes nicely the experience of contemplative prayer. Contemplative sitting is not about seeking answers to problems. It is not about expecting any outcomes, rewards, nor certain results. Becoming a contemplative does not happen just because one may think it is a good idea.

Contemplation is a daily prayer practice that leads to change and growth when we commit and do it. God touches our hearts and then we will be able to see how God is touching our ordinary lives in very ordinary ways. However, one must do the silent sitting, emptying oneself to ego concerns, and trust in the Divine Indwelling. In response to Fr. Rohr’s quote: take the plunge, enjoy the water, and love the scenery! (And do it again tomorrow and...)

So calm so grounded

Low tide,
a quiet morning,
and the rocks
poke their hard heads
forth from the sand
to breathe the fresh coolness
and watch us wander by.
Do they wonder what it must be like
to be rarely still?
I wonder what I might learn from them,
from living a life so calm,
so firmly grounded.

- www.contemplativepoetry.com Photo and poem by Diane Walker. Blog entry posted for July 21, 2012

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START THE NEW YEAR OFF with a renewed commitment to a daily practice of contemplative prayer! It requires no special equipment, clothing, diet, or complex directions... yet this “spiritual exercise” may result in almost unimaginable spiritual development. It is a prayer practice that begins with “nothingness” and grows a personal relationship with God. Interested?

Contemplative prayer requires only a daily commitment to sit in silence focused on being in the presence of God’s love. Centering prayer advocates recommend 20 – 30 minutes in the morning and evening. You can begin with 10 minutes whenever you MAKE THE TIME for it. Sitting in silence means to quiet the mind –that is, letting go of all thoughts, making up grocery lists, ruminating about the day, thinking about problems, etc. etc. To quiet our “monkey minds,” it is recommended to silently repeat a sacred word of your choice whenever “distractions” occur (and they do often!). The sacred word may be a short phrase (i.e. “Come Lord Jesus”, “Yes, Holy Divine”) or just a word (Love, peace, trust, Holy Mystery).

God initiates this longing humans have to know our God, to know our lives have purpose and meaning. In this chaotic world of suffering and violence, it is quite human to feel fear, helplessness, stress, even hopelessness. Yet, a trust and grounding in GOD’S LOVE FOR EACH OF US allows us to find a pathway to a Spirit-directed life. Contemplative prayer helps ground us in God. The Indwelling Christ silently gives us whatever we need as comfort, strength, courage, trust, passion, etc. to lead compassionate, meaningful lives.

Are you up to the challenge? Just grab a chair...

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“It is the work of true spirituality to reteach the contemplative mind, which is nothing less than ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:16).” - Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

Richard Rohr, OFM, is a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC). Over 100,000 people daily receive Rohr’s free e-mail meditations from www.CAC.org. (Sign up to receive the free meditations by googling www.CAC.org.)

The following is promotional material about Rohr’s daily meditations:

In 2014, the meditations will follow the trajectory of a life, from the silence before birth through the development of ego, the fall that can drop us into the second half of life, a journey of descent (through suffering, humility, and shadow), ever emancipating us for greater maturity and eldership, and eventually the silence again of full union. Fr. Richard Rohr through these daily meditations will offer a map for the journey towards wholeness, a “primer” on the ways in which we experience transformation.

Each week of 2014 meditations closes with a special “Sabbath” reflection –key thoughts from the preceding days and an invitation to a unique contemplative practice (Rest). The Rest practices bring the week’s teaching deeper, below head into heart and body, to integrate and connect Fr. Richard’s words with authentic life.

Throughout 2014, Richard Rohr in his free, online daily meditations will look at the nine likely stages of spiritual development. The focus will be on the practical ways in which our spirituality forms our inner lives and is then lived outwardly in the world, which is to live a life of love and justice for others.

“It comes down to the capacity that each of us has developed to know how to love. It is the supreme work of your entire lifetime. Love is a science. Love is a discipline. Love has to be at the top of your priority every day.” Fr. Richard Rohr, from his homily for the Feast of the Holy Family, Dec. 29th.

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“Act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God.” - Micah: 6:8

Recent homilies and the meditative pause in our SJF Tuesday E-News have mentioned the humbleness of Jesus, beginning with his birth and then his baptism by John. God has chosen to be manifested through Jesus in our human nature. Jesus also exemplifies this virtue of humility – not by denying his gifts of the Spirit – but by using these gifts to preach/heal/live God’s dream for creation, what he called the kingdom of God. So as followers of Jesus –as being part of the Body of Christ– how can we manifest the virtue of humility?

Contemplative prayer can help us. First, the purpose of contemplative prayer is to be a means in which we accept and surrender to God’s love, empty ourselves of our ego needs and agendas, and allow God to become “alive” in our hearts and minds. Our ordinary lives are filled (overflowing!) with activities, jobs, responsibilities, commercials, modern day technology –and the list could go on and on—that moments with God are likely to be only quick thoughts (at best sometimes!). Taking time to only be “with God” encourages us to see the busyness of our lives in a different way. Perhaps, we can humbly agree with Pope Francis, “I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”

Secondly, by committing to a practice of contemplative prayer, we can become “awaken” to the Spirit of Jesus the Christ within us (i.e. Indwelling Spirit, Divine Presence, God’s Love) that reveals our creative gifts, passions, and talents being called to bring compassion and justice to our world. Expanding our hearts and minds requires us “seeing” with the eyes of Love, allowing the Indwelling Divine to be present in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We cannot do this by our own human capabilities. It is by humbly agreeing with St. Paul, “... I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...” (Galatians 2:20) that we discover a meaningful and purposed life.

Contemplation, ultimately, gives direction and faith support to our actions. A gift from our loving God.

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“Chant is used to quiet the mind, open the heart, uplift the Spirit, and mourn the dead... Chant is singing our prayers. Chant is vocal meditation. Chant is the breath made audible in tone. Chant is ‘discovering Spirit in sound.’” (Robert Gass, *Chanting*, p.11, 12)

Chanting has roots going back over 5000 years and found in some form in all religion/spiritual traditions. Chanting is defined as the continuous recitation of mantras. A mantra is a Sanskrit word meaning, “to deliver the mind.” Therefore, a mantra is specific sacred words and syllables chanted by individuals or groups to connect their minds with the “Divine Mind” and each other.

The ancient practice of chanting has its modern day advocates for its spiritual, emotional, and healing benefits. Contemplatives can use chanting to help focus their minds and ease into their daily prayer practices. The relentless energy of “monkey mind,” cannot always be tamed, but chanting has the ability to shift our consciousness from our active, busy lives to deeper states of meditation.

Chanting is an effective tool that you can use often to de-stress your life and support your overall health and wellness. Throughout history, there has been a link between music, health, and healing. In recent years, the acceptance of the mind-body connection in health and healing has also increased the acceptance of music therapy as a tool to combat disease. The sonic effects of chanting (particular tonal and vibration characteristics) have a direct impact on our bodies and energy.

Beyond the benefits of the audible sounds, is the pathway of chants to bringing us to silence. The inner music of peace and contentment is heard in the silence by the heart. The inner sound of the Universe reverberates within us as a sense of Oneness. Chanting becomes a window from audible sounds into the spiritual realm of silent being.

From the fruits of this sacred silence, we are truly and humbly able to give praise and thanksgiving to our God (Divine Presence). Chanting then gives voice to our gratefulness for all creation and the Creator Spirit. All glory and praise to our God! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

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A sung silence: Taize prayer

Taize refers to an ecumenical monastic community founded by Brother Roger Schultz in the 1940s near the town of Taize, France. Now there are over 100 monks that welcome to Taize thousands of people each year retreats.

Taize (teh-ZAY) prayer services are meditative and offer a calming space to be silent and centered in Christ. Usually there is a candle-lit atmosphere, simple sacred icons or images, scripture readings, prayers of praise and intercessions, a long silence (10-15 mins.), and chants (the Taize trademark). The Taize short songs are repeated again and again, allowing the music to settle in the heart. This meditative singing becomes a way of listening to God. The long silence holds participants in a deeper presence together in which the Holy Spirit prays within them.

Taize prayers are the simple, repetitive chants sung in many languages. These chants are usually easy to pick up and their repetitive nature creates a meditative effect throughout the large crowds. The Taize chants were composed by only two monks. The Taize community adheres to strict standards as to how these chants are to be sung and what accompanying instruments can be used. Musical CDs are available of their chants, as well as downloads from Amazon.com., etc.

- The Michigan Catholic, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Detroit, had a large centerfold article on Taize prayer in its January 11, 2014, issue. The following Catholic churches were listed as having Taize opportunities:
- National Shrine of the Little Flower Parish, Royal Oak, 48073, 3rd Monday at 7:30 p.m. For more details, contact Rob Abbott at rabbott@shrinechurch.com.
- Christ the Redeemer Parish, Lake Orion, 3rd Tuesday at 7 p.m. and every Tuesday of Lent/Holy Week. For more information, visit www.CtRedeemer.org.
- St. Mary of the Hills Parish, Rochester Hills, Wednesday, February 19th at 7 p.m.

“SILENCE IS PRAISE TO YOU, O GOD.”

- Psalm 65 (Hebrew text)

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Voices for Love of Silence from FRIENDS OF SILENCE
Newsletter, Jan., 2014

“...beneath the ice, the seeds of spring are waiting to be born anew. Perhaps we too need to slow our heart rates, burrow down within our souls, and gather near the warmth and light to discover the timelessness of grace. Let the gift of winter be the practice of being fully present to each sacred moment as we wait to see what will be born anew within our hearts.”

I live in unfamiliar places:
The unknowing of empty spaces
Between what was and what is yet to be.
It is the hardest earthly place for me
To dwell within, pause, absolutely still.
Knowing only God and love can fill
The wanting, one drop at a time.

It's only through the heart's abiding
That Wisdom might be found hiding
In the shadows of such Sacred Pause.
I offer up what was to mourn in empty
Spaces,

Let go of worn embraces
So what is yet to be
May somehow birth in me.
--Pam Breau in Presence, Vol. 10, #3

“Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go. And sometimes the most important thing in the whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes.” - Etty Hillesum, in *An Interrupted Life*.

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The Christian contemplative approach primarily emphasizes God's initiative and action in life. Contemplative prayer is a means of opening ourselves more fully to union with the indwelling Divine Presence (i.e. God, Christ, Spirit). Any benefits or results are gifts from God. We don't earn them. Nor expect them. Nor seek them. They happen because of God's infinite love for each of us. A commitment to a daily practice of contemplative prayer is made to be receptive to God's love and grace and consent to God's actions. We only have the intention of openness. We let go of control. We surrender to God. We sit in silent stillness to give God space to touch our souls, our hearts. We surrender all images, concepts, expectations, and goals in order to REALIZE the indwelling Divine Presence (not acquire --God IS always present to us.)

Therefore, the basic theology of Christian contemplative prayer is the basic theology of the Gospel-- Jesus' life, death and resurrection has made us one with God. In Jesus' parable about the Kingdom, we are to seek the treasure within and be prepared to leave everything in order to find “the treasure hidden in the field.”

Through God's love and grace, our growth and conversions are transformed into a human consciousness that Jesus taught as the Kingdom of God. God uses our life experiences to lead us away from individualism (narcissism), the ego-centered self (false self), and dualistic thinking (me-you, us-them) to an inclusive, compassionate, evolutionary development of humankind.

Each of us is an embodiment of the Divine. Know this. Embrace this truth. Christ is within us. Each of us is called to give life-witness to this spark of inner divinity.

“As you expand your
meditative practice,
in concert with your faith,
you will find
that those divine moments
come more often,
until you are finally awakened
to your own deepest self,
one with Christ.
James Finley

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Contemplatives in Action

A daily contemplative practice is NOT an exercise in personal piety for a coveted personal encounter with God. John Main, OSB, Benedictine monk (1926-1982), states the purpose of contemplative prayer is “to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do.” Then even our daily activities are love moments with God. Seeing God in everything is a gift of grace and the fruit of a thankful heart.

We become “Contemplatives in action” when we are “awake” and gradually come to realize God gifts us each day. Our spiritual journey to a mature, trusting faith is not about us earning or achieving anything. It is about “sensing” or “interior knowing” of the Indwelling Christ rather than expecting results, rationalizing belief systems or meeting requirements. When we can put aside all expectations and surrender completely to Love, we discover God’s presence and actions in our lives. Thus, contemplative prayer becomes a spiritual discipline, an inner pilgrimage, a gospel consciousness, as well as an essential life skill so much needed in our noisy world.

What do “contemplatives in action” look like? Although each of us is challenged to be a better human being, the brokenness of our world also challenges us. Jesus’ Kingdom of God calls us to bring compassion and forgiveness into all our relationships, especially to consciously serve the poor of this world. Can we, as 21st century Christians, be defined more by compassion than technological savvy or material success?

In following columns, I will explore with you how God gifts us with a contemplative mind/heart to enrich our own lives and also motivate us bring forth God’s dream for all creation.

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Lent

Contemplative prayer is a means to a more holistic way of life in the midst of the chaos and noise often present in our ordinary lives. This Lent can be a time of “letting go” and surrendering our lives to God in order to “awaken” to the grace and gifts of our loving God.

Jesus said, “Narrow is the gate that leads to life and few there are who enter it.” (Matt: 7:14) When God becomes our source of life, security and identity, then we pass with ease. Here is the paradox: By unburdening ourselves of false trust and self, we “awaken” and see that God was (and is!) always present, leading us through with Love, and being the source of Life. We don’t discover God as only a final destination, but we have “new eyes” to see that “we live and breathe and have our being in God.” (Acts: 17:28)

This Lent, focus less on “giving up something” and more on “expanding/embracing your God-ness”. Let us ponder the wisdom words below of Sr. Mary VanGilder, IHM, written over 10 years ago:

WE ALREADY HAVE GOD’S VISION

Recognize that God is present within us.

Be aware that we may see God in unexpected ways, ways we may not understand.

Instead of judging others, we are challenged to die to ourselves and surrender to God.

We may then be able to see a new vision of our world through God’s eyes, a gift we already have.

And in seeing that new vision, our actions will touch our world with God’s love, with God’s peace, in harmony with each other.

- Mary VanGilder, IHM, ©2004

Contemplative Living

“Modern medical imaging shows that people who meditate actually think differently from those who don’t.”

- Lara Patriquin, M.D.

The contemplative mind is opened by quieting and shifting the habitual “monkey mind” to encourage a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight. Contemplation is a third way of knowing that complements the rational and sensory. The rational involves calculation, reasoning, and analysis; the sensory emphasizes observation and measurement. Contemplation simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, pondering deeply, beholding, increasing attentiveness, and/or refocusing.

Contemplative practices usually try to affect the quality of one’s attention. A contemplative tries to withhold judgment and just observe what emotions might emerge. Instead of impulsive decision-making, a contemplative tries to become “detached” from the thoughts, feelings, and reactions that flow incessantly through our human minds. For example, rather than seething with anger, the contemplative allows more space to notice, reflect, accept, and then transform the anger – resulting in greater emotional maturity and cognitive flexibility.

Also, contemplation encourages present-moment awareness. Often our minds are focused in the future or the past with thousands of thoughts each day swimming across our consciousness. Our minds naturally wander and often to worry, anger, or fear. As a result, stress and depression can accompany our busy lives. However, contemplation teaches us to “come back to the present.” Then in daily life, we can refocus on our breathing and the wandering mind is trained to “come back to the present” and let stressful thoughts float away.

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to change its structure through repeated activity. Richard Davidson, a pioneer in neuroplasticity research, believes that peace of mind is something we can all work toward. He said, “This positive state is a skill that can be trained. “

Contemplative Living

God’s Gift of Wonder

Often we speak of God as “Holy Mystery.” This name speaks of the truth that our minds cannot totally comprehend what is of God. God is more than everything we know. However, as we open ourselves to “Holy Mystery,” we may begin to see with new eyes, the holiness of all creation, including ourselves and all others. Wonderment is a gift to be nurtured by slowing down and seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching the beauty/love-ness of everything created by God.

“Wonder encourages us to stand humbly before the unfathomable mysteries of human life, trusting that, in them, we encounter God.” (Melanie Svoboda in *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality*)

Can we see God’s creative presence in the photographic records of the marvelous billions of galaxies swirling around in space unbelievable light-years from us? Or in the incredible filming of microscopic one-cell creatures found deep in the darkness of oceans? Miracles are happening every moment! And we go through life too busy to look around. In the words of Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

What awakens your sense of wonder? A brilliant night sky? A baby’s smile? A beautiful sunset? The grandeur of mountains? Autumn leaves? To be open to wonder, is to embrace a discipline of living in the moment, which allows us to take in the beauty that surrounds us daily. Take the time to notice a tree! Or a bird calling. Or snow melting! Or the warmth of a sunny day.

I join my hands in thanks
for the many wonders of life;
for having twenty-four brand-new hours before me.

-- Thich Nhat Hanh

Contemplative Living

God's Gift of Openness

A daily practice of contemplative prayer can be transformative because God is the Initiator of all blessings. We sit in silence with God as a sign of our willingness to welcome God's presence and actions in our lives. The gift of openness creates an attitude of joyful anticipation of life! To be open is to be receptive to other people, different behavior patterns, innovative ideas, and/or diverse experiences. You are willing to share yourself with others—i.e. open your heart. It is also a willingness to accept that you are not in charge and in control of everything around you. Your “need to know” is not always a first priority! A quality of openness allows and trusts in a Creator of Love that is always present to us. Consequently, we do not have to label or prejudge anyone or any life experience as being beyond God's interest. Thus, openness allows us to remain “in the present moment” and see the other gifts of abundance, joy, peace, and beauty in the NOW.

“Openness is an ability to go with the flow... without expecting predetermined outcomes.” Tao quote

Personal transformation can occur when we let go of rigid, narrow-mindedness and embrace our heart songs. This openness is a gift of goodness from God that you accept and acknowledge within yourself. How can you encourage and develop this gift?

- Embrace life as unfolding with opportunities and new possibilities -- not only seeing obstacles or problems to be solved. .
- Practice empathy --“putting yourself into another person's shoes.”
- Be willing to try something new!
- Don't prejudge and label others to fit your predetermined “reality boxes”.
- Experience other cultures
- Attend other ethnic festivals, celebrations, parades, etc.

Contemplative Living

God's gift of unitive consciousness

Mysticism means seeing Oneness
Unitive Seeing means seeing from Oneness.

Ancient philosophers to contemporary spiritual writers have described a process of letting go of an ego-centered life in order to experience a “oneness,” a bonding with all creation and God. If the focus of your life is to accumulate wealth, live comfortably, enjoy pleasures, and avoid any suffering, then you have not moved beyond an ego-centric life.

Unitive consciousness is like a garden. In the words of Fr. Richard Rohr, “We cannot objectively be separate from God; we all walk in the Garden whether we know it or not. We come from God and we will return to God. Everything in-between is a school of conscious loving...”

Cynthia Bourgeault, author of *Wisdom Jesus*, explains, “It is simply: let go. If you would see as God sees, you must flow as God flows.” Contemplative prayer is a discipline to prepare a mind, body, and heart for the self-emptying life called for to bring forth unitive consciousness. A contemplative mind is one open to being and seeing as God does.

Bourgeault further states, “the real problem with any constrictive motion [defending, hoarding, accumulating, clinging] is that it makes us spiritually blind, unable to see the dance of divine generosity that is always flowing toward us.” It is by embracing the virtues of gratitude, humility, and self-surrender that we see with new lens of perception the divine abundant life.

Jesus' life description as the “Paschal Mystery” is each of our life's journey into God-ness. We must “die” to old ways of relating and acting in order to be “reborn” into new dimensions of being with God. Jesus' choice to be “servant” shows us the self-emptying model of being in the kingdom of God. Unitive consciousness IS the kingdom of God.

Contemplative Living

As we move through Holy Week and Triduum, a contemplative perspective may help us focus on the “good news” that was Jesus’ message. The Way of the Cross is also our own life experiences of failings, sufferings, and deaths that, ultimately, help us grow into a mature faith, compassion, and an awareness of God’s abiding presence of love.

“If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is a benevolent universe. God is not someone to be afraid of, but is the Ground of Being and on our side.”

- Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

Christian contemplation draws us to acknowledge the presence of God within us, rooted as the Spirit of Christ. We live in a Divine Embrace. God is always the initiating lover. We do not earn God’s love! All the Christian mystics responded to God’s unconditional love by offering their lives back to the world, often in service to the poor and rejected. Love gets returned by love. Jesus showed us how to relate.

Therefore, the focus is not on worthiness; the emphasis is on our trust and surrender to God. Through silence, we learn to trust that God is acting, teaching, and using us. Silence softens the hardened soil of our hearts, becoming the seedbed that allows Divine Love to take root.

Jesus’ path of transformation calls us to live as peacemakers, justice seekers, compassionate servants to all.

How do you show your love for Divine Love? Fill in the rest of this sentence: Because God loves me, I.....

Contemplative Living

“We are Easter People living in a Good Friday World.”

- Barbara Johnson (1947-2007)

Often it does seem to be a “Good Friday World.” Despair can be a lonely, tenacious companion whether we are facing personal loss and suffering, listening to global news, or hearing the political rhetoric of our times. How often would you like to wave the white flag of surrender before you even have to get out of bed in the morning? Who hasn’t wondered, “What is this world coming to?”

Yet, we are Easter people. We live not lonely lives of desperation, but as beacons of Light to all that seek hope. We know that death, injustices, or oppression are not the final outcomes. Jesus the Risen Christ lives! God is with us! Love is stronger than any fear or death.

“Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are the Easter people, and hallelujah is our song! (Pope John Paul II)

Contemplation teaches us self-surrender –i.e. trust in the Indwelling Divine Presence, the Spirit of Christ within each of us. As Paul declares, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me...” (Galatians 2:20) Surrender to that truth. Sitting in silence is an opportunity to “wave the white flag,” and be strengthened to live in the hope, power, and love of the Resurrection. God is in charge.

Practice Resurrection. Start with a smile. Believe in God’s transformative powers working in and through us. We are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). Spring is coming. God continues to create life. Rejoice!

Contemplative Living

“God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

- Mother Teresa of Calcutta

By sitting quietly in nature, we can experience our natural essence of goodness, beauty, wisdom, and cosmic being. Nature mirrors back to us the simplicity and complexity of each creature and, at the same time, its “specialness” in all of creation. Silence and solitude gift us with this sense of oneness – a knowing of our connectedness with all creation.

Nature also mirrors back to us the Divine Presence that is within all. As we become awoken to that Divine Presence (i.e. God, Divine Spark, Holy Spirit, God-Energy, etc), we then can mirror back to others their own holiness, goodness, and creative talents. Until we find peace, forgiveness, compassion, and gratitude within ourselves, we cannot expand those God-qualities to our external world.

Therefore, look for and nurture silent moments of solitude in each day, preferably in nature or, at least, in awareness of your natural surroundings. For example, take a few minutes in the morning in your backyard garden. Or have a five-minute afternoon break away from everyone. And relish a “chilling out” time from the evening TV. No scheduling or lists to do. Just you, with you, loving you. Be renewed. God is there!

“The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and, that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. - Anne Frank

Contemplative Living

God’s Gift of Gratefulness

Before I take the first step out of bed, I thank God for being alive. Then I silently say these words from a favorite hymn, “Glory and praise to my God, who alone gives light to my day. Many are the blessings you give, to those who trust in your ways.” ** Thus, begins a day of cultivating a garden of gratitude. You probably have your own daily practices that recognizes God’s lavish abundance given to you.

“To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything [God] has given us – and [God] has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of [God’s] love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from [God]. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God.” - Thomas Merton

Here is the holy paradox: The more you acknowledge and receive God’s gifts, the more you will want to give to others. A grateful heart does not hoard. A grateful heart does not see “entitlement,” but sees opportunities to share with others. A grateful heart does not withdraw unto itself, but is open to show kindness, patience, and respect. “Thank you” is best expressed in compassionate actions!

Check out this www.karmatube.org video entitled “Out of the Mouths of Babes” (www.karmatube/video.php?id) showing Abby, a 7-year-old girl, and her annual Pay It Forward Project. She is so inspiring! Also, find time to check out the web sites www.gratefulness.org. and www.dailygood.org to see how any kindness given to others has the potential to change lives – perhaps, most likely, your own. Living those two simple words, “thank you,” can transform lives from mundane existence to experiences of spontaneous joy!

For it is in giving that we receive.”

- St. Francis of Assisi

** (Adapted from John Michael Talbot’s, “Glory and Praise to Our God.”)

Contemplative Living

God's gifts of courage and strength

"We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot."

- Eleanor Roosevelt

We do not "will" ourselves to have courage. We don't "think about" having strength to face any obstacle in life and, then automatically, everything turns out super. Courage and strength are virtues that emerge from trusting God to be with us. Fear wins when we fail to stand up for what is just and right. Fear wins when we allow failure to happen before giving our best. Fear wins whenever we let the darkness of life to overcome our God-light of compassion, peace, and goodwill.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor in her latest book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, actually tells of her experiences in dark caves, walking along dark shorelines, being underneath the night sky. She writes, "The only real difference between anxiety and excitement was my willingness to let go of fear." However, this is also a book about faith: finding the stars in the dark, bleak future of some churches. She addresses a lot of our fears and anxieties by repeating the strong Biblical messages of reassurance: Do not be afraid. Whatever the darkness, these words seem appropriate from Isaiah 41:10:

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Also, be assured by the words of the song, "You are Mine," by David Haas:. (All stanzas can be seen at www.catholicgarden.com/yrmine.html)

I will come to you in the silence,
I will lift you from all your fear.
You will hear my voice,
I claim you as my choice.
Be still and know I am here.

Contemplative Living Resources

I have some hesitancy about offering this list of resources on silent prayer and contemplative practices. For me, it often seems more appealing to open up a book about prayer than actually spend ½ that time in prayer. So, don't procrastinate and check out these resources – after your daily prayer practice.

With no specific ordering, the following are contemporary writers and a sampling of their books: (not necessarily their latest, nor most popular)

- Ilia Delio, OSF, *The Emergent Christ*
- Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O., *Open Mind, Open Heart* (updated edition 2006)
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace; The Miracle of Mindfulness*
- Richard Rohr, OFM, *Everything Belongs ; Naked Now*
- Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus; Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*
- Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., *Thoughts in Solitude*
- John Main, OSB, *Fully Alive: The transforming power of prayer*
- Laurence Freeman, OSB, *Christian Meditation: Your daily practice*
- ORGANIZATIONS/ON-LINE LINKS:
- *Contemplative Journal*: www.contemplativejournal.com. Free quarterly web magazine on the spiritual dimensions of life.
- *Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.* www.contemplativeoutreach.org. Fr. Thomas Keating)
- *Contemplative-Life. Bookstore*: www.contemplative-life.org.
- *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*: www.contemplativemind.org.
- *The Contemplative Society*: www.contemplative.org: Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault
- *World Community for Christian Meditation*: www.wccm.-u.s.a.org. Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB
- *The Center for Action and Contemplation*. www.cac.org. Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM. Free daily e-mail.
- *Winter Feast for the Soul*: www.winterfeastforthesoul.com daily silent prayer from Jan. 15th – Feb. 23rd . Archives are always available.
- (Blog) poetry & photos of Diane Walker: www.contemplativepoetry.com.