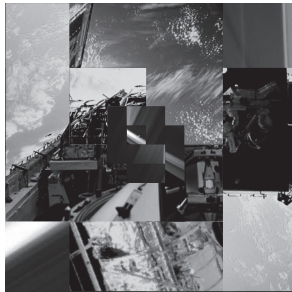


NO MORE ILLUSIONS CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM: A MODEL FOR MISSION

BY CHRISTOPHER AND PHILEENA HEUERTZ



An accidental (and literal) marriage of a contemplative and an activist has marked our journey in mission. Service has been an incubator for our vocational imaginations of partnership in marriage.

Specifically, Word Made Flesh (WMF), has been the community for this formation to develop within us. WMF is a humble community of contemplative activists serving Christ among the most vulnerable of the world's poor. We serve 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.

Newly married and surprised to find ourselves leading the mission, we embodied a single vision and focus to propel the movement forward. After years of what seemed to be remarkable spontaneous expansion and growth, a dual vision developed between us, providing depth to the movement.

As a result, Phileena founded the Community Care Center to bring focus to the spiritual, mental/emotional, and physical health of staff through vocational expression, vocational support, and vocational formation. Chris gave himself to transformational and visionary expressions of leading the movement by set-



ting direction, cultivating missional imagination, and building a core team to carry out the vision.

UNIQUE CALLING, ONE PURPOSE

In more recent years, the revelation of our quintessence of contemplative activism has become crucial for the endurance of WMF. Chris is a pure activist; his spirituality is nurtured predominantly by social activism. Phileena is deeply contemplative; contemplation fuels and defines her activism. Both of these vocational expressions and spiritualities are vital for the Christian life. Both are essential for faithful mission. Both are crucial to the longevity of the movement of WMF.

During our years with WMF, we have observed and listened as staff members relate their personal struggles and challenges—challenges not unique to activist communities. A young girl from the streets ringing a staff member’s doorbell in the middle of the night because her boyfriend beat her up terribly and the hospital wouldn’t admit her; day after day meeting another young mother or elderly abandoned widow with no place to live and no one to care for them; the discoveries of young girls sold for sex at what appeared to be a barber shop. We listened to our staff and friends in poverty as they yearned to see the kingdom come. The weight of the world seemed literally at our community’s doorstep.

Reflecting on the strains and heart breaks our activism exposed us to, Phileena led WMF in a recovery of our contemplative basis. Contemplation has been referred to as anything that dismantles illusions. Illusions threaten to impoverish all of us; we are impacted by either the sin of our own delusions or that of others’. Both rich and poor are victim to paradigms and systems that offer lies in exchange for truth.

The message of Christ is good news when we realize the true state of our shared humanity—lost and in need of being found; blind and in need of restoration of sight; in darkness and needing the light; hungry and thirsty and in need of the Bread and Water of Life. If we haven’t come to the point of desperation about our human condition, we are probably still living an illusion.

The gap between privileged, wealthy Americans and our disenfranchised friends of the majority world grows narrow as we embrace the truth of our shared

humanity. All of us fall victim in one way or another to the bondage of false and hidden perceptions, motivations, paradigms, and systems. Lives grounded in contemplation free us from our enslavement and into authentic action.

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CONTEMPLATION LEADS TO ACTION

In contemplation, we grow in intimacy with God—experiencing the presence of God and being known by God. Learning to let go through contemplative prayer makes way for the Spirit to transform our action from inside out. Contemplative prayer practices and other disciplines of contemplation create space in us for the fruit of the Spirit to grow. In that space, we find God at work within us, transforming us, changing us into the likeness of Christ. The fruit of contemplative prayer is seen in the active life. The fruit of the Spirit marks our actions rather than anxiety, fear, control, and other compulsions.

In activism, we worship Christ by caring for the poor and for one another and by establishing communities of justice. We embrace the union of activism and contemplation that in turn energizes our passions while simultaneously transforming the soul and purifying our action.

Activism alone can be a cruel master. Without a contemplative base, the false self tends to drive us; and even our best intentions toward good can be laced with violence—violence that looks very similar to the violence of conflict and social disasters that we try to attend to in our ministries. A life that is not centered in the silence of God can easily become a frantic and even violent frenzy of imposing ourselves on the world.

Recovering a contemplative base unites prayer and silence with action—two points on a continuum that hold one another in healthy tension. The union of action and contemplation is the way for authentic service and creativity. A cyclical relationship develops on this continuum in which contemplation leads to action and action to contemplation. In this tension we find grace and freedom and fullness of life.

A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Living in this spirituality—a Christian spirituality that grounds us in prayer and service or contemplation and action—allows for a proactive posture rather than a reactive one. Service is much more peaceful and joyful.

The prophet Isaiah spoke eloquently of a promise for those who spend themselves on behalf of the poor and oppressed: “If you do away with the yoke of op-

pression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”⁴⁷

By the grace of God, we at WMF are pouring out the waters to drench our barren places and give birth to beautiful life-giving gardens. The invitation is open to all of us. May we all be inspired anew to abide in the Living Water from whom all life, love, and activism originate. As we persevere in solidarity with our friends in poverty, may the promise be fullness of life and well-watered gardens for those who suffer. **■**

