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Jan Johnson

Contemplation: No Better Place To Be Than With God

Long before I'd heard the word *contemplative*, much less learned how to pronounce it, I had an experience that pulled together the frayed ends of my life. After having been a "high-achieving" church leader, Bible teacher, and pastor's wife, I crashed and burned, so to speak, in my personal life. As a result, I had little to say to God. It took a while, but I eventually meandered back to God—slightly—by way of twelve-step

meetings and pondering Brother Lawrence's invitation to practice gently the presence of God.

I had halfheartedly consented to go to a women's retreat at the church I reluctantly attended because the speaker had written a rather gritty book that described what I was going through. The speaker, positioned in front of a two-story-high window in the chapel of the retreat center, opened with this verse: "For I know the plans I have for

you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV¹).

Yeah, right! I thought. My cynicism came flowing out, only to be absorbed by my view through the window. I didn't hear anything else the entire weekend. I spent every session staring out that window at the tree-filled mountainside and occasionally at a tiny structure that looked like a tree house near the top.

I had a sense God was inviting me up there, inviting me to stop being mad at him. I couldn't talk about it to anyone. After the sessions, I stayed in the chapel to gaze. I shut my eyes, knowing the window and the trees were there. No words. No tears.

When I got home, I found that for the first time in a few years, I was ready to move forward with God. Those hours God and I had spent together, relating but not speaking, helped me become almost comfortable with God once again. I wasn't so cynical, but I also wasn't hopeful. I was just ready to hang out with God. But this time I wouldn't bombard God with so many prayer requests. This time I would just be still and know that God is God. And learn to love it.

A few years later, in spiritual direction training, I read the following words of Gerald May and scribbled in the margin next to them "making peace with God at Alpine Conference Center": "The term *contemplation* implies a totally *uncluttered* appreciation of existence, a state of mind or a condition of the soul that is simultaneously *wide-awake* and free from all preoccupation, preconception, and interpretation. It's a *wonder-filled* yet utterly *simple* experience."²

Where in Scripture...?

I had no one with whom to discuss this and wondered if anybody else ever practiced this wordless prayer. Did anyone else just sit with God and be? I found some of these moments in Scripture, especially in these three patterns: waiting, resting, and delighting.

Waiting

While our culture considers waiting to be a negative, tiresome void that happens because what we want has been delayed, the Scripture describes waiting as full and rich. It's active, expectant and open-ended: "Truly my soul silently waits for God;...My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him" (Psalm 62:1,5, NKJV³).

People talk about "being in God's waiting room" as if it's worse than any medical waiting room in existence. However, waiting as a long-practiced way of praying doesn't have to be boring, but can be full of alert peacefulness: "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope" (Psalm 130:5, NIV). The expectancy is electric, as described by Wisdom's declaring, "Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway" (Proverbs 8:34, NIV). Imagine yourself waiting and gazing from God's doorway; that "counts" as prayer too.

The antidote to my cynicism (as in, "The church will never get it!") was hope, which is learned through this practice of waiting. Each minute of resting in contemplative prayer is train-

ing to be a person of hope and trust rather than pessimism, scorn, and suspicion. Notice how the word *wait* is often linked with *hope* (*italics added*):

- We *wait in hope* for the LORD; he is our help and our shield (Psalm 33:20, NIV).
- I *wait* for the LORD, my soul *waits*, and in his word I put my *hope* (Psalm 130:5, NIV).
- My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and *wait in hope* for my arm (Isaiah 51:5, NIV).
- But as for me, I keep watch for the LORD, I *wait* in hope for God my Savior; my God will hear me (Micah 7:7, NIV).
- But if we *hope* for what we do not yet have, we *wait* for it patiently (Romans 8:25, NIV).

For me, waiting in contemplative prayer also involves asking God questions. I don't expect God to answer me, necessarily, in the quiet, although that happens now and then. My asking in quiet prayer sets me up to hear all day long in the voice of my son, in the recalled words of an editor, in an article in the newspaper. Often my question is,

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—Gerald May

What do I need to know about... my spouse...a writing project... my leg injury? I assume that if I need to know something, God will make it known to me when I need to know it. The contemplation sets me up to wait as long as needed. It puts me in a posture of listening to God all day long in the back and forth of life.

Resting

Resting is demonstrated by the outward silence of contemplative prayer. To be quiet and vulnerable before God is a concrete form of laying all in God's hands and not worrying about who I am and how I'm perceived. The shadow of the Almighty is a great place to *rest* for the soul that is scattered, parched, guilt-ridden, or uncertain. The psalmists spoke to their souls about rest, saying: "Find *rest*, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him"; "Be at *rest* once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you" (Psalms 62:5; 116:7, NIV, *italics added*).

Those of us who are "recovering controllers," needing to surrender people and situations, find training in contemplation by simply "being" in prayer with God, rather than telling God what to do in the form of prayer requests.

Delighting

After waiting and resting, it's possible to move forward to delighting: "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God" (Isaiah 61:10, NIV). "One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple" (Psalm 27:4, NKJV). For such a contemplative, there's no better place to

be than with God. (Beware: This state might lead to wild behavior such as raising hands, singing passionately, or doing dance steps!)

From Pressure Cooker to Slow Cooker

Contemplation slows us down and detaches us from the hurried, harried culture. Like a slow cooker, it gives space for the thoughts to simmer and flavors to blend. It addresses the "head to heart" problem of knowing things intellectually, but not knowing them in our gut and so not being willing to act on them. It gives time for truth to be embraced and move throughout our soul.

The quiet, restful moments with God melt one's hard, unre-

pentant heart. Many times we know what is the kind and loving thing to do in a certain situation, but we just don't have the kind and loving heart needed to do that thing. I want to be willing to reach out to someone who has scorned me; I want to lay down my self-importance and my need to be noticed; I want to stop voicing my opinion when no one is asking. But I can't quite do it. Sitting with God in the midst of such tension often "slow cooks" your heart into alignment with God's heart.

A few years ago, a friend asked me to check the Web site that profiles sex offenders to see if his friend was on it. There I discovered the name and face of one of my favorite clients at the Samaritan Center, a drop-in center for the homeless where I volunteer. I should not have clicked on the screen to see his offenses, but I did. I was so repulsed by his offenses against children that I could not speak, and my stomach was upset for the rest of the evening. I could not speak to God about this.

But for the next few days I found myself waking early in the dark and watching the morning light creep into my bedroom. Somehow in the dark, I could address God about this, but not with words. By the time my day to volunteer came, I was ready. The client greeted me enthusiastically, as usual, and I responded as usual. (The director and I also made appropriate boundary-related decisions. We rarely had children on our property, and when we did, certain guidelines were in order.) My only weak moment that morning came when I was doing laundry—one of my tasks as a volunteer. I stood there and prayed to Jesus, "So it's come to this: I'm washing the clothes of a sex offender."

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But then I thought of how Jesus washed Judas' feet, and...it seemed like a holy moment.

Learning From the "Community"

Perhaps sitting in the dark and waiting for the sun to rise doesn't sound like contemplative prayer to you. I don't always practice disciplines by the book. I apply the same principle to them that Jesus did to the Sabbath: People weren't created for contemplation; contemplation was created for people (from Mark 2:27). Scripture names disciplines—fasting, silence, study, and so on—and the assumption is that we'll do them. But it doesn't prescribe how. We work this out by examples, both in Scripture and in community: by reading what our brothers and sisters in the past have done and by interacting with the contemporary community about that discipline. But we also take a discipline before God and ask God what we need to do it.

Devotional masters such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, Madame Guyon, Jean-Nicholas Grou, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* recorded timeless insights into seeking the heart of God. Describing the contemplation of God, Bernard of Clairvaux (a 12th-century abbot and founder of more than sixty monasteries) wrote of an "inward paradise of pleasure...[where] vision of pure truth illuminates the eye of the heart. The most sweet voice of the inner Comforter brings joy and gladness to the ears."⁴ Contemplation has

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long been a place of gazing at God in great delight.

Contemplation is generally considered to be an apophatic (consciousness-oriented, wordless, imageless) approach to prayer, as opposed to the kataphatic approach (content-oriented, concerned with words and images).⁵ Centering prayer, for example—which is as much, if not more, a discipline of silence as it is prayer—is apophatic, while meditation on Scripture is kataphatic. *Lectio divina* combines these approaches, using *contemplatio* as the fourth and last stage. After meditating on words and images of Scripture, we simply rest in them:

Reading a Scripture passage
(*lectio*)

Meditation on that passage
(*meditatio*)

Prayer (*oratio*)

Contemplation (*contemplatio*)

In spite of contemplation's detachment and wordless connection with God, it is based on the foundation of study, reflection, and prayer; so wrote the 14th-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Those "who do not make the effort to ponder God's Word should not be surprised if they are unable to pray [contemplatively]," wrote this anonymous Englishman or -woman.⁶ Thomas Merton,

a 20th-century Trappist monk, concurred. Contemplation is "embedded in a life of psalmody, liturgical celebration, and the meditative reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*)."⁷

Lectio is ideal for those who can move into contemplation better if they begin with words or images. But there is a shift: when we meditate, the focus is on the words and images of the passage, while contemplation focuses us on resting in God.⁸ Meditation helps us savor the truth about God, and contemplation makes it sweet to our soul. "Meditation investigates; contemplation wonders."⁹ In my early days of practicing *lectio*, I admit to shortchanging the contemplation phase. I soon figured out, however, that this is the icing on the cake: "taste and see that God is good."

An abbreviated form of the above process is to rest in images as one wakes up or goes to sleep. They might be images such as these: the very satisfied sheep lying down in green pastures instead of standing on all fours and eating (Psalm 23:2); God singing over us, perhaps even rocking us (Zephaniah 3:17); or even reclining, as John did in the upper room, with our heads resting on Jesus' chest (John 13:23,25). Then we rest in that.

How You're Different

Peace in Agitation

Practicing this form of quiet prayer makes it easier to slip into a state of rest, even when you wait to pick someone up from school or a busy airport, or as you sit in the dentist's chair. I notice it most after an airplane lands, and we folks in the back wait for the front folks to deplane. It's normal for people to complain and even gasp, "I must get out of here." For several years, I prayed the 23rd Psalm in this situation but have gradually slipped into just "being" with God. Yet it's an alert waiting; you notice who's struggling: the person getting suitcases out of the overhead bin, or the mom holding a diaper bag and juggling a baby. So you lend a hand.

Waiting and resting train you to be alert to God in all of life so that you live a contemplative lifestyle. You see and hear God in the flowers around you, in the books you read, and in the voices of your teenagers. Honestly,

Searched and Known

In the quiet of contemplation, the false self is unmasked, and you see how you are with others—pressured, condemning, invitational, or hopeful. The silence is not always comfortable. God searches you and sees your offensive ways and gently notifies you about them. You may find yourself lying on the floor on your face, praying such things as, "Lord, make me what I should be; change me whatever the cost."¹⁰

The faces of those I serve at the Samaritan Center often

come to me in moments of contemplation at home. Especially in the early years of volunteering, I would hear in my head the shrill words I spoke to a client, or feel the resentment toward one I deemed undeserving. In these quiet moments, I saw my real self and asked God to put within me a deeper and quieter love for these "have-nots."

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Nudged Forward into Service

Resist the urge to pigeonhole contemplatives according to the so-called Mary vs. Martha stereotypes: i.e., people are either contemplative being-types or active doing-types. In reality, contemplatives make powerful activists, and activists cannot survive unless they're also contemplatives. In the quiet, contempla-

tives are motivated by God to roll up their sleeves and partner with God in reconciling people to God, to others, and even to themselves.

The daily life of Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity includes significant amounts of meditation and contemplation.¹¹ This is why they are able to be the heart of Jesus in such hopeless situations. Teresa of Avila not only wrote about her famous vision of the interior castle, but was also a monastic reformer. As Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin served the poor in their House of Hospitality in New York City, they allowed significant time not only for rest and study but also for daily Eucharist.¹² Jim Wallis, a writer and activist with the inner-city Washington, D.C., Sojourner community, wrote:

Action without reflection can easily become barren and even bitter. Without the space for self-examination and the capacity for rejuvenation, the danger of exhaustion and despair is too great. Contemplation confronts us with the questions of our identity and power. Who are we? To whom do we belong? Is there a power that is greater than ours? How can we know it? Our drivenness must give way to peacefulness, and our anxiety to joy. So concerned with effectiveness, we learn instead to be content with faithfulness. Strategy grows into trust, success into obedience, planning into prayer.¹³

Contemplation and action are as inseparable as loving God and loving one's neighbor are inseparable. My contemplative life both drives and sustains my volunteering at the Samaritan Center. From outward appearances, I do laundry, hand out towels, and goof off with clients, but that's my camouflage (as

Eugene Peterson describes the “subversive pastor”¹⁴). I try to do a decent job at those things, but I really go there to pray.

All this points to the wisdom that we already know: union with God leads to transformation of the person. As I abide in Christ, the fruit emerges.

Endnotes

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² Gerald May, *Will and Spirit*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982, 25, italics added.

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⁴ *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings, The Classics of Western Spirituality*.

Translated by Gillian Evans. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 84, 85.

⁵ May, 108ff.

⁶ William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*. New York: Doubleday, An Image Book, 1973, 93.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Doubleday, An Image Book, 1996, 28.

⁸ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 9.

⁹ Avery Brooke, “What Is Contemplation?” *Weavings*. July/August 1992, 10.

¹⁰ Anthony Bloom, *Courage to Pray*. New York: Paulist Press, 1973, 17, as quoted in Mary Conrow Coelho, “Participating in the New Creation.” *Weavings*. March/April, 1987, 18.

¹¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988, 28.

¹² Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker*

Movement. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997, 36, 99.

¹³ Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*. New York: Orbis Books, 1994, 96, 200.

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989, 27ff.

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Jan Johnson (www.janjohnson.org) is a writer, speaker, and spiritual director. Parts of this article are adapted from her book *When the Soul Listens* (NavPress, 1999).

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