

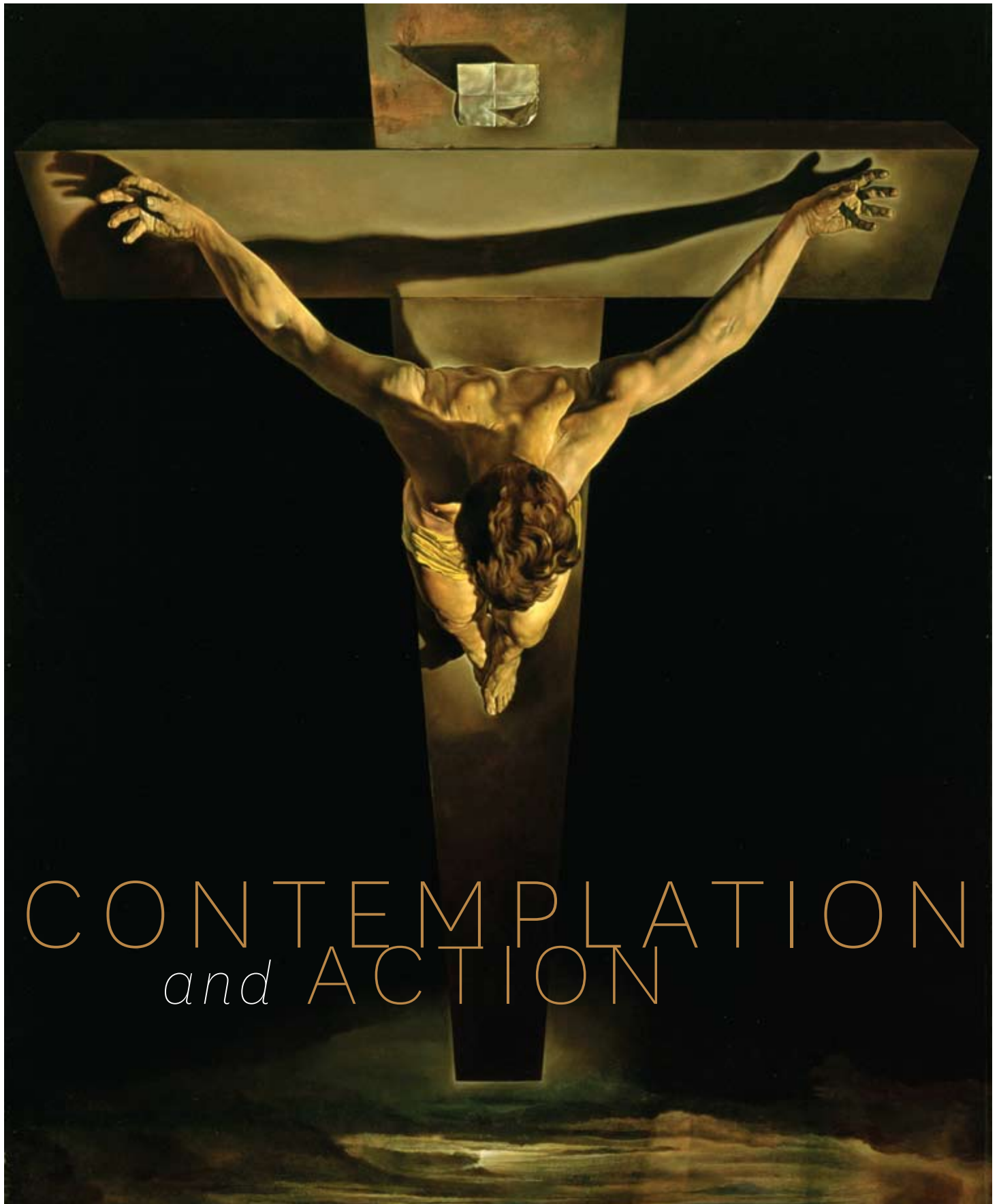
CONVERSATIONS



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CONTEMPLATION *and* ACTION

CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION

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ACCOMPANIMENT AND
HONEST DIALOGUE FOR
THOSE WHO LONG
FOR RADICAL
TRANSFORMATION
IN CHRIST.

→ IT STIMULATES
HUNGER AND
ILLUMINATES THE
PATH BY DRAWING ON
CLASSICAL WISDOM
AND PRACTICE,
EXPLORING THE VITAL
ROLE OF COMMUNITY,
AND ILLUSTRATING
THE JOURNEY WITH
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Conversations
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**CONVERSATIONS IS PUBLISHED
SEMIANNUALLY IN SPRING/
SUMMER AND FALL/WINTER**

© 2010 ISSN: 1548-2057

DISTINGUISHED PARTNER:



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IN KEEPING WITH THE IDEA OF THE SOUL AS A UNIQUE REPRESENTATION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY, THE FORMAT OF CONVERSATIONS INCLUDES FIVE CONTINUING THEMES. EACH REPRESENTING AN ENDURING ASPECT OF THE SOUL—THOUGHT, EMOTION, BEHAVIOR, RELATIONSHIP, AND INTENTION.

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BY PHILEENA HEUERTZ

CONTEMPLATIVE
ACTIVISM

A TRANSFORMATIVE WAY

THE SIGNS OF OUR TIMES ARE TROUBLING. Poverty and exploitation, wars and terrorism, global warming and overconsumption plague our planet. Though there are marks of beauty, creativity, justice, and peace, we have a long way to go before our world is fully redeemed. Being part of an international community committed to serving Jesus among the most vulnerable of the world's poor gives me an uncommon, intimate understanding of the ways in which our personal lives can impact another—either for good or for harm.



It is estimated that 27 million people are victims of modern day slavery—trafficked into all forms of bonded labor, including the commercial sex industry.¹ Today in Kolkata, India, some of my friends are fighting for their freedom from such a degrading “trade.”

Numerous wars are being fought throughout the world in places like the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Africa. Other countries are trying to recover and rebuild from recent conflicts. As I write, nations proliferate nuclear weapons, and economic sanctions endanger the well-being of innocent people. The threat of terrorism lingers, and nation states make war against one another for all manner of reasons—including for power, control, security, survival, and autonomy. Wars are even made in the name of God. And Christians are not excluded from sometimes making religion a cause for war.

It seems domination and exploitation are commonplace almost everywhere we turn—nation to nation, person to person, and in relationship to our environment.

What does it mean to be a faithful Christian in the context of this kind of real world reality?

A TROUBLED WORLD



Attempting to live as faithful children of God in our world is not easy. We are bombarded by the temptation to compromise our integrity in many areas, but the external temptations and challenges are only part of the story. Internally, we also encounter obstacles. To be human means

we are capable of committing acts of incredible love and also acts of horrible violence. And a lot of the time when we yield to violence, we are unaware that we are doing so. How else can it be that we have allowed the world to get to such a horrific state?

More than 2,000 years ago St. Paul affirmed our lack of self-awareness and self-control when he wrote, “What I want to do, I don’t do. And what I don’t want to do I find myself doing” (Rom 7:15ff, TIB).²

There is a battle going on within us, and it plays out in the theater of our personal, communal, and global landscape. The implications of being human are far-reaching for either good or evil.

Thankfully, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus open for us a way to be divinely human. The spiritual journey invites us to ever deepening layers of faithfulness to God, others, and ourselves.

There is still hope for the world.

THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The human condition is complicated, mysterious, and marvelous. We are complex human beings created in the image of God—daughters and sons of the Most High. We are the beloved of God. This is an extraordinary identity. But though we have divine DNA, we don’t often reflect this heritage. Instead of living from a place of knowing in our core that we are loved—and loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves—we live at a lower level of awareness. In some cases we become too egocentric—loving ourselves more than we love God and others. In other cases we think too poorly of ourselves—we behave more like slaves being driven by an angry master than children of a loving, divine parent. And there are various expressions of our distorted view of self found between these extremes.

The human condition is anchored in our search for God and for ourselves—to know and be known. When we awaken to the spiritual journey, we find that surrender and letting go are the surest of ways to find out who we truly are, who God is, and who our neighbor is. The spiritual journey invites us to come into fuller understanding and acceptance of our belovedness so that we can love others and become co-creators with God.

Fr. Thomas Keating, a seasoned Cistercian monk who resides in a monastery in the mountains of Colorado, offers immense wisdom for us as we attempt to navigate the spiritual journey. A master of theology and psychology, he promotes contemplative prayer as a way to surrender to Christian transformation. His lecture to university students at Yale was published in a little book called *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. In it he offers contemporary wisdom by identifying three emotional “programs for happiness,” saying that we generally overidentify with one. If we’re honest, we can find ourselves interacting with the world primarily through one of these three “programs”:

- » *Power and Control*
- » *Affection and Esteem*
- » *Security and Survival*

Keating says that these three “programs for happiness” emerge from very basic instinctual 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 the basic need that may have gone largely unmet in our childhood; thus, the false self gains fuel for its existence.³ Essentially our “program for happiness” becomes the archetype of our false self.

1. “Human Trafficking Statistics” Polaris Project | P.O. Box 77892, Washington, DC 20013 | Tel: 202.745.1001 | www.PolarisProject.org | Info@PolarisProject.org

2. Scripture quotations marked (TIB) are taken from The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation, copyright © 2009 by Sheed & Ward, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

3. The “false self” term is generally attributed to Thomas Merton, who encapsulated the “true self” and “false self” in reference to the Apostle Paul’s teaching on the old and new creation.

When we overidentify with a particular social group, culture, or nation, we fuel our false self. Temperament also plays into the false self. For example, a dominant personality type who didn't experience the security or control that she or he needed as a child may be compelled to control her or his situation and surroundings, or in some cases other people. The consequences of over-identifying with one of these "programs for happiness" are more devastating the greater our influence, authority, and power.

Experiencing anxiety and frustration is often a sign that in the unconscious there is an emotional "program for happiness" that has just been triggered.⁴ Do you ever have an overly emotional reaction to a situation or a relationship and later wonder why you reacted so strongly? As we grow in self-awareness, we often realize that some of our reactions to present circumstances are actually reactions to past events that are buried in our unconscious.

When we experience one of those overly emotional events, the current situation provides a trigger for the unresolved anguish. When we recognize the agony surfacing, we are experiencing grace. This is an invitation to greater wholeness, but sadly, instead of trusting and surrendering to the Maker and Lover of our soul, we tend to cling to one of our "programs for happiness" to help us attempt to "achieve" the Christian life and feel better about ourselves—"I am in control, affectionately esteemed, and secure." The "program" temporarily and artificially appeases the discomfort we experience from our sense of separateness from God and others. The key to shedding our childish ways in exchange for more maturity is self-awareness

Self-awareness is a central aspect to the Christian life. Self-knowledge paves the way to becoming whole and connected to God and others. A first step toward self-awareness is recognizing the immanent (all-pervasively present) as well as transcendent (independent of the created world) nature of God. The Christian doctrine of the Divine indwelling affirms God's immanence—we believe that God dwells in our soul. Therefore we don't have to go anywhere to find God or be with God—more often we need to stop running and be still to recognize God's presence with us. Being rooted and connected to God's immanence illuminates our identity and liberates us to be connected to God, who is also all around us.

However, it seems that more often we relate to God's transcendence without affirming God's immanence. When we don't hold God's immanence and transcendence in tension or balance, our sense that God is distant from us—somewhere out there—can increase relational distance between God and us. A lack of experience of God's indwelling presence further propagates the notion that God is looking down on us, keeping a checklist of our right and wrong behavior. The burden of living the Christian life then falls on us to do and behave appro-

priately. The task can become burdensome and dreadful—far from the abundant life Jesus invited us to live into. We need a spiritual revolution like the one the Apostle Paul wrote about in Ephesians:

You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which is being corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution, so that you can put on the new self that has been created in the God's likeness, in the justice and holiness of the truth. (4:17–18, 20–24, TIB)

This kind of revolution starts with a commitment to "know thyself" as Socrates taught. Contemporary Christian spiritual teachers emphasize the connection between self-awareness and our relationship with God: "In order to find God, Whom we can only find in and through the depths of our own soul, we must therefore first find ourselves," wrote Thomas Merton.⁵

The spiritual journey really is a revolution—an overthrow of the old rule to make room for the new order of Christ. But like any worldly revolution, it does not happen overnight. Much discipline and thoughtful consideration must accompany our actions. For a transformational revolution to take place in our lives, we must submit to a spiritual journey marked by contemplation and action.

ACTION EXPRESSED THROUGH VOCATION

The way in which we interact with the world—our work, creativity, and service—is our *vocation*. Living within our vocation allows for the most satisfying life. The English word vocation is derived from the Latin *vocare*, "to call," and *vox*, "voice."

When we live within our vocation, we are responding to the Voice who has called us. Our vocation is the expression of St. Paul's reminder that "in [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).⁶ When we live our vocations, we live as those who are receiving and giving love and expressing that love relationship in a way that is unique to our nature, personality, gifts, and strengths. But when we are not anchored in the love of God, we are more than likely living out of one of the "programs for happiness" that wreak havoc on the world around us.

Through our vocations we attempt to give of ourselves through creative acts of love and service. Whether you are clergy or a layperson, in the paid workforce or the non-paid positions of parenting and homemaking, you have the opportunity to live actively in the world. As followers of Christ, in response to the state of our

4. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999, 30.

5. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1961, 63.

6. Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™. All rights reserved.



world, we try to tend to the needs of those around us. As we grow in relationship with God, our activism can take on increasing responsibility with far-reaching influence. We were made to give of ourselves in this way—to serve, lead, and reflect the love of God.

It seems that few of us struggle with being active enough. The more common theme is that of Christians struggling to know what to say “no” to and struggling with knowing how to live a simpler life. We are very active people—some might argue, overactive. While some of our actions may be cloaked in the name of righteousness and justice or in the name of “loving our neighbor,” other actions are rooted in selfishness (or at least short-sightedness).

While our behavior, conduct, initiative, and enterprise can be well-meaning and well-intentioned, many of our best “good acts” are not good enough. And some of our well-meaning intentions even cause more harm than good. In our attempt to offer moral support to a friend, we may inadvertently hurt him or her by communicating judgment of his or her actions. Or on the global scale we can see how “security and survival” can take precedence over love for neighbor—our nation’s bent toward overconsumption and affluent living often supersedes just working conditions and equal opportunity for our global neighbors.

Time and time again, action without contemplation leads us off course in the journey of life.

CULTIVATING CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation affirms our need for a spiritual revolution. It reminds us that God is God, and “I” am not. A lifestyle of contemplation fosters personal and communal transformation.

In the broadest sense of the word, contemplation means creating sacred space to be still, to rest in God, to reflect, to look inward, to attend to the inner life, and simply to be with God in solitude, silence, and stillness. Solitude, silence, and stillness are in fact the qualities of contemplative prayer. Contemplation in its broad sense can also be understood, as Parker Palmer describes, as “anything that dismantles our illusions.”⁷

Fr. Thomas Keating defines contemplation this way: “The essence of contemplation is the trusting and loving faith by which God both elevates the human person and purifies the conscious and unconscious obstacles in us that oppose the values of the gospel and the work of the Spirit.”⁸

So how do we cultivate contemplation?

Like any endeavor that we value, it takes discipline. Contemplative prayer practices are, in fact, more to us like disciplines than prayer as we’ve been accustomed to understand it. That’s because the dominant type of prayer

that has been taught in modern Western Christianity is kataphatic prayer—prayer that makes use of our faculties (reason, imagination, memory, feelings, and will). Kataphatic prayer corresponds with ordinary awareness and our ego. It is wonderfully self-reflective. The “I” is the center of orientation for this kind of prayer. It arises from the predominant way in which we relate to the world and to others.

By contrast, apophatic prayer does not use our normal faculties, but transcends them. The center of orientation for this kind of prayer—by its very nature—is not “I,” but abandonment of self and attentiveness to God. But this prayer does make use of different kinds of faculties, faculties with which we are less in touch, faculties known as “spiritual senses.”⁹

Engaging our spiritual senses is enhanced through apophatic prayer, which is usually characterized by intentional silence or meditation. By way of apophatic prayer, we grow in receptivity to and awareness of God, who is indeed very personal and intimate with us. Contemplative prayer practices foster apophatic prayer.

Contemplative prayer starts from the assumption that we need to receive from God. It’s all about humbling ourselves, letting go, and surrendering to God. And it can be humiliating to have to receive. Contemplative prayer practices humble us. Contemplative practices teach us how to surrender to the presence and action of God within us and within our world. In contrast to kataphatic prayer practices, the fruit of contemplative prayer is not looked for or found during the prayer time. The contemplative space that we allow to be cultivated within us over time by the Holy Spirit produces a garden of abundant fruit in our active life—fruit produced by the Master Gardener. The fruit we strive to cultivate on our own pales in comparison.

Over time, the discipline of contemplative prayer postures us toward surrender so that we let go of our illusions. Through the dismantling of our false self, we are liberated and released into deeper waters of the abundant life.

Growing acquainted with the Presence of God through the contemplative practices that support silence, solitude, and stillness makes way for contemplation. Contemplation in its classical Christian spirituality sense is a gift from God. Its essence is a state of union, love, peace, and mystical awareness that we cannot “achieve”—no matter how many hours we give ourselves to contemplative prayer. We are to receive and surrender to the state of awareness called contemplation if it is given to us, but we are not to grasp for it.

But making space for the contemplative dimension of our relationship with God requires courage. In time, through contemplative prayer, whoever we think we are we find out we’re not. The spiritual journey provides

7. Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999, 17.

8. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009, 45.

9. For more exploration of kataphatic and apophatic prayer see Cynthia Bourgeault’s book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2004), chap. 4.

the most painless way to discover that. Instead of grasping and crafting our identity, we lay it down (a “living sacrifice”—Romans 12:1). We lay ourselves down, and we arise transformed.

A TRANSFORMATIVE WAY: CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM

When we consider the state of the world and the ways in which human beings—including Christians—have historically contributed to and continuously contribute to the divisions and conflicts we face, it’s obvious we are desperate for a spiritual revolution. Contemplative prayer is part of the discipline needed to nurture the revolution—a revolution that requires surrender. It provides a way to wake up from our illusions and be transformed. It’s not something we can do for ourselves; it is done to us.

Regular contemplative prayer teaches us to surrender and grow acquainted with the immanent presence of God. As we gain courage to trust God and let go of our emotional “programs for happiness,” we are better equipped to examine and evaluate our vocation and subsequent interactions with the world.

Contemplation opens us to the possibilities of experiencing:

- » *Interior freedom instead of pursuing power and control.*
- » *Divine love instead of craving the affection and esteem of others.*
- » *Presence of God instead of clinging to security and survival.*

Contemplation is the space and presence-of-being that allows for the dismantling of our illusions and nurturing the growth and development of our true selves. Abandoning and surrendering to the immanent presence of God around and within us allows for greater enlightenment of our true and false selves. Contemplative practices reinforce a posture of regular abandonment and surrender to God—in our exterior as well as interior life.

The energy it takes to sustain our “programs for happiness” tends to increase over time. The longer we live without nurturing the contemplative dimension of life, the more we distance ourselves from our true selves, our belovedness, God, and others.

Henri Nouwen—one of the greatest Christian spiritual teachers—said that God speaks over each of us, “You are my Beloved; on you my favor rests.” He said that Voice has always been there, but it seems most of us are more eager to listen to the other, louder voices that are saying, “Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful; then you will earn the love you so desire.” Meanwhile, the soft, gentle

voice that speaks in the silence and solitude of our hearts remains unheard or at least unconvincing.¹⁰

Action without contemplation can be a dangerous road—leaving us blind to the pitfalls of our “false self” motivations. A life of action without contemplation leads to making God in our image instead of surrendering to being formed into God’s image. Action without contemplation doesn’t allow for the space and awareness needed to let God introduce God’s self to us—free of preconceived notions and biased filters.

A life of action without contemplation is characterized by:

- » *Activism instead of acts of love.*
- » *Criticizing without energizing.*
- » *Despair instead of hope.*
- » *Disconnection between “doing” and “being.”*
- » *Fundamentalism and judgmentalism.*

Action without contemplation is not an obedient life and appears rather absurd when we honestly examine it. Henri Nouwen’s teaching encourages us to turn from an absurd way of living to an obedient life. He helpfully instructed that the English word *absurd* comes from the Latin word *surdus*, meaning deaf. An absurd life is a deaf life—one in which we cannot hear the Voice in silence. The many activities in which we are involved—as noble as they are—and the cacophony of sounds around us often drown out the Voice of the One who calls us the Beloved. Without contemplation, the liberation and the fecund life of which Jesus taught are out of reach, and his admonition that we would do even greater things than he seems impossible.

Contemplation leads to just and compassionate action, and action born from the heart of God leads to contemplation. Even Thomas Merton, who committed to long periods of hermitage—steeped in solitude, silence, and stillness—became a very active voice for justice in the face of the social evils of his time.

A commitment to contemplation leads to radical action. In the words of Mother Teresa:

The true inner life makes the active life burn forth and consume everything. It makes us find Jesus in the dark holes of the slums, in the most pitiful miseries of the poor; in the God-Man naked on the cross, mournful, despised by all, the man of suffering, crushed like a worm by scourging and crucifixion.¹¹

In the book of James we are reminded that faith without deeds is dead. In the same way, contemplation without action is irrelevant. Contemplation demands action from us—some kind of fruitful response to the needs before

10. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, tenth anniversary ed. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002, 28–29.

11. *Love: A Fruit Always in Season: Daily Meditations by Mother Teresa*, ed. Dorothy S. Hunt. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.



us. Contemplation helps us to respond to the needs around us appropriately.

Contemplation without action is irrelevant to Sarita,¹² my twenty-year-old friend who is a mother of three living in a shack that you would not house your dog in, whose children’s only joy used to be a broken, jagged-edged slide in a once hopeful, now abandoned park. Someone needed that metal slide to keep his family protected from the elements, and now even that slim piece of normalcy is gone.

Contemplative activism makes us supple in the hands of God. By way of Christ’s ongoing, transformative work in us, we are able to love and serve more freely, purely, and unconditionally—like Jesus. Rather than divide the active life from the contemplative life—as if it’s reasonable to choose to live one way or another—an authentic and relevant life brings union to the active and contemplative dimensions of our spirituality.

Consider the wheel as a symbol for life. Contemplation will be found in the center axis, and the active life will extend out in the spokes. All the while, the wheel turns and progresses forward.¹³ Without the center axis, the spokes would lose their anchor and be unable to support the forward motion of the wheel. Without the spokes, the center axis would be deemed extraneous. When we are least connected to our contemplative center, our life is most tense and chaotic. When we are anchored in contemplative spirituality, the active, exterior expression of our life is more peaceful, purposeful, and effective.

In a world plagued by human exploitation, violence, and the destruction of our ecosphere, we owe it to the world to develop contemplative activism.

As Thomas Keating so eloquently puts it:

To submit to the divine therapy [in contemplation] is something we owe to ourselves and the rest of humanity. If we don’t allow the Spirit of God to address the deep levels of our attachments to ourselves and to our “programs for happiness,” we will pour into the world the negative elements of our self-centeredness, adding to the conflicts and social disasters that come from over-identifying with the biases and prejudices of our particular culture and upbringing.¹⁴



May the revolution begin. May it start with each of us.

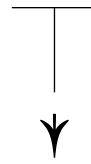
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phileena Heurtz is a spiritual director with Word Made Flesh based in Omaha, Nebraska. She is the author of the recent book *Pilgrimage of a Soul* (InterVarsity Press).

12. The name of my friend has been changed to protect her identity.

13. Henri Nouwen, *Beloved: Henri Nouwen in Conversation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2007, 23.

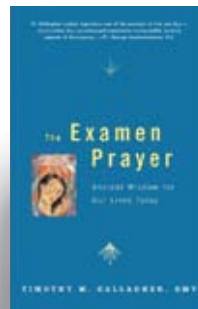
14. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*. New York: Paulist, 1999, 36.



IF YOU’RE LOOKING FOR A CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER PRACTICE TO GET STARTED ON THE JOURNEY OF CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM, OR IF YOU’RE LOOKING TO BROADEN YOUR CURRENT PRACTICE, I RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING:

- Breath Prayer*
- Prayer of Examen*
- Lectio Divina*
- Centering Prayer*
- Welcoming Prayer Labyrinth*

SOME HELPFUL BOOKS ON A FEW OF THESE PRACTICES ARE:



The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today

by Timothy M. Gallagher, O.M.V.

Divine Intervention

by Tony Jones

Lectio Divina

by M. Basil Pennington

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening

by Cynthia Bourgeault

Open Mind, Open Heart

by Thomas Keating

Welcoming Prayer Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening

by Cynthia Bourgeault



NOTES

Series of horizontal wavy lines for taking notes.

CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION



**This article originally appeared in
Fall/Winter 2010, Issue 8.2: Contemplation & Action
issue of *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*.**

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