

Abstract

“THE MONASTERY AND THE MINIVAN: ACCESSIBLE MONASTIC PRACTICES
IN THE TRADITION OF THE DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS”

JOSHUA MCCRORY HATCHER

Project under the direction of Professor Rebecca Wright

The purpose of this little reflection is to offer a humble sort of middle way; a series of contemplative monastic practices intended to be accessible to seekers from all walks of life who desire to move beyond a systematic “head knowledge” *about* God, and into the mystical heart-space of experience *with* God. Somewhere between the monastery and the minivan sits an elusive convergence of desert mother and world-weary father-of-four; of 2nd century monk and 30-something law clerk.

Through an exploration of the monastic practices of prayer, contemplation, and Sabbath rest, this project seeks to bridge the chasm of accessibility and offer a humble pathway to those who wish to know from experience what they have known intellectually. This pathway rests within the perennial tradition of the Church, and upon the shoulders of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of pre-Orthodox Alexandrian tradition, of medieval mystics such as Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux, as well as modern practitioners of contemplative practice to include Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating.

Approved _____ Date _____

Preface to the Reader

What follows is a result of many years of apprenticeship to a vast array of spiritual mentors, some living and some from among the great cloud of departed witnesses. It's a humble alternative step of sorts to be offered to and undertaken by those who desire a more well-worn pathway from systematic head-knowledge *about* God into a tradition of spiritual practice intended to make us more aware of our intimacy *with* God; or better – of God's intimacy *with us*.

Though not a result of any formal testing, the material that makes up this project has been used in two small group Bible Studies and revised both for relevance and accessibility in collaboration with these groups and several deeply spiritual “first readers,” for whom the content is intended.

This project relies heavily on the Rabbinic and Christian traditions of imaginative reading of Scripture¹, particularly the two accounts of 1 Kings 18-19 and Mark 1:16-39. While ultimately intended for expansion to include additional spiritual practices, the limitation in length of this project suggests it remain confined to an exploration of the disciplines of prayer, contemplation and Sabbath rest. I hope that in time it might lead to further study and publication.

¹ Deeg, Alexander. “Imagination and Meticulousness. *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* in Judaism and Christian Preaching.” *Homiletic: The Journal of the Academy of Homiletics*, vol. 34 no. 1, May 28, 2009. p. 143

Introduction

“I’m not sure I heard a word,” I told my wife upon returning from mass with our two young children. Not nearly a week from delivering our youngest baby boy, she had stayed home while I got a glimpse of her weekend life as a pastor’s wife and Sunday-single-mother. Between scooping up Cheerios and juggling crayons, I remember wondering where our family fit into a life given to spiritual transformation. A round of experiences like this can lead us to think that institutional spiritual life is designed for celibate monks, nuns and priests, and that the rest of us are consigned to either forego the endeavor or wait it out until our kids graduate and leave home. Maybe you can relate.

The purpose of this little reflection is to offer a humble sort of middle way. Somewhere between the monastery and the minivan sits an elusive convergence of desert mother and world-weary father-of-four; of 2nd century monk and 30-something law clerk. Somewhere deep in this fusion of minds, we discover our absolute similarity with those spiritual masters we tend to feel so distant from: Release – absolute release – in the giving over of the selves we think we should be.

What holds true of our constructed selves must also inform our awareness of our sacred selves. Nicolas Herman, who later took the name Brother Lawrence when he entered as a lay brother into Carmelite monastery in 17th century France, writes of this middle way, “It is not necessary for being with God to be always at church; we make an oratory of our heart wherein to retire from time to time, to converse with Him in meekness, humility and love²”.

² Lawrence, Brother. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Oneworld Publications, 1993. p. 56

I wonder if this self-emptying discovery of our belovedness can also lead us to grow past the boundaries of traditional spiritual experiences of daily masses, structured prayers, and curated devotional readings. It's not that these are tired or childish paths that should be abandoned out of principle. Maybe they're simply limited and *limiting* in the perceived uniqueness that only otherworldly, churchy sorts of activities can lead us into an incarnational, walk-alongside-me sort of God. Maybe we stand in the need both.

There is a holiness to our daily routines; a sacred quality to our relationships and daily chores. Built on the tradition of the desert mothers and fathers of early Alexandria, what follows is a humble reflection on the Spirit-driven realignment of our minds, our value systems, and the boundaries of place and vocational practice where God meets us.

Through the awareness of prayer, the slow practice of contemplation, and the gift of Sabbath, we discover who we already are: We are already praying. We are already holy. We are already at rest.

Be joyful always. Pray without ceasing... ~ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17

CHAPTER 1: PRAYER-AWARENESS

We Are Already Praying...

There are as many different kinds of prayer as there are conditions of soul; these conditions determine the character of one's prayer.³ ~ John Cassian

It happens perpetually, uninterrupted until the hour of our death. Every five to five and a half seconds⁴, the diaphragm tightens and descends within our ribcage, creating just enough room in the upper body for our lungs to expand, soaking up the requisite amount of air from the world around us. As it's filtered, oxygen from that air is absorbed into the bloodstream. From there, the oxygenated blood flows through the pulmonary artery to the heart, which then launches it on a sixty-second round-trip throughout the body⁵, feeding our muscle tissue with the manna that keeps the body functional.

Over the course of a day, the average adult breathes over 21,000 times, pumping nearly 2,000 gallons of oxygenated blood through the body's ventricular system. Sometimes we're aware of this vast and beautiful respiratory arrangement that's going on within us. Sometimes it remains a subconscious exercise, as we find ourselves preoccupied instead with the functionality our breathing facilitates. Distracted or not, conscious of our sustaining or not, the fact remains that we *are* breathing.

St. Paul paints our perpetual state of prayer as similarly subconscious when he writes, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who

³ Ramsey, Boniface. *John Cassian: The Conferences*. Newman Press, 1997. p. 324

⁴ Barman, Susan M., Kim E. Barrett, Scott Boitano, Heddwen Brooks. *Ganong's Review of Medical Physiology*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2012.

⁵ "What Happens When You Breathe?" *National Institute of Health*, 17 July 2012, nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/hlw/whathappens.

searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God⁶" (Romans 8:26-27).

Prayer is constant, just as our communion with God is constant. The Spirit of our living Creator calls out from within us, reaching out with a longing for herself that's both perpetual and uninterrupted. As the authors' own understanding of the Divine Indwelling grows, the Scriptures begin to speak of this self-longing as a state of being, primed within humanity's own awareness and yet coated and perfected by the Spirit's unceasing groans beneath our consciousness. God, as the object of our contemplation and prayer, seems not to discern the origin of our prayer, but knowing the mind of the Spirit, receives both to the benefit of the one who prays (Romans 8:23-27).

In other words, if we're going to attain the goal of *prayer without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:18), we must consider prayer itself to be less an activity that we dedicate a set amount of time to before moving on to other things, and more a constant state of being that exists beneath the surface of our conscious selves.

Sometimes we're aware of this vast and beautiful respiratory arrangement that's going on within us. Sometimes it remains hidden well beneath the surface, as we find ourselves preoccupied instead with the functionality our communion with God facilitates - how our oneness with God plays out when it spills over into our daily routine. Distracted or not, the fact remains that we *are* praying. The question is how attentive we are to our life of prayer.

To get from here to there, and so awaken to the subconscious union with God ablaze within the depths of our Selves, we're going to need a roadmap.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Christian Scriptures (including this one) are taken from the New International Version (1984).

+ A TENDENCY TOWARD THE MYSTICAL +

Maybe we were too ambitious. When my family first moved to St. Louis in 2016, we thought it would help break our kids into their Midwestern experience if we took them to the Zoo. And being the homeschooling over-preparers that we are, we downloaded a sitemap complete with highlighted animal stops and set off on our adventure.

After the initial instinctual wandering that every two and five-year-old are pre-wired with, we unpacked our map and quickly discovered we'd missed a few necessary stops. As it turned out, the effectiveness of any map rests wholly on its user's knowing two things unique to every individual human experience. We need to start by knowing:

(1) Our Current Location: *Where We're Starting From*

(2) Our Intended Destination: Where We're Going

The interior journey of the saints, as it's told through the voices of Scripture and of tradition, is a movement from *here* to *there*. We begin where we *think we are*; an entrapped amalgam of our own impulses, unable to break free from the chains of human tendency (Romans 7:19-24). Throughout the Scriptures, St. Paul refers to this discarded exoskeleton as our *former selves* (Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 1:21).

Our destination is both painted and promised as a unitive prayer of Jesus in John's recounting of the Gospel; that we might live into a full indwelling of the wholeness of God, as a collective consciousness with him and with all humanity (John 17:20-23). St. Paul simplifies that union, saying, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

The question, then, is *how to do we get from here to there?* Knowing full-well that there are more "theres" beyond where any of us might stop next, how will we move from

where we perceive our starting point to be into union with God and the awareness that the soul exists perpetually in a state of unconscious prayer?

In the end, it must be a journey of *growing awareness*; an interior pilgrimage into the depths of the self and into union with God where we already live and breathe. We begin, to follow the 20th century Cistercian cartographer Thomas Merton:

*In prayer we discover what we already have through the indwelling Spirit of God and our incorporation through baptism into Christ. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. All we need is to experience what we already possess.*⁷

I hope this little project can be a pathway, a map of sorts, into your own awareness of the constant stream of subconscious prayer ascending from within you. We'll follow in the footsteps of saints and prophets, map-makers and apostles; all of whom are ultimately listening, trailing in the cross-draped shadow of Jesus. We'll begin by staring deeply into the doubtful, drowning eyes of St. Peter.

⁷ Merton, Thomas and Patrick Hart. *Thomas Merton/Monk*. Cistercian Publications, 1974. p. 80

+ **THE SLOW DESCENT OF PRAYER: Matthew 14:22-33** +

“It’s a ghost!’ they said, and they cried out in fear.” A confession of sorts of their panicked disbelief, the disciples found themselves unable to recognize Jesus in the maelstrom of their own uncertainty. Even after Jesus’ immediate attempt to calm them, “Be courageous! It’s me. Don’t be afraid,” they feel it practical to test the Lord. Peter calls across the tempest, “If it’s you, then beckon me out onto the water with you.” Without knowing, he’s mapped the first step into what will be his pathway into God.

An experience of both outward tension and interior uncertainty, the Apostle teeters on the edge between fear and peace, of an awareness of God’s providential care⁸ and the rush of anxiety lying too close to the surface to be ignored. His fear is in itself a groaning prayer, as is the investigation he launches across the waves.

Jesus answers only a word: “Come.” I imagine his expression to be combination of patience and anticipated failure, coupled with the certainty of an opportune teaching moment as Peter – his inner tension now gaining legs - descended the safety of his boat and began to walk toward Jesus.

It wasn’t long before Peter again took notice of the storm that had driven him to panic in the first place. His uncertainty boiling over and his body descending into the deep, Peter reaches desperately to the one he failed to recognize at the outset. Again he prays aloud, this time with less presumption, “Lord, help me!” With a now familiar sense of immediacy, Jesus lowers his hand to catch Peter before the sea swallows him whole.

Never missing an opportunity to teach, Jesus seizes the moment, “You of little faith,” he says to Peter, “Why did you ever doubt me to begin with?” Together they climb into

⁸ Being mindful here of Isaiah 43:2

the boat, the teacher and his humbled, freshwater-soaked student, to find Jesus' other disciples lying prostrate in thanksgiving on the deck. This time, it's a confession of a different sort that's driven them to the ground, "You really are the Son of God..."

However conscious the disciples may or may not be of it, every breath of this experience is saturated with the groaning prayer of the Spirit from within them (Romans 8:26-27). From the inception of their calling, the disciples have been in a state of prayerful communion with the Divine. Within the vignette of Matthew 14, every step in their progression from embarking onto the Lake of Genessaret, through panicked uncertainty to awestruck worship maps a progression we can follow into our own prayer-consciousness as well. If we're paying attention to it...

"Why did you ever doubt me to begin with?" I'm sure Jesus' question wormed its way deeper into the Apostle's experience, below the simplicity of his near-drowning incident. That's the question, isn't it? Why do we ever doubt God to begin with, if not because we become so overwhelmed, sitting in that anxious space between what we've experienced of God and what we know to be possible should the waves overtake us. Of course, there would come a time when the waves *would* seem to wash over him, but our Apostle isn't nearly ready for that experience quite yet.

For now - for this marker on Peter's map that would lead him more fully into an awareness of his constant unconscious prayer life - it's enough to lead him toward a trusting peace the next time it starts to rain. For you and me, it's another reminder that failure and fear, that life is itself the pathway into union with God.

+ A WEEKLY PROGRESSION INTO PRAYER-AWARENESS +

*Do not despair, thinking that you cannot change yourself after so many years. Simply enter into the presence of Jesus as you are and ask him to give you a fearless heart where he can be with you.*⁹ ~ Henri Nouwen

Charting a descent into prayer and the awareness of its constancy in the life of all who bear the reflection of God (Genesis 1:27, Genesis 9:6) requires of us the rediscovery of who we are within a cycle similar to the tradition of weekly corporate worship. With each new week, Creation begins again with our observance of the new creation in Christ through public assembly and worship. As we mark the Resurrection on Sunday, so begins our attempt to live out a life consistent with our calling as the also-crucified and resurrected children of God (Romans 6:3-11).

Undoubtedly, we fail time and again, and are drawn cyclically back to the source of our being to find the strength to begin anew. This is the long game. There's much to become aware of, more than any of us can grasp in one lifetime. It's going to take a while.

Borne of the practice of early Christian monastic tradition along with the marked degrees, purposes, and characteristics of prayer as described by those who dedicated their lives to the practice, what follows is a roadmap into prayer-awareness that's been well-trampled by the saints and rediscovered time and time again by the generations who follow after them. So then, if we are to rediscover it ourselves, we must at the same time chart the course that's been plotted while taking more than a few steps with our eyes shut.

⁹ Nouwen, Henri. *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*. Doubleday, 1998. p. 41

As days progress, we'll apprentice ourselves to Apostles, Desert Holy Men and Monastic Women, to Cistercians and ultimately to Jesus himself. We'll be led by the unknowable into the depths of mystery.



A Weekly Progression into Prayer-Awareness

*I urge, then, first of all, that
petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving
be made for all people...
~ 1 Timothy 2:1*

Monday: *Preparation*
Tuesday: *Confession*
Wednesday: *Discernment*
Thursday: *Intercession*
Friday: *Thanksgiving*
Saturday: *Contemplation*
Sunday: *Sabbath Rest*



Each step of this course into prayer-awareness builds upon the one before. It maps a stirring that begins within our interior self and moves slowly outward; at once creating space for us to listen to God and then moving us outward to engage the countless divine reflections spread throughout the universe.

Feel free to begin on a day other than Monday if you need to in order to keep your own unique routine. For you, Sunday may not be a day of Sabbath Rest, for example. You may need to move the landing pad to another day to make this work. It's important to keep our progression in order, but the days of takeoff and landing should be suited to your availability to each step.

While in the desert, having renounced all worldly pleasures and responsibilities, St. Anthony the Great discovered that there was a man living in the city whose sense of spirituality was equal to his own. This man was a doctor, living a seemingly normal life in the city of Alexandria, who had dedicated himself to two very simple practices: He gave whatever wealth exceeded his need to the poor, and he sang the Sanctus daily as a regular practice¹⁰.

If the goal of monasticism is to live a life fully focused on, moving toward and driven by a realized communion with God without the distractions of worldly affairs, surely this promise should be accessible to everyone. An ascetic spirituality, then, would call into its practice both the Stylite led to pray across a lifetime perched atop a pillar, as well as the mother and real estate agent who's doing well to get three minutes of peace throughout the course of a normal day. That promise of equitable accessibility is the foundation of the movement toward prayer-awareness.

We'll take up that movement into prayer-awareness and contemplation in more detail in chapter 2, so for now it will be sufficient to simply touch on the question of access.

The aim of a monastic life at any level is to crucify the self and its passions so that the renewed Spirit might cultivate virtue and goodness naturally. St. Paul would locate this Spirit-oneness in Christ himself, saying, "I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Whether this leads us to live a solitary life in the deserts of Northern Egypt, eating

¹⁰ Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 6

nothing but bread every few days¹¹, or entering into mindful presence within the routine an overscheduled workday, the potential to move beyond the usual enslavement to our thoughts is latent within all of us.

+ PREPARATION +

It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.¹² ~ Evagrius Ponticus

It's not just for cloistered nuns and full-time priests. The spiritual life of prayer-awareness is simply a life lived in full awareness to what already is. In other words, prayer-awareness isn't the beginning of something new, only the enhancement of what was already beginning before the thought of prayer ever entered our consciousness. We turn inward to discover the Spirit of God has already beaten us there. Prayer-awareness, then, is like a lens through which we can see only what was already there to begin with. Whatever thoughts, anxieties, temptations, and uncertainties we harbor within the mind before committing ourselves to pray tend to stow away for the passage into prayer as well.

It seems the seed of doubt and anxiety had already been planted within the disciples well before it sprouted into full panic at the sight of Jesus walking on the water. The ghostly appearance of Jesus across the waves simply exacerbated what was already bubbling up inside them. When the disciples cry out in fear, beginning without knowing an intense string of prayers, the worry and doubt already growing within them spills over

¹¹ Athanasius. *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. Paulist Press, 1980. p. 36

¹² Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Praktikos §6, p. 17

in conversation with the Divine. They're afraid when they pray because they were afraid before they began.

The 12th century Cistercian monk, St. Bernard of Clairvaux once wagered a farmer that he couldn't say the Lord's Prayer without becoming distracted and listless. He was so confident in the farmer's inability to stay centered that he offered his horse as a trophy should he stay his mind through to the end. As the farmer set himself to pray, he began mindful of his task, but by the third petition began to wonder if he would win the saddle as well¹³.

Midway through the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has already been baptized in a river and tempted in a desert; he's recruited four disciples, exorcised a demoniac in a synagogue and healed a town-load of the sick and possessed. The twenty-six verses from baptism to early-morning prayer are case study in self-emptying for the sake of others, in doing and serving, all of which are good things. Then, as if to give us space to catch our breath, Mark changes course to give us a glimpse into the intimate prayer life of Jesus.

It's as though the language stills, the Evangelist begging us to read a little more slowly and drink a little more deeply from the well of Christ's own way of being. Jesus gets up before sunrise, dis-embeds himself from the city, and prays beyond words as a state of oneness with God. He prays, not as an activity to later be laid down for something else, but as an extension of his life of prayer; an experience with the God who recognizes and reaches out for himself.

We'll take up our own preparation for prayer in its fullest sense in the second chapter, so for now, let it suffice to say that prayer is a race that's won before the starting pistol.

¹³ Macgregor, Cecilia. *Climbing the Ladder*. JT Hayes, 1874. pp. 327-8

In the arrangement, in the disposition carried onto the field; this is where we pray before prayer has begun.

Throughout the day, be mindful of the spiritual warfare that's raging unseen in the world around you, and often enough within ourselves as well. Disengagement from the world is more than just peaceful retreat, its intent is to make space for the Spirit of God to speak to us.

Withdraw mindfully and deliberately from the temptations that invade your mind. Take note of them. What whispers tend to seduce your thoughts? And when? Investigate the inner working of your spirit as you're drawn to indulge the natural tendencies of the mind and body. Detach. Battle. Pray.

Prayer for the Spirit

Sit quietly for a few minutes if your environment will allow it. Read 1 John 4:4 aloud to yourself: You, dear children, are from God and have overcome the spirit of the antichrist, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

Imagine the day ahead, and pray: Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him/her." But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side. Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God! (Psalm 3:1-7a)

+ CONFESSION +

Remember your former life and your past sins, and how, though you were subject to the passions, you have been brought into soul-health by the mercy of Christ...¹⁴ ~ Evagrius Ponticus

It seems fitting to begin the slow descent into prayer-awareness by reflecting on our need to scrape away the loose ends of our own tendencies away from God. The life of unceasing prayer begins where our own humanity finds its origin and meaning: In our struggle to see the image of God within ourselves.

When the disciples of Jesus acknowledged what was boiling inside them, they set themselves on a path of vulnerability that opened them to a cleansing of confession. Beneath their expression of fear lies the realization of their own deficiency, their own distrust of God's provision when Jesus is just out of earshot, their yet-unsettled vision of what would happen to them should they be overtaken by storm or apparition.

Fear is a confession unto itself. It is, after all, the admission of our own inadequacy to whatever circumstance invades the mind and shocks the nervous system. The exploration of that fear, and the subsequent examination of the myriad of shortcomings beneath it, could well consume a thousand lifetimes should we have the patience to investigate the totality of our fallen condition.

As an astronomer dedicates herself fully to a study she will never see the end of, so those who dedicate themselves to thorough self-reflection and repentance will never truly dig to the bottom. Each mountain climbed reveals another hidden behind its peak. Though we mustn't linger too long, lest our introspection give way to an unnecessary turn toward shame and self-loathing, confession and self-reflection is a good place to begin a life of ceaseless prayer.

¹⁴ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Praktikos §33, p. 25.

St. Ignatius of Loyola wraps up the self-reflection exercise of his prayer practice – the Examen – with a meditation on our fundamental bent toward self-sabotage. His understanding of sin and our saturation of it is at the core of this examination.

For Ignatius, sin isn't just a mistake we commit that has a beginning in our action and ends when that action is completed. The action is the plant that grows from the seed of our condition itself. Light and rainfall are the conditions that bring about that action; things that are well beyond our control, but the problem is the seed. The problem is us. Sin isn't what we do. It's who we are¹⁵. Of course, this is only half of the story, as our baptismal identity insists we're *also* saints who are glowing like the sun. We live in constant tension between these two identities.

By making note of the roots that grow from the seed of our interior selves, we will more effectively recognize the Spirit's work of chopping those roots from the ground. Every day, God is molding us into a new creation, one that reflects the likeness of Christ himself. We're being formed and re-formed across lifetimes as passive clay in the hands of a master-potter. It's going to take a while, and our alertness to that process leads us deeper into our life of prayer.

I know a good many people who keep a journal to remind them of what happened throughout each passing day. After a while, the routines we so easily slip into becomes so automatic that if we don't write down our thoughts and activities, they slide out of memory too quickly for us to process.

My wife keeps a blog to document our family adventures, and as the pace of raising kids accelerates, I find myself going back to her blog as if it were the storehouse of my

¹⁵ Manney, Jim. *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen*. Loyola Press, 2011. p.55

own memories. Each page draws out feelings and emotions buried deep within the storehouse of my consciousness, and ignites a reliving of a past nearly forgotten. It can be both beautiful and painful, sometimes all at once, but it's always real. Always raw. And always good for the soul.

A careful, journaled experience of our own unavoidable human struggle may prove beautiful as we experience over time the sharpening of our collective spirit.

As you're able, try to keep a mental snapshot of mistakes throughout the day. You'll want to review them in confession at day's end, and experience the deep-cleanse of the Spirit as we end each day with the promise that we're made new every morning. Experience sleep as a resetting of the mind, the spirit, and the soul.

God is still working on you, and you can try again tomorrow. It may be painful as we relive and become more aware of our sinful tendencies. But it will, in the end, be always real. Always raw. And always good for the soul.

Prayer for the Spirit

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. ~ Psalm 130:1-5

+ **DISCERNMENT** +

If you wish to pray then it is God whom you need. He it is who gives prayer to the one who prays...¹⁶ ~ Evagrius Ponticus

¹⁶ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Chapters on Prayer §58, p. 64

To the casual observer, Peter's instinct to leave the boat and walk toward Jesus on the Lake of Gennesaret may seem a bit impulsive. The seed of doubt already budding within him, Peter looks for certainty not only in the miraculous movement of Jesus above the waves, but in the transference of that wonder onto himself. In other words, it's not enough for Jesus to be walking on water. For Peter, he needs to see *himself* walk on water as well.

Driven by his want of conviction, Peter makes a promise to Jesus. Faithfulness is in itself a lifelong pursuit, leaving room for the coexistence of both belief and unbelief. Peter stands in concert with so many others who paradoxically confess their belief while appealing for sufficient faith (Mark 9:29, John 20:24-29).

Implicit in his conditional question, "If it's you...", Peter vows to risk his life to confirm that it's truly Jesus approaching him. I'm not sure this intense trust warrants the doubting reputation of the "one of little faith" Peter gets stuck with for two millennia following this adventure. It seems to me an incredible act of (at least initial) trust as he leaps overboard. For Peter, and for us as well, vows are rooted in unconditional openness to God. A willingness to step into the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the uncharted, and at the command of Jesus to venture out onto the waves.

It was no coincidence that Thomas Merton entered into his vows as a Cistercian monk shortly after the beginning of World War II. Never one for war to begin with, he found himself unable to bear the burden of personal possessions, preferring instead to rid himself of the materialism he thought responsible the killing of others in some far-off country¹⁷.

¹⁷ Merton, Thomas. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*. Dell, 1980. p. 98

This leads us to wonder what measures as the presence of Jesus walking out onto the waves? The uncontrollable circumstances surrounding our existence that count from this side of the Ascension as waves buffeting the boat of our safe-keeping? The shape of our vows, paid to the Lord in the presence of his people in this moment, require of us a level of discernment and openness. Our prayer, then, is that the Spirit might channel through our being the circular motion of her own recognition of divinity.

It's telling how many of Jesus' parables had to do with the routines of everyday people. Rather than sit and wax poetic about the Proverbs, the Prophets and the Mishnah, Jesus told stories to peasants; stories about seeds and plants, servants and their masters, relationships between geopolitical enemies and the power of peace among rivals. We can learn a lot about God by paying attention to the beautiful and complex order within creation, by paying attention to what's going on in the world, and what's going on within ourselves.

Our promise to God is really no more than a pledge to be open to a divine movement within us. It's the availability to step into the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the uncharted. As the writer of 1 Peter would write in retrospect: the pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:21).

Pay careful attention to your emotional and spiritual compass throughout the day. What events, what Scriptures, what encounters pique your curiosity and nudge your spirit to further exploration? What does the Spirit of God want you to do next? To be next? And for whom? Throughout the day, and at its end if you're able, pray *from* those emotions. Where, O Lord, do you want me to step next? Even if it's into the water, I promise to follow...

Prayer for the Spirit

Truly I am your servant, Lord; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains. I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. In the courts of the house of the Lord – in your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the Lord. ~ Psalm 116:16-19

+ INTERCESSION +

It is a part of justice that you should pray not only for your own purification, but also for that of everyone. In doing this you will imitate the practice of angels¹⁸. ~ Evagrius Ponticus

His eyes no longer tethering him to Jesus, Peter begins to become aware of the world around him. When he saw the wind and the waves, he began to intercede for the world to change. Behind Peter's desperate cry for rescue sits a complex petition, not only for transformation within himself, but for the transformation of his circumstance as well.

There's a sensation that occurs as we accumulate more stuff. When we buy something new – a new car, a new shirt, a new watch, whatever it may be - we become suddenly and overwhelmingly aware of other people who have the same stuff that we have. It's everywhere. You never realize how many red Ford Explorers there are on the road until you yourself are behind the wheel of one.

They were there all along, of course, our minds just hadn't been aware of them. It's an experience called inattentional blindness, and the premise is simple: Seeing is more than a matter of opening one's eyes¹⁹.

¹⁸ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Chapters on Prayer. §39, p. 61

¹⁹ Carpenter, Siri. *Sight Unseen*. Monitor on Psychology. April 2001, Volume 32, No. 4. p.54

When Peter *saw* the wind and the waves, he became suddenly and intensely aware of what was already within his line of sight. The images that went unprocessed as his whole being was wrapped up in the outstretched arm of his Savior suddenly burst into his line of sight, and he *saw* them.

Think of the dozens of friends, mothers and fathers who beg Jesus to heal the ones they love. This is the heart of intercessory prayer: We turn our attention to the hurt within the other and allow that hurt to become our own, saturating our thoughts and compelling us to beg the transformation of the world from the one who creates it.

Intercession is more than prayer that benefits other people. It transcends the tribal experience of asking special favor only for those *we* love. *Intercession is the means by which we live a life fully aware of our communal consciousness. It's how we train the mind to be at one with all of God's creation (1 Corinthians 12:12-14), the Spirit of God flowing through and reaching out for itself, not only leading us to God, but gathering us together with the universe that the Spirit indwells.* And so Jesus teaches us to pray also for our enemies.

This step, like every other, is inexhaustible in its depth. It's a descending spiral staircase that never reaches the ground floor. The deeper our attentiveness to the experiences of other people, the more we pray for the transformation of those realities. The more we pray for the transformation of those realities, the more attentive we become to the experiences of other people. Little by little, and without our knowing, we leave ourselves and our own experiences in the care of God, and become like the saints and martyrs who cry "How long, O Lord?" (Revelation 6:9-11) from beneath a heavenly altar (Revelation 6:9-11), interceding for the world with prayers that never cease.

In time, our mind begins to turn outward by default. We'll reach the point where prayer for the self becomes unconscious and our attentiveness is always toward the needs of other people. I, for one, haven't even come close to this way of being, so for now, let it be sufficient to lean into the experience for a few hours every week until we return to the more familiar terrain of withdrawal, confession and self-renewal.

Our mind's tendency to return to the self, coupled with the extreme weight everyone within our sightline carries on a daily basis, makes it problematic to intercede as a review at the end of the day. Instead, throughout the day, **practice the art of mindful prayer in the moment you become aware of need. There's no need to be long-winded. A quick check-in will suffice. What's most important is to move the energy of your love and consciousness toward the person you're praying for, whether seen or unseen. God knows the needs of the faithful, and already holds them in the Divine heart care. Send your love and your being in their general direction, and trust that God will work with that love and being to the benefit of all people...**

Above all, remember this is a *practice* intended to give us the experience of real community in the technical sense of collective life and consciousness. If we are truly one humanity in Christ, then the me located in you laughs when you laugh, and weeps when you weep.

Prayer for the Spirit

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, Lord, like steams of living water. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. ~ Psalm 126:3-6 (adapted)

+ **GRATITUDE** +

*Whether you pray alone or in community, strive to make your prayer more than a mere habit. Make it a true inner experience.*²⁰ ~ Evagrius Ponticus

As shown by the work of Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis, a highly-attuned practice of gratitude fundamentally and permanently alters the chemistry of the brain. Gratitude changes everything. By being thankful, we locate the source of observed goodness outside of ourselves, and form a relational bond with both the gift and the giver alike²¹.

They fell down and worshipped him. Like a reflexive instinct that pulls your foot upward when you step on a carpet-tack, it happens almost without their knowing. The disciples' fear is expelled by a sudden rush of gratitude that transforms their minds on a chemical level. Fear and appreciation cannot physically coexist in the same headspace.

A seasoned bishop writes to a young, timid cleric, welding together the paths of spirituality and brain function: God did not give us a spirit of cowardice and fear, but of dynamic power, of godly love, and sound-mindedness (1 Timothy 1:7). In the neurological landscape, the posture of thankfulness looks similar to that of love and safety. Spirit-gifted calm and clear-mindedness is the polar opposite of fear, disjointedness, and uncertainty²².

A moment earlier, the imagined future of the disciples was no less than catastrophic. They've done this before. Both Peter's outcry and Jesus' gentle response call us back a

²⁰ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Chapters on Prayer §41, p. 61

²¹ Emmons, Robert. "Why Gratitude is Good." *Greater Good Magazine*. November 16, 2010. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good

²² Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 349

few chapters to another seafaring episode. The disciples, finding their boat nearly capsized by a violent storm, already certain for their projected reality, “Lord save us; we’re definitely going to drown!” For them, it’s inevitable. A moral certainty. They’re going to die, and they’ve already mapped out how (Matthew 14:23-27).

Both of these maritime experiences give insight into the relationship between our spiritual drive toward passionless-ness and our instinctive emotional compass. Fear isn’t just an attitude that exists within the mind without physicality. Fear, like all emotions, is an energy that wells up, both within the air around us and within the body’s central nervous system²³. Fear requires a projected pathway, real or imagined; a concrete experience to locate itself in. At times, particularly after an experience of crisis or trauma, the pathway leads backward through the reliving of some past experience. Often it leads forward, the road diverging into a thousand imagined tragedies. As soon as we come up with a plan to sidestep one anticipated problem, we find ourselves on a path toward another.

The wind now calmed, and Peter air-drying in the safety of his fishing boat, the disciples’ energy is completely transformed as they fall face-down in worship. The once-certain catastrophe that dominated their imaginations has given way to the giftedness of Jesus so that all they can manage to blurt out is a confession of who he is. Their imaginations have launched outside of themselves into the person of Christ again. Any lasting transformation of the mind is going to take repetition.

A mind renewed and bent toward gratitude produces within itself a transformational energy that overflows into the air around us, forging pathways that lead into anticipated

²³ Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. Paulist Press, 1999. p. 19

blessing, hope, and belovedness²⁴. Through the Spirit's transformation of the body's fundamental brain chemistry, we begin to notice a giftedness within other people that connects to our own thankful energy, and ultimately projects outward into the world. *As intercessory prayer trains the mind to look beyond itself into a life of interconnected need, grateful prayer moves us beyond our imagined isolation into a life of interconnected complete-ness; each of us finding fulfillment in the images of God reflected in the other.*

The one who lives a life of prayerful gratitude swims eternally upstream. **Pause throughout the day and enter into active appreciation. Heighten your awareness of the overflowing goodness within people around you; intentionally take notice of the beauty woven throughout God's good creation. Where is the light of God breaking through the cracks of imagined scarcity? What form does the Divine image take to bring grace and stillness into your inner orbit? Take careful note of your thankful emotions and the encounters that evoke them. You may want to keep a journal of those moments throughout the day, or if you're feeling especially bold, cultivate the habit of sending notes to people you see God working through.**

Prayer for the Spirit

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

²⁴ Emmons, Robert. "Why Gratitude is Good." *Greater Good Magazine*. November 16, 2010.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever.

to him who alone does great wonders...

His love endures forever.

to the One who remembered us in our low estate

His love endures forever.

and freed us from our enemies,

His love endures forever.

and who gives food to every creature.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His love endures forever. ~ Psalm 136:1-4, 23-26

+ CONTEMPLATION +

That many do not advance in the Christian progress because they stick in penances and particular exercises, while they neglect the love of God which is the end.²⁵ ~ Brother Lawrence

Contemplation is epilogue to the disciples' adventure on the Lake of Gennesaret. That it takes countless episodes like it *and* the twice-physical indwelling of the Holy Spirit²⁶ should indicate the difficulty with which the soul is fully at ease with the nearness God.

Having completed its migration away from the self into the collective consciousness of humanity through withdrawal, confession, discernment, intercession and gratitude, this step into contemplation – or wordless prayer – is redefinition of prayer itself. In this

²⁵ Lawrence, Brother. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Oneworld Publications, 1993. p. 17

²⁶ Here referring to both Jesus' breathing of the Spirit (John 20:22) and the manifesting of the same Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4)

space of passionless-ness, unmoved by the inevitable temptations that *will ever and always distract the mind* and the attachments that are good in themselves, but inevitably give way to temptations as we hold too tightly to them; prayer is no longer something we *do*. It's something we *become*. Among many other mysteries, prayer is a state of being; of awake and aware oneness with God without image or object, beyond adjectives and description, where we simply are.

The shift from Old Testament to New is pretty unsettling if we're paying attention. Flip the page from Malachi to Matthew and, as if a switch has been flipped, the religious zealots are the antagonists and the once-marginalized are the heroes. This seems to be the natural order of things if we wait long enough. Revolutionaries grow into Empire. One generation's up-and-coming politicians are the next generation's stale establishment.

Over time, hyper-religiosity becomes its own downfall, and the means to escape the demons of the world become themselves more problematic in their tendency toward pietism. An over-zealous capitalist climbs a corporate ladder through greed and inequality, and we call that sinful. A gifted spiritual master gains prestige for herself through discernment and wisdom. If it's the prestige that allures us, then what's the difference? Though externally we may affect the world either positively, negatively, or somewhere in between, internally they're both the same experience. Both are rooted in the same idea of measuring self-worth through uniqueness and excellence²⁷.

If we are to avoid this cycle and remain happily rooted in the presence of God, we must again and again return to the mystical core of the Gospel: We haven't gone anywhere. We haven't gained anything. We've simply discovered what we already have

²⁷ Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. Paulist Press, 1999. p. 17

through the indwelling Spirit of God and the nearness of her Christ. We've started where we are and deepened what we already have and realized that we were already there. We already had everything, and are simply in the process of knowing it. We are simply experiencing what we already possess.²⁸

Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10). This is the end of all prayer, as well as its beginning.

Prayer for the Spirit

... ..

²⁸ Merton, Thomas and Patrick Hart. *Thomas Merton/Monk*. Cistercian Publications, 1974. p. 80

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches... ~ Matthew 13:31-32

CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPLATION

We Are Already Holy...

“Authentic religion is more about subtraction than addition, more letting go of the false self than any attempt at engineering a true self. You can’t create what you already have.”²⁹ ~ Richard Rohr

It’s simply a matter of mindset. Somewhere between drizzle and downpour rests the unofficial, unspoken watershed pattern of rainfall where it becomes necessary to open an umbrella. It’s a reciprocal arrangement of weather patterns, a subtle dance of warm pockets and cold fronts that culminate in thunderstorms we’ve all come to agree are unavoidable. No one would presume to control the weather.

Instead, what we’ve done is devise ways – *ingenious* ways in many cases – to guard ourselves against the inescapable conditions that envelop us from time to time. Standing under an awning alongside some likewise-fated stranger, waiting for a momentary window to sprint from here to there without being immersed in the deluge, never does one look to the other and plot the overthrow of a weather system. Instead, we usually just open an umbrella.

An umbrella safeguards our interior space from exterior circumstance. It keeps what’s going on *outside* of us – the pattern we can’t hope to control - from sideswiping our own appointed *interior* course.

²⁹ Rohr, Richard. *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015. p. 8

The prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17, wrought with foreshadowing and hope for the then and future Church, centers around the place of Jesus' disciples in the otherwise treacherous system of the world. Then and now, it's also instructive for those listening in:

*I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is **not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.** They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. I have sent them into the world. (John 17:14-18)*

This is one of several great epiphanies throughout the Gospels, a redirecting of signposts in place from early Genesis through Job³⁰, the Psalms, and the claustrophobic ministry of the prophets³¹. In this world, we will have trouble (John 16:33). We *will* suffer and fail. We'll get laid off from our jobs and diagnosed with inexplicable illnesses. Our relationships will be broken and children wander off into the far country, and it won't be because we fell shorter of God's unknowable will than our neighbor did. So many aspects of our lives we can't control, any more than we can control the weather (Luke 13:1-5, John 9:1-5).

Surrounded by temptations and struggles, the inevitable draw of power and frenetic busyness of distracted life, the umbrella of learned quietness and attentiveness to the

³⁰ Here, being mindful of the sudden appearance of the serpent in Genesis 3:1, introduced as an agent of temptation without cause, background, or explanation, and the unspeakable, random nature of the suffering of Job throughout the account of his suffering and restoration.

³¹ Mindful here of Psalms 73 and 94, among others, which question the random prosperity of the wicked and seemingly-counter-intuitive struggle of the righteous, as well as the roller-coaster ministry of Elijah highlighted in 1 Kings 18-19.

Spirit³² leads us to break the compounding anxiety of a growing plot to overthrow a universal system. Instead, we safeguard our interior space from exterior circumstance.

Quiet contemplation keeps what's going on outside of us – the patterns and systems we can't control - from sideswiping our own appointed interior course, as we begin to be vulnerably present to what *is*.

+ OPENING SPACE IN THE DESERT +

“And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens.”³³ ~ Athanasius of Alexandria

It was Jesus' own command that led St. Anthony the Great into the desert: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Though Anthony's biography leads us to believe he spent twenty years “withdrawing” from the world, his biographer's description of *withdrawal* seems to portray a deeper dive into what makes “the world” *the world*: the siege of demonic consequence that puzzles our minds and troubles our spirits away from realized oneness with God³⁴.

Surely Anthony's struggle is itself the pathway to transformation. As the patriarch Jacob wrestled with God and with humanity to discover his path apart from possession and title³⁵ (Genesis 32:22-32), so the practice of spiritual, emotional, and ideological withdrawal from the world brings about a Spirit-led demolition of the world's system

³² Peterson, Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989. p. 25

³³ Athanasius. *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. tr. Robert C. Gregg. Paulist Press, 1980. pp. 42-3

³⁴ Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 64

³⁵ Highlighting particularly the beginning of v.24, “So Jacob was left alone,” after sending his possessions and family across the River Jabbok.

extant within our Constructed Selves, and by extension the renewing of the Mind (Romans 12:2) toward oneness with Christ.

This is the path of spiritual surgery, of opening wounds that make possible a deliberate, life-giving intervention within. As a life of physical withdrawal into the desert stood as a paradigm for generations of early ascetics, it serves as allegory for those longing for divine interruption within our own over-scheduled lives. Trailing in the sandy footprints of 3rd – 4th century Northern Egypt³⁶, we'll likewise follow a surgical pattern of breaking and mending, or as Jesus names it, *cross-bearing* (Matthew 16:24-26)

...

³⁶ Abba Moses the Black, for example, of whom it is written, “A brother questioned Abba Moses saying, ‘I see something in front of me and I am not able to grasp it.’ The old man said to him, ‘If you do not become dead like those who are in the tomb, you will not be able to grasp it.’” (Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 141)



The Paradigm of the Desert

*I have been crucified with Christ
and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*

~ Galatians 2:20

Death

*Self-Emptying Withdrawal from and
Rejection of the World's System (Romans 12:1)*

Resurrection

*Spirit-led Transformation of the Spirit indwelt Mind³⁷
(Romans 12:2)*



What follows, then, is a three-lane highway of quiet contemplation; an interior alternative to a hastily-scheduled estate sale and abandoning of husband and children, career and student-debt repayment program. We'll begin where Jesus begins, with the witness of sacred Scripture.

³⁷ Mindful also here of the non-binary complexities woven between these two sequential steps, hinted at by Athanasius himself: "This was Anthony's first contest against the devil – or, rather, this was in Anthony the success of the Savior, who *condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1-5).*" (Athanasius. *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. tr. Robert C. Gregg. Paulist Press, 1980. p. 35)



Contemplating Scripture

*Life-Long Transformation
Through the Mirror of Scripture*

Contemplating Creation

*Endless Observation of the Created Order
that Teaches the Way of God*

Contemplating Experience

*Meaning-Making; Internalizing the
Grace and Transformation of the Spirit*



Though for any of us, the completion of this road in a single lifetime is unlikely, we should strive never-the-less toward the Kingdom's narrow door; to the resurrected mindset free³⁸ from determined causality of circumstance; free from blaming God or ourselves for our suffering (Luke 13:1-5, John 9:1-3). We aim, in the tradition of Contemplatives past, to sit in non-judgment of our circumstances - whatever they may be – to be present with them, and sit next to them with discerning minds and open hearts.

We'll begin by chasing the wearied tailwind of the prophet Elijah...

³⁸ Echoing Evagrius Ponticus' understanding of the Kingdom of God as "knowledge of the Holy Trinity coextensive with the capacity of the intelligence and giving it a surpassing incorruptibility." (Praktikos p. 16)

+ A SLOW SPIRITUAL AWAKENING: 1 Kings 19:1-18 +

I know that for the right practice of it the heart must be empty of all other things, because God will possess the heart alone; and as He cannot possess it alone, without emptying it of all besides, so neither can He act there, and do in it what He pleases, unless it be left vacant to Him.³⁹ ~ Brother Lawrence

It wasn't what Elijah expected. After a meteoric display of God's power (1 Kings 18:38), the queen doubled down on her devotion to the conquered Ba'al, and swore the death of the already-exhausted (1 Kings 18:46) prophet. The growing season that followed would see him purged of every spiritual victory too readily internalized. Withdrawing alone into the desert, Elijah sank into suicidal depression: "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4).

Emptied of the mountaintop triumph that should have defined him and purged of any ambition to live in anxious exile, Elijah's breakdown leveled the ground for what would become his spiritual awakening. The Spirit was clearing space within Elijah for an encounter that would both confirm a divine calling on his life and give meaning to what might otherwise be deemed a failed ministry. Physically exhausted and spiritually depleted, he fell asleep.

From a certain point of view, weakness can be a strength unto itself (2 Corinthians 12:10). Hidden beneath the heavily-guarded constructions of unshakable happiness and unfettered success lies the vulnerable truth that no trajectory of apparent success is sustainable. One miraculous victory over hundreds of pagan priests heightens expectation for the next divine encounter, and for Elijah it was simply too much. He fell victim to the

³⁹ Lawrence, Brother. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Oneworld Publications, 1993. p. 50

tragic instability of upward mobility, and disengaged entirely from the system of upwardly-mobile anticipation. As death often does, his withdrawal from attempted self-influence would ultimately make space for his resurrection.

Elijah withdrew deeper into the mountain wilderness to discern the voice of God beneath a symphonic eruption of wind, earthquake, and volcanic ash. In the wilderness, Creation itself, coupled with the Word of God and ultimately the reflection on his own life experience, gathered Elijah again into the complex interchangeability of success and failure, weakness and strength, blessing and struggle.

Standing at the end of a road that would begin again with his next step, Elijah had become passive to the inescapable movement of God within himself. He was transformed, renewed, *resurrected*. It seems he was in no place to discern the next leg of his journey while assaulted by his own lack of *and need for* self-worth. Emptied of himself, he became the Word that gave him life.

Clear of distraction and self-involvement, Elijah resurfaces connected and ready to discern the voice and will of God. He knows the steps marked out for him, and he takes them. Returning to the Desert of Damascus, he anoints kings and successive prophets with the zeal of a well-rested servant.

For Elijah, this was a season of Spirit-mandated (1) Contemplation of the instructive Word of God spoken directly into his spirit, (2) Contemplation of Creation with all its explosive possibility, and ultimately (3) Contemplation of his pilgrimage into the wilderness and back again. For us, the wayfaring prophet whispers across generations the words that once filled his own ears: *The journey is too much. Retreat. Disengage, in*

spirit if not in body. Withdraw to the Mountain of God. Be crucified with Christ - again and again – and you will be raised to new life in his Spirit (Romans 6:1-11).

+ IMPLANTATION: CONTEMPLATING THE SCRIPTURES +

“Eat what is good and your soul will enjoy prosperity. Don’t forget to eat your bread, lest your heart should dry up. If you keep the word of God like this, there is no doubt that it will keep you.”⁴⁰ ~ St. Bernard of Clairvaux

The strange beauty of an *abstract* painting is its invitation into endless possibilities. Though it may be based on a particular object or event, the interpretation of its meaning requires more than just the portrait itself. *It requires the participation of its observer.* The experiences and desires, worldview and chemistry of the beholder completes the mystery - inasmuch as a mystery can be completed - as each experience of it completes a unique and unduplicatable work of art. Abstract art can’t be decoded. It’s simply an invitation to endless exploration.

Having withdrawn some 250 miles into the wilderness, Elijah is drawn further still into the mystery of God. Interestingly enough, this invitation isn’t through direct instruction in the traditional didactic sense, but rather through conversation and a series of leading questions: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” The question is repeated, and Elijah hears himself twice justify his retreat (1 Kings 19:10, 19:14).

It’s in the conversation that we find an invitation to the contemplative mind. God could have easily infused Elijah with a sudden sense of knowing urgency, or jumped straight to the detailed task list that followed (1 Kings 19:15-18). Instead, the Divine Spirit summons him slowly, calms his nervous system through a decreasingly intense progression of wind, earthquake and fire, followed by the calming timbre of a slight

⁴⁰ St. Bernard in Advent, sermon 5, quoted in Nouwen, Henri. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. HarperOne, 2013. p. 51

whisper. Elijah is drawn unknowingly into the sacred mystery that demands patience, openness, and quiet space within which to unfold.

Time is a patient teacher that accompanies the slow simmering of Scripture. Sacred reading is more than just an intellectual exercise. It's sacramental, transcending the literary exchange of information and initiating a slow internal growth that nourishes the soul. The prophet Ezekiel begins his ministry by eating a written scroll. He ingests it and describes its taste in great detail before vomiting its contents toward the House of Israel (Ezekiel 3:1-5). The consignment of the Spirit in St. John's Gospel account is coupled with the breath of Jesus physically shrouding the Apostles (John 20:21-23) to implant the encounter firmly in the depths of memory⁴¹.

This type of transformation doesn't come naturally to us. We must first be shaken from our own distracted - almost hypnotized – existence; drawn in slowly by the Divine Spirit. Eventually, we find ourselves calmed through systematic disengagement from noise and constant interference, followed by the calming timbre of a low whisper. The Scriptures themselves draw us into the sacred mystery that demands patience, openness, and quiet space within which to unfold.

It's precisely this slow, examined melding of Scripture and Life that, as Thomas Keating puts it: *Dismantles our selfish programs for happiness by a spiritual practice or discipline, first calling to mind that events and people or our plans and memories are dominating our awareness from morning to night.*⁴²

⁴¹ Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Beacon Press, 1967. pp. 247-57

⁴² Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition*. Paulist Press, 1999. p. 31

No seed can take root where another has already been planted⁴³. If the mustard seed of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:31-32) is to take hold within us, we must first till the ground and remove the buried stones and lifeless roots that would strangle the budding seed of spiritual renewal (Matthew 13:1-23).

Letting Go of our Need to be Right

*Just as one cannot build a ship unless one has some nails, so it is impossible to be saved without humility.*⁴⁴ ~ Amma Syncletica

The Apostles had a decision to make. The mystery of God had been delivered to “outsiders,” to people who weren’t completely aware of the story so far; and so the saints gathered for conclave to discern the way forward for this newly-broadened faction of disciples (Acts 15:1-35, Galatians 2:11-21). This is, in fact, one of a very few direct Scriptural witnesses to the *application* of itself in a broad sense to a new audience. What follows changes the paradigm for meaning-making and the construction of spiritual patterns.

Rather than lay out a complex and exhaustive religious ecosystem, the Apostles invite these spiritual refugees into a mystery. After a few specific instructions that ultimately represent a small fraction of Old Testament regulation, the Bishop of Jerusalem says, “For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). The Scriptures can’t ever be fully systematized. They can’t be decoded. They’re simply an invitation to endless exploration.

Throughout human history, the functional evolution of Divine Essence has mirrored the evolution of humanity itself. That is to say, as human systems develop along

⁴³ Borrowing here the imagery and symbolism of Jeremiah 1:10

⁴⁴ Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 235

identifiable patterns from instinctual survival to the development of complex governments and emergence of interconnected cultures, our understanding of God across religious traditions, albeit with a good number of growing pains and transitional hiccups, has developed to fit neatly into identifiable patterns⁴⁵.

Thomas Merton divides the meaning of Scripture into two almost competing senses. While the *literal* sense of formative myth and sacred story may be divined from the self-interpretation of the page itself⁴⁶, the *typical* sense – or the place where deep meaning is rendered – is known only to God⁴⁷.

It's nothingness we must let go of; the illusion of what was never there to begin with. Our inherent desire for power and separateness, built on a foundation of narrow religiosity and tribal stories cannot begin to explore the *typical* sense of sacred story⁴⁸. These sacred stories burrow into the soul over time and transform it through divinely-guided meaning-making, the goal of which is hidden with God.

The illusionary constructions of our *literal* senses can survive neither the grave of our physical being nor the daily crucifixion of our ego⁴⁹, and so exist only as constructions of our own mind, if they even exist at all.

⁴⁵ A summary of Ken Wilber's adaptation of *The Spiral of Development* from Don Beck and Chris Cowan's *Spiral Dynamics*; Wilber, Ken. *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Shambhala Press, 2001. pp. 6-16.

⁴⁶ Ref. Matthew 13:18-23, wherein Jesus directly explains the meaning of the previous parable. Ref. Also Jesus' interpretation of Moses' practical theology of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) in Matthew 19:8.

⁴⁷ Merton, Thomas. *Bread in the Wilderness*. Fortress Press, 1986. p. 39

⁴⁸ Wilber, Ken. *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Shambhala Press, 2001. pp. 79-80

⁴⁹ Leaning heavily here on Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) and Paul's rejection of his own worldly accomplishments (Philippians 3:3-11).

For Elijah, this meant jettisoning his ambition for acceptance – for himself and for God - among his people. Impassioned connection to God, coupled even with undeniable displays of divine power, may in the end elicit neither conversion nor approval (1 Kings 19:10, 14), neither of which is extant and neither of which is necessary to the spiritual Self.

Returning to the apostolic conclave: Rather than crystallizing a complex and exhaustive religious system that both exiles non-conformists and intercepts our immersion into divine mystery, we swim in diverse water where there are no “outsiders,” only divine mystery hidden with God and explored in community with all creation. For, Truth has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is explored regularly. The Scriptures can’t ever be fully systematized. They can’t be decoded. They’re simply an invitation to endless exploration.

We must let go of our need to be right about what ultimately cannot be fully known.

Letting Go of our Need for Certainty

Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: “I do not know.”⁵⁰ ~ St. Anthony the Great

Water as a substance is utterly fascinating. From the pre-existing, chaotic deep to the compounding waters of the great flood and baptismal imagery of the Gospels⁵¹, the attachment of gifted grace with a compound so impermanent and unstable is staggering. Baptismal water can never be replicated. It evaporates and flows through rivers and

⁵⁰ Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 4

⁵¹ Genesis 1:2, 6-9 as interpreted by 1 Peter 3:20-22, and Matthew 3:1-17 along with its parallel Gospel accounts

oceans, eventually making its way through cloud and atmosphere, only to be deposited again in some unknown place to begin the cycle again.

Faith is groundless. That's not to say it isn't founded on a sense of Truth, but rather that it's founded on a Truth so infinitely greater than ourselves that whatever it is we're standing on lies imperceptible to our human sensibilities. Faith is an ease – a comfort – with knowing only in part (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). Why else would Jesus teach almost exclusively through metaphor, symbol and parable? “The Kingdom of Heaven is *like*,” he begins over and over throughout the Gospels (Matthew 13:34-35). He never lets us in on exactly what it *is*, only what it is *like*.

The last words of Jesus in John's Gospel account concede a groundlessness under the feet of the Apostle Peter. Inquiring as to the fate of John as well as that of himself, Jesus leads him simply to take the next step on his pilgrimage, answering with an eccentric invitation to abandon his curious need for total understanding and insight: “If I want John to stick around until I return, what difference would that make? As for you, *follow me*” (John 21:22).

Understanding and discipleship do not exist easily within the same space. We cannot, at the same time, follow the Spirit with mindful openness *and* comprehend where the road is leading. Leaving room for the possibility of some double-minded overlap, our focus will either be on the guide marking our steps directly ahead, or on the destination looming in the distance.

Maybe Elijah was *too* certain. Maybe he has the course mapped out already in his own mind. Step 1: Demonstrate publically beyond any doubt that the God of Israel reigns in Judea, that Ba'al is at best an impotent spirit and at worst a figment of priestly

imagination⁵². Step 2: The humbled masses will flow back to Jerusalem. He seems so utterly convinced of it.

Maybe it was the chasm between expectation and reality that led him to sink wholly into the despair that followed. Our illusions of certainty are not abandoned without incident. As Elijah – and we ourselves – must discover the hard way, hope that knows its object is not hope at all (Romans 8:24). In order for Elijah to contemplate deeply the divine instruction that would ultimately follow, he would first need to dissolve the clear image of where his future was heading. A queen’s threat and a prophet’s understandably fearful reaction set the stage for Elijah’s much-needed escape.

Circling back again to our Apostolic Council of Acts 15: In the end it was the honest vulnerability of St. Peter that broke the theological certainty of religious hardliners. “None of us has ever been capable of living up to the standard we’re imposing.” Met with the harsh dissipation of their collective illusion, the assembly fell silent (Acts 15:10-12). They began with a false question. God, it turns out, refuses to be fully systematized. The Wind blows wherever it chooses (John 3:8), and its erratic movement can’t be decoded. There is only an invitation to endless exploration.

We must let go of our need to be certain about what ultimately cannot be fully known.

Cultivating the Practice: Lectio Divina

Hence the importance in the Christian tradition of listening to sacred scripture, which is much more than just listening to its literal meaning. It is sitting with the text in the presence of the Holy Spirit and allowing the Spirit to deepen our capacity to listen.⁵³ ~ Thomas Keating

⁵² Here summing up the entirety of 1 Kings 18:20-40.

⁵³ Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. Paulist Press, 1999. p. 27

While dying to the ego self is an active withdrawal from our restless ecosystem⁵⁴, transformation and resurrection aren't simply the elevated achievements on an enlightened mind. Ours is not an endeavor to replace what we've emptied – a learned behavior replacing a lower learned behavior – but rather *a submission to the alien activity of Grace*⁵⁵.

In other words, there is nothing left to do. The prophet replaces neither his drive for approval nor his need to chart the path ahead. Instead, Elijah simply gives his spirit over to the voice of God. He accedes to his emptiness. He conforms to it, and he *listens*.

The practice of drinking deeply from the well of Scripture is the essence of a practice of sacred reading. Appearing quite early within the tradition of desert monasticism⁵⁶, Lectio Divina is a method of prayerful engagement with Scripture that opens the heart to the slow, simmering movement of the Spirit behind the text. Though its specific practice varies a little here and there depending on form and custom, and is often more easily accessible when experienced in solitude or in a small group, the basic manner holds true throughout. It begins with a four-fold reading of sacred text:

Reading: Settling into Prayer⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Brueggeman, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. John Knox Press, 2014. p. 31

⁵⁵ Rohr, Richard. *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015. p. 11

⁵⁶ Paintner, Christine Valters. *Lectio Divina – the Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer*. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2014. p. 4

⁵⁷ What follows is a rough summary of the practice of Lectio Divina as I learned it from the Sisters of Contemplative Outreach of Birmingham while on retreat at the Sacred Heart monastery in Cullman, Alabama in January of 2015. Formal resources are readily available, and will be listed in the bibliography. A good place to start would be: Paintner, Christine Valters. *Lectio Divina – the Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer*. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2014.

The practice begins by releasing distraction and taking on a meditative disposition for what will follow. Select a passage of Scripture and breathe a few deep, transitional breaths to cultivate an attentive Mind. Read the passage aloud, allowing the words to wash over you in non-judgment. There is no need to make meaning out of them yet. Simply hear them as enter in. Complete this step with a few more deep, transitional breaths. There's no need to rush. It isn't a race, and there's nothing to win.

Meditation: Consent to the Spirit

Begin the reading again, this time mentally highlighting phrases and ideas that speak into your heart. Again, we're not making meaning just yet, only consenting to the Spirit's work through the words of Scripture. Listen with your whole body, giving yourself over to deep connection with the Story. When the reading is over, repeat aloud the phrases that heightened your awareness, followed by a few more deep, transitional breaths.

Reflection: An Exploration of Meaning-Making

Read the passage again for the third time, paying close attention to the phrases that caught your attentiveness. Allow them to connect within the broader themes of Scripture: Love, Justice, Mercy, etc. Give these ideas space to take root within you. Listening more to your heart than your mind, feel your way through to meaning-making. After the reading, share what the passage tells you about the divine relationship between you and God. Again, this is not an intellectual exercise. We're not trying to *learn*, but to grow, listen, and be. Conclude with intentional, meditative breathing.

Contemplation: Resting in the Movement of God

Not unlike the practice of Centering Prayer, the final step is intended to give space for the unknowable movement of the Spirit within. After the fourth and final reading of your

chosen Scriptural passage, sit quietly and without thought (inasmuch as is possible), offering the Spirit both time and open space to nurture you without expectation. Anywhere between five and twenty minutes should do the trick, however long you're comfortable. Let go of your assumptions. Let go of any ideas of what discipleship *should* be. Simply rest in the promise of Scripture. Simply be.

Prayer for the Spirit

Breathe deeply. Imagine yourself exhaling any preconceptions, any certainties of who God is or what the Spirit will do, and pray...

*I'm single-minded in pursuit of you;
don't let me miss the road signs you've posted.
I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart
so I won't sin myself bankrupt.
Be blessed, GOD;
train me in your ways of wise living.
I'll transfer to my lips
all the counsel that comes from your mouth;
I delight far more in what you tell me about living
than in gathering a pile of riches.
I ponder every morsel of wisdom from you,
I attentively watch how you've done it.
I relish everything you've told me of life,
I won't forget a word of it.⁵⁸*

⁵⁸ Translation: *The Message*, poetically rendered by Eugene Peterson

~ Psalm 119:11-16

+ **OBSERVATION: CONTEMPLATING CREATION** +

“The Kingdom of Heaven is enlightenment of the soul along with true knowledge of creation...⁵⁹” ~ Evagrius Ponticus

“How long has it been missing?” This was the question on the table as I walked up the stairs to my study and into a spontaneous convention of our parish building crew.

Someone, it appeared, had mistaken a small plaque commemorating the historicity and reconstruction of our church’s worship building for something of value, and painstakingly removed it from the outside wall just south of our campus entrance doors.

You expect this kind of thing in urban ministry: Coils gone missing from air conditioning units, down-spouts removed and sold for scrap. It’s not the theft that unnerves, but rather the fog that blurs our willingness to give freely to meet so desperate a need. The conversation that followed was quite enlightening.

“How long has it been missing?” Around the circle we went, not one of us recalling the last time we saw the thing intact. Not one of us mindful of the last time we stopped to notice that precise square yard of brick, it could have been missing for years.

Burrowing through yet another layer of William James’s description of Inattentional Blindness, our tendency toward cognitive distraction also leads us to falsely-construe meaning by filling details seemingly-familiar to the mind. In other words, instead of taking in all events and objects and triaging their importance as objectively possible, the mind prioritizes the familiar and then drifts off into fantastical thought related to its preexisting connection⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Praktikos §2, p. 15

⁶⁰ James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. Harvard University Press, 1981. p. 419

Think of it as the hypnotic state we awake from at the conclusion an all-too-familiar commute. We arrive at our destination with little to no memory at all of the route from there to here. Our neighbors and friends travelling right alongside us, bustling commerce on either side of the road, life as usual spinning away with neither care nor notice as our internal autopilot guides us numbly across miles of potential epiphany. We awaken in a parking space, ready to reengage the familiar.

If it's true that our minds are fallen and unable to discern the Spirit apart from her direct intervention (John 6:44, Romans 3:11), then surely our attention in its natural state is clouded by distraction and systematic hypnosis, crippled from awareness to any ethereal insight of the Created Order that surrounds us.

“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11) This was the direction God gave to Elijah after a long season of spiritual discipline and preparation. His mind quieted by solitude and melancholy, guided by the interior presence of Eternal Spirit⁶¹, Elijah not only *saw* the eruptive sequence that followed; more than this, at last he was paying attention. Drawn to awareness of a world outside himself, his Mind now attentive to the pattern and method of God, he would come to recognize the divine whisper of subtlety and humility spoken *through the order of creation itself*.

A mind set on things above (Philippians 3:19-20) may well be gifted such insight. Before we awaken to it, however, we must first acknowledge our own Spiritual

⁶¹ A reference here to the verbal instruction to “Go out and stand on the mountain,” or in other words, “Pay attention to what’s about to happen...” in 1 Kings 19:11

Inattentional Blindness and clear some mind-space for our spiritual reprogramming, offloading the anxious mindset of constant connection and production⁶² (Colossians 3:2).

Letting Go of our Need for Significance

*Our journey is made not just for ourselves but for all who belong to the body*⁶³. ~ Henri Nouwen

If taken literally, the word *philharmonic* – when used to describe an orchestra – is a compound word that means *from love of musical harmony*. When one refers to a *philharmonic orchestra* (as opposed, for example, to a *chamber orchestra*), it usually means there are some seventy to one hundred musicians onstage playing in guided harmony with one another. A philharmonic orchestra is made up of four sections: Strings, Woodwinds, Brass, and Percussion.

Though each section is important, just as each individual instrument is important, none is uniquely significant unto itself. Musically speaking, it's the sum of instrumentation borne from the collective love of harmony that gives life and beauty to an arrangement.

When St. Paul paints the collective soul of humanity, he uses a similar form, “We are all baptized with one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:13)... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Though every bone and vessel of the body is important, none is uniquely significant unto itself. Biologically

⁶² Brueggeman, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. John Knox Press, 2014. pp. 28-31

⁶³ Nouwen, Henri. *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*. Doubleday, 1998. p. 57

speaking, it's the sum of individual parts borne from the common belovedness of the one Spirit that gives life and beauty to a reconciled humanity.

Throughout the New Testament, individual followers of Jesus tend to be dynamically and radically repositioned, not as a standalone consciousness among other like, but separate and distinct beings, but as part of a greater collective consciousness⁶⁴. Jesus' realignment brings these individual consciousnesses into harmony with one another in corporate, orchestral arrangement. Deeper still, if we take our inner connection and the indwelling of the common Spirit to its logical conclusion (John 14:23, Galatians 2:20, 1 Peter 4:2), we are all – or at least will be in the end - extensions of the one being of the cosmic and eternal Christ (John 1:12-13, Galatians 3:26, Ephesians 2:4-7, 1 John 3:1).

We are not who we once were (1 Corinthians 1:26). We are not who we will become (1 John 3:2-3). In the meantime, during this season of evolution and becoming, our sense of being shifts from one day to the next. Elijah's awakening to his position of utter normality drives him into full melancholic collapse, "I have had enough Lord. Take my life, Lord. I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4). His separate-self still longs to be set apart, to occupy the solitary and high-moral space of the lone prophet. The God of Community – used here in its fullest sense of co-ownership and interdependence – refuses Elijah's uniqueness.

"You are not the only one left," and with a whisper, Elijah's self-importance is redirected. "Anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet

⁶⁴ Ref. Jesus' designation of the company of believers as "Fellowship," "Community" (Matthew 16:18, 18:17) the repeated designation of "The Twelve," even when there were only eleven of them (John 20:24, 1 Corinthians 15:5), Paul's allusion to "the body" in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31,

(1 Kings 19:16)... Yet I reserve 7000 in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18).

As the Divine Mind of the one body guides Elijah into awareness of the prophet’s lungs manifest within Elisha, a multiplicity of string sections and nerve endings within thousands of brother and sister Israelites, the illusion of his own uniqueness melts into the collective spirit of God. *He finds meaning in his place among the orchestra*⁶⁵.

How intolerably boring it would be to attend a uniform arrangement of a hundred like violins, playing in unison over the same progression of notes. How useless a hip without the accompanying rest of the body to support and direct its movement (1 Corinthians 12:19-20). So each of us, then, must awaken to the same reality as apostles, prophets and saints. We are each deeply important; fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). Yet none of us is uniquely significant unto ourselves. Holistically speaking, it’s the sum of our individual spirits reborn in the one common Spirit that gives life and beauty to a reconciled humanity.

Letting Go of our Self-Reliance

Though consisting of only 32 individual gameplay pieces and 64 available spaces to move them, the game of chess opens more positional possibilities than there are molecules in the known universe⁶⁶. If a student of the game were to go about her practice by dissecting each extant arrangement and planning the best response to each position, she would no doubt be wasting her time.

⁶⁵ Here assumed from the dramatic change in disposition between 1 Kings 19:5, 10, 14 and 1 Kings 19:19.

⁶⁶ Fuhrman, David. “How Many Possible Move Combinations Are There in Chess?” *Bern Medical*. March 1, 2013. www.bernmedical.com/blog/how-many-possible-move-combinations-are-there-in-chess.

Instead, students of the art of chess commit themselves to the study of strategy and principles, relying on their own developed instincts honed from a manageable number of consistencies and tendencies of gameplay. In other words, instead of preparing for every eventual possibility, they develop and train the mind to respond to patterns, and trust that development within an infinite array of attacks.

In his pioneering work, *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle delineates the two directions our minds are programmed to move in. We are, he says in a psychological reframing of the experience of saints throughout the centuries, wired to do one of two things: (1) To endlessly reprocess the past, and (2) To ceaselessly worry about an infinite array of possible futures⁶⁷. If left unchecked and untransformed, we would be – and if we're honest, often are - anxiously simulating each extant situational possibility and planning the best response to each.

The study of strategy and principles requires the occasional mindfulness bell to snap us back into the present moment of God's provision, and the promise of it in each subsequent present moment into which we've not yet arrived. For the disciples, the Eucharist would serve as such an alarm-bell⁶⁸. As Jesus offers them – and us as well – a piece of bread to taste and experience in real time, we expel a situational numbness and are called back to the reality of his nearness. For Elijah, however, the mindfulness bell of awakening would be both seismic and earth-shattering.

⁶⁷ Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Namaste Publishing, 1999. pp. 48-49.

⁶⁸ Hahn, Thich Nhat. *Peace is Every Step*. Bantam Books, 1991. p. 22

Elijah's transformation of practice begins at the origin of all our anxieties. He begins in the place of Fear. A once bold⁶⁹ confidence had given way to terror and self-reliance, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" (1 Kings 19:3) Though he had been preserved through trial and conflict, the threat of Jezebel presented an unforeseen positional threat, and Elijah responded with panicked self-preservation.

When Jesus guides his disciples into the practice of inner calm, rather than expand their catalogue of possible scenarios and simulated responses, he cultivates within them the practice of natural contemplation. Drawing upon a mindfulness of birds and lilies, he transforms their minds to see and recognize patterns of reliance upon God, and to trust that development in the wake of an infinite array of scarcity. "Consider how the lilies grow," he says, drawing their attention to the ready mindfulness bell of the created order. "They do not labor or spin, yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If this is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, the beloved with little faith?" (Luke 12:27-28)

As once he did on Sinai, nullifying by gift and command of Sabbath the anxious slavery of endless production⁷⁰, here Jesus unshackles us with the gift and command of total dependence evidenced by the natural growth of perennial plant-life. The notion of self-reliance, whether the physicality of human need or the illusion of a self-contained system of faith, isn't simply a 'bad' or 'immoral' option, but rather a mirage that

⁶⁹ Here referring to Elijah's brashness of confidence in 1 Kings 18, particularly evidenced in his crude mockery of Ba'al in v. 27.

⁷⁰ Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance, New Edition with Study Guide*. Presbyterian Publishing, 2017. p 27

repositions itself further and further away the more possibilities we're able to prepare for. It is itself a form of slavery.

Cultivating the Practice: Natural Contemplation

*Some brethren came one day to test him to see whether he would let his thoughts get dissipated and speak of the things of this world. They said to him, 'We give thanks to God that this year there has been much rain and the palm trees have been able to drink, and their shoots have grown, and the brethren have found manual work.' Abba John said to them, 'So it is when the Holy Spirit descends into the hearts of men; they are renewed and they put forth leaves in the fear of God.'*⁷¹ ~ St. John Colobus

Creation has a way of knowing about it that's easy to miss if you're not paying attention. It's an awareness written in the trees and in the cycle of the seasons. Spring gives way to summer and autumn, a cold winter devoid of adequate sunlight. Then out of nowhere, another spring of new warmth and light. Humanity itself seems to reawaken every spring, as though the whole of creation is shouting down the darkness and the cold, reminding us year after year that life, hope, and rebirth, *is* ultimately the way of the Creator.

Liturgically, the placement of flowers around church altars is intended to recall the mind outward into the natural order reflected in the cycle of the church year and of the seasons. Candles fashioned from the labor of bees call to mind what we might be together under the eternal light of a living God. The Psalms themselves call us to the practice of natural contemplation,

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

⁷¹ Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 87

There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 119:1-4)

We grow so accustomed to decay. As our bodies age, a sense of declining health proves inescapable, epitomized by escalating rounds of physician's visits and medicinal regimens. Our clothes grow worn and need replacing, museums take careful measures to slow inevitable deterioration and call it *preservation*. The land requires a similar intentional care. For some reason, our awareness is drawn almost magnetically to the rust of time.

"The Lord is about to pass by" (1 Kings 19:11). Apart from this commitment, what follows as Elijah's exercise in Natural Contemplation could easily be written off as random seismic activity; the natural instability of life in the mountains.

It began with a great and powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered rocks from the divine pathway (1 Kings 19:11-15). How clearly this echoes the coming of the Spirit accompanied by another violent wind on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2), but such was not the case for Elijah. The Lord was not in the wind.

After the wind, there was an earthquake, the beginnings of a subtle descent into divine awareness. Why else would wind and shock merit inclusion in its retelling, if not to mark how attention takes time to develop? The Lord was not in the earthquake, nor in the fire that followed. The Divine Spirit took the form of a gentle whisper, one that attended the explosive shockwaves before it. The Whisper of God came subtly, so subtly that it might otherwise have been missed had the universe not gripped Elijah in preparation, turned his mind to listen, and listen deeply.

If we cannot find God where we are, we will not find God anywhere (Acts 2:2).

Cultivating the practice of natural contemplation comes with no restriction or pathway other than the time it takes to pay attention.

Step 1: Clear the Mind, and the Calendar

Begin by blocking out an hour or more where you can quiet your Mind without the distraction of task lists and text messages. Elijah was driven to isolation as a means of escape (1 Kings 19:3-9). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus practiced this prayerful solitude early in the morning, before sunrise (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16). Our motivation for seclusion will prove less important than the quiet availability that grows from its seed.

Step 2: Pay Attention to Everything

Nature need not be confined to the undeveloped spaces. In other words, the practice doesn't restrict itself to overgrown patches yet untouched by human hands. *Nature* can be found in a carefully-manicured backyard or an urban zoo, an isolated mountain range or a city park. Become deeply curious about unnoticed things: Birds and wildlife, grass and the delicate webs of crawly-things. It's telling that most of Jesus' parables have to do, not with the inner workings of Temple and Synagogue, but of harvests and seed-choking plants. Watch, calm your mind, and let the universe teach you.

Step 3: Pray for Meaning

“That’s how the Holy Spirit descends upon the hearts of the faithful, that they may grow.⁷²” Thus the meaning St. John Colobus found beneath the symbolism of budding palm branches. Meaning comes subtly; so subtly that rain and harvests, the natural cycle of the Universe mean nothing beyond natural seismic movement without prayer and the

⁷² Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975. p. 87

preparation of the Spirit. And so we pray; before, after, and as a manner of being throughout. The entire exercise is an offering of prayer. *Show me your way, O Lord, that I may know your truth* (Psalm 25:4).

Step 4: Resurface Slowly

The Kingdom of God arises slowly. Like a seed planted in the ground (Luke 13:18-19), the rush of frenetic modernity can neither speed nor slow its process. Take a few minutes to allow the seed of contemplation to germinate within your spirit. It may be helpful to journal your emotional and cognitive response to the still quiet before jarring your system back into a state of usefulness and productivity.

Creation declares the works of the Lord. Emptied of our need for individual significance within it and the security of self-reliance without it, we become aware of our common movement into God alongside it. There is much meaning to be made if we are paying attention.

PRAYER OF THE SPIRIT:

Breathe deeply. Imagine yourself exhaling any illusions of independence and the need of securing tomorrow for yourself, and pray:

Praise the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great;

you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

He wraps himself in light as with a garment;

he stretches out the heavens like a tent

and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.

He makes the clouds his chariot

and rides on the wings of the wind.

He Makes winds his messengers,

Flames of fire his servants.

He sets the earth on its foundations;

It can never be moved.

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;

The waters stood above the mountains.

~ Psalm 104:1-6

+ DISCERNMENT: CONTEMPLATING EXPERIENCE +

Experience is a good thing; it is that which tests us.⁷³ ~ Abba Poemen, the Shepherd

They spent the day with him. Even for the earliest followers of Jesus, discipleship was never an academic exercise. Discipleship was and is an apprenticeship, painted in the subtle brilliance of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel.

"They *followed* Jesus" (John 1:37). Before Jesus turned around to see who was behind him, Andrew and the disciple we can only assume is John himself set out to find the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:36). They sought him, and so began the three-phase discipline of contemplating our own experience of following in the friendship of Christ.

Seeking God

"You will seek me and find me," says the Lord, "when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). The discipleship of Andrew and John stands paradigm for our own apprenticeship to Jesus. It begins by paying attention to where we are, how we came

⁷³ Ward, Benedicta tr. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1984. p. 170

to be there, what's going on around us, and not least the guidance of teachers who point to Jesus across time and space.

Staying with Christ

“Where are you staying?” The first of many questions that would hang too long in the air, redirected and unanswered by the Teacher. “Come, and you will see...” (John 1:38-40). The Spiritual Life, at least through the lens of Jesus, transcends the simple paradigm of *problem* and *solution*; of molding certainty from the clay of mystery. There were no answers to be given. They simply spent the day with Jesus, as we must also sit for a season with Christ, growing accustomed to the mystery.

Sharing in the Work of the Spirit

Three days and some twenty miles into their apprenticeship, Andrew and John – by now accompanied by Simon Peter, Philip and Nathaniel – stood bystanders at a wedding in Jesus' hometown of Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11). Their awakening is nothing short of simplistic beauty: An understated conversation between Jesus and a banquet master; nearly 180 gallons of water fermented instantly into choice wine; the first of Jesus' miraculous signposts.

Three days and some twenty miles into their apprenticeship, immersed in the slow, marinating experience of God, the disciples put their faith in Jesus. This was the culmination of three days of countless conversations and unanswered questions, none of which could take the place of the simple, guided sharing in the work of God.

Forty days and some countless miles into a similar divine encounter, the prophet Elijah sat with the memory of his own epiphany as he drifted to sleep in a cave along the cliffs of the Mountain of God (1 Kings 18:8-9). By his own repeated confession, he had

been zealous in his search for Divine Presence; a search stayed over time as Israel rejected God's covenant, broke down sacred altars, and slaughtered faithful prophets (1 Kings 18:10). He had shared deeply in the heavenly work of spiritual warfare, and at last was emptied of himself enough to discern meaning for his life, and for himself.

It's fitting, then, that the word *person* - which we commonly use to identify an individual separate from the collective *personhood* of a collective group - comes from the Latin word *persona*, which refers to a *theatrical mask*. It's as though language itself is trying to teach us something. Even the name by which we call ourselves betrays the existence of a deeper, more true character underneath; one that we might only meet when emptied of our need for security and individual significance in the presence of God...

Letting Go of our Need for Security

"You fool!" says the Lord, "Tonight your soul – your being, your psyche, your *self* – is required of you. Then who will get what you have stored up for yourself?" (Luke 12:13-21). Our life, Jesus teaches, doesn't consist of possessions stored away in anticipation of future want and need⁷⁴. Barns razed and replaced with more spacious storehouses will not only fail to secure longevity, but will also inevitably fall short of relieving the anxiety of anticipated need for security⁷⁵. Security built on accumulation isn't security at all. It's an illusion built on an illusion; that we might actually *own* anything in the first place. Treasures built up in a system of "ownership" lend themselves to decay and thievery as warehoused provision reveals its temporal deception (Matthew 6:19-21).

⁷⁴ Luke 12:15; from the occasional introduction to the above parable.

⁷⁵ Brueggeman, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. John Knox Press, 2014. pp. 26-29, 80

I wonder if it was this awakening that led the teacher of Ecclesiastes to enlightenment. Looking back on the pathway behind, the teacher says, “I’ve seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). I wonder if this is the sentiment Elijah would have penned as well if he had the chance; a prologue to his anguished confession that he stands in no better stead than his ancestors and longs to die (1 Kings 19:4).

Through our experience of impermanence - whether in solitude, in suffering, disappointment, intentional withdrawal, the intentionality of the created universe, the list goes on – we rid ourselves of what Henri Nouwen calls *scaffolding*: the friends and meetings, telephone calls and distractions that amuse us away from confronting our own emptiness⁷⁶.

For Elijah, this came through the realization that no conquest, no matter how grandiose, would turn his people toward God⁷⁷. Any sense of security, it seems, was no more than an elusive mirage. Even if he could approach it, if hardly for a moment, it would only leap further into the distance.

The illusions of our *scaffolding* are as many and varied as the needs we recognize within ourselves. Retirement accounts, family and social relationships, educational degrees, racial and societal privilege; all hallucinations that are subject to decay and thievery, revealed as temporal deceptions on the occasion of every funeral, every stock market collapse and failed job interview, every vulnerable conversation about the

⁷⁶ Nouwen, Henri. *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. HarperOne, 1981. p. 27

⁷⁷ Here comparing the response of “the people” in 1 Kings 18:39 (prostrating themselves and declaring victory for the God of Israel) to the fickle change of heart represented by 1 Kings 19:10, 14 (“the Israelites have rejected your covenant and broken down your altars”).

commonality of human experience. While these instruments of self-preservation aren't intrinsically sinful, they are limited in their ability to preserve the "self."

In the end we are groundless. Subject to the vain wind of circumstance, unable to grasp the air of emotional response as it moves further away the nearer we come to it, we must let go of our need for security. It never existed to begin with.

Letting Go of Our Need for Achievement

It starts on the playground, around the time our need for distinction and individual significance emerges from the Ego. We begin the hunt for something – anything – that will set us apart from the people around us.

When you're eight years old, being thought of as the best soccer player on an elementary school playground can be incredibly significant to one's identity. It's an identity that must be vehemently guarded. An unspoken wall is constructed between skilled and unskilled, between those considered *the best* and the second-class *rest*.

Being the best soccer player on an elementary school playground is meaningful when we're eight years old. If by the time we're thirty, however, we haven't evolved past that particular identity – more, if we haven't died to it entirely, broken down the dividing wall that kept us there, and emerged with an entirely new and resurrected identity – we've somehow missed out on a major part of our developmental process.

In his paradigm-shifting work, *The Theory of Everything*, Ken Wilber makes the distinction between what he labels as *Narrow Religion*, the pathway to solidifying the *separate self*, and *Deep Religion*, the goal of which is to ultimately transcend the self⁷⁸.

⁷⁸ Wilber, Ken. *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Shambhala, 2001. p. 76

While there is certainly much overlap in the actual practice of the two, this distinction is the root from which grows all forms of spiritual measurement.

Surely, it's this *deep religion* that St. Paul draws us into when he writes, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:3-4), and again, a few verses later, "You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:9-11).

This wisdom carries itself through into the desert of Alexandria, reflected in the deconstructing discipline of Abba Poeman, the Shepherd: "Throw yourself before God, and do not measure your progress."⁷⁹

This evolution – or more properly, de-evolution – of the separate self doesn't emerge without some level of struggle. Evident within Elijah's rehearsed response to God is an intense emotional, physical, spiritual, and physiological exhaustion. His separate self is clinging to the cliffs of Horeb by its fingertips: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. I am the only one left" (1 Kings 19:10, 14). With its last breath, Elijah's separate self gives birth to his transcended self, as the instruction of God awakens him to a mission beyond himself: "Anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Mehola to succeed you as prophet."

It starts on the playground, and somewhere between there and here, we must give ourselves over to the inevitable breaking down of identity barriers. The separate self

⁷⁹ Ward, Benedicta tr. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1984. p. 172

doesn't give in without some level of struggle. If we are to contemplate the common experience of collective consciousness, we must first bury who we think we are...

Cultivating the Practice: Vocational Awareness

With the separate self wholly deconstructed, then, it holds true in the light of resurrected practice that the doctor who devotes herself to the study of medicine juggled with great imbalance alongside the carpool line, or the father who gives himself over to the routine of vacuuming floors, changing diapers, and bedtime stories, or the child who explores the daylight away in imaginative play, is in fact living out the resurrected fullness of the transcended self *as much as any monk praying in a solitary desert*.

Even the father of ascetic monasticism was not without equal. From the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers:

It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels.⁸⁰

It's an equality echoed by the Apostle Paul throughout the New Testament: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

Even through the hyper-clericalism of the medieval Church and into the period of the Protestant Reformation, the level ground of vocational spirituality held fast. In one of his earliest treatises, Martin Luther wrote:

I advise no one to enter any religious order or the priesthood, indeed, I advise everyone against it – unless he is forearmed with this knowledge and understands

⁸⁰ Ward, Benedicta tr. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1984. p. 6

*that the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.*⁸¹

Spending an hour in a church pew with little children isn't for the faint of heart. Between mixing formula and distributing snacks, quieting ill-timed tantrums and chasing our littles through nooks and crannies that grownups were never meant to squeeze through, parents are lucky to steal five minutes of stillness out of an average mass.

For the over-hurried, it's really no different. Though the obvious scattershot of children and diaper bags might be lacking, the mind of anyone brave enough to keep pace with a modern workweek bounces from Costco list to unfinished projects, from reliving a bad meeting to planning the next one.

Boundary gives breath to our dormant frustration. The wall between secular and sacred, between the sanctuary and the family dining room, that we convince ourselves we've crossed in the few minutes of meditation before the morning circus begins inevitably leads to false accusations of failure as we spend too little time on one side of the "wall" or the other. The barrier between the sanctuary – from the Latin *sanctuarium*, where the sacred things are housed – to the common space of our family dining rooms. As all barriers ultimately reveal themselves to be, these too are illusions.

It was with great hesitation that the 17th century monk, Brother Lawrence, took up his fifteen year assignment of washing dishes in his Carmelite monastery in France. By

⁸¹ Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," in Luther's Works, American Edition (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 36:78.

nature, it was said, he had a great aversion to it. Over time, however, he came to see his every task as an extension of his love for God. He awoke to his condition of perpetual prayer, and asked God in circumstance for the grace to do his work well⁸².

There is holiness in the ordinary. The plumb line runs from the Scriptural witness of Colossians through the kitchen of a Parisian Carmelite monastery and into our own laundry rooms. Every diaper, every board meeting, every science worksheet, piano lesson and dance recital; every runny nose, every every-thing done as an extension of our love for God is holy in and of itself.

Dying to the numbness of individual distinction and accomplishment that feeds the separate self, we pray freely for the grace to do our work well, whatever it is that's in front of us. Be it in prayer and solitude, or in care for a child or an aging parent, or in the cultivation of any cause greater than ourselves, what greater monastic discipline is there than the complete giving over of ourselves to the practice of the presence of God?

Prayer for the Spirit

Breathe deeply. Imagine yourself exhaling all need for security and individual accomplishment, and pray...

I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.

I have set the LORD always before me.

Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

my body will also rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave,

nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

⁸² Lawrence, Brother. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Oneworld Publications, 1993. p. 10

You have made known to me the path of life,

you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

~ Psalm 16:7-11

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ~ Mark 2:27

CHAPTER 3: SABBATH REST

We Are Already at Rest...

What makes us unique is that we can restrain ourselves. We can decide not to do something that we are able to do. We can set limits on our desires. We can say, “Enough⁸³.” ~ Bill McKibben

It isn't just rest; a shutting-down of the body's normal functionality. During most stages of sleep, our cerebral systems are still fully active, engaged in activity of a different sort than the kind we're accustomed to when we're awake. Sleep isn't just a break from motion and production, it's motion and production that serves a distinctive purpose.

As soon as we drift off, our bodies go into full repair mode. Our muscles loosen as their blood supply increases, leading to tissue repair and growth development. Production of the brain's stress hormone cortisol dips and rises throughout the night, re-setting the body's sense of hyper-alertness throughout the day⁸⁴. In its stead, the central nervous system increases its flow of cerebrospinal fluid, flushing out excess proteins that pack the space between brain cells when we're awake and sorting our memories into their proper storage compartments.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Maiken Nedergaard of the University of Rochester likens sleep to a sort of dishwasher for the brain⁸⁵. Its level of activity and functionality remain the same, as one would never call the low humming and sporadic

⁸³ McKibbin, Bill. *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*. Owl Books, 2003. p. 205

⁸⁴ National Sleep Foundation. *What Happens When You Sleep?*
<https://sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/what-happens-when-you-sleep/page/0/1>

⁸⁵ Brains Sweep Themselves Clean of Toxins During Sleep.
<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/10/18/236211811/brains-sweep-themselves-clean-of-toxins-during-sleep>. All Things Considered. October 17, 2013.

typhoon of a dishwasher *inactivity*. Sleep is instead the activity of repair, of restoration, and of rest.

The concept of Sabbath, as described in the Scriptures and envisioned across the landscapes of the individual soul, the land, and culture itself, stretches well beyond a simple decrease in activity. Throughout Sabbath rest, we don't necessarily produce *less* so much as we produce *differently*; we produce with the goal of cleansing ourselves and our environment from the excess buildup that pack the space between our moments and between each other when we're all awake.

Our collective belief in the unfettered growth of Western technological and financial advancement leads us to measure success and failure in economic terms, often at the expense of our own mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health⁸⁶. We live within a culture of unknown limitation, and have by and large given the designation of our own limitations over to a system that is at best disinterested in, and at worst exploitative of, our own well-being.

Within this frenetic cultural framework, the only protest is intentional inaction; or in this case, action of a different sort. We simply were not created to pour ourselves out without stopping to be refilled. The testimony of Scripture and the delicate balance evident throughout creation points us to a regular practice of the intentional restoration of the mind, body, and spirit. If we're awake enough to cleanse the excess.

+ **REST > SLEEP** +

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ~ Mark 1:35

⁸⁶ Francis, Pope. *On Care for Our Common Home*. Our Sunday Visitor, 2015.

Everyone was looking for Jesus. When they awoke after a hectic night of healing and exorcism; the whole village having packed themselves into the small space outside the house Jesus was staying in, his disciples went looking for him. Jesus was gone, and no one knew where or why.

Mark's Gospel account launches with a start. The first thirty-four verses of chapter read like the weekly agenda of a head-of-state. John the Baptist lays the groundwork and we're off to the races: Baptism in the Jordan, forty days of fasting and spiritual torture in the wilderness, John's subsequent imprisonment; Jesus recruits the first four of his disciples, expels a demon from a synagogue, heals a few more people, then everyone in town comes knocking at his door. It's an exhausting read, let alone the concept of following Jesus around for a few days.

It's reminiscent of the Creation Hymn of early Genesis. Just when you think you're keeping pace with the Spirit who never stops; who speaks sun and moon and the expanding universe into existence and then populates the canvas with every plant and animal you could think of, out of nowhere God stops everything and rests. So significant is this change in pace and tone that nearly every dissection of the account marks it as the beginning of a new chapter.

As though marking the end of a cosmically creative week, Jesus finishes the work he had been doing; and so very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he rested from all his work (Genesis 2:2, Mark 1:35). He deliberately leaves the center of distraction and productivity; he leaves the house and goes off by himself to pray.

It's impossible to overstate the rebellion Jesus launches when he refuses to allow the current of popular culture to carry him back to Capernaum. His disciples are part of that

current. When they found him, the evangelist is very careful to relay exactly what they said, as well as the implication beneath it: “Everyone is looking for you.” It’s as though they expect Jesus to suddenly awaken to the deviant insurrection of his absence.

This withdrawal would prove to be Jesus’ pattern for re-creation throughout his ministry. He teaches his disciples to pray in the solitude of their own interior garden (Matthew 6:6). He spends sleepless nights in unattended prayer; just he and his God alone in hidden communion (Matthew 14:23, Luke 6:12, Luke 22:41-44). The question of relationship between the Cosmic Christ and Jesus of Nazareth notwithstanding, he sets in motion a pattern consistent with that of God himself: Creation and Rest. Re-Creation and Self-Repair. He sets in motion a cycle projected into the pattern of our own existence as well, if we’re awake enough to cleanse the excess.

+ LOCATING SOUL-SABBATH +

You have to keep looking for people and places where your truth is spoken and where you are reminded of your deepest identity as the chosen one. Yes, we must dare to opt consciously for our chosenness and not allow our emotions, feelings, or passions seduce us into self-rejection⁸⁷. ~ Henri Nouwen

Energy is contagious. The residual aura of arguments and intense conversations can be felt by someone walking into a room even when the dispute pauses itself to preserve appearances. It’s as though our words and emotions have shadows that take a few minutes to dissipate. People who are joyful by nature tend to sprinkle that joy in a path behind them wherever they walk. The same is true of people who are perpetually angry, and a whole host of layers between those two extremes.

⁸⁷ Nouwen, Henri. *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992. p. 59-60

Societal overextension and busy-ness escalates like an arms-race. As the energy of production increases unchecked, requiring of us more and more work to buy more and more stuff, the ones who produce our stuff are then required to work more and more to produce it, with the promise that then they too will be able to buy more and more stuff⁸⁸. As that spiral of increase layers over itself a few times on the way up, culture as a whole begins to buy into the illusion of perpetual growth without consequence⁸⁹.

Momentum tends to work that way. Either we're moving one direction or the other. There's no such thing as standing still.

The energy of Soul-Sabbath doesn't just place a stop-gap in the upwardly-mobile whirlwind. Nor does it simply inoculate the individual without effect on the ecology surrounding her. Rest and healing begin within the self, even as the word *repentance* implies a dramatic reversal of direction; a passive turning as a captain changes the direction of a great ship. From an observer's perspective, it's convenient shorthand to say that a ship is turning, but we all know there's someone behind the wheel.

Rest and healing begin within the self, and with contagious energy begin to sprinkle rest in a path behind them wherever restful souls walk. Restful spirits lead to restful workplaces. Restful homes. Restful schools and farms and ultimately restful ecological systems.

When the Spirit spoke the need for periodic soul-repair into the life of Israel, she wasn't setting apart a privileged religious class who could observe the custom in cloister while the blue-collar masses tend to the daily needs of society. The gift of Sabbath is

⁸⁸ McKibben, Bill. *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*. Owl Books, 2013. p. 24

⁸⁹ Francis, Pope. *On Care for Our Common Home*. Our Sunday Visitor, 2015. p. 51

intended for all people: The hyper-religious Levitical hermit and the peasant farmer and everyone in between. In the sections that follow, we'll look for concrete places to locate the practice of Sabbath within the realistic pattern of modern life. We'll find space for contagious soul-healing for the monastic retiree and the mother-of-four law student and everyone in between.



The Contagion of Soul-Sabbatical

*The Sabbath was made for humanity,
not humanity for the Sabbath... ~ Mark 2:27*

Sabbatical *Balance*

Sacred *Manna*

Sabbatical *Consciousness*

Sacred *Place*



Each place of rest is intended to cultivate a practice of Sabbath that fits your individual circumstance and will bring rest to your individual spirit. There's no template for specific practice, just the promise of restoration for those who will allow the Spirit of God the time and space for necessary healing.

+ SOUL-SABBATICAL BALANCE +

The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone, even by the devil. He is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of the divine freedom⁹⁰. ~ Thomas Merton

When I was a teenager, I spent my afternoons learning the family business. My dad ran an executive recruiting firm in Memphis where me I and a dozen or so others spent our days on the phone vetting candidates for an eclectic array of open jobs. I was the youngest one in the office then; barely a Junior in High School, and the amount of money involved in each search turned my eyes green in a hurry.

I remember flying with our team to Dallas for a convention in the late 1990's. There were dinners and awards ceremonies; all of the biggest producers were invited onto this platform in the middle of the convention hall, night in and night out, with the ridiculous amounts of money they'd brought into the company in flashing lights above their heads. It was really quite a spectacle. No one from our office was ever invited up.

After a few trips through this circus, I leaned over to my dad and asked him pointedly, "What does somebody have to do to bring in that kind of bankroll?" He knew what I was asking. "Well," he said, "I'm pretty sure you'd need to put in fifteen or sixteen hours a day. Wouldn't leave much time to coach your kid's baseball team, you think?" He knew what I was asking and his answer affirmed the value system that was planted in our family culture from the beginning. We have *enough*, and the sacrifices necessary for much more were beyond our framework.

⁹⁰ Merton, Thomas. *An Invitation to the Contemplative Life*. The Word Among Us Press, 2006. p. 50

I imagine the scope of the Divine energy bank to be well beyond the need for seventh-day rest. Surely the Christ who summoned wind and wave to still; who conjured bread and fish enough to feed thousands with excess to spare could have continued healing the sick and exorcising the possessed until neither illness nor demonic spirit was left. And yet Jesus woke up before dawn to spend time in solitude with God.

It's as if he knew, as if he set in motion a pattern affirming the value system that was planted within his family. One day the disciples would follow in the footsteps of Jesus: preaching and leading a new generation of the faithful who would in turn lead the next. And so he rested; planting within the culture of his own establishment the cycle of serving and resting, producing and healing. We exist within a fragile balance across a vast array of human and ecological relationships, a balance reflected in our own physiology⁹¹.

Sabbath rest is not without sacrifice. There's money and prestige, advancement, convention hall platforms and lighted dollar signs all left unclaimed. We have enough, and the sacrifices necessary for much more are beyond sustainability.

Take control of your calendar. Put pen to paper (or finger to touchscreen) and map out an hour or so each week to withdraw in solitude with God. You may have to scrape a few sacred minutes in the morning before your kids wake up, or begin to say no more often, or give up the possibility of advancement at work. You may have to disappoint some people. Spend *more* time - however much you can increasingly carve out – doing whatever will restore *your individual spirit*. Get a massage, imagining the Spirit of God passing healing to your body. Read a book, imagining

⁹¹ Francis, Pope. *On Care for Our Common Home*. Our Sunday Visitor, 2015. p. 33

God calming your central nervous system. Go for a run. Learn how to knit.

Whatever will *restore your soul*, as if that time were a gift directly from the Divine

Spirit. Because it is.

+ SACRED MANNA +

At worst, drinking together is saying, “We trust each other enough that we don’t want to poison each other.” At best, it is saying, “I want to get close to you and celebrate life with you.” It breaks through the boundaries that separate us and invites us to recognize our shared humanity⁹². ~ Henri Nouwen

There’s little public admiration to be apportioned at the dinner table. No one is reminding us how awesome we are, or stimulating our dopamine-driven reward systems. There are no likes or retweets to be gained. Only time. A quiet, communal refueling of the body that under ideal circumstances would happen in moments of pause from the constant drive to produce. Meals remind the body to stop every so often and re-fill.

I like to eat lunch at this little grocery café about a half-mile from our parish office. They’ve got a relatively healthy assortment of fish and vegetables, and the price is right. Right next to the salad bar, there’s this little jumble of picnic tables all lined in a neat series of rows, chairs pointed like pews toward the central altar on the wall. Now and then when the days are more stressful (read: “Lent”), I find myself joining the choir of congregants all multitasking our lunch while taking in the day’s hurried news and sports cycle. We’re not all really eating so much as we’re watching television while quickly restocking untasted nourishment without noticing what’s going into our bodies.

Slow down. I can see it in the eyes of my five-year-old son as we sit at the dinner table, my own brain-chemistry still rapid-firing from the demands of the work-day. Slow down. There’s orange juice on the table and love wrapped into food that didn’t prepare

⁹² Nouwen, Henri. *Can You Drink This Cup?* Ave Maria Press, 1996. p. 85-86

itself. There's time on the table, present moments of time that if allowed to pass without attention would leave and never come back⁹³.

Sabbath, like Passover, carries a quality of communal mealtime along with it. While no one would assume to recreate a first century Passover observance, the inclusion of community bread and wine is undeniable (Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-38). By way of cultural carryover, sharing a meal within the context of the early Christian tradition connected those at the table with an underlying sense and establishment of intimacy and mutual acceptance (Mark 2:13-17). By the time Paul writes to the Corinthian church, worship itself initiates within the context of a Sabbath evening meal (1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 12:12-31), with the circular remembrance of Christ's physical body present within the meal and the reality of the church as that same body⁹⁴.

It's like breathing. There's enough going on within the activity itself that sometimes it's a good idea to not accompany it with anything else. **Slow down. Taste the food you're eating as though God himself was giving it to you as a gift within the wilderness of our daily wandering (Exodus 16:1-36). Allow yourself to taste each bite deeply and intentionally. Be mindful of those you're eating with, or mindful of yourself as sufficient to the occasion if you're eating alone. Give yourself a few minutes of distraction-free giftedness. God is giving you the blessing of his presence to permeate our bodies down to their digestive systems. Take this time to simply be.**

⁹³ Baker, Dan. *What Happy People Know: How the New Science of Happiness Can Change Your Life for the Better*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2003. p. 226-7

⁹⁴ Morrill, Bruce. *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist*. Paulist Press, 2012. p. 95

+ SABBATICAL CONSCIOUSNESS +

If we respond to the invitation to repent addressed so lovingly by the divine physician, we can begin at once to take advantage of the divine therapy⁹⁵. ~ Thomas Keating

His eyes closed as he broadcasted his spirit to the interior mountain of the soul. The world around him stopped, and he awoke in far-off solitude; his disciples still sleeping within the house. It seems Jesus was often able to shut out the world and drift into himself. Whether physically or spiritually, it really doesn't matter. In early Mark, he walks out the door to spend the dawn alone in prayer (Mark 1:35). By chapter four, he fades into his interior mountainside on a cushion in the stern of a storm-rocked boat (Mark 4:38). Jesus shuts the world out from time to time for a momentary sabbatical of consciousness.

When you pray, he teaches his disciples, don't stand on the street corners as the hypocrites do, who think they'll be heard for their many words. Instead, fade into your interior room; the castle of your inner being, and your father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6). Here Jesus isn't really painting a picture of a five-bedroom bungalow in the suburban sprawl of the outer city, each family member with their own 12 x 10 sacred space to retreat into. The room within. The interior castle, as St. Teresa of Avilla would later translate Jesus' conceptualization into her own life of prayer.

How many of Jesus' teachings are intended to reprogram our inherent ideas of the human pursuit, to change what we chase after and why we chase after it. In the twelfth chapter of Luke, Jesus tells a story about a rich man who pursues happiness through the security of his surplus. Met with an over-abundant harvest, he – referring to himself as

⁹⁵ Keating, Thomas. *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994. p. 40

soul – determines to warehouse his overflow and take it easy for a while. This is how humanity is hard-wired to pursue happiness; a retirement account or some other security blanket that will ensure abundance well into the future; give us today enough to last a lifetime. While he calls himself a *soul*, Jesus names him only the *fool*⁹⁶. Happiness instead, Jesus redirects, is found in richness toward God.

Through inner Sabbath, the intentional withdrawal of the mind into whatever interior mountain we're able to construct for ourselves, we allow time to reconnect with the God who wills to be our friend. **Find a sacred space where you can disconnect from all forms of communication; where you can turn your phone off and practice ten to twenty minutes of *Sitting Sabbath*. Open yourself to a deepening relationship with God in the place of silent meditation. If you don't have ten minutes, even a period of ninety seconds or so, if taken in mindful breathing, can refocus the mind and reset the pace of our frenetic existence. Whatever you do, breathe.**

In a deliberate protest of non-production, the body stills and we give ourselves time and space to be reminded that we're *not* what we secure for ourselves, nor are we the means by which we secure it. We are children of a loving Savior who wills to give us rest. Sitting, we quiet the mind and observe the thoughts and feelings that arise within the body, and realize that we – in the true sense of the self – are more than the combination of those thoughts and feelings. **Allow your thoughts to come and go, your feelings to come and go. They are only reflections of our own human experiences. Nothing more. Observe your reactions to the silence, and be mindful that you are –**

⁹⁶ Brueggemann, Walter. *Money and Possessions*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016. p. 192-193

having been joined together with the experience of Christ – the very consciousness of Christ beneath the shell of thought and feeling (Romans 6:1-14, Galatians 2:20).

+ SACRED SPACE +

The time of temptation is not the time to leave⁹⁷ ... ~ Evagrius Ponticus

I love the specificity of Mark's language. When Jesus gets up before sunrise to pray in solitude, it's not simply his lack of companionship that marks the occasion. The *place* itself is solitary. The land is sacred; set apart as holy with divine purpose.

The sanctity of place emerges early in the narrative of Biblical history. In Genesis chapter 8, Noah builds an altar to the Lord shortly after the flood waters subside; one not necessarily to mark a location but rather to perform a religious ritual (Genesis 8:20-22). There's really no mention of the holiness of the region around the altar, only the liturgy of the sacrifice itself.

However, beginning with the account of Abraham a few chapters (though no doubt countless centuries) later, it seems the place of theophany itself bears a sacred residue long after divine encounter has passed. In Genesis chapter 12, Abram is led to a place called Shechem where grew a great tree. There God promises the land as an inheritance to generations of Abram's children, so Abram built an altar to mark both the promise and the place of its making (Genesis 12:6-7).

His story reads like a montage in fast-forward. After an unfortunate episode in Egypt, Abram circles back to Bethel, to the place of God's appearing where his altar was constructed. It's there in that sacred place, the account details, that he called again on the name of the Lord. And so begins a long succession of patriarchs building altars to mark

⁹⁷ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Praktikos §28, p. 24

the sacred spaces of divine appointment. Jacob to mark the spot where God appeared to him as he fled his brother (Genesis 35:1). Moses to commemorate the Israelite victory over the Amalekites (Exodus 17:15). The list goes on...

What makes a space holy and set apart isn't its architecture. It's not even the spattering of religious icons that note an area as *intended* for sacred encounter, as though God can be conjured by the proper placement of crosses and religious artifacts. It's the actual movement of his Spirit within a place that marks it as divinely relevant. The question is, where has God *not* appeared?

Noted child psychologist and professor at the University of Notre Dame, Darcia Narvaez considers a lack of connection to place and, in particular, to nature leads to diminishing of self-worth among early adolescents⁹⁸. Our increasing disconnection from place as indicative of self and community has led to a de-tethering of the individual to our greater communities; ultimately from our identity as those to whom God speaks *within* a given place.

Place plays heavily on memory. On identity. Smells have a tendency to lower the eyelids without our knowing. A familiar scent triggers memory and we shiver to discover our eyes have closed, our souls broadcasted out of body into another time and place. Early cenobitic monks lived in cloister, bonded inextricably to the place of their communities. The earliest of these monasteries featured high walls to serve as a visual boundary both for those outside as well as those inside⁹⁹. The early Alexandrian monastic fathers warned against drifting listlessly into the fantasy of living in a more

⁹⁸ Northcott, Michael. *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. p. 159

⁹⁹ Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 125

spirited place¹⁰⁰. No place *feels* especially sacred. All place *is* sacred. This is the paradox of the spiritual experience of place.

This cross-section of holiness has worlds of implications of how space and land are treated in the landscape of ecology, sustainability, economic theory, distribution of goods, ownership of goods and land, banking and finance, management of labor, treatment of animals. Our relationship with the land God not only gives for our use (not ownership, by the way, only *use* [Leviticus 25:23]) could be and *is* the subject of countless books. For our purposes, however, it is enough to say that the place of our encounters with God need not be taken lightly, but serve as a trigger for memory when his promises seems distant, a springboard for a life of prayer in the places that call us to deepen our experience of that life.

Find a place where you've experienced God in one way, shape or form. There may not be a bush in your backyard that's caught perpetual fire from which the voice of the Divine spoke to you (Exodus 3:1-22), but a place that triggers a memory or feeling of divine safety. In short, find a place where you've experienced Sabbath healing. It could be a pew in a local cathedral, or a bench in a local park. Maybe a room in your apartment or a corner of some isolated forest. It doesn't need to look holy to other people, only to trigger a spiritual response within you. Make a habit of spending time in that place allowing the Spirit of God to calm you. Talk with God in that place. Listen to God in that place. If he's slow to move within you, keep going. No place *feels* especially sacred. All space *is* sacred. This is the paradox of the spiritual experience of place.

¹⁰⁰ Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972. Praktikos §28, p. 24

Epilogue

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ~ Matthew 13:44

It's going to take some digging, this discovery and rediscovery of our sacred treasure buried in the field. Circling back to the sentiments of Thomas Merton, we "start where [we] are and [we] deepen what [we] already have and [we] realize that [we] are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. All we need is to experience what we already possess."¹⁰¹

This treasure waits not far below the surface of each of our constructed selves, glowing through the cracks that both time and the human experience reveal. Though it may be glimpsed now and then through extraordinary spiritual practice and miraculous inbreakings (for which the desire to replicate and sustain is overwhelming), the upended nearness of Christ leads us further and further into the holiness of our *ordinary* lives.

My prayer in writing this little reflection is to offer a humble middle pathway between the monastery and the minivan; between the long obedience of cloistered life and the equally sacred living out of our worldly vocations.

Within the thin spaces of Prayer and our awareness of its inner constancy, quiet Contemplation and Sabbath rest, our need for heightened spiritual sensation begins to still. We open ourselves to *be* re-created through the slow, ordinary work of the Spirit. We open ourselves to the re-discovery of who've been all along. We are already praying. We are already holy. We are already at rest.

¹⁰¹ Merton, Thomas and Patrick Hart. *Thomas Merton/Monk*. Cistercian Publications, 1974. p. 80

Bibliography

- Athanasius. *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcelinus*. Paulist Press, 1980.
- Baker, Dan. *What Happy People Know: How the New Science of Happiness Can Change Your Life for the Better*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2003.
- Barman, Susan M., Kim E. Barrett, Scott Boitano, Heddwen Brooks. *Ganong's Review of Medical Physiology*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2012. Brains Sweep Themselves Clean of Toxins During Sleep. <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/10/18/236211811/brains-sweep-themselves-clean-of-toxins-during-sleep>. All Things Considered. October 17, 2013.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Money and Possessions*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance, New Edition with Study Guide*. Presbyterian Publishing, 2017.
- Carpenter, Siri. *Sight Unseen*. Monitor on Psychology. April 2001, Volume 32, No. 4. p.54
- Deeg, Alexander. "Imagination and Meticulousness. *Haggadah and Halakhah in Judaism and Christian Preaching*." Homiletic: The Journal of the Academy of Homiletics, vol. 34 no. 1, May 28, 2009, 139-151.
- Emmons, Robert. "Why Gratitude is Good." *Greater Good Magazine*. November 16, 2010. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good
- Francis, Pope. *On Care for Our Common Home*. Our Sunday Visitor, 2015.
- Fuhriman, David. "How Many Possible Move Combinations Are There in Chess?" *Bern Medical*. March 1, 2013. www.bernmedical.com/blog/how-many-possible-move-combinations-are-there-in-chess.

- Hahn, Thich Nhat. *Peace is Every Step*. Bantam Books, 1991.
- Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005.
- James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Keating, Thomas. *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994.
- Keating, Thomas. *Open Heart, Open Mind*. Continuum, 2006.
- Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. Paulist Press, 1999.
- Lawrence, Brother. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Oneworld Publications, 1993.
- Macgregor, Cecilia. *Climbing the Ladder*. JT Hayes, 1874.
- McCraty, Rollin. "The Grateful Heart." *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- McKibbin, Bill. *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*. Owl Books, 2003.
- Manney, Jim. *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen*. Loyola Press, 2011.
- Merton, Thomas. *An Invitation to the Contemplative Life*. The Word Among Us Press, 2006.
- Merton, Thomas. *Bread in the Wilderness*. Fortress Press, 1986.
- Merton, Thomas and Patrick Hart. *Thomas Merton/Monk*. Cistercian Publications, 1974.
- Merton, Thomas. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*. Dell, 1980.
- Morrill, Bruce. *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist*. Paulist Press, 2012.

National Sleep Foundation. *What Happens When You Sleep?*

<https://sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/what-happens-when-you-sleep/page/0/1>

Northcott, Michael. *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

Nouwen, Henri. *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.

Nouwen, Henri. *Can You Drink This Cup?* Ave Maria Press, 1996.

Nouwen, Henri. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. HarperOne, 2015.

Nouwen, Henri. *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*. Doubleday, 1998.

Nouwen, Henri. *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. HarperOne, 1981.

Paintner, Christine Valters. *Lectio Divina – the Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer*. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2014.

Peterson, Eugene. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NavPress; Lea Edition, 2015.

Peterson, Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

Ponticus, Evagrius. *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combatting Demons*. Cistercian Studies, 2009.

Ponticus, Evagrius. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Publications, 1972.

Ramsey, Boniface. *John Cassian: The Conferences*. Newman Press, 1997.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Beacon Press, 1967.

- Rorh, Richard. *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999.
- Rohr, Richard. *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015.
- Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Namaste Publishing, 1999.
- Voskamp, Ann. *One Thousand Gifts*. Zondervan, 2010.
- Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975.
- “What Happens When You Breathe?” *National Institute of Health*, 17 July 2012, nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/hlw/whathappens.
- Wilber, Ken. *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Shambhala, 2001.
- Wilber, Ken. *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*. Shambhala, 2000.
- Wilber, Ken. *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions – More Inclusive, More Comprehensive, More Complete*. Shambhala, 2018.

