

## **Reflections on a Contemplative Practice**

May 8, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Before I turn to Duncan to offer reading and his words, allow me to first share my brief part of our shared reflection and to set some context for the theme of contemplative prayer at First Church. In the early days of the pandemic you'll recall we were (and I trust still are) all looking for some grounding amidst the uncertainty and anxiety and new global reality we were all facing. Do you remember how in March of 2020, we'd offer almost daily opportunities for online connection and sharing and prayer? One of those early offerings was a weekly group centered around the daily devotions of Father Richard Rohr of the Center for Action and Contemplation. Duncan was a regular at those gatherings along with Alex Steinert Evoy and Beth Loomis. I had met Duncan a few years before in another small group here, but it was during that Richard Rohr group that I came to learn about his extended experience with contemplative practice. This was at a time when I was beginning my own practice of daily centering prayer - first for just 5 minutes of silence, then 10, then up to 30. The practice lasted for several months and I've had several seasons on and off since.

I'm reminded today of two things. First, a hope that one time First Church member Frances Whistler shared with me years ago before she moved back to England that First Church would at one point offer a regular practice of prayer and contemplation, a time to collectively ground all of our activities in the church and world! It seemed good and right to her that a church community would have such an anchor, not merely for individuals but for the good of the whole which, like worship, becomes a beating heart or an essential organ that in ways seen or unseen circulates a gratitude and groundedness through all that we do: Of course, she was right. Since then, we've been growing into this together, in seasons with Kate Layzer or Hilary Hopkins offering weekly times of silent meditation. And now, the contemplative practices that Duncan leads every Monday afternoon, which in my view offers so much more than an individual benefit for participants, though it does that to be sure...it is a gift to this wider community and like other small groups we hold here it casts ripples into our wider church.

I'm also reminded today of these powerful words the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton said: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common

form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

Wow! And to think this is as true for as individuals as it is for communities, especially in a community so driven my activism and overwork as this one. With that allow me to introduce, Duncan to share our reading, his own reflections and a taste of contemplative practice.

Duncan Hollomon:

Please join me in prayer: “Holy Spirit — May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our minds and hearts, bring us closer to you, our guide and our creator, and to one another. Be with us as we find our way through the dark of our confusion and doubt, and lead us toward your loving wisdom. Amen.

I trust that most of you are aware that for more than a year now on Monday afternoons a number of us gather to engage in contemplative spiritual practice, which I host on zoom. We began at the beginning of Lent last year, and, well, we just kept going.

A few weeks ago, Dan asked me to say some words to the wider congregation of introduction and welcome about our gathering. I'd like to start with a poem. It's by Bill Stafford, an Oregon poet of whom I'm very fond. Having lived for a year in the woods in Oregon a long while ago, I experience a particular resonance with his poems. This one is called “Ask Me” Here it is:

*Some time when the river is ice ask me  
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether*

*what I have done is my life. Others  
have come in their slow way into  
my thought, and some have tried to help  
or to hurt: ask me what difference  
their strongest love or hate has made.*

*I will listen to what you say.  
You and I can turn and look  
at the silent river and wait. We know  
the current is there, hidden; and there  
are comings and goings from miles away  
that hold the stillness exactly before us.  
What the river says, that is what I say.*

So... Why does that poem speak to me? Because that moment, that moment of stillness and quiet, when the river is ice... that's when we are the most available to receiving the wisdom we normally ignore. We are too busy; our minds are too noisy. We need to slow down. Paul Simon wrote "Slow down, you move too fast. You've got to make the moment last." We need to slow down to listen to what was always there. We just couldn't hear it.

The first stage of contemplative practice is slowing down, and becoming still. The Sanskrit word is "Shamatha" which means "calm abiding." That's what the poet is doing here — slowing down, and becoming quiet enough to hear the river under the frozen surface of ice.

Stafford asks himself a question - Is what I'm doing, my life? I invite you to ask yourselves that same question. I ask myself that almost every day. And what does Stafford hear? We don't know. But what we do know, is that he is listening to the river, and allowing it to speak to him.

The second stage of contemplative practice is allowing ourselves to know in new ways. The Sanskrit word is “Vipassana” which means “clear seeing.” How do we do that? By being willing to relinquish our old ways of knowing, and become open to whatever comes. Stafford says, “What the river says, that is what I say.” That is contemplative practice — allowing a kind of knowing to enter us. Opening ourselves to whatever speaks to us.

Our Monday gatherings are an opportunity for this kind of contemplative practice. We sit quietly, allowing our minds to settle, attending to the sensations of our bodies, because those sensations are always in the present moment. Our thoughts can be in the future, as pleasant anticipation or as worry, or in the past, as fond memory or regretful self-reproach. We cling to our mind forms rather than surrendering to whatever is true right now.

So... if you're willing. I'd like to invite you to experience a few moments of contemplative practice. It's an opportunity for you to be with yourself in an intimate and honest way, without self-judgment. Just being with yourself.

[Meditation practice — using gravity and breathing. Triple A — “Attention, Awareness and Acceptance.”]

With this reflective, contemplative perspective in our minds and bodies, I'd like to spend some time with two familiar biblical scenes that illustrate the practice of entering not-knowing that allows a transformation of our knowing.

First, from the story of Jesus's death and resurrection. Imagine you're Mary Magdalene standing outside the tomb into which

Jesus was laid. You are devastated and traumatized. This man whom you loved, whose words and being spoke to something deep inside, has been brutally killed. Powerful forces beyond your control silenced this man whom you worshipped and revered. You are alone, facing your grief, and facing the tomb. The gospel of John says,

As she wept, she saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." Note what she says here "I don't know where they have put him." That's only a small part of what she doesn't know.

Back to the John's telling of the story. "At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." That is, she doesn't know who this person is.

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

What's going on here? I would suggest that Mary's ability to grasp

with her mind what was happening was simply overwhelmed. For her, Jesus was dead, so it was impossible that Jesus could call her name. And yet (those two words again) she is compelled to recognize him as “teacher.”

That is, she had to first surrender to her not-knowing. Like Stafford standing by the river. He doesn't know what it says. The surface is ice — frozen and still. The once bubbling, singing river is now silent.

It is only in that silence that Stafford can hear what the river is saying. His own personal knowing has been transcended, just as Mary's knowing is transcended. It is when she enters into that state of not-knowing, that she hears her name. And then she knows.

It is in her relationship with Jesus the Christ that her way of knowing is transformed. She is with him, and he with her. She knows with her heart.

The same transformation happens to Saul. He was a religious zealot, persecuting those who had chosen to follow Jesus. Then, while on the road to Damascus, he is struck blind. His usual way of knowing is blocked. He enters into his time of blindness, his state of unknowing. Some days later, Ananias places his hands on Saul's shoulders, and brings a blessing from Jesus.

Saul becomes Paul, through his personal relationship with Jesus the Christ. To me, that's the restoration of his sight — his ability to see himself, and others for who they are. His knowing is transformed, and yet, he had to pass through that period of non-knowing in order to be open to the new, heartfelt, relational way of knowing.

Having hosted the contemplative gathering every week for more than a year now, I can say that one of the shifts that I've noticed in those that come regularly is that they begin to relinquish the demands for knowing or believing in a certain way. They begin to trust their own knowing in the presence of others in a new way.

They also trust their own not-knowing, as we share that experience with one another.

There is something intangible yet holy that happens when we shift from our personal awareness, to sharing that awareness with others.

In thinking about how to describe this shift, I remembered the familiar words from First Corinthians - "Now we see through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know even as we are known."

That's the second half of our time together - sharing our experiences with one another. We are blending two forms of contemplative practice - entering into stillness and silence, and being and sharing with one another in a contemplative way. We're not analyzing the text or struggling with church dogma. We are simply sharing our inner experiences with others. As one member wrote to me a short while ago, talking about her reaction to our time together. She shared that it "allows for deep thinking and sharing in remarkably brief amounts of time. I spent years in another church community and it took years to get beyond the chit chat to the real spiritual "meat" in conversation. I like chit chat but I really learn from this type of focused community inquiry."

So... I hope my words have given you a glimpse into what you might experience were you to join us on Monday afternoon. And — you are more than welcome to do so.

Please pray with me — Holy Spirit - Help us to be quiet enough to hear your voice as you speak through songs of the river water, and through the whisper of the wind in the trees, and in the tender hearts of those around us. Help us to know how to listen, how to know with our hearts. Help us to be patient in our not-knowing, so, we may be open to how we might know through you. Amen.

