

CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM:

A TRANSFORMATIVE WAY

PHILEENA HEUERTZ

We are complex human beings created in the image of God—daughters and sons of the most high God. We are the beloved of God. This is an extraordinary identity. But we don’t often reflect this heritage. Instead of living from a place of knowing in our core that we are loved, which fuels our ability to love God with our whole being while loving others, we live at a lower level of awareness. In some cases we become too egocentric. In other cases we think too poorly of ourselves.

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, promotes contemplative prayer as a way to surrender to Christian transformation. In his book *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*, Keating offers contemporary wisdom by identifying three emotional “programs for happiness.” 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 these three “programs for happiness” emerge from basic instinctual needs. It’s a natural part of our human development to seek a degree of power and control, affection and esteem, and security and survival. In time, however, we over-identify with one by way of compensating for that basic need which may have gone largely unmet in our childhood; thus, the false self⁶ gains fuel for its existence. Essentially our “program for happiness” becomes the archetype of our false self.

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. 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 pervasive presence) as well as transcendent

ACTION WITHOUT CONTEMPLATION CAN BE A DANGEROUS ROAD—LEAVING US BLIND TO THE PITFALLS OF THE MOTIVATIONS OF OUR FALSE SELF.

(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.

It seems, however, we relate more often 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 check-list of our right and wrong behavior. The burden of living the Christian life then falls on me to do and behave appropriately. The task can become burdensome and dreadful—far from the abundant life Jesus invited us into. We need a spiritual revolution like the Apostle Paul wrote about in Ephesians:

... Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution, so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God’s likeness, in the justice and holiness of the truth.²

This kind of revolution starts with a commitment to “know thyself.”³ For a transformational revolution to take place in our lives, we must submit to a spiritual journey marked by contemplation *and* action.

CULTIVATING CONTEMPLATION
It seems that few of us struggle with being active enough. The more common theme I notice is that of struggling to know what to say “no” to and how to live a simpler life. We are very active people and some might argue we are over-active. 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 good intentioned, many of our best good acts are not good enough. And some of our well-meaning intentions even cause more harm than good. Time and time again, action without contemplation leads us off course in the journey of life.

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.

I understand contemplation, in its broad sense, to mean creating sacred space to be still, to rest in God, to reflect, to look inward; to attend to the inner life; to simply be with God in solitude, silence, and stillness. Solitude, silence, and stillness are, in fact, the qualities of contemplative prayer.

So how do we cultivate contemplation?

It takes discipline. Contemplative prayer practices are 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 cataphatic prayer—prayer that makes use of our faculties (reason, imagination, memory, feelings, and will). Cataphatic prayer corresponds with ordinary awareness and our ego.

By contrast, apophatic prayer does not make use of 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 that we are less in touch with, faculties known as “spiritual senses.”⁴

Contemplative prayer starts from the orientation that we need to receive from God. Contemplative practices teach us how to surrender to the presence and action of God within us *and* within our world. The fruit of contemplative prayer is not looked for or found during the prayer time. The contemplative space that we allow to be cultivated by the Holy Spirit within us over time,

produces a garden of abundant fruit in our active life—fruit produced by the Master Gardener.

A TRANSFORMATIVE WAY: CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM
Action without contemplation can be a dangerous road—leaving us blind to the pitfalls of the motivations of our false self. 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. Without contemplation, the liberation and fecund life of which Jesus taught is 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. A commitment to contemplation leads to radical action. 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.

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

² 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.
³ Socrates’ guiding philosophical rule that holds both spiritual and practical wisdom
⁴ For more exploration of cataphatic and apophatic prayer, see Cynthia Bourgeault’s book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2004), chap. 4.

This article originally appeared in the Fall 2010 issue of *Conversations Journal*, “Contemplation and Action” vol.8.2, pp. 46-51. It is reprinted here with permission from the publisher. <http://conversationsjournal.com>