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MINDFUL  
SILENCE

THE HEART  
OF CHRISTIAN  
CONTEMPLATION

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## CHAPTER ONE

# SLEEPWALKING

*So let's not be asleep, as others  
are—let's be awake and sober!*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:6

*Silence is God's first language; everything  
else is a poor translation.*

THOMAS KEATING

**MY DOG, BASIL**, is the most wonderful dog I've ever known. Tender, attentive, and compliant, Basil always wants to be together. Though we both cherish our walks along the lake and playtime in the park, we don't have to be doing anything to enjoy simply being in one another's company. Being in silence together is rather easy for us; except on those occasions when Basil has had enough of sitting around and I on the other hand want to meditate.

There's been more than one time when I've been in contemplation, attempting to let go of each and every thought passing through my stream of consciousness, and Basil has sat directly in front of me and nudged my hand or my knee. I'm well-schooled in contemplative prayer, so I know the rules: "As soon as you get caught up in a distraction, let it go, and return to your breath or sacred word." So, I'll notice Basil staring at me and trying to get my attention, but I'll let it go and return to my meditation practice. Then it's a battle of wills. Basil can

be very determined, eventually using his voice with a muffled growl to communicate that he wants to go outside.

Contemplative practice is simple but it's not easy—especially when your fur baby wants your attention. But it's even more difficult to stay connected to our soul in daily life, amid a myriad of competing demands, needs, and responsibilities. Staying connected to our true self is all the more challenging when others confront us with anger, aggression, or manipulation.

But it's when life delivers pain and suffering that our soul is really exposed. Sometimes our experiences betray our beliefs. We might believe that God is good, but if God is good, why is there suffering? Perhaps you've found yourself wondering, if God is good, why did my partner cheat, my child die, or my parent endure an agonizing death?

Life has a way of dumfounding our religious paradigms.

Moreover, though Christians profess to follow Jesus and his teachings, rarely are any of us able to live up to his standards. For example, it's one thing to *believe* we should love our enemies and forgive seventy times seven, but try putting that into practice when you have been victimized or when your enemy is a mentor, a clergy member, or a friend you once trusted.

Orthodoxy and religious beliefs are fine until life circumstances betray them. Actually, the central question for our life of faith revolves around *orthopraxy*: How do we *practice* what we believe, especially when life gets stressful, difficult, and painful?

Contemplative spirituality, Christian or otherwise, helps us embody our beliefs and values, especially when life gets challenging. Contemplative practice helps us cope with life.

One very popular expression of contemplative spirituality is mindfulness. Everywhere we turn these days, it seems, this meditation practice has gained traction. Rooted in Buddhism but packaged as secular, mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to what is arising in the present moment. By practicing mindfulness, we deepen our

awareness and perception. But it doesn't require faith to engage in it. People of various professions and religions practice it.

Medical science has demonstrated remarkable physical benefits of a contemplative practice like mindfulness. Evidence reports it helps improve disorders such as depression and anxiety; lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar; reduce inflammation, infections, and pain; and overcome chemical addictions such as smoking and alcoholism. It has been linked to better sex, and it may even slow brain aging. You may have come across the popular program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at your medical or wellness clinic, public school, local gym, or at the company for which you work. For decades now, Western society has experienced the scientifically confirmed benefits of Eastern meditation.

Buddhism is not the only spiritual tradition to offer such a practice. In Hinduism, we find transcendental meditation. Islam offers dhikr. And Christianity provides contemplation. All great religions have a contemplative stream—an undercurrent of wisdom and spiritual practice that helps us transcend our biologically hard-wired central nervous system's fight, flight, or freeze response to stress. God knows we could all benefit from a practice that helps us manage life better.

Mindfulness is attractive to people in the West because we value reducing stress and feeling better. But these are byproducts of a much more revolutionary project found in the contemplative tradition—the deconstruction of the self. Contemplative practices were designed to awaken us to truth, not to cure illness.

Contemplative spirituality is a way of seeing. The English word *contemplation* comes from the Latin *contemplatio*, which means to look at, to gaze attentively, to mark out a space for observation. Contemplative practices are those that create margin to pay attention to and observe our life. This assumes we have determined to take responsibility for ourselves. It involves some introspection—not for the sake of inner knowledge, but for the sake of living a more skillful life. With self-awareness comes greater understanding of our pain and the way

we cause suffering. Contemplative prayer offers an antidote. Through contemplation we find alleviation of our personal suffering, and we discover how to minimize our infliction of suffering on others. Over time, as we engage in contemplative practice, we become less self-absorbed and able to be of greater service to others.

This requires effort and patience. So, we take up a contemplative practice to make regular time for this critical observation of reality. Contemplative practices are held by postures of solitude, silence, and stillness. In solitude, we develop the capacity to be present. In silence, we cultivate the ability to listen. And in stillness we acquire the skill of restraint or self-control.

Christian mystics have always held that silence is God's first language. It's unfortunate we are not more acquainted with this language. Silence is consciousness itself, the Source of all that is. The heart of Christian contemplation beats with silence and expands our consciousness.

THE HEART OF  
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Life happens. It's out of our control. What *is* in our control is how we respond. A commitment to contemplation is an agreement to take responsibility for our actions and relationships. Religious teaching tries to awaken us to such accountability.

One of my favorite spiritual teachers, and personal mentor, is a wise Cistercian (Trappist) monk named Father Thomas Keating (hereafter referred to as Father Thomas). He introduced me to the Christian contemplative tradition many years ago, and my life has never been the same. I'll never forget how he said, "If you stay on the spiritual journey long enough, the practices that sustained your faith will fall short. When this happens, it can be very disillusioning. But if we stay on the journey, we find out that this is actually an invitation to go deeper with God."

That's what happened to me.

## WAKING UP

When I landed in West Africa's Freetown, Sierra Leone, it was suffocatingly hot. Sixty percent of the country was still controlled by the rebel forces, but the ten-year war over blood diamonds was slowly coming to an end. Soldiers were being disarmed and brought into UN peacekeeping camps.<sup>1</sup>

Refugees from all over the country were pouring into the capital city—survivors of brutal mutilation and children displaced from their parents. Both the government and rebel forces used amputation as a tactic for fear and control of the population.

There seemed to be no mercy for this horrific demonstration of war. Young and old people alike were subjected to having one or both arms chopped off. In some cases, sons were forced to commit the grotesque act on their parents.

The only consideration given was the audacious choice between “short” or “long sleeve”—indicating where the severance would take place on the arm.

These brave and broken people struggled with basic daily chores like washing, dressing, and embracing loved ones. Many of the men, farmers, needed *both* hands to work the land. They faced the despair of not knowing how they would ever provide for their families again. Needless to say, my early life in middle America did not prepare me for this degree of human suffering.

As if meeting the adult survivors of this brutality wasn't enough, I encountered children who had also suffered under the wicked knife of their oppressors. One child was only three months old when the soldiers brutalized her. We met her when she was two, struggling to open the shell of a peanut using her one hand pressed against the nub that was left of her other little arm.

While at the camp for the war wounded (essentially a slum community for thousands of survivors of mutilations), we were introduced to a number of teenage girls who wanted to share their story with us, hoping the world would then know what had happened to them. They

were desperate for someone, anyone, to do something to respond to their unbearable circumstances. So, I bolstered up the courage to listen and bear witness to their pain.

I heard detailed accounts of how the soldiers came to their village and rounded up the people. I heard how the combatants sexually assaulted and systematically amputated the limbs of their mothers and murdered their fathers. I heard how they then assaulted the young girls, often gang raping them repeatedly, and forced them to be their “war bride,” which meant they would be subjected to domestic and sexual slavery.

As the girls recounted the sordid details through glassed-over eyes, some of them held their babies—children conceived from the sexual violence they’d suffered.

I left the camp in a daze. I couldn’t believe the horror my new friends had survived. Before that day, I thought I’d seen it all.

For many years, I had helped establish communities of justice and hope all over the world among impoverished children with HIV and AIDS, destitute youth living on the streets, and survivors of sex trafficking. But I had seen nothing that compared to this kind of inhuman cruelty and anguish.

Immediately I looked for someone to blame: the government and warlords whose greed led to such human atrocity. Certainly, there were systemic structures of injustice at play that were to blame—much like the systems of global economic disparity with which I had grown familiar.

But as I recalled the stories of the soldiers who brutalized these young girls, I found particular human faces who were responsible and should pay for their crimes. Anger and judgment stirred in me toward the soldiers who had committed such unspeakable brutality.

And then I visited the camp for young soldiers who had just recently been disarmed. Boys of all ages, and as young as five or six, gathered together to meet with us. That’s right—children involuntarily enlisted



to fight as soldiers. And like the young girls, they too wanted to tell their story.

In moments, a few teenagers were directed to us. How could I bear to sit down with the soldiers who were responsible for the horrific suffering of the girls I'd met just the day before?

Somehow, I did.

And the boys began to recount similar stories of militant invasions of their village, the murder of their parents, and being conscripted into war. They remembered being drugged and forced to cut off arms and legs and to take up weapons that were too heavy for them to carry. They remembered being given girls to violate as the war dragged on.

It was all too much for me to bear. Combatants. Just children. Forced to grow up under the parental authority of warlords. As I listened to my little brothers, to the suffering they'd endured and the guilt they lived with, and as I remembered the agony of my younger sisters, I was struggling once again to find someone to blame. The soldiers I had so easily judged and convicted the day before were now sitting in front of me with a sea of pain in *their* eyes. It was now not so easy to demonize them.

It's a natural human tendency to look for a scapegoat—someone to blame for suffering and injustice. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn about the scapegoat as the innocent animal used in religious ritual during Yom Kippur. All the sins of the people were symbolically placed on a lamb, which was then released into the wilderness as a way of cleansing the people of their imperfections and wrongdoings (Leviticus 16:8-10). This, in a sense, gave them a clean slate to start anew. A short historical study reveals that Greeks and Romans had similar practices, using a goat, a dog, or even women and men as an instrument of atonement and cleansing. This resulted in communities casting out, stoning, and sacrificing those deemed unacceptable. Scapegoating is an example of the myth of redemptive violence, common across many cultures and in many Christians' understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus—believing Jesus was the symbolic “goat”

needed to placate God. Father Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, my trusted spiritual teacher and personal mentor (hereafter referred to as Father Richard), has helpful teaching on this:

Humans have always struggled to deal with fear and evil by ways other than forgiveness, most often through sacrificial systems. . . .

If your ego is still in charge, you will find a “disposable” person or group on which to project your problems.

*Jesus became the scapegoat to reveal the universal lie of scapegoating.* Note that John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the *sin* [singular] of the world” (John 1:29). It seems “the sin of the world” is ignorant hatred, fear, and legitimated violence.

*Jesus became the sinned-against one to reveal the hidden nature of scapegoating* and so that we would see how wrong people in authority can be—even religious important people (see John 16:8-11 and Romans 8:3).<sup>2</sup>

And so there I was in Freetown surrounded by mass agony, attempting to apply redemptive violence by looking for someone to blame, stone, cast into the wilderness, or crucify. As my heart tore open, I wondered, *Who is responsible for all this suffering?* And not only *this* suffering, but who is responsible for *all* the pain in the world? I wanted someone to blame.

But I couldn’t find the culprit. As I traced the lineage of oppressor and victim, it seemed everyone had been victimized. I had run out of people to project my judgment onto, so I subconsciously directed my anger toward God. I wondered, *If people are basically victims victimizing one another, and God created us, then surely God must answer for this. God must be to blame.* I thought, *Perhaps God is not all that good after all.*

Have you ever felt that way? In the face of despair have you doubted God’s goodness? What blows has life delivered you? An illness perhaps? Or an unwanted divorce? Suffering is suffering, so don’t

compare yours to someone else's. Instead, consider events that have taken place either in your life or in the life of someone you love. Has it been a struggle to accept those circumstances?

Those many years ago, facing the trauma of a nation torn apart by war, I found myself plunged into a crisis of faith. What I had learned about God growing up in the Protestant pews of Indiana was radically challenged in the face of human need. My worship had dried up. I had no words to pray. Scripture no longer inspired me. And God seemed painfully silent.

I was afraid. I didn't know how to engage such silence. I thought something must be wrong with me. I felt as if I didn't have enough faith; or even worse, something must be terribly wrong with God.

Thankfully, Father Thomas came into my life right on time.

Early one spring Saturday morning, my husband's spiritual director left a voicemail inviting the two of us to have dinner with his beloved teacher, an elderly monk that we'd never heard of named Thomas Keating. We were mesmerized at dinner by this tall, humble, Gandalf-like figure dressed in a black robe. Turns out, his religious order, the Cistercians, observe a strict rule of silence. It was out of his deep well of silence that his life radiated so much peace and wisdom. Following dinner, Father Thomas gave a teaching and closed with a guided centering prayer practice.

Father Thomas's teaching was like a wellspring to my arid soul. With gentle authority—the kind of credibility that comes from experience—he opened a portal to God's nourishing presence. He helped me realize that I didn't need to be troubled or discouraged by God's *felt* absence and grueling silence. Like an old transistor radio, I just needed to learn how to tune in to this new frequency. After that day, I found courage to give myself to the silence with all of its darkness, questions, doubts, and pain. And it was there, in the great, deafening silence, that I woke up.

The allures, distractions, and pace of our time, coupled with our inner illusions of self, others, and God, threaten to keep us asleep and

at bay from the Source of our existence, purpose, and rest. Most of us go through life sleepwalking. It's not easy to wake up. Usually it takes a crisis of some sort to do so: an unexpected career transition, a feared medical diagnosis, a miscarriage, a natural catastrophe. But contemplative prayer aids the waking process too.

In the face of agony in Sierra Leone, my faith fell short. Forgiveness for such horrific wrongs seemed like an impossibility. Healing for my friends and their nation seemed completely out of reach.

When I had a hit a wall and come to the end of myself, contemplative prayer, in the form of a Christian meditation method called centering prayer, became the only way in which I could attempt to encounter God. There, in solitude, silence, and stillness, I could just show up—as I am with all my doubts, questions, and pain. And over time, the gentle, secret, grace-filled presence of God began to reveal a love so enormous that it has the power to transform all the pain of the world—beginning with my own.

## DYING

Little did I know that waking up was going to be followed by the invitation to die. Perhaps if I had known that, I would have resisted or refused to awaken. Of course, I'm not talking about a physical death, but rather a *spiritual* death. Waking up was followed by an invitation to let go of who I thought I was. Remember, the contemplative tradition has one main objective: the deconstruction of the self.

So, if you're curious about where the contemplative path leads, I'll cut to the chase: death. Death to your short-sighted self-will. Death to your self-serving ego. Death to your limited sense of self.

This may come in the form of a dramatic culmination or in many small deaths over time. Death is one of the seven stages in our pilgrimage of soul, but it's not the final stage. Along the way there are usually a series of many minor deaths. These small deaths support the other stages that I outline in *Pilgrimage of a Soul: Contemplative Spirituality for the Active Life*.<sup>3</sup> The other phases—awakening, longing,

darkness, transformation, intimacy, and union—are preludes to death and at the same time the fruit of dying. Like a labyrinth, we cycle in and out of these stages in the journey home to our true self.

Contemplative spirituality is an invitation to wake up and die so you can truly live. Contemplative prayer is for courageous, devoted seekers. It facilitates personal transformation for a world in need of healing love. Contemplative spirituality supports the way of following Jesus, which necessitates dying to self or emptying self to make room for the all-consuming presence of God (Philippians 2). But we are reluctant to choose this road less travelled. It's easier to walk through life asleep.

Sleepwalking takes the form of deeply embedded unconscious illusions about self, God, and others. These distortions orient us toward psychological, behavioral, and spiritual attachments, compulsions, and addictions, which over time lead to general unhappiness. This is what Christian tradition calls imperfection, sickness, or sin.

CONTEMPLATIVE  
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Our addictions may not take the form of chemical cravings (though it can turn into that) but at the core reside in our compulsions to be identified with what we have, what we do, and what others say about us.<sup>4</sup> We are enslaved to our unconscious impulses and do everything we can to satiate our inner discontent: nonstop scrolling through social media, which only magnifies our unhappiness; unnecessary shopping in the hopes that more stuff will make us feel better; over-eating or drinking to drown and dull the inner ache. We have any number of escape routes from pain, but the path of transformation is learning how to be *with* the pain so new life can emerge in and through us. Contemplative spirituality teaches us how to do that.

Trying to satisfy our desire for power and control, affection and esteem, and security and survival, we grow more and more dissatisfied

with our self, God, and others. Father Thomas refers to these desires as “programs for happiness.” He says that these three programs for happiness emerge from very basic biological needs. It is a natural part of our human development to seek a degree of power and control, affection and esteem, and security and survival. The problem is that, in time, we over identify with one by way of compensating for that basic need which may have gone largely unmet in our childhood. Then our *need* turns into an unconscious *compulsion*. We crave its gratification, unable to be happy or content when life fails to deliver the amount of power, affection, or security we desire. Our personality forms around this attachment. An overly emotional reaction to life exposes our vulnerable condition.

Have you ever reacted emotionally to a situation or a relationship and later wondered why you responded so strongly? As we grow in self-awareness, we often realize that some of our reactions to present circumstances are actually in response to past events that are buried in our unconscious. The current situation provides a trigger for the unresolved pain. When we recognize the agony surfacing, we are experiencing grace. This is an invitation to greater healing and wholeness. Contemplative spirituality helps us wake up to this dynamic at play in our unconscious.<sup>5</sup>

At a young age, we fell asleep to our interior anguish. That sense of being utterly alone, separated from others, and unlovable was too painful to acknowledge. In order to cope, we unconsciously built up fortifications to protect this most vulnerable self. In essence, this formed our personality.

Personality comes from the Greek word *persona*, which means “mask.” Our personality is not our true self. But because we think it’s too risky to expose our inner pain, we create a mask and we hide. We think our mask, our personality, will be more lovable. But you can see the dilemma. Our mask enslaves us, keeps us in hiding. We are not free. Instead we grow increasingly alienated over time from authentic connection with others. A tragedy for sure, given we all want to belong.

In our attempts to self-protect and be happy, we end up yearning for that which cannot ultimately satisfy. Sure, it might dull the inner ache briefly. Compulsive scrolling through social media might momentarily help us feel less lonely, for example. But once the digital stupor wears off, our inner unconscious misery begs again to be filled. It's like drinking a glass of saltwater when you're thirsty. At first it satiates, but then it leaves you sick. Eventually we learn what kind of nourishment really satisfies. The cycle of torment and emptiness continues until, by grace, we awaken (become conscious) to the inner void.

After my visit to Sierra Leone jolted me awake, I found myself in a season of inner excavation. The surface layer of pain—associated with the victimization of young boys forced to become vicious soldiers and young girls enslaved as domestic and sexual servants—uncovered secondary pain. I had come up short with answers and solutions to such desperate human need, which revealed the next layer of my aching heart. Layer upon layer of self-awareness ultimately revealed a wound in my psyche. The shape of my wound? A young girl who didn't know she was loved just as she is. I soon came to realize that I had constructed my life in such a way that I wouldn't have to face that primordial pain.

Now, the shape of *your* wound may be different, corresponding to a different program for happiness: a young boy who doesn't feel safe, or a young girl plagued with the fear of having no control. My pain related to the need for affection and esteem. So, at a young age I unconsciously found a way to dull the misery. I found a coping mechanism. If I could just be and do for others, maybe they would find me worth loving. And so, my life unfolded in large part around my compulsion for approval. I made decisions and lived in such a way that others would think and speak well of me. Thus, I would achieve a degree of affection and esteem. Waking up was devastating, because it forced me to come face-to-face with the pain of feeling unloved.

When we become an astute observer and do our inner work, we can identify the shape of the wound that traps us in a cycle of suffering.

The more self-aware we are, the more liberated we become so that, when life wounds us and we experience pain, the suffering has less power over us; it dominates our consciousness less. I like how Father Thomas puts it: we know we're making progress in the spiritual journey when the things that used to drive us up the wall now drive us only halfway up the wall.

In fact, becoming wise spiritual pilgrims allows us to hold our pain, rather than our pain holding and trapping us. Yes, life is painful, but it's also the source of so much joy. And you can't have the joy without the pain. It's the experience of pain that forms our inner well to contain joy. Contemplative spirituality gives us the tools to both embrace our pain and dig our well.

Initially, contemplative spirituality helps us stop sleepwalking. And once awakened, we learn to die to the lies we've lived for so long that keep us in a cycle of unrelenting suffering. Those lies manufactured an entire sense of self, our identity—and it's that self, the false self, that has to die so the true self can be resurrected from its sleep.

For me, this meant dying to the lie that I am who others need me to be. Once I awakened to the realization that I identified with this lie, over time, through contemplation and by grace, I was able to die to that identity. From the dying, a freer Phileena emerged, one who is less controlled by the approval of others. I am now able to be truer to my voice, my needs, my desires, and my dreams, regardless of what others think about me. And in the space of that freedom, I'm able to be of greater service to those around me.

Who are *you*? What external forces shape *your* identity? In what ways do you feel trapped inside a self that's not the truest you? When you observe your life, what do you see and hear?

## DEAF, BLIND, AND CLOSED-MINDED

Jesus is well known for his ability to heal people who were blind and deaf. Time and again in the Gospels, it is the person pushed to the margins of society, well acquainted with their sense of separateness



and sickness, who seeks out Jesus. With desperate openness and receptivity, those most in touch with their need for healing experience remarkable liberation.

And yet, it is often those who possess the sense of sight and sound who are unable to see and hear what Jesus was trying to reveal. “Don’t you see or understand yet? Are your minds closed? Have you ‘eyes that don’t see, ears that don’t hear?’” (Mark 8:17-18).

In another seething rebuke from Jesus—if we have an open mind, eyes to see, and ears to hear—we realize he is speaking to many of us today. “Woe to you, religious scholars and Pharisees, you shut the doors of heaven’s kingdom in people’s faces, neither entering yourselves, nor allowing others to enter who want to” (Matthew 23:13).

Like many good-hearted religious people of Jesus’ day, we too often fail to get the good news that Jesus is trying to communicate—essentially, that we are loved, safe, and have no need to fear. We settle for our own poorly crafted heaven, placating our programs for happiness, rather than enter God’s liberating kingdom where we live into our inheritance as divine children. To our further shame, in our unawakened state we prevent others from entering the kingdom of heaven who want to. We often miss the mark. And one interpretation of sin is just that—missing the mark.

Contemplative spirituality helps us distinguish between our false and true self. It helps us access real freedom and power to *not* miss the mark. Through contemplative prayer, we learn how to penetrate the center and live into our divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

## A RICH TRADITION

Christian contemplative spirituality is not new; it’s simply a new way of seeing in every age. It is, in essence, putting on the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5-11). Christianity holds a rich contemplative tradition, beginning with the model given in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is the way to abundant life. We can’t avoid suffering and death if we want to experience resurrection.

As Christianity developed, contemplation was normalized by the second century with the stress on *contemplatio*, or resting in God for prayer. We see clear expression of the tradition in the writings of the desert mothers and fathers of the third and fourth centuries. These desert ascetics were radical Christians who rejected the corruption of their religion by the Roman Empire. With the emperor Constantine's conversion to the faith, Christianity was no longer a faith on the margins of society, but instead became enmeshed with the empire itself. The church began to lose its prophetic voice to the state. It blended with an empirical agenda for domination and exploitation, which led to all kinds of evil in the name of Christ.

The desert mothers and fathers rejected this distortion of the faith and dared to live a different way of austere solitude, silence, and stillness. They fled to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Arabia to live lives of prayer, fasting, labor, and poverty. They believed that spiritual practice was essential to enlightenment or union with God. They were determined to keep themselves open and receptive to the transformational work of grace in their life rather than give in to the allures and deceptions of a powerful state that co-opted Christianity. Their spiritual practices formed the foundation of monasticism.

For a few hundred years, the contemplative tradition (also referred to as the wisdom tradition) was simply the way in which Christianity was expressed among the faithful; we didn't need a name for it. But in time, that way would largely get squeezed out of the Christian religion—at least the Christianity of the West. It's unfortunate that the wisdom tradition was mostly lost to modern Western Christianity.

In 1054, Christianity experienced the Great Schism—that canyon-like divide between the Greek East and the Latin West, what became the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The growing community of early desert mothers and fathers were largely part of the Eastern church. Consequently, the evolving Western Catholic Church viewed the contemplative tradition as

more Eastern and distanced itself from something it deemed foreign to its own contextualization.

Already a step removed from their contemplative roots, Protestants were even further detached from this crucial dimension of spiritual formation. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, advocates for legitimate change in the Western church often threw out the baby with the bathwater, abandoning altogether the contemplative tradition of the faith. Protestants therefore distanced themselves further from their contemplative roots than Catholics.

Following the Reformation, we entered the Enlightenment period, or the Age of Reason, with its emphasis on rationalism. This era drove the nails in the proverbial coffin of any contemplative tradition that included nonconceptual prayer practices.

Nevertheless, while the contemplative tradition was pushed further and further to the margins, Christians always maintained a remnant of its wisdom. Throughout these pages, we'll explore a few of the greatest teachers of this vestige and the insight they've left for us.

## PRACTICING FAITH

If religion refers to the doctrine and rituals that affirm belief, spirituality is *the way we live our beliefs*. In first-century Palestine, Jesus brought Jewish religious tradition under scrutiny in order to purify it and demonstrate how to embody and practice liberation and transformation. If we have an open mind, eyes to see, and ears to hear, Jesus is scrutinizing the practice of our faith today.

Contemplative spirituality, then, is quite simply a way to *practice faith*. Practicing faith means we clear space within us to encounter divine love so that we might be freed and changed. A truly liberated and transformed person naturally liberates and transforms the world.

So, exactly *how* does one take this narrow road of practicing faith? Through contemplative prayer. Christianity offers several different prayer practices to assist us. While there are few Scripture references that give a specific, prescriptive way to pray, the Bible provides an

expansive scope of prayer. It offers examples of many different kinds of prayer, such as praise, petition, lament, intercession, and withdrawal to solitary places.

The overarching theme in Christian Scripture points to prayer as a means of *communion with* God, which leads to personal and collective change. Contemplative prayer is a powerful means to that end. It opens us to a new way of seeing and being in the world.

### INTEGRATING CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

After twenty years leading an international nonprofit that cares for the most vulnerable of the world's poor, my husband, Chris, and I noticed a few unfortunate things about good-hearted Christians trying to build a better world:

1. We're often some of the grumpiest people—carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders.
2. We tend to take better care of others than we do of ourselves.
3. Many of us perpetually teeter on the edge of burnout.

Many of us, not just social justice activists, can relate to this. Sleepwalking through life often leads to grumpiness, self-neglect, burnout, and disillusionment with our faith.

Such short-lived attempts to make the world a better place won't do. The world's need requires our stamina and resilience. So, in 2012, Chris and I set out to “do good” better. We started Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, to ground social engagement in contemplative spirituality. Gravity is for people who care about their spirituality and want to make the world a better place. Our organization exists to nurture the integral connection between mysticism and activism, or contemplation and action. Gravity grounds social engagement in contemplative spirituality by offering retreats, spiritual direction, and Enneagram workshops and consultations.

We give three different kinds of retreats. The Grounding Retreat is a basic introduction for people who want to learn more about the

contemplative tradition and prayer practices. The Deepening Retreat is for those who want to develop their contemplative practice. And the Enlightening Retreat is for people who have been on the contemplative path for a while and desire further teaching and guidance.

We offer the service of spiritual direction for people who desire ongoing support for their spiritual journey. Spiritual direction is an ancient practice that dates back to the early desert mothers and fathers and their communities. It's a relationship of spiritual counsel whereby the director supports clients in observing their life and allowing themselves to be observed by God. This gentle yet at times piercing practice helps the client to discern God's presence and action in their life, which always leads to greater freedom to live into their true self.

Working with the Enneagram is incredibly helpful for spiritual development. Gravity's Enneagram workshops and consultations are a crucial part of expanding consciousness. The Enneagram is a sacred map that helps identify your unconscious and subconscious motivations. Circling around nine principal types of human nature, your Enneagram number reveals your path of transformation as well as your path of disintegration. While the Enneagram reveals your personality, it is different from other personality profiles in that it links to your childhood wound. Your childhood wound illuminates your path of liberation. The Enneagram is a powerful resource for the contemplative path, for as it deconstructs the false self, it simultaneously reveals your true self. It helps us offer the best of ourselves to a world in need.<sup>6</sup>

No matter your vocation, whether you're a humanitarian, activist, pastor, bartender, doctor, lawyer, or stay-at-home parent, contemplative spirituality is for you. It helps you live into your best self.

We can "do good" better (which is a confession that we won't always "do good" great) when our active lives are rooted in contemplative spirituality. Contemplative prayer dismantles our unconscious compulsions (for power, affection, and security) and allows the Spirit to flow more freely through us to help heal our loved ones and community.

Contemplative prayer is a gateway to encountering real, transforming love. Sure, there are still problems in the world and in my own life, but contemplative prayer helps me access the love of God in the midst of those difficulties and opens me to ongoing growth. Transformation leads to engaging the world in joy-filled, creative ways. There's no room to be grumpy or fussy when one accesses the divine love that penetrates our humanity and is present even (and most especially) in the most horrific of circumstances.

Contemplative prayer and social action must go hand in hand for effective social change. Otherwise our social action will too often end up being our imperfect will imposed on the world. It's too easy to unconsciously project our own wounds or ego-driven desires onto other people and projects. Contemplative prayer exposes and unhinges our unconscious motivations. One who is committed to contemplative prayer has awakened to their need for healing from these inner wounds and their need for liberation from unconscious compulsions. Waking up makes us much less toxic as we engage others and seek to offer some good in the world.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. If we put all our effort into taking care of others to the neglect of self-care, then we're disobeying the Great Commandment and headed for dysfunctional relationships—with God, with others, with our work. Social change is possible when we love others *as* we love our self. Contemplative prayer practice is a commitment to love our self so we can love others well. When we allow ourselves to be loved through contemplative prayer, we remember that our identity as the beloved is an identity that we share with all God's children. Eventually, we come to the realization that loving our neighbor as our self means that we are one with our neighbor. To love our neighbor is to love our self, and to love our self is to love our neighbor.

But many of us struggle to accept love.

A commitment to contemplative prayer is a commitment to authenticity—being real with the fact that we ourselves are in need.

Each of us is in need of love, in need of transformation. We don't have all the answers. And sometimes our greatest intentions inadvertently cause harm.

We delude ourselves if we think we hold the answers to the world's problems. If we're honest, we have trouble tending to *our own* personal, relational, community, and national problems. Tending to our personal story of healing and wholeness must go in step with our desire to see the world made whole. Through activism we confront toxicity in our world; through contemplation we confront it in ourselves. The two go hand in hand. This is contemplative activism. It grounds us in divine love and allows us to be a channel of that love.

When we're grounded in love we are less likely to burn out, because love is directing our action, rather than unconscious, distorted motivations. Love's ever-burning flame fuels our life with passion. An effective response to social, economic, and political injustice originates from within a soul who is awakened to her need and is committed to being transformed by divine love. As we are changed through contemplation, the world around us is changed.

THROUGH ACTIVISM  
WE CONFRONT  
TOXICITY IN OUR  
WORLD; THROUGH  
CONTEMPLATION  
WE CONFRONT IT  
IN OURSELVES.

Contemplative prayer practice effectively keeps us humble and honest. Humility and honesty are essential to building a just world. The more of us who commit to such practice, the more peaceful our world will be.

### SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

It's one thing to read about contemplative spirituality, it's another to grasp it. Many of the writings of historical Christian contemplatives and mystics seem obscure and mysterious. It can be difficult to understand the experiences of God they try to communicate. Often, we fear what we don't understand. As we've seen, mysticism and the whole

contemplative dimension of the gospel really got sidelined through the centuries. Nonetheless, mystics are simply those who grapple with the Great Mystery—our infinite God who transcends our finite understanding yet makes the Godself known to us. Through the writings of the mystics, we come to learn that practices of contemplative prayer help us begin to engage the Great Mystery.

*Practice* is another word for discipline. And the English word *discipline* is derived from three Latin words: *discipulus* meaning student; *discere* meaning learn, hear, get to know; and *disciplina* meaning instruction. The single most distinguishing mark of contemplative prayer is discipline—becoming a student who hears and applies instructions. And in a society that is accustomed to instantaneous gratification—even in our prayer life—instituting and nurturing spiritual discipline will not be easy.

It might be more attractive to us if we think of *discipline* in its Latin root intention: spending regular time in contemplative prayer is a way to assume the role of student, be instructed, and get to know God and oneself.

Prayer disciplines exercise our ability to hear and see and to be molded as a teacher forms a student or a potter shapes the clay. If we long for a more meaningful life, one that is transformed by faith—authentic, abundant, and effective—we must adopt practices that reflect that desire and commitment.

Contemplative prayer invites us to empty ourselves of our attachments, compulsions, and addictions so that God can have more space to live more fully within and through us (Philippians 2). This is the way of the Paschal Mystery—the pattern of salvation as seen in the life of Jesus.

*Paschal* is derived from the Greek word *pascha*, which in turn is derived from the Aramaic and Hebrew term for “the passing over.” This evokes memories of Jewish salvation history, when God spared the lives of the Hebrew people. “Mystery” refers to the aspects of Christian faith that cannot be understood by reason and intellect



alone. It follows that the Paschal Mystery points to the mysterious ways of the Divine that we are invited into by faith.

Contemplative prayer helps us embody such faith. As we let go of control and yield to God in contemplative prayer, we undergo the way of Jesus—suffering, death, and ultimately resurrected life. The natural order in all of life is death and rebirth. If we want to live the abundant life, we will gladly yield to this process. For the way of the cross is our ultimate peace and fulfillment.

Contemplative prayer addresses our attachment to pleasant emotional experiences—in prayer and daily life. We do not come to contemplative prayer to experience something pleasant but rather to learn how to be content in all circumstances (Philippians 4:12).

So, come with me as we explore these touchstones of contemplative spirituality:

- Withdrawing to Engage
- Finding Liberation by Discernment
- Discovering Darkness Is Light
- Exploring a Deep Well
- Dying for Life
- Unknowing to Know

Let these dynamic cairns open your mind, your eyes, and your ears as you pilgrimage further down the path of awakening, transformation, and wholeness. You'll be guided and supported not only by me but by these prominent wisdom teachers within the Christian tradition: Thomas Merton, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, Clare of Assisi, Mother Teresa, and the fourteenth-century anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

You'll find a contemplative practice at the close of each chapter to ensure your exploration is not solely an intellectual exercise. Instead, let your reading be a catalyst for interior prayer and growth. Let me encourage you to engage in each of the practices at the end of the

chapters: breath prayer, the prayer of examen, lectio divina, labyrinth, the welcoming prayer, and centering prayer.

What these prayers all have in common is a certain degree of solitude, silence, and stillness—practices that are desperately needed in our crowded, noisy, busy lives. It's the degree of solitude, silence, and stillness that sets contemplative prayer apart from other forms of prayer that are heavily reliant on words. Contemplative prayer isn't meant to subvert prayer with words; instead, contemplative prayer complements other forms of prayer.

Each of these modes of prayer helps us assume a passive and receptive posture of mind, body, and spirit, which in turn helps us yield to the presence of God and God's work of radical change in us.

If these practices are new for you, I hope you'll adopt at least one of them in your daily life. And if you already have a daily contemplative practice, by all means, please continue your discipline while you deepen your knowledge of the contemplative tradition.

Contemplation helps us let go of what we can see with the eyes and step into what we can perceive with the heart (2 Corinthians 5:7). Contemplative prayer loosens our grip on attachments, compulsions, and addictions that keep us closed-minded, spiritually blind, and deaf to the inner voice of love. The more we grow quiet and still, the more open and receptive we become to God's action in our soul and, consequently, in our life.

Prepare now to awaken.

### *Practice: Be Still*

This simple prayer helps us begin to grow acquainted with the posture of letting go that is required in all contemplative practice. I learned this prayer of being from Father Richard. The text comes from Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

To begin, find a quiet place, gently close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths.

Prepare to pray the psalm in five consecutively diminishing sentences.

Either aloud or quietly to yourself, say the words, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Then take a couple deep breaths and pause between each of the following phrases:

“Be still, and know that I am.”

“Be still and know.”

“Be still.”

“Be.”

When you feel ready to move on, pray, “Amen.”

This prayer can also be prayed with a group. The facilitator leads with each sentence and the group repeats aloud after each consecutively diminishing phrase. The pause between each phrase can be lengthened depending on your need or the needs of the group.

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still, and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

For more information visit [gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still](http://gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still).

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