

The Transforming Journey Inward, or A LOVE STORY

A talk for Gold Street Chapel held at the SWCHS on Sunday 27th February 2011

by Jacqui Marsden

I have divided my talk into 5 sections:

1. First I'll slowly read some scriptures that support the practice of Christian meditation (lectio divina)
2. Tell my story of how God led me onto this particular spiritual path
3. Some teaching and quotes about meditation & contemplation, incl how to do it
4. A practical opportunity to experience 5 minutes of silent prayer
5. Feedback/questions, and some final quotes

"The important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality which gives meaning shape and purpose to everything we do, everything we are." J. Main

Good visual aids: E8 Mathematical diagram & tray: The BIG LOVE

Scripture references to Christian meditation –

Another word for contemplative prayer is silent prayer. We can be entirely SILENT when we pray. Silence is not an absence, but a Presence. Silence is not just about outer stillness, but interior silence too. How do we become still inside? Meditation can give us this great gift. A noisy mind is usually unable to become present to His Presence, but a quiet mind can 'hear' Him. In the NIV Bible Concordance, the references for 'meditation' are interchangeable with 'contemplation'. I shall briefly describe the difference between the two a bit later.

Read Ann Lewin's poem 'The Kingfisher'. Silence for 2 minutes.

First let us listen to a few scriptures that refer to silent intimacy with God, as well as His Presence **within** us.

Gen 24:63 Isaac went out to the field one evening to *meditate*...

1 Kings 19:9, 11-14 God was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in the *still, small voice*...

Joshua 1:8 & Psalm 1: 2 ...*meditate* on the law day and night...

Psalm 19:14 ...May the words of my mouth, and the *meditation* of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Psalm 39:3 ...and as I *meditated*, the fire burned...

Psalm 46:10 *Be still* and know that I am God.

Psalm 48:9 ...we *meditate* on your unfailing love...

Psalm 77:12 ..I will *meditate* on all your works...

Psalm 27:4 ...delighting in the Lord's perfections & *meditating* in His temple...

Psalm 48:9 ...O God, we *meditate* on your unfailing love as we worship...

Psalm 63:6 ... I lie awake thinking of you, *meditating* on you through the night...

Psalm 104:44 ...may my *meditations* be pleasing to him..

Psalm 119: 15 ... I *meditate* on your precepts...

Psalm 119:23 ... but I will *meditate* on your principles...

Psalm 119:27...then I will *meditate* on your wonders...

Psalm 119:48 ...and I *meditate* on your decrees...

Psalm 119:97 ...I *meditate* on it all day long...

Psalm 119:99 ...for I *meditate* on your statutes...

Psalm 119: 148 ...that I may *meditate* on all your promises...

Psalm 143:5 & Psalm 145:5 ...I *meditate* on all your (wonderful) works...

Isaiah 30:15 ...in *quietness* and confidence is your strength...

Hosea 2:14 I will lead her out into the desert (a quiet place) and speak tenderly to her there.

Ezekiel 36:25 ...I will put my Spirit within you...

Matt 28:20 ...And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.

Luke 17:21 "Jesus replied, "The Kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, 'Here it is', or 'There it is', BECAUSE THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU."

Luke 2:18 Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart. (Mary is called the Mother of Contemplatives because of her attitude of surrender to God. Her Magnificat in Luke 1: 46-55 is truly a magnificent example for us to treasure in our hearts.)

Luke 10:41 & 42 we read: "But the Lord said to her: "My dear Martha, you are so upset over all these details. *There is really only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it – and I won't take it away from her.*"

Jesus seems to favour Mary here, perhaps because her priorities were right? Both Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene are classic examples of contemplative women.

John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches."

And finally, Jesus' prayer for unity, with His beautiful language of union in

John 17:21: ...just as you are in me, and *I am* in you, so they will be in us...

1 Corinthians 6:19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

1 Thess 5:17 Pray always. (Pray continually. Keep in praying.)

From many of the above scriptures we can safely conclude that God is intimately with us, and that separation from God is an illusion! And yet, how do we relate to someone whom we cannot even see? Each person's relationship with the invisible God is utterly unique. As we develop this invisible relationship with God, we initially do so with the eye of faith, or with the eye of the heart. This faith is a great gift, and it opens up the way to God for us. We cannot see God with our normal faculties, or comprehend God with our minds or our senses. Sometimes we can perceive His Presence by a combination of faith and intuition.

We pray to Him in many different ways. Contemplative prayer is just one of the ways of drawing close to God, and of communing with Him. It comes to us as a pure gift.

The difference between meditation and contemplation is this: during meditation we still use thoughts, images and words, as David often does in the Psalms. He meditates on the various things of God. Contemplation is a kind of prayer that has gone beyond

words. It is silent communion. It is simply resting with Him and gazing at Him, and allowing Him to hold me in a loving gaze. One rests in loving awareness of God. Meditation can be seen as a kind of preparation for contemplation, like the train ticket that gets us to our destination. Once we get there, we no longer need the 'ticket'.

My own story

"Prayer, the expression of our desire for God and our relationship with God, is not something we control, it is what we are drawn to." Ann Lewin

My initial conversion happened in Cape Town, in 1979 – 32 years ago, when I was 22 years old. As the Emmaus Rd account from Luke 24 was read at an outdoor Easter Sunrise Communion service, I experienced a watershed moment of grace – a moment of pure illumination. I had been searching for God, and at that moment my eyes were supernaturally opened and I understood who God was. I knew that a personal relationship between God and me had begun.

Then 25 years later, after praying in the usual way, a new prayer came to me with some urgency: Lord, please help me to see! God must have given that desire to me... to see behind, through and beyond natural sight... As my search continued, and I read widely, I found that the language of 'seeing' was quite common among the contemplative authors.

It was not long after praying that prayer for spiritual sight that I had a kind of a 2nd conversion, a 'graced awakening', or a 'blind stirring of love', as James Finley calls it. This happened about 7 years ago. One day, as I was praying in my usual way, I suddenly felt as though I was being gagged with a soft silk scarf and gently being asked to be silent, to not say a single word... to simply be quiet. QUIET. Shhhh. Quiet. I was being called into silence, stillness and solitude – into an exterior and interior quiet & peace. After this surprising experience, this happened to me every time I attempted to pray in my usual way! I also noticed how I was longing for silence, and seemed to need to sit quietly with Him in total simplicity.

And so I began a daily practice of Christian meditation, in the early mornings. Regular Spiritual Direction helped me to understand what was happening to me on my spiritual journey. As a result of this daily discipline, I began to discover that God was doing many unexpected things within me. One of them manifested as being able to comfortably hold paradox, and being given a non-dualistic way of seeing the world. So much in the

spiritual life seemed to be both/and, not either/or – this was so liberating! Once we have the eyes to see it, we find that Scripture is full of paradoxical sayings, e.g. Mary is both a Virgin and a Mother, Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; the first shall be last; when I am weak, then I am strong; and of course the Beatitudes are full of paradox, for example: blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn; the meek, those who hunger & thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers & the persecuted.

(Very simple example of birds & cats: I love them both, although they cannot easily co-exist. This does not mean that I exclude one at the expense of the other. It seems that life is very often like that. We need to be able to hold the both...discuss?)

I no longer needed to constantly separate out this from that, to 'divide the field'. I could let things be, and trust the process. Love took on an increasingly non-possessive quality. St Bernard of Clairveaux spoke of a 'disinterested' love. By that he meant a love that is no longer interested in the positive feedback loop of receiving love back. It just loves, unconditionally.

As I silently learned to observe my thoughts, feelings & sensations, I discovered that there truly is another 'I' who is observing my thoughts, memories and feelings. This 'I' is my true self in God. I do not have to over-identify with my thoughts or feelings. They do not have to define me. A relative detachment came with this insight,: I learned how to be both involved and detached at the same time (another paradox!).

In one of his poems, T.S. Eliot said: "Teach me to care and not to care, and to sit still." This line virtually sums up Christian meditation!

A regular meditation practice slowly begins to change our levels of awareness. An example of this increased awareness is given Martin Laird, who makes the important distinction between pain & suffering: pain is simply pain, and suffering is the commentary about the pain. Another fruit of silence is that one learns to stay in the present moment. This can bring great peace. If I can 'meet whatever happens with stillness, rather than with commentary', I can choose to respond rather than to react.

As I look back at this different way of being and of praying, there are very definite markers along the way. First of all, it was always God who initiated new desires, yearnings and insights. Often the yearning itself was a prayer. One of the earliest of these insights, surprisingly, was the deconstruction of the word 'God'. I remember the moment when it happened. I was driving my car into our driveway at home, when the question suddenly came to me – who or what is God really?! It felt as though all my

previously held images of God began to crumble away – it was quite a scary process! My spiritual life was being completely uprooted.

Gerald May, in his book: *The Dark Night of the Soul*, says: *“A common experience, often confusing but not too painful, is that the word ‘God’ loses its meaning. That word, which used to bring forth familiar images and feelings, now seems inadequate and somehow even wrong. And there seems to be no satisfactory substitute. One learns experientially what John and Theresa continually affirm: no words, not even the divine names, can ever adequately portray the Reality.”* (p 90)

It was reassuring to learn that this was a well-documented experience along the spiritual journey! The next major thing that happened was that I was given a new understanding of the fact that God was within me. This radically changed my theology. I no longer needed to call on Him to come to my aid. I simply needed to become quiet and register that He was already here. I was not alone. He was with me, and my very breath was His name – YHWH.

All of the above happened at a time of great turmoil in our family with a beloved prodigal son. I also experienced other losses, including the death of my father and others, many major adjustments, chronic pain and a life threatening illness. The suffering associated with these experiences seemed to create a big emptiness inside of me. Later I learned that this ‘hole in my soul’ was my ‘capax dei’, i.e. a capacity, or a space for God. The circumstances of life, and the circumstances we experience in our closest families, very often seem to be the very means through which God can draw us closer to Himself.

“He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.” Aeschylus – quoted by Martin Laird

Not only had I changed my career from nursing to counselling at the time, but I was finding considerable challenges in this new work. I needed to find deeper resources of love and compassion, as well as a deeper theology of suffering. I was being pruned for greater fruitfulness. All suffering seems meaningless at the time! However, God was using the circumstances of my life to prune me, and at the time the pruning hurt. Little did I know how redemptive this suffering would prove to be.

I now understand that inviting God into our suffering can lead to transformation in ways that we could not have imagined. We do not have to wait until we are healed before

God we are acceptable to God. We are infinitely precious in our very brokenness and fragmentation: this really is the Good News!

It was around this time that I must have entered what is called The Dark Night of the Soul: this was a very painful time of purification and letting go of my attachments, idols and ideals – a time of further detachment and letting go. Although I was not fully aware of it then, the following scripture from the above list was confirming my experience: *“I will lead her out into the desert, and speak tenderly to her there.”*

As a result of all this letting go, my ego, or my false self, was being deconstructed. Fr Richard Rohr, a great contemporary Franciscan teacher, confirmed that this process often does feel like a kind of dying. However, this dying also holds tremendous opportunities for growth.... *“I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* (John 12:24)

During this process I often felt as though I was standing on the edge of the world, utterly alone, and being stripped of everything that I held dear. From the outside I probably looked much the same. All of this was happening interiorly as bottomless depths seemed to be opening up within - there seemed to be some kind of ‘fertile void’ inside. There was no doubt that something very significant was happening to me. I can only grasp for metaphors to describe this experience. To use St Theresa’s metaphor, I was becoming aware of my ‘interior castle’!

She “described the soul as a beautiful interior castle with seven inner mansions, or dwelling places, each of which contains many rooms. We might visualise this soul castle as seven concentric circles. God, of course, dwells in the centre. God also surrounds and permeates the castle.” G May

This AWARENESS that God was within me would often come to me during my counselling work, during sessions. As I provided a ‘trinitarian space’ for clients, I noticed in new ways that God was indeed working with me. Again I realised in practical and real ways that I was not alone. Not only was His Spirit with me, it was also within me like a great tide of love... there was a spring of living water within me. There were also moments of realised oneness with God, in silence, in nature, in worship, in work... my relationships became increasingly like holy ground.

At the same time, the usual spiritual practices that had nourished me for years seemed empty & devoid of nourishment. I began to understand that I was being weaned away from the gifts of God and the graces of God to God Himself... 'just' God. Again and again prayer became a matter of simply resting in Him, listening to Him, being prompted by Him, and being with Him.

Eventually I was led to a greater sense of interior space and freedom, and a much greater capacity to love. My compassion increased in direct proportion to my dying ego. I now know that my true self was being called forth. I no longer needed people's approval; in fact it felt as though I needed less and less of everything. What freedom and joy! I began to notice that my faith turned into a deep trust. I was increasingly having to relinquish and let go of any last vestiges of control, and to surrender to His higher wisdom. I found myself becoming more humble, more able to hold the 'not knowing', to enter the mystery, and it was alright. He was in me, I was in Him, and He was in the Father. This knowledge was enough for me.

It is interesting to note that this awareness of the inner journey, facilitated by silence, is beginning to emerge in many secular and sacred places, e.g. 'The Great Silence', a recent BBC production; the book 'Finding Sanctuary', by Jamieson, the Julia Roberts film: 'Eat, Pray, Love'. It seems to be happening right across the world. This call to silence is so significant that it is actually being identified as one of the markers of the Emerging Church Movement. It is happening cross-denominationally and across the world. It is a silent revolution, and seems to be a new move of the Spirit...

Daily spiritual practice:

Jesus said: "Follow Me! " Follow me where? Follow me into the very heart of God!

Ideally, this practice needs to be a regular discipline. One can begin with small steps, say 10 mins a day, which can then be increased to 20-30 minutes a day, once or even twice a day. It is time set aside to do nothing, and to just be quiet, offering the least resistance to God working within us. At the time it can feel like nothing is being accomplished. Initially it is important to have a special prayer word, like Maranatha – which means Come Lord Jesus, or simply His name, or the word peace...whatever is meaningful to you. This word signifies my consent to God, and my surrender to Him. It 'gives Him permission to not only be present within me, but active within me too. As I committed myself to this regular practice, I began to notice various changes within myself. I was being transformed from the inside out.

This practice is about subtraction. Less is more. Yesterday, at a retreat at Clare Priory, Fr Martin Nolan reminded us how Michelangelo chipped away at the marble to find David, or the Pieta, inside. Our little word, in this little present moment, chips away at all those layers we have put up around our heart to protect ourselves. It chips away at the false self, and gradually reveals our beautiful true self, which is hidden in Christ with God (Col 3:3). This leaves us in that paradoxical place of utter surrender, and utter security. Of course this is not possible without deep trust...and this is where, as Thomas Merton says, "Everything depends upon our image of God." As I said goodbye to Fr Nolan yesterday, he smiled knowingly at me and said: "You have everything you need inside of you!"

The biblical basis for the use of the special prayer word is when Jesus in the Wilderness, after his baptism, quoted scripture at the Enemy. It is not a practice borrowed from Eastern religion. Initially it was the Desert Mothers & Fathers who developed this practice of Christian meditation. Isaac the Syrian, one of the Desert Fathers who left us a rich source of spiritual wisdom, said: *"Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you and you will see the things that are in heaven."*

Prayer can be likened to a house with many rooms. If each room represents a different way of praying, it is probably the conservatory at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, which can be equated with contemplative prayer. It is not for everyone. In Matt 6:6 (5-7), Jesus teaches us to go into our 'inner room' and pray in secret. The phrase 'inner room' was probably a metaphor. In those days people shared their small homes, which often only had two rooms, with their family and even their animals. We can probably also call this inner room our 'heart room', or our inner sanctuary, where God lives. In the above scripture, Jesus told us not to use many words... only a few words. We can take this further by going from a few words to one word, and then going from one word into silence. How did Jesus pray when he went into the hills alone? I imagine that He probably also communed with His Father in silence.

May I give those of you who find it difficult to 'be' permission to just 'be'. You do not have to justify your existence by being busy, by doing, by endlessly wearing yourself out and proving that you are useful. Many of us have scripts running from childhood that we must not be idle or lazy. Many of us can still hear those internalised critical parent voices... You do in fact have permission to be quiet, and to do nothing, and to let God be both present and active in you. Sit in a relaxed and dignified posture, and close your eyes.

Repeat your special prayer word in order to become still on the inside. Know that you are most loved. This practice is simple, but not easy.

Practical experience of silent prayer (for only 5 minutes)

Start by focussing on your breathing – bring your concentrated awareness to your body – consciously relax any tense muscles – and focus on your breathing once more. Remember that your body is a temple. Make your body a prayer. Do nothing but repeat the special prayer word as you learn to stop thinking, to stop the chattering monkey mind and to become still inside. This is not about emptying the mind as much as it is about stilling the mind. As our mind was made to think thoughts, we give it something to do. Give it the little word to repeat. When the mind strays, gently bring it back to the prayer word. Do yourself no violence – just return, over and over, to your word. This repeated practice develops compassion for yourself, coming back, coming back, coming back to God. Always returning to Him. And if you can be compassionate to yourself, you can be truly compassionate to others. Anchor your heart to your special prayer word. (Later, as your practice develops, you can join your breath to your Prayer Word). And then drop from your head into your heart, where God is. Imagine you're taking a slow lift down, going slowly down. 10 is your head, 1 your womb or abdomen. You can stop in your heart, or even lower down. God is in our very core, and is the ground of our being.

In the stillness, we just give Him our full attention, and then allow Him to work within us. This can be called 'going into your heart room', that quiet place within where God is, where he always waits for us – He takes care of us from there, and our healing begins from there too. These are deep waters, so stay close to Jesus & remain discerning. We shall now go into 5 minutes of silence. I shall begin and end our time with the words of Psalm 46:10: Be still and know that I am God...be still and know that I am... be still and know...be still... be still... be. ***

Then: how was the silence for you? Questions?

Fr R Rohr's meditation on 13.2.2011, speaking about the fruits of contemplation: If it does not radically change the lifestyle of the person—their worldview, their economics, their politics, their ability to form community, you have no reason to believe it is genuine mystical experience. It is usually just people with an addiction to religion, which is not that uncommon, by the way. True mystics (or contemplatives) are glad to be common, ordinary, egalitarian, servants of all, and "just like everybody else," because any need for specialness has been met once and for all." (read x2)

See www.cacradicalgrace.org for many resources by Fr Richard Rohr, including CD's, DVD's and many books. Have a look at the World Community for Christian Meditation website: www.wccm.org . This organisation is headed up by Fr Laurence Freeman, with the international head office in London. There are many Christian meditation groups in the City of London, called 'Silence in the City'. You may also want to look up the Norwich Christian Meditation Centre, led by Rev Nicholas Vesey. There are many resources on Youtube too, e.g. recorded talks given by the above teachers. Remain discerning.

The Medieval Mystics

There is a long history of the Christian contemplative tradition, which got lost for a few centuries. We owe much to Thomas Merton and Fr Thomas Keating in America, and John Main in the UK, who reminded us of our rich spiritual heritage by their writing and teaching.

St Augustine - Confessions

The Rhineland Mystics:

e.g. Meister Eckhart: Sermons

The English Mystics:

e.g. Julian of Norwich – Revelations of Divine Love

The Cloud of Unknowing – Anonymous Author – thought to be a medieval English Monk who lived around the same time as the Spanish Carmelites Therese & John

Br Lawrence - The Practice of the Presence of God

The Spanish Mystics:

e.g. St John of the Cross – Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Dark Night of the Soul

St Therese of Avila – The Interior Castle

Russian Mystics/authors, e.g. The Way of a Pilgrim; The Pilgrim continues His Way – Anonymous author, translated from the Russian by R.M. French

Also find various writings by or about the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Many contemporary authors will quote them.

Contemporary teachers/writers of contemplation:

Pope John Paul 2 was a contemplative, and wrote beautiful mystical poetry; he actually wanted to be a monk!

Fr Thomas Keating – Intimacy with God; Open Mind, Open Heart;

Thomas Merton – New Seeds of Contemplation;

Martin Laird – Into the Silent Land; A Sunlit Absence (coming out soon)

Fr Ben O'Rourke – Finding Your Hidden Treasure; Return to your Heart

Fr Richard Rohr – The Naked Now; Everything Belongs; Radical Grace

Br Laurence Freeman – Jesus the Teacher Within

John Main – Door Into Silence

James Finley – Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God – A Guide to Christian Meditation; The Contemplative Heart; Merton's Palace of Nowhere

Gerald May – The Dark Night of the Soul;

Evelyn Underhill – Mysticism; Letters

Br Roger of Taize's various books and letters on the inner journey

Henri Nouwen – The Inner Voice of Love, The Prayer of the Heart

John O'Donohue – Benedictus, Eternal Echoes, Divine Beauty, Anamcara (Celtic Spirituality)

Albert Nolan – Jesus Today

Basil Pennington – Centering Prayer: Renewing An Ancient Christian Prayer Form

Sister Wendy Beckett – Sister Wendy on Prayer

False self

(punishment / reward)

being correct

'in control'

often feels separated from God

fragile/not real

constantly defending itself

insecure

doing

don't believe it

eccentric

always needs more

trying to please others

can lead to legalism

on the edge of upset-ness

agenda

stuck/stunted growth

judgement/falling short

driven

immature

reacts (+ over-reacts)

trapped

criticising self + others

building ego

qualifies, justifies, strives

needs praise & recognition

earning

Martha

façade/show

proving worth

we can collude with our own lies

holding on

comparison

True self

(transformation)

being connected

in faith/trust

conscious union with God

strong

happy/abundant/satisfied

secure

being

experience it

centred

needs less and less

resting in relationship

radical grace

peaceful

creativity/spontaneity

endless growth possible

mercy

led

mature

responds

free

loving self + others

dying to self ('cause I have a self)

depends on God

appreciates affirmation

receiving

Mary – Martha - Mary

congruence/genuineness

knowing worth

requires deep honesty/authenticity

letting go

compassion

(Some of the ideas expressed above and below are loosely quoted from a talk given by Fr Richard Rohr on Contemplative Prayer. He is a Franciscan priest, author and teacher.)