

Contemplative Activism: Doing Good Better



by Phileena Heuertz

An accidental (and literal) marriage of a contemplative and an activist marks my husband, Chris, and my life together. Social justice service has been an incubator for our vocational imaginations and partnership in marriage.

For 20 years, Chris and I co-directed an international mission among the most vulnerable of the world's poor. We served among children with HIV and AIDS, abandoned children living on the streets, women and girls enslaved in the commercial sex industry, and former child soldiers. Our humble organization grew to 300 young people serving in 13 cities across the globe.

After so many years leading this international movement of love and hope, my husband and I noticed a few things about social justice types:

- 1) We are 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 care for ourselves.
- 3) Many of us perpetually teeter on the edge of burnout.

It didn't take long for us to realize we were going to need a deep spirituality to not just survive such intense service, but to find a way to thrive in it.

Though Chris and I grew up in the Evangelical tradition, we were mentored as young adults by renowned Catholic spiritual teachers like Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier and Richard Rohr. And then one grace-filled day, we met Fr. Thomas Keating and he introduced us to the Christian contemplative tradition and Centering Prayer. Our lives have never been the same.

The practice of Centering Prayer coupled with wise teaching from various mentors helped us to begin to recognize unconscious motivations that not only interfered with our service, but in some cases, infected it. We had awakened to the contemplative journey and there was no turning back. So in

2012, we founded Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, in Omaha, Nebraska, to attempt to help people “do good better” by grounding their social engagement in contemplative spirituality. I dare say the invitation to integrate contemplation and action has never been more widely received.

Today, in addition to teaching and giving contemplative retreats around the world, we host two contemplative retreats a year in the Omaha area at the Benedictine Monastery and Retreat Center in Schuyler. People fly in from all over the country and in some instances from other countries. In the first three years of Gravity’s inception, we have hosted over 200 retreatants from 15 countries. More than one-fifth do not ascribe to any Christian tradition (Agnostics, Atheists, Buddhists, Muslims, and Non-Religious participants) and the median age is 33. 72% are under the age of 40 and 30% are non-white.

When we started Gravity, we wondered, “Would *young* people be interested?” Most contemplative groups we knew about were comprised of older, more seasoned, mature people. However, we have been astounded at the way in which young people have responded to Gravity. It seems that the committed prayer of contemplatives who have gone before us is having an impact. People of all ages are awakening to their need to be connected to God through grounding practices like Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, and the Welcoming Prayer. Generally, most young people who attend our retreats know little to nothing about Christian contemplative prayer practices. But once introduced, they nearly always respond with relief and gratitude to find a practice that helps them cultivate presence to themselves and to God.

Our over-developed society may be contributing to the receptive response of young people.

Contemplative prayer—practices marked by solitude, silence, and stillness— offers correction to the imbalance and depletion many of us are experiencing in our crowded, overly-consumed, hyper-active, digitally-addicted society.

In **solitude**, we learn to be present. We learn to be present to our self, to God and to one another. As we let God heal our hidden fears, we experience more authentic connection to our self, to God and to others. Practicing **silence** helps us develop the ability to listen and discern God’s voice and leading. And over time, as we practice **stillness**, we gain freedom from the misguided egoic motivations of our human condition, and are led to make greater impact for good in our family, community and society.

Young people are certainly taxed with the relentless, fast-paced, jam-packed nature of our times. Contemplative prayer offers an alternative for which their soul longs: presence instead of being scattered, attention instead of preoccupation, clarity or discernment instead of confusion. Clearly, there is hope when younger generations of people combine their ambitious dreams for better world energy with contemplative practices that open them to their divine potential. ☸

Phileena Heuertz is the author of *Pilgrimage of a Soul: Contemplative Spirituality for the Active Life*. She is the founding partner of Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism. After 20 years of grassroots social justice work, she and her husband, Chris, now work with all kinds of people who care about their spirituality and want to make the world a better place, by offering contemplative retreats, spiritual direction and pilgrimage. Connect with Phileena at phileena.com, their work at gravitycenter.com and on Twitter @phileena.