

Life Phase:

John Dunne (*Time and myth*) suggests that the spiritual journey is a training in consent to God's presence and to all reality. He proposes that there is several consents that needs to be made:

- * The first occurs in childhood when God asks us to consent to our basic goodness.
- * The second consent is when we begin to experience new talents and abilities – and have the opportunity to contribute.
- * The third consent comes in early adulthood when we begin to experience loss; having to let go of people and situations. Where we lose our health, and change in appearance.
- * The fourth kind of consent is the consent to be transformed. This is probably the most scary and most challenging consent because it involves the letting go of the False Self – the only Self we have ever known. We can be more afraid of this death than of physical death.

Now that people live longer, there may be a wonderful flowering of Contemplative Prayer among senior citizens. Death used to cut short the spiritual journey for a lot of people before they even heard of some of the states described above. In a few years, however, many will be living past a hundred. The last twenty to thirty years of life will provide an enormous potential for Contemplative growth. All the stages of the great mystics of past times will be available.

Thomas Keating

The pathology is simply this; we have come to full reflective self-consciousness without the experience of intimacy in God. With the Fall we became aware of this reflective self-consciousness. We realised we were vulnerable, afraid, alone. We suffer. We have pain. We are lonely. As St Augustine proposed: Our hearts are restless in us, until they find rest in You. All of us have a longing – a hunger and thirst that a deep union with God alone can fill.

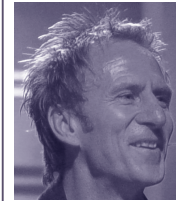
Anne Frank, a Jewish girl persecuted during the Holocaust, verbalised her own longing and pain with this profound writing:

Today the sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue, there is a lovely breeze and I am longing—so longing for everything. To talk, for freedom, for friends, to be alone. And I do so long... to cry! I feel as if I am going to burst, and I know it would be get better with crying; but I can't, I'm restless, I go from room to room, breathe through the crack of a closed window, feel my heart beating, as if it is saying, "can you satisfy my longing at last"? I believe that it is spring within me, I feel in my whole body and soul. It is an effort to behave normally. I feel utterly confused. I don't now what to read, what to write, what to do, I only know that I am longing.

Anne Frank

May we hear the invitation, echoing the holy longing in our hearts, to come to sit ... and have the courage to act, as we are transformed.

Reflecting on Luke 10 and the encounter with Martha and Mary, this session refers to the age-long debate juxtaposing the contemplative with an approach involving action.



Johan GEYSER

A Holy Longing

Welcome to the first Conversation at Mosaiek.

This is the culmination of a dream that we have had for years. For a long time we felt the need to create a platform where we can have conversations about our journey, and hopefully learn and grow further along what we felt God has called us to. Creating "just another conference to create the illusion that we have our act together and can teach others" was the last thing on our mind.

This opportunity to converse about movements in the Spiritual life energised and excited us – to create a vision of what living-with-God encompasses. That it should be biblically-based, keep the traditions of the Church in mind, as well as incorporating contemporary developments in disciplines such as Biblical Studies, Physiology, Sociology, Theology and Neurology, was essential.

I invite you to join me in focusing on the Contemplative Dimension of this journey, referencing Luke 10 as a case study; especially interpreting it from the Contemplative Tradition's understanding of this text.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* - Luke 10:38-41 RSV

* Some manuscripts 'but few things are needed or only one.'

Martha and Mary

There was this family in Bethany, a household that comprised of a brother, by the name of Lazarus and two sisters named Mary and Martha. Now, as anyone who has grown up in a family where the women outnumbered the men would know, you would be aware of a certain dynamic: Queuing to get into the bathroom and a certain over-protectiveness. And usually the distribution of labour in the family doesn't work out too well either. In a predominantly male-status-society, having a boy was your pride and joy, so one can only imagine the favouritism that existed in that family towards Lazarus, as opposed to his two sisters. This story takes place before that headline-news experience – the one where the bloke died and Jesus called him out of the grave. Jesus was obviously good friends with this family.

And the setting is a huge event, where everybody comes over to Mary, Martha and Lazarus' place to listen to Jesus. And where does the trouble start to brew? The kitchen, of course. The one sister is actively busy to ensure everything runs smoothly, while the other one is missing in action. Note the absence of other men in the story – obviously even then they couldn't have been trusted in the kitchen.

In this story Martha and Mary are juxtaposed as symbols of the Active life and the Contemplative life respectively. The *Cloud of the Unknowing* considers the Contemplative life as the highest form of life; the Active life as the lowest form and the nearly impossible life, the Active Contemplative life.

Teresa of Avila's proposition throws this scripture upside down, in that she states that Jesus had no problem with what Martha was doing, only by the manner in which she did it. Jesus was not particularly happy or impressed with Mary either, she chose the most important part, which was the better part, but not the best way, which would have been to act contemplatively.

This is what I want us to strive for, my Sister; and let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve ... Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always rest and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her.

Teresa of Avila

The Active Life: Martha

Consider this unique character. Martha seems to be this extremely conscientious woman. Jesus chose her home to be hosted in, which would have been quite a nod from the society's perspective. She seems to value hospitality and tries to keep everyone happy, and fed. The bee always buzzing about the room, ensuring everyone has enough to drink, is comfortable, needs are met. From the outside it might seem as if she is there to serve – to create a great experience for others. The one paying the price to ensure a care-free and distraction-free environment. She seems to be the person to



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speak to when you want to get something done, and could be labeled as a very responsible person with gifts like organisation, planning and hospitality. But her noble attempt turns to a fluke when she misses the moment that she has endeavoured to create. We see her become dissatisfied. Maybe she feels invisible. "Isn't anybody seeing what I am doing here?" She gets tired. Comes across as stressed and highly strung, and anxious. In a movie on the life of Cinderella, she would probably play the part of the evil and ugly stepsister.

According to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6 and 13, obstacles to the Spiritual Journey is being worried ('torn apart') and upset ('tossed around'). Early church fathers took this teaching so seriously that one asked a pilgrim whether he still worries, or chose the way of Christ.

Martha was totally unaware of her inner motivation in serving Christ. She was converted on the conscious level of her psychological awareness, but not converted on the unconscious level of her motivation. She was caught up in control ('finishing in time'), what Christ would think of her, and achieving her goal. These themes are significant in the build-up and construction of the False Self. It shows signs of:

- * Comparison;
- * Loneliness;
- * Questioning God;
- * Frustration;
- * Sense of loss of control;
- * Complaints;
- * Projection;
- * Attachment to outcomes;
- * Irritation; and,
- * Hurry.

The False Self reveals itself in the ordinary – the little things in life. Note that Lazarus wasn't even mentioned in this telling. It's not shown during the raising of Lazarus from the dead, a big event that only happened once in the earthly life of Christ. It is dangerous to make a religion out of the better moments of one's life.

The Contemplative Life : Mary

On the other side of the equation we meet Mary. We see this person who might come across as peaceful. A great fan of Jesus who would rather grab hold of an opportunity to spend time with him, than share the concern of her sister for the well-being of the other guests, or well-being of Christ for that matter. Her desire is to be with Him – purposefully rather choosing time with him than addressing the needs of the other followers around her.

Christ suggests that a manner in which Martha can deal with the False Self, is by following Mary's example of sitting at His feet. The path to transformation is to sit. The Dalai Lama says that the four-pillar-practice of Buddhism is the sitting, the teaching and the community. What would you describe as the major practices of Christianity?

In my life, I was taught to 'sit' in a variety of ways:

- * **Reformed Sitting.**
In this arena, the main emphasis is to understand the Word and then enter into the world of the Word. This manner engages the Cognitive and rational part of your being.
- * **Charismatic Sitting.**
In my story, this happened in reaction to the prior very rational approach. This manner is all about experiencing the anointing, and touch of Jesus. The main role of the Word is not so much understanding, but getting your faith in order to experience God's power. This sitting engages the Affective and emotional part of your being.
- * **Contemplative Sitting.**
Here the main objective is not so much understanding or experiencing, but intention. It involves a moving to an awareness of the reality of God's presence, beyond that of words or feelings. This 'sitting' can be described as resting, the prayer of the quiet – where the immediacy and intimacy of God is emphasised. 1 Corinthians 13:12 / Numbers 12

There's a story about two fishes. Where the little baby fish went to his mother and asked her to explain to him what water was. The wise mother fish answered: There are three ways to answer your question:

1. You can swim out to the shore, and thereby leave the water and die.
2. You can take photographs of it, which you can look at, I can try to explain it to you and you can reflect on the content of each photograph.
3. Or, you can just be in water – that surrounds you, go through you ... Just be.

There is a time to stop thinking: Where it's not about my feelings of reflection, but a time to move into its reality. Stop taking photographs.

Your thoughts and your feelings about God, is not God. Your feelings and thoughts must give way to the reality that is God. Talking about God or talking with God must give way to just be with God.

This does leave us with a challenge. It doesn't feel like praying.

John of the Cross said that one of the signs of the Dark Night of the Senses is dissatisfaction with the previous ways of 'sitting'. When prayer loses its appeal and becomes uninteresting and difficult. Those practices that used to give satisfaction, enthusiasm and motivation dries up. When your discursive meditation (Reformed Sitting) and consolations (Charismatic Sitting) dries up. God is inviting us into a new relationship through Contemplation. Teresa uses the analogy of watering a garden; there comes a time where one should cease from all striving and effort and just surrender to God.

We meet Mary again. After the *thing* with her brother, in John 12. At a typical Sunday Morning gathering: Martha, the activist; Matthew, the tax collector; Judas, the thief; Simon, the leper; Lazarus, the ex-corpse. This get-together takes place 6 days prior to the Passover and Jesus' crucifixion. Mary enters the passionate and excited conversation and does a peculiar thing. She anoints Jesus' feet with an extremely expensive perfume. It's been estimated that it was worth a year's wages. And you've all heard that accusation – the argument that kills all arguments: "We could have given it to the poor". But despite accusations of wasting money, she pours it at his feet. She has seen Jesus' death! She's the only one that sees the significance of Jesus' death before it happens – a realisation that came from 'sitting', living a Contemplative life – but that has evolved to action: the Active Contemplative life. Her life is now Christo-centric.

Contemplation isn't about making you a better person. It's about transforming your being. The old traditions use words like 'Unity with God', 'Unitive Seeing' or 'Theosis' (becoming like God). Everything changes in the 'sitting'. Your consciousness is transformed. You become aware of another dimension.

Look at the girl who disrupts the meeting, to pour out an extravagantly expensive perfume in the middle of a crowd of people. Such actions are inspired from a different dimension: it's unpredictable, different, uncommon, there's a different insight. And Jesus responds: You prepared me for burial by your act of love. Love prepares us for dying. It helps us to transcend normal living.

Not only did she do uncommon things, but she did it with a new motivation. She could surrender herself just as she was, and all that she was, to Christ. Christ taught us in Matt 7 that it's not enough to do the right things, if we don't have the right motivation; if we don't do it for the right reasons.

Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer even though the might not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would be by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened.

John of the Cross

Towards a praxis of living the Active Life, contemplatively:

How can we progress towards this life? Many great heroes of the faith have struggled with this age-old dilemma between Action and Contemplation; and the growing towards an Active Contemplative life.

- * Cassian insisted that a balance is required. Action and Contemplation in equal measure. But that raises questions of integration?
- * Gregory the Great's story is coloured with this journey. He lived the Active Life as a priest, then later explored the Contemplative life as a monk, before he eventually got selected as Pope, where he felt he could live out an Active Contemplative life. He uses the story of Jacob and Leah (the Active Life) and Rebecca (the Contemplative Life) as analogy for this, where Jacob had to embrace Leah before he could receive both.
- * Thomas Merton, in his writing 'The Seven-Storey Mountain', also reflects on the progression from Action to Contemplation to Active Contemplation.

There is no formula – no single correct way to integrate this Active Contemplative life. It is a journey.

To pray, I think, does not mean to think about God in contrast to thinking about other things, or to spend time with God instead of spending time with other people. Rather, it means to think and live in the presence of God. All our actions must have their origin in prayer. Praying is not an isolated activity; it takes place in the midst of all the things and affairs that keep us active. In prayer a "self-centered monologue" becomes a "God-centered dialogue".

Henri Nouwen

There are numerous things that play a role in this journey:

- * **Personality:**
Introverts tend to be more engaged with the internal world which is associated with the Contemplative life, whereas extroverts find themselves more occupied with the external life, the Active life. And this impacts our own journey as to its integration. Introverts aren't necessarily Contemplatives, because of the manner that they might go about with their inner worlds, or resistance to embrace unfamiliar areas within their being. Extroverts could also not necessarily be considered as being Active; attributable to the journey they are on with their own False Self.
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