

Sweet Silence

A Collection of Talks Given at Contemplative Prayer Retreats

Joan Saalfeld, SNJM

In the sweet silence of Your Presence, I open to Your Love and Life

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The pieces included in this collection are retreat talks that I have given to Christian contemplative sitting groups over the course of 12 years. These groups included members of: Pathless Path at Picture Rocks Retreat Center in Tucson, Arizona; Seven Thunders at Bethany House at the Trappist Abbey in Lafayette, Oregon; and the Contemplative Sitting Group at Mary's Woods in Lake Oswego, Oregon. They are the printed versions of 30-minute oral presentations, informal rather than academic, directed more to the heart than the head. They are offered here in the hope of encouraging anyone who is drawn to silent, contemplative prayer.

Eastern methods of meditation had not been widely taught in the West until after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) when the contemplative orders of the Church were encouraged to look to the East to see what they could learn about silent forms of prayer. At the same time the great contemplatives of the West, many of whom had previously been silenced by the Church, also became more known (e.g. Meister Eckhart, Theresa of Avilla, John of the Cross).

I was introduced to zazen, a method of meditation practiced by Buddhists and by Father Bernard McVeigh, OCSO, who was then the Abbot of Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey in Carlton, Oregon. He gathered a group of people who were seeking to learn more about Zen and introduced us to Robert Aiken, Roshi, who was a Buddhist leader in bringing Zen to the West. In addition to Aiken Roshi, I studied and practiced with Benedictine Fr. Willigis Jager, OSB, and Redemptorist Fr. Patrick Hawk, CSSR, both of whom were Catholic priests as well as Zen masters.

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November 2025

In the sweet silence of Your Presence I open to Your Love and Life

Go Deeper

Once upon a time on the edge of a big wood, there lived a young woman who made her living by gathering firewood. One day, as she was about to start her work, she met an old woman coming out of the woods. And the gatherer recognized her and said, “You are a wise person. What advice can you give me?” And the old woman looked at her eye to eye and said, “Go deeper into the woods.”

So, the young woman left her home on the edge and went deeper into the woods, and there she found various trees that had very beautiful wood, and she rejoiced and decided to take some of the wood from the trees and make furniture to sell—and she did, and the young woman did well and was able to live a more comfortable life.

But after a time, she began to reflect on what the wise old woman had told her, thinking, “She didn’t say to make furniture—but to go deeper into the woods.”

So, the young woman gave up what she had been doing—not without pain—and did go deeper.

And there, among the trees, she came upon a silver mine. And the now mature woman rejoiced and stayed there a long time, mining the silver and selling it as well as making jewelry from it herself, and loved what she was doing and actually became quite rich.

But again, after quite a long time, she began to reflect, “That wise old woman didn’t say to become a silver miner and make jewelry and get rich, but to go deeper.” And once again, she gave up what she was doing, not without great pain, and moved on through the woods, and came to a place where precious gems sparkled in the light coming through the tall trees.

And the rich, now elderly woman stopped, and for a long moment gazed at the precious gems—but then stayed on the path— not without limping and a twinge of arthritis—kept on going deeper into the woods.

And what did she find there? What is the greatest treasure that keeps her going— that keeps us going?¹

This is a story that can speak to us of the path of our practice, a contemplative path that takes us deeper into the life of God. In each of us there is a place so deep and true and central to our existence that we cannot ignore or diminish the value of what happens there inside of us. In Deuteronomy we read that the message of God is not far away in the heavens or across the sea. “No, it is very near to you” (Deut 30:14). Indeed, it is in the depths of our very own soul that we hear a call to fullness of life that we freely follow, if we trust the faithfulness of God.

This place, this woods in our being, is a place of silent conversation where we must go and listen and attend. It is here that we hear a call to relationship, a call to answer the questions, “What am I doing with my capacity to love? To what or to whom do I commit this life I feel so keenly?” And in our daily practice we wait and watch and listen and long for we’re not sure what. But Wisdom, sitting at the gate, makes herself known. And we find that the gate at which she sits is the gate to ourselves, and that it is an open gateless gate leading to union with all of God’s people and all of creation.

This inner journey is our life’s work, permeating and transforming our outer lives. It is this life of prayer and inner longing and attending to reality that bursts into service, recognizing the divine in all things and all people, choosing the LIFE of God by giving ourselves away.

But we don’t always recognize the divine on this journey and are easily sidetracked, or worse, we can think we have arrived. We are very good at getting involved in our own concepts. We busy ourselves with our own brand of furniture making and silver mining, with the latest trend or the beautiful workings of our own mind.

When things don’t go as we would like them to, we think we have lost our way, lost God, and we beat ourselves up thinking it’s our fault, or we hide or run away. Remember how Luke tells us those two disciples, after the death of Jesus, went away from Jerusalem and were on the road to Emmaus:

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they did not recognize him. (24:13-16)

Like these disciples on the road to Emmaus after the death of Jesus, we cannot immediately recognize the divine in our lives, the closeness and care of God. Often, we are too taken up with our own hopes and expectations and disappointments and losses to understand or even notice the reality right in front of us. We tell ourselves that now that Jesus is gone, we don’t know the way we should go to find God, when we are already on the path, and Jesus is walking right next to us inviting us deeper—deeper into His life. We are like people who complain that they are thirsty, when, at the same time, they are standing in a stream—a stream of living water.

Jesus does not promise us comfort, only fullness of life. He does not release us from our struggling human condition; he joins us. And just when we think we’re getting somewhere, he seems to leave. But if, like the Emmaus disciples, we ask him to stay, he shares himself with us in Eucharistic mystery. And our eyes are opened, and we find that there is nothing and no one

outside of the risen, cosmic Jesus. And that in Him we cannot even tell the difference between end and beginning, gain and loss, dying and being born. And we find on our journey that gradually we, too, become Eucharist. We, like Jesus, as we move through our ordinary daily lives, we, too, choose to be broken, shared, consumed, in order that all might live a risen life together. We find that we are on the inner and outer journey to transformation.

It makes me think of the journey that Mary made when she was transformed by her “Be it done unto me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). We are told in Luke that she hurried over the hill country to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth who was also with child. There she gave and received the understanding and love that only two pregnant women in very unlikely, even impossible, circumstances could experience and give to one another. Mary, so young and full of life—so inexperienced, but committed to the unknown events that stretched out before her—rushed to Elizabeth to receive and to offer understanding and care. And Elizabeth, so old and full of life—so experienced, and somehow aware of the role of Mary and the divine life that had suddenly ignited inside her—reassured her young cousin, and us, about the choice she had made, and the path

into God into which she had been invited and which she had chosen to go. Elizabeth said, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Luke 1:45).

Ultimately, it is always about faith—the faith of persons to believe and trust in the call they have heard and the path they have freely chosen, and God’s faithfulness to the promise that call implies.

For God is always faithful to his love and care for us, and nothing can take that away. Indeed, as St. Paul tells us, “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor any other creatures will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

So, we have set our foot on the contemplative path—a path of silence and listening and emptiness. Every time we sit, we leave what we’ve been doing and go deeper into the woods.

If we are faithful to our path, believing in God’s promises, we will notice that our daily lives are lived more authentically, our choices made more confidently, our self more whole and in touch with the world and people around us.

Let me close by reading the words to a song by Christopher Walker and Estelle White that speak to me of our practice of contemplative prayer.

“If Now My Mind Was Still”

*If now my mind was still, empty of self, cleansed of desire and will, all my thoughts wealth,
Then, where no ear can reach, deep in my soul,
I'd know the Living Word who makes me whole.*

*All my imaginings cannot suffice,
And if my thoughts have wings they carry pride. But where no ear can reach, deep in my soul,
Your love can pierce the dark, making me whole.*

*So, in my emptiness, waiting until I give my nothings to be fulfilled, You, where no hand can
touch, deep in my soul, pour out your love divine, and make me whole.²*

The Rich Young Person

I'm glad to be here with you all and to have this important time together. It's a time to open ourselves as much as possible and just do our practice. Just sit in silence and do our work—as Thomas Merton put it, (and I quote), “In a wordless and total surrender of the heart...a prayer of silence, simplicity...a deep personal integration in an attentive watchful listening of the heart”³ This time, then, is still, but not static; it is a living moment, a life-giving breath-by-breath encounter with the Source in ourselves and in all around us. In it we seek to experience God. In it we seek to discover our true selves. And eventually we find that these two desires converge and are, in reality, one. For when we uncover more and more of our deepest, best selves, we also experience that nothing is outside God. God is always, at all times, in all things including our failures, our inept attempts, our pain, weaknesses, ignorance, confusion...in every aspect of our lives, even in sickness, even in pain, even in death.

And so, in our practice we want to listen to inner and outer reality, to be very attentive to light, shadow, spirit, essence, LIFE, breath. And with each breath, without us even knowing it, we let go of the things with which the ego concerns itself and make space for God in ourselves and our lives.

With this space making in mind, I'd like us to reflect this morning on two stories. The first is from St. Mathew's Gospel, Chapter 19:16-22.

There was a person who came to Jesus and asked, “Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?” Jesus said, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” The person said, “Which?” “These,” Jesus replied, “*You must not kill. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not bring false witness. Honor your father and mother*” and “*You must love your neighbor as yourself.*” The person said to him, “I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?” Jesus replied, “If you wish to be whole, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Upon hearing these words, and possessing great wealth, the person went away sad.

This section of the Gospel is often interpreted to show how hard it is for someone who is attached to worldly riches to follow Jesus. It is also sometimes interpreted to be a place in the Gospel that Jesus calls a person to a special vocation to a monastery or a religious congregation like the Jesuits or Benedictines or my own Sisters of the Holy Names. And these are valid readings of the passage. But scripture is so rich and speaks to us on many levels. Today I invite you to reflect on this story as a call to each one of us in our inner life, no matter our age, our status or position, or how much money we have.

“What good deed must I do?” “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” And Jesus recites the commandments—the rules which describe how we must have right relationships with the people in our lives.

But this person knows, as each of us knows, there is more to life than a set of rules to keep. And when we know there is more, we want it and seek it. There is a longing that nothing seems to answer or fulfill. So, what more do I need to do? This desire for the more, this quest, is our life’s work, and it is an inner search, which we do in the darkness of faith, desiring so hard, with such longing, that the desire itself becomes our prayer.

If you wish to be whole, Jesus says—that is, if you wish to discover your complete true self and enter into fullness of life, with all your faults and mistakes and fears; if you wish to discover the divine Mystery of love that dwells in your heart of hearts, and loves you more than you can fathom.... If you wish to be in relationship with the loving Presence that lives within you and every single being in the universe, then let go of the ego-feeding things that mean so much to you—money, status, image, knowledge, possessions, power, accomplishments, memories, control—let go of all that and surrender yourself in loving openness. If you follow me in trying to do that, without even knowing it, you will take on my attitude, my attentiveness, my compassion. Your behavior will change. Your life will come into right relationship with all, not because of a set of rules, but because you are aware of the nature of reality. You will love your neighbor as yourself—because you will realize that your neighbor is yourself and you will act accordingly. Paradoxically, our search for the “more” will end in the discovery that there

is no more, only the realization of what already is and has always been—luminous, penetrating Oneness.

The Gospel tells us the person went away sad, because of great wealth. Was it that there were so many possessions, so much intelligence, so much status, so much control, so much importance that there was nothing for it but to go away—sad—but away—away from the fullness of life, from wholeness, from Jesus. Jesus had answered the question. What was the wealth? Was it the security that possessions can give? Or was this a person who needed certainty? Was it the fear that opening to Jesus would require change? Would they have to change too much? Would they lose the only self known? We don’t know all that caused the turning away, but it is clear that a first step could not be taken that day.

This beautiful person is surely like us with all our inner and outer riches that make us who we are. It can take a long time to realize that we already possess the “more” we seek. It usually takes many times to recognize and realize and cherish and become the more. We can’t immediately realize that our participation in the vast, glorious, messy dance of life, is the only

“more” that matters. We don’t immediately trust that Jesus will teach us the steps in that exhilarating, painful dance. Like the person in the Gospel, we leave. We go away sad. It is not known if this Gospel person ever came back to Jesus. I hope so. Sometimes we have to go away and have time alone to be able to let go of things or people or how we see ourselves before we can come back. I hope this person came back. And the reason for my hope is the sadness. We are made for happiness, for fullness. A divine encounter like this cannot just be forgotten. I hope the person came back. It is never too late.

Now, lest we end on a note of sadness, I’d like us to attend to another story about a rich person who meets Jesus. This one is from one of the apocryphal Gospels. I heard it from Fr. Willigus Jaeger about 40 years ago. It goes like this:

One day Jesus came to the big house of a very rich person and said to the owner, “I’d like to take a room in your house.” “Absolutely,” cried the very rich person, delighted. “Here, take this fine upstairs room—corner room—nice view—light and airy. Please, be my guest.” And Jesus took the room and began to live there.

Some days passed and then Jesus said, “You know the sitting room next to my room...how would you feel about me having that room as well?” “By all means,” said the very rich person. “I want you to feel at home. Please take that room, too.” And Jesus moved into the sitting room.

More days passed, and then Jesus said, “How about that living room on the first floor? I really like that room.” Without hesitation the very rich person said. “Please. My house is your house. Feel free. Take it.” And Jesus moved into the living room as well.

And then one day Jesus said, “You know, I’ve never seen your basement. You must have a basement here. I’d really like to see it. “Oh...” said the very rich person, with much head shaking, “We don’t go down there. I keep that locked up. I don’t even know what all’s down there.” But Jesus led the way to the basement door and gently convinced the very rich person to unlock it, and together they went down the stairs. “See?” the very rich person said. “Just a lot of junk.” And that was true. There were boxes and boxes, some quite old, some with things falling out—all kinds of junk.

“Let’s go back upstairs!” the very rich person said. “No,” said Jesus, quietly. “Let me go through it.” The very rich person slowly nodded, and in not too long a time, Jesus had opened all the boxes—even the ones that were the oldest, and in the darkest corners of the basement. Jesus helped the very rich person to get rid of a lot of it, freeing up a lot of space.

And Jesus moved into the basement as well.⁴

The Living Water in the Present Moment

Therefore, I speak to them in parables for they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding (Matthew 13:13).

This morning, I invite you to open the eyes and ears of your heart to see and hear a familiar story from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. It goes like this.

Now Jesus had to go through Samaria. So, he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Sir," the woman said, "You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water. (John 4:4-15)

She doesn't get it, does she?

I think this scripture passage from John's Gospel gives us a telling image of how most of us don't get it when God unexpectedly shows up in our lives. Though we try to be open we often miss it. I think we can feel an affinity, a sympathy for this Samaritan woman because she is just as obtuse as we often are. She doesn't get that Jesus is talking about essential reality, while she is hearing and talking on the immediate visible level. She knows the two of them there at the

well are separated by class and nationality and gender in a very rigid culture in a violent period of history. She's doing what her daily life calls on her to do. She's just trying to draw water, and this strange man asks for a drink. Who does he think he is? Then he says, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

We hope that in our silent sitting, our prayer, our interior openness that we will experience the living water Jesus speaks of to the Samaritan woman. Not as an image or word, or something outside of ourselves, but in a personal awareness of Life with a capital L bubbling up and flowing through us and through all things, connecting all beings in solidarity and love. We want that experience. We sit in hope.

And sometimes we can wonder why we do not have a breakthrough like that when we want it so much and put so much effort into getting it. Well, perhaps we are too goal oriented. Like the woman at the well, we'd like some speedy and helpful results. "Give me this water so I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here for water." Perhaps we too are hoping that our sitting will do something for us, perhaps solve our problems, give us a glimpse of God, take us to a new state of being.

We learn gradually, by trial and error, pain and persistence, that our sitting is not goal-oriented, but a process, a process not of adding or attaining anything, but of clearing out mind and heart, emptying the clinging ego, to uncover the wellspring of eternal life that that is already in each of us. This well is overgrown with the residue of past experiences, both good and bad, which are the inevitable consequence of our lives. We remember our successes and relive them in all our glory. We recall our own mistakes and regret them. We think about others who have hurt us, and we mourn our hurts and losses. We know we cannot live without making mistakes and sustaining psychological damage. It is just the human condition. Our sitting helps us let go of the baggage from these things. And if we do experience an awareness, a hint, a brief splash of the living water within and without, we cannot hold onto it. Insight is not a permanent condition.

We go back to our daily lives and take up ordinary tasks. We hope our sitting sharpens our awareness so we can recognize who it is who asks for a drink, for it is simply in going about our daily lives that we experience realization. Our sitting and our living must support and enrich each other. If we are regular in our practice, we gradually—or sometimes all at once—come to recognize that this life, this water comes to us moment by moment, that Jesus is always asking for a drink and always offering living water. This is the life of service we are called for; this is the life of contemplation we are called to. For it is already ours if we can only learn to see and drink

of it; our life's work is to uncover it wherever we are, not just at our times of silent sitting, but all the time—AT ALL TIMES.

In one sense time is a current on whose flow we sail moment by moment, always rushing forward. I am reminded of a raft trip on the Rogue River in southern Oregon. After we had shot several class 3 rapids, the guide said that a class 4 was coming up and asked us if we wanted to “surf.” None of the six of us knew what that meant, but we said, sure. “Okay”, he said, “be ready and do exactly as I say.” So, he waited until we were in the middle of the next rapids and then gave orders to each side to dig in such a way that maneuvered the raft motionless on top of the rapids while the water rushed underneath. I have never forgotten that feeling of simultaneous motion and stasis. A great image I think of the immediate and the essential aspects of reality.

Most of life is rushing on the immediate, visible level of time. Now and then, we are able to “surf” and experience the eternal right in the midst of the rushing. Undeniably, though, we are creatures of time passing, and we can cling to certain past moments, wanting to probe and relive them, and we imagine future moments when we will be better, stronger, more capable and confident. This often happens in this time of our sitting! In dwelling on the past or pondering the future, we can neglect the living water of the present moment that wells up in us in our daily lives—the present moment that confronts us and challenges us to recognize and embrace the divine in it, no matter what the circumstance.

We can be so focused on getting done what we are responsible to do in our jobs and our relationships, what we need and how to get it, who we think we are or should be—that we don't recognize the essential, eternal, divine reality underlying and permeating the situation right in front of us. Even if we have reflected on the two aspects of life—on the one hand the immediate, one-thing-after-another series of events we experience each day, and, on the other, the deep, essential, timeless is-ness hidden in each moment of time—we, like the Samaritan woman, often miss the living water waiting to reveal itself if we are awake and ready to receive it in such ordinary circumstances.

Jean Pierre de Caussade (7 March 1675 – 8 December 1751) was a mid-18th Century French Jesuit priest and writer known for his work *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. Not long ago this work was re-translated and retitled *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*. Writers such as Alan Watts and Fr. Willigis Jaeger, have found in Caussade a Western, Christian-correspondent to the Eastern teaching of Zen Buddhism. Zen leads us to awaken to Reality, to the essential being of our true selves, and of all beings, to the unity of all in the Emptiness that is full and complete—to embrace this Reality, living in compassionate solidarity within that union. Christian contemplatives like Caussade and Eckhart teach that contemplation helps us to

recognize God in all that happens to us and to accept each moment as a gift of the Holy Spirit of Christ who dwells in us, and all things, infusing all with divine life, inviting connection and communion in love. Caussade tells us: “There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed, or of some duty to be performed. All that takes place within us, around us, or through us, contains and conceals His divine action.”⁵ Both Zen and Western Contemplation stress the importance of the present moment.

If we are faithful to our practice, we gradually—or sometimes all at once—come to realize that this life, this water, is already ours if we can only learn to recognize and drink of it, and that our task is to uncover it wherever we are, and in whatever circumstance. Each present moment holds the secret to finding living water in our own true self—in the heart of our heart where there are no opposites, where all is both clear and hidden, where we both know and do not know, where the eternal now dwells, and living waters flow.

Eckhart calls God the great underground river, and John of the Cross speaks of knowing the wonderful spring hidden by darkness. He writes:

“Although It Is Night”

(“Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God Through Faith”) *For I know well the spring that flows and runs,*

*although it is night,
that eternal, hidden spring;
I know well where it has its rise.*

I do not know its origin, for it hasn't one. But I know every origin has come from it.

*I know that nothing else is so beautiful, and that the heavens and the earth drink there. I know well that it is bottomless
and that no one is able to cross it.*

*Its clarity is never darkened,
and I know that every light has come from it.*

*I know that its streams are so brimming
they water the lands of hell, the heavens, and earth. I know well the stream that flows from this
spring. It is mighty in compass and power.*

*I know that the stream proceeding from these two is proceeded by neither of them.
This eternal spring is hidden.
It is here to call creatures:
and they are filled with this water, although in darkness, because it is night.⁶*

The Present Moment

Good morning! I'm happy to be here with all of you as we sit together and open ourselves to God, to help us become completely mindful of each breath, each moment as we make our way on our spiritual journey—our search to experience God, Reality, our truest, best selves. This morning, I want to talk about these moments and about the paradox of this spiritual search—the paradox that we are seeking what we already have if we can only realize it. In the Zen tradition—18th century Zen Master Hakuin's *Song of Zazen* ends with the lines:

*At this moment, what is it you seek? Nirvana is right here before you. Pure Land is right here. This body, the body of the Buddha.*⁷

And in the Christian tradition—the 18th century mystic, Jean Pierre Caussade, writes in his classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence*:

“Thus, you seek God, and meanwhile God is everywhere. Everything proclaims him to you. Everything gives him to you. He went alongside you; he surrounded you; he pervaded you and dwelt in you...and you seek him. You fret and fuss over an idea of God and meanwhile in essence you already possess him. You chase after perfection, while it lies in everything that meets you unsought for. In the shape of your sufferings, your activity, of the impulses you receive, God himself comes forward to meet you. All the while you strive in vain for exalted notions that he refuses to clothe himself in.”⁸

To truly grasp, to completely realize, that God is present in our sufferings and activities and feelings, to experience this reality, is enlightenment—is breakthrough—is recognizing the presence of, and living in, the Cosmic Christ. Caussade goes on:

“Yet don't reason and faith reveal to us the real presence of divine love in all creatures and in all the happenings of this life just as surely as the word of Christ and the Church guarantee for us the presence of the sacred body under the Eucharistic forms of bread and wine? Don't we know that divine love wants to unite with us through all creatures and events?”⁹

Caussade speaks here with the confidence of a mystic who has experienced the divine impetus to unite, and the interconnectedness that already exists, in ourselves and in all of creation. Science now tells us about this inter-being of all, as well. From sub-atomic particles to galaxies in the cosmos, the impetus away from separateness toward union is everywhere. The sciences are discovering in glorious detail what mystics have always known from direct experience.

In Zen, since everything shares the same essential nature, there is the saying “Everything is a finger pointing to the moon.” Using Christian language Caussade, says everything is sacrament, indeed is Eucharist. A sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,” that is, of divine life.

Caussade makes bold to say: “There is nothing preventing every moment of our life being a kind of communion with divine love and this communion bringing forth in our soul just as much as the communion that entrusts us with the body and blood of the Son of God.”¹⁰ When Fr. Willigis Jaeger speaks about the present moment, he says that the Church’s official sacrament of the Eucharist is a solemn proclamation of what actually was always and everywhere the case, and that if we are truly mindful, even for one moment, we can experience the divine presence in eating breakfast just as well as in taking communion.¹¹

Father Jaeger uses the image of a masterwork in music, when he says that God is the symphony that resounds in everything. “God did not once compose the symphony and is now playing it through us and through creation. No, God is the symphony which includes all of reality.”¹² Nothing is excluded from God—not suffering, not our psychic handicaps. Not our pain, or weakness, or even our failures and sins. To experience this truth is the satori experience of Zen, the “grace-giving present moment” Caussade talks about, the breakthrough to Essential Reality of which Meister Eckhart says: “We cannot learn this by running away, by shunning things and shutting ourselves up in an external solitude; but we must practice a solitude of the spirit, wherever and with whomever we are. We must learn to break through things and to grasp God in them and in ourselves powerfully in an essential manner.”¹³

How can we come to this awareness? What is the required disposition to receive the grace of the sacrament of the present moment, the divine life that courses through all things? What must I do to break through to this consciousness? Of course, life plays out moment by moment. Why don’t I see it? How do I access this sacrament, this communion of the everyday?

We do it through a conscious being present to the reality of a situation, inside of ourselves, or outside in our day-to-day activities. We cultivate a conscious heightened awareness—what Zen calls mindfulness. This is not just a matter of recognizing or realizing what is happening in a situation; that’s just the first step.

And this first step is not always easy. Our feelings arise from the ego, which is always looking out for itself, resisting change, seeking the comfort of stability. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We need to look out for ourselves, but it can make it difficult to see the essential reality of our day to day lives—though our contemplative practice over time helps our attentiveness

and prepares us to see better and not to run from what is going on inside us and around us. We face the situation in all its detail, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. If we are feeling fear or anger or joy or depression or envy or whatever—or if we have witnessed, or been a victim of, some form of violence or hatred or misunderstanding, we don't deny it. We look at it. We let it be there in the form and feeling of whatever it is. We attend to all its details. We recognize it for what it is.

The second step even harder. The second step is to accept what we have recognized and faced. This is harder than the first step because our thoughts and feelings get in the way. Our ego wants to make meaning and turn every situation to its advantage. Again, that's not bad, the ego isn't bad. We need it for stability in our lives. We really aren't trying to get rid of ego, but we have to temper and get beyond it, not just facing and tolerating whatever the moment brings, but **embracing** it gently and holding it lovingly, or at least in a calm, friendly way. If we can't love it, we can at least be nice to it. This is very hard in cases of what we experience as betrayal, or loss of someone or something we thought we would never lose—an ability, our health, our memory, an image we have of ourselves...but we accept it with as much equanimity as we can muster. Then we come to the third step, having faced whatever situation or feeling is there, having accepted and embraced it as best we can, we gently let it go. This, too, can be very difficult. After we have recognized the hurt or elation or accomplishment or disaster, this moment before us wherein we can experience the divine, we do not try to keep it. We release our hold, our understanding, our love, and allow to happen what will happen both inside and outside of us. We do not cling to it or let it cling to us.

If we are able to carry out these three steps, we can experience what theologian Paul Knitter wrote about in his journal:

“In being mindful, no matter what the feelings or thoughts are—no matter how intense the anger, deep the hurt, confusing the sense of inadequacy—they will tend to take care of themselves. Or better, they will be dissolved in the light and warmth of the fundamental unity, of the interconnecting Spirit, that is the most fundamental fact of existence. It doesn't always work that way, but often, miraculously, it does.”¹⁴

I would add that if all three dispositions are present: facing our moment in detail, truly accepting and embracing it, letting go of all that was there, whether good or bad, we can gradually free ourselves of the hold our ego has on us, and go beyond it to access divine life in the present moment.

Don't be discouraged if you don't recognize the opportunity of the present moment all the time. Often, when I think back over my day, I feel like that V-8 commercial. The person who pops his forehead and says, "I could have had a V-8!" I could have been more attentive. I could have been more mindful. We only gradually become formed to the Spirit. And the practice of attending to the present moment does not produce instant results, but, over time, it is efficacious. And, if we are faithful to our sitting, we begin to notice that at least some of the time we react to situations differently than we used to—maybe we're not so quick to judge, maybe not so quick to anger, maybe more a sense of connectedness and unity at unexpected times. Maybe a sense of refreshment or desire to help.

I believe this attentiveness to the present moment, this mindfulness, is the "gateless gate" and the "pathless path" of Zen. And I believe this is what Jesus is talking about in the Gospels' kingdom of heaven parables. Awareness of this present moment is the treasure hidden in the field. This is the pearl of great price. Rejoice! The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.

The Net Cast into the Sea

But as you know, the Scriptures are very rich and can be read on multiple levels— historical, theological, literal, personal, literary, social, psychological, spiritual—without denying the other levels of reading. So, this morning I want to talk about some things that this great image, this simile, of the Kingdom of Heaven, this comparison might suggest to us in our quest to open ourselves to, and experience, the divine.

An image like this always is using something we can see and experience with our senses to tell us something about a reality that we cannot see or is ordinarily hidden. Of course, when talking about things divine no comparison can tell us the whole of the unseen reality, but only suggest some characteristics to be considered.

The wonderful thing about parables is that their symbolism is suggestive, not absolute or conclusive. That is, they are not allegories in which there is a one to one relationship—one physical thing or person in the story that stands for one particular spiritual virtue or characteristic and only stands for that entity. For example, in the medieval mystery and morality plays, a person named Purity stands for that virtue and only that virtue. It is an absolute comparison. Or in a morality play, a character named Everyman stands for humanity, and the pack on his back, clearly labeled sin, is unambiguous in its single medieval meaning about the human condition. The images in a parable, on the other hand, are expressive of various meanings and levels, more suggestive and less clear than allegory, but more realistic, and in tune with our own mixed experience. So, in this case, the net cast into the sea and catching multiple fish can suggest a whole range of things about the kingdom of heaven.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea” (Matthew 13:47). First let’s think about the sea and what characteristics it might evoke about the underlying reality called the Kingdom of God. The sea that has waves on the surface, calm below, and is filled with creatures and beauty and danger and nourishment and awe. The sea that never changes and yet changes constantly. The sea which seems infinite, our boat too small, our existence insignificant. A place of inscrutable goings on and impossible risk. Often a place of struggle and violence, but other times calm as stone. So, inviting. So, compelling. We are irresistibly drawn to it, to its mystery and depth, and to its teeming life. I am reminded of that part of Moby Dick when the sea is serene, and Ismael looks over the side of the ship and finds he can see a whole other world in which a whale is nursing her baby right below the surface. Most of the time we ride the waves, and once in a while we see into the deep, or even dive, perhaps snorkel, and see wonders we never dreamed of. Or we stay on the surface, but we fish. We cast in a line or a net to see what we can catch while staying safely on land or on a boat.

Our life span, our background, our family, our choices, our desires, our ego, make up the warp and woof of the net we weave and cast as deep as we are able into the sea of experience. We gather into our net, experiences of every kind—we collect people and beliefs and prejudices and knowledge. We gather beauty and love, faults and ignorance, suffering and brokenness, successes and habits. We can't help it; that's what comes into my net. We can't control everything that swims into our net. And what's in my net, positive and negative, gives me my identity, and my sorting of what's in my net is what makes me grow. Our sitting can be part of that sorting and deepening process.

Now let's read the parable as an image of our practice—our sitting as casting an inner net into the sea of our own true self, the deep sea of God who dwells within us, the sea that is full of all sorts of wonders and worries that swim into view when we sit down to pray. Thoughts, worries, memories—don't try to stop them. That's just how the mind works. Let them go by and continue your practice in the here and now.

The sea that is one with us, though our ego doesn't let us realize it—the sea of inner and outer experience gradually teaches us to leave our net and enter into the sea itself, to swim with the rest of inner and outer LIFE with a capital L.

I am reminded of a story one of the monks told after the death of Fr. Bernard McVeigh, the abbot here who built this meditation hall. He wasn't abbot at the time that the events of this story happened, but rather he was the novice master then, and the one telling the story was a novice just beginning his life as a Trappist, along with three others. Bernard had taken the young novice monks to the beach, and the first morning there, as they were finishing breakfast, Bernard appeared in his swimming trunks (this was the Oregon coast in autumn) and told the young men to put on their swimsuits and follow him to the beach. They did, shivering all the way. And they watched, quaking in the morning mist, as Bernard ran to the ocean and, without hesitating, dove directly into a big wave. The monk said he never forgot the sight of it. For him it was an image of plunging into experience, into Life...into God. Father Bernard longed to experience God. Through his sitting Bernard dove in faith and fidelity every day for many years. While we may not be as brave and energetic as Bernard, whenever we practice with attention, we dive into our true selves and the divine milieu, indeed into the kingdom of God. And of this Kingdom Jesus tells us, "there will be no end" (Luke 1:33).

In Luke 17:20 Jesus is asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom will come. Here his questioners are likely thinking of the messianic kingdom on earth that had been foretold where they were hoping to have power over their Roman oppressors. When the Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of

God is in the midst of you” (Luke 7:20-21). The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons and daughters of the living Father” (Thomas 3).

Thomas Merton and other mystics tell us that when we find our true selves, we find God. This realization—the moment-to-moment experience of this truth—IS the Kingdom—the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field, the storeroom with new things and old. Then we ARE the sower and the seed, the yeast, the mustard seed, the net cast into the sea.

The kingdom is already here if we can only recognize it. It is in our midst. It exists in the inner chamber of our true self, awakened to the interconnectedness of all things. It exists in the conscious experience of each present moment. It exists in recognizing the ground of our being in the divine milieu all around us. It exists in the creative energy of the cosmos, which is divine love. It is being present to the Presence all around us. And of this kingdom there will be no end.

Kingdom Parables: Treasure, Pearl, Mustard Seed, Yeast

I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old (Psalm 78:2).

Jesus said to them, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field (Matthew 13:44).

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When she found one of great value, she went away and sold everything she had and bought it (Matthew 13:45-46).

Like the parable of the net cast into the sea, these two parables about the Kingdom of Heaven offer important clues about the spiritual life. When we start out on our quest for meaning, we know intuitively that we are looking for something precious and valuable. There is a longing, a yearning we can't explain and can't deny. The material, everyday world and all it offers is not enough. And we begin to search.

And then something happens that gives us a glimpse, an intimation of the more, of connectedness. Sometimes this happens when we are a child, and we spend time trying to repeat the experience though we cannot explain or understand it. Sometimes the experience is so deep and "other" from our normal, everyday life, that we keep it to ourselves, and (like the persons in these parables) joyfully embark on an inner journey to do whatever it takes in order to buy the field where the treasure is buried, to make the beauty of the pearl our own. We read. We learn a spiritual practice and do it with great attention. We dig. We dive. And in this slow, silent, hidden work, a pearl is eventually formed, a treasure revealed. Things we thought were important start to fall away, sometimes all at once, like opening an oyster shell—sometimes little by little, like

layers of soil scraped from a buried chest. Paradoxically, the quest becomes less one of seeking the something once experienced, and more a realization of what we already have. The destination becomes the journey. And the journey brings us home to ourselves. The pearl of great price is the realization of my true self within, and of the divine milieu without.

We know from science that matter is energy arranged in different forms, $E=mc^2$. And we know from the mystics that energy is divine life, a spiritual treasure hidden in each material creature, even inanimate objects. There is a light in each entity, a glimmer of God, if we can only learn to see it. This is what artists have always known and tried to capture in their work.

The Japanese sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, titles his biography, *Listening to Stone*. In it he writes that he has always endeavored, "To search the final reality of stone; beyond the accident of

time, I seek the love of matter. The materiality of stone, its essence, to reveal its identity—not what might be imposed, but something closer to its being. Beneath the skin is the brilliance of matter.”¹⁵ I think this is true of all great sculptors, all great artists. If you think of the so called “unfinished” figures of Michael Angelo, human bodies half revealed emerging from granite, we can see another take on the true identity of matter.

The intrinsic oneness of the cosmos, which we continue to understand better through science and celebrate through art, but never fully understand by reason, is what is realized and experienced by the mystic. Teilhard de Chardin, who was both scientist and mystic, tells us that there is an impetus toward wholeness in the universe that denies separation and constantly moves toward union. This impetus, this energy of which everything is made, is love. Love creates communities of sub-atomic particles, atoms, cells, fields, beings. To recognize and experience the union of spirit and matter is the work of our lives.

But the journey to this realization of union, the journey to our true self and the recognition of our true place in the community of all creation, is not all sweetness and light, is it? There is joy, to be sure, joy just to know that there is a treasure in the field of our experience—joy in the secret certainty of it—joy in the sense of union when we feel the pulse of divine energy, if only briefly. But the parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl are also about the cost, the high price, of the journey as well—which is only everything. They tell us that once the treasure or the pearl is discovered, everything must be sold to secure it. There are two aspects to this “selling all.” The first is the inner work of emptying out mind and heart and ego divesting ourselves of concepts and images as we do our practice, even the concept of ourselves, whether our self-image is less than we really are, or more. And Eckhart tells us we must let go even of our concept of God and let the Reality of divine love work freely. He says, “Let God be God in you!”

And there is an outer cost of the Kingdom as well. Gradually we realize the need for the outer work of overcoming separateness by recognizing and cultivating our relationships with all people and all things through actions of kindness and love and service. We have always heard that we should treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated, but then we come to realize that we treat others as ourselves because they ARE ourselves. The “should” falls away and we desire to serve all people and all creation, for we are one with them.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32).

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty measures of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matthew 13:33).

Both of these parables—the mustard seed and the yeast—again suggest hidden power and growth, the seed in the dark soil reaching for the light, and the yeast in the center of the dough, causing all to rise. Both are about the growth and power of the kingdom, the divine energy to serve others, to shelter, to nourish, to help sustain LIFE. The yeast of the Kingdom converts finely ground grain of our existence into the bread of Life, to nourish us and help us realize that, like Jesus, we are nourishment for others. Like Jesus, we become Eucharist, blessed and broken and shared with all. Our lives are no longer only ours, but part of the whole. Eckhart tells us in his sermons,

When I think on God’s Kingdom, I am compelled to be silent because of its immensity, because God’s Kingdom is none other than God Himself with all His riches. God’s Kingdom is no small thing: we may survey in imagination all the worlds of God’s creation, but they are not God’s Kingdom. In whichever soul God’s Kingdom appears, and which knows God’s Kingdom, that soul needs no human preaching or instruction; it is taught from within and assured of eternal life. Whoever knows and recognizes how near God’s Kingdom is to him may say with Jacob, “God is in this place, and I knew it not.”¹⁶

God is equally near in all creatures. The wise man says, “God hath spread out His net over all creatures, so that whosoever wishes to discover Him may find and recognize Him in each one.”¹⁷ And again it is said, “He knows God rightly who recognizes Him alike in all things.”¹⁸ And, again, “To serve God with awe is good; to serve God out of love is better; but to have awe and love of God together is best of all. To have a restful or peaceful life in God is good; to bear a life of pain in patience is better; but to have peace in the midst of pain is the best of all.”¹⁹

So, Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not speak to them without using a parable (Matthew 13:34). “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. “Yes,” they replied (Matthew 13:51).

And we do understand to a certain extent, but there is always more divine Life, divine energy, to experience. The journey does not end. We can never comprehend it all. And nothing is lost as we continue along the way of inner practice and outer service. Instead, we become the house owner who has found the treasure and paid the price. For in yet another parable “Jesus said to them, “Therefore everyone who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52).

Lord, that I May See!

We come for a morning of stillness. We sit and open ourselves with every fiber of our being. We sharpen our senses and attend to our innermost resources. We listen to hear the silent song of our own true self and our relationship to every other being in the universe. We look into the silence. We embrace the stillness (even as the chatter of our ego mind goes on) and hope to experience the stillness behind the chatter, the stillness beyond the stillness—the great Reality underlying all things, interpenetrating, giving identity to each being, behind all revelations and human understanding—called by many names in many cultures—Ground of being, Godhead, Oneness, Brahman, Emptiness, Kingdom of God, Love, Presence.

This attentiveness prepares us for a new way of viewing ourselves and the world and all that is in it—insight into the true nature of reality that is usually hidden or cloudy to us. This may be experienced as a new kind of light on the world we live in, and we intuit, at least intermittently, in a non-intellectual, non-reasoning way that God is much closer than we thought and much bigger than we thought. We touch a mystery that calls to us to experience even more deeply. We get a hint of light in our darkness, and we want to see more. We are like the blind beggar whose story Luke recounts in his Gospel’s 18th chapter, verses 35-43:

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”

He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but Jesus stopped and ordered the man brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Lord,” he replied, “I want to see.”

Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. Shouting all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:35-43)

This blind man was dealing with the loss of his physical eyesight—which is the primary way most of us experience reality. His blindness was a huge deficit for getting along in life. Unable to work, reduced to begging, he sits in darkness and listens for clues to what is going on around him, dependent on what others tell him they see.

This blind man kept calling out to Jesus, even when rebuked and shushed by others. I wonder. Did this man already have a measure of inner sight and that's what led him to recognize and call out to Jesus in the first place? Or is it just his naked desire, his desperate need, his yearning to be whole that made him so insistent. He believed he was meant to be a complete person. He knew he needed help, and he had heard about Jesus helping others. So, he did not flag in his efforts to be heard. He kept calling out. And Jesus says that it is this faith that healed him. In his darkness the blind man kept calling.

We, too, call out when we come to our practice and focus for a sitting, whether from longing or insight or need. We listen with the ears of our hearts and focus our inner eye; for we, too, want to see. We desire to see ever more deeply into the mystery—to see our true nature, to see what we must give up in order to gain clearer sight, to recognize what we are clinging to, and worrying over, that just needs letting go.

In the spiritual life, we seem to need to experience darkness so that we will ask for help to see. Without the darkness (this, too, is gift from God, this, too, is God!) we don't seem to be able to let go of our independence and realize that we cannot do it on our own. Darkness and blindness, whether physical or spiritual, strips us of power and throws us on the mercy of God. And, as Jesus tells the blind man, it is our faith that heals us.

Freeing ourselves from the grasping ways of an overactive ego allows us to enter a realm of unknowing and blind faith which cannot be expressed in words or images, yet, as St. Augustine describes it, is "more intimate to me than I am to myself."²⁰ But this experience is followed by a new kind of knowing or "seeing" or awakening to our true nature, which gives a new view of creation, a new "seeing" all of life. The Russian 20th Century mystic and poet, Vladimir Solovyov puts it: "*Beneath the coarse surface of material being/I managed to touch the eternal purple hue,/And I came to know the radiance of divinity.*"²¹ In another poem he says, "*I saw everything, everything was just one.*"²² And in another, "*Barriers are sundered, fetters are melted/By the divine fire, And the eternal dawn of a new life rises/In all, and all in One.*"²³

And what must we do with this new way of unitive seeing? Our Gospel story tells us: "Immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus, praising God" (Luke 18:43). Like the blind man in the Gospel, we find that our new way of seeing calls for a new way of living. We come to realize that the sight given to us is not just for ourselves, but for all those with whom we are in relationship, those with whom we live and work in our daily lives. And to our astonishment, we find that we are in relationship with many, many more and much more than we thought. We realize that we are not separate but are in relationship with all persons and all things. We are more ourselves than ever and inexorably drawn to the divine energy that sustains and gives identity to all and that we share with all—the energy that is divine love. We

discover that it is not only that we love our neighbor as ourselves, but that loving our neighbor IS loving ourselves, and that we participate in the divine life by living the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Like Jesus, we become Eucharist to others. We are blessed and broken and give ourselves to all in our ordinary daily lives. Little by little we see more and more. Yet we continue to cry out with the blind man of the Gospel, Lord, that I may see:

- Myself as you see me—loveable and loving, even though weak and inept, often selfish and contrary.
- Lord, that I may see that you are truly in everything—nature, situations, events, illness, celebrations, disappointments, pain.
- Lord, that I may see that you are the path as well as the destination— unknowable, yet closer than my very self.
- Lord, that I may see beyond the images, the concepts, the people, the things, the tasks, the daily grind, and find you IN the people, the things, the tasks, the daily grind.
- Lord, that I may see that I need to let go of, to hollow out, all that keeps me from you, until, as Sufi mystic, Hafiz, puts it, I am a hole in your flute through which you breathe life to make my tune, mine, only mine, and Yours, only Yours.²⁴
- Lord, that I may see, that what I need to do is to let you love me, to just sit and let you love me, and work and let you love me, play and let you love me, serve and let you love me.
- Lord, I want to see into Reality, mysterious, various, messy, ambiguous. I want to heal my past and live in the present. I want to purify my heart. I want to see God. I want to see how to serve others in love. I want realization, awareness, enlightenment. I want to see my family and those close to me in your light. I want to allow You to love me into my true self.

For the energy underlying all things is You, and you are Love, and love wants to be united with the one loved. The great underground river of Eckhart and John of the Cross that refreshes and nourishes all creation is You, is Love. All the great diversity of creatures in the universe groans and longs for union with You.

As the letter to the Ephesians says, “May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened” (1:18). May we say with the blind man, “Lord, I want to see.”

The Wheat and the Weeds

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a person who sowed good seed in a field. But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner’s servants came and said, “Didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?” “An enemy did this,” the owner replied.

The servants asked, “Do you want us to go and pull them up?” “No,” the owner answered, “because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Matthew 13:24-30)

This story of the wheat and the weeds and the harvest is usually interpreted, as Jesus does himself in Mathew’s Gospel, as eschatological, that is, a story about what will happen at the end of the world. In this interpretation the owner represents God, the field is the world, the wheat represents people who hear and follow the word of God, and the weeds signify those people who reject it. The harvest is the sorting of the two at the end of time. The message is quite clear. The world has all kinds of good and evil people in it, and they are all mixed together and it is very hard to destroy the bad without collateral damage to the good. But in the end the good will triumph while the evil will be destroyed. It’s a story that uses agricultural images readily understood by those who first heard it in the time of Jesus.

Now remember that the actors and actions in a parable are not exact equations, but can be suggestive of various realities, with meanings often dependent on the openness and experience of the listener or reader. Jesus said of the people of his own time who rejected him, “They look but do not see, and hear but do not listen or understand (Matthew 13:13). This parable about the kingdom of heaven, like all the other kingdom parables in the Gospel, has much to offer to us who practice contemplation.

If we focus not on the separation at the end, but on the wheat and weeds growing up together, we can relate to our own experience that human life is often confusing and can rarely be categorized into pure anything. I think the parable suggests this familiar and perplexing jumble of good and bad in society, and within oneself, and that it offers us an image of tolerance and faith and hope. Jesus is once again using this term “the kingdom of heaven,” to designate a reality which is not possible to describe directly—a reality that is just too big and complicated,

as well as too big and simple, for us to understand directly. We can only intuit the kingdom of heaven itself as an image for the very life of God, the divine energy, the sustaining love of God within us, and outside us.

In his own time, listeners often missed making meaning of the wheat and weeds because they lived under great oppression, and they were hoping for a physical, political kingdom where Jesus, as powerful king, would put down all oppressors, and they, his followers, would have an easier, happier life. In our time, here Jesus again uses a parable for those who see with the eyes of faith and listen with the ears of their hearts. So, for a moment, let's focus not on the harvest in the parable, but on the wheat and weeds growing up together. I think we find that the story is not just about separation at the end, but about the messy, ambiguous, often painful mixture we meet in our lives every day. Life is not clear and not fair, and often we need strong faith to believe that good is indeed stronger than evil, and that evil will ultimately disappear. I think this image of the wheat and weeds growing up together can help us have more reasonable and compassionate expectations of those around us, perhaps keeping us from being so quick to judge, so demanding of our rights, perhaps more accepting of the way things are for us.

Lastly, I think this parable can be interpreted as a story of the inner life of the self. If we read it on the spiritual level, it is not unlike a vivid dream in which the actors and actions represent different parts of the dreamer. Each character is a part of the self, and what happens in the dream suggests something about what happens to the self. Like all comparisons, that between a parable and a dream doesn't work perfectly, but well enough, suggestive enough to play it out a bit.

Let's listen to the parable again this time focusing on it as a story about the inner life:

The kingdom of heaven is like a person who sowed good seed in a field. But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came and said, "Didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this," the owner replied.

The servants asked, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" "No," the owner answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn." (Matthew 13:24-30)

So, let's think of the owner as herself who, with the help of family and teachers and friends has planted good seeds of faith and kindness and humility and zeal and all other good characteristics in the field of herself, but then, as time goes by, doesn't pay attention to how things are growing, and with most parts of herself, goes to sleep. Significant time passes before the conscience wakes her up and asks how things like selfishness and arrogance and indifference got in among the good things in the field. She says an enemy did it. And indeed, it did. And the enemy is (Who do you suppose? What part of herself?) her uncontrolled ego, who, if left to itself, sows all the things that impede the path to wholeness. When she wakes up to what is going on, she asks herself, should she focus on her weaknesses and faults and neuroses and try to root them out? Should she try to destroy her pesky ego, the cause of all her problems? What does the parable tell us? No, let them grow up together until the harvest. The ego is not an enemy unless it starts sucking up all the nutrients. The ego is just a very pushy member of the self, with lots of appetites and desires. And the self needs to learn to stay awake so she can restrain and guide the ego to the rich harvest of deep realization.

Let me read you something about the ego from Fr. Willigis Jaeger's book, *Search for the Meaning of Life*:

"Our ego is the demarcation that gives us shape and form. It is what makes us human beings so that the Divine can resound through us.... The only pathological element is the arrogance of the ego, which makes it inaccessible to the Divine.... The ego creates culture and gives rise to progress and development of every sort. At no point need we see it as negative. The only negative feature is that it peremptorily puts itself in the driver's seat and speeds off through life without any clear sense of where it is going. All too often it winds up flipping the car over. It has to learn to get its orientation from the depth of true being. It must find its way back to wholeness."²⁵

And that's why we're here, isn't it? For our silent, attentive, sitting helps access our true being and find our way to wholeness. Our sitting is a tool we use to attend to the field of the self. Our sitting is the coming together of self-discipline and self-acceptance.

Something we notice after we have practiced for a good while is that the brokenness in us is not mended or taken away; it just doesn't matter anymore. We come to realize and accept that the brokenness is part of our reality, and it's reality that we're after, for God is in reality. The problems, the hurts, the losses and disappointments are all part of the whole, part of the ultimate union. In a way, what we finally learn, is to tolerate being ourselves, accepting ourselves, and giving ourselves away, weeds and all.

The great master, Dogen, in the Zen tradition, says: “To study the way is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self.” And Willigis Jaeger, in our Christian tradition writes,

“The self is the space where we experience Wholeness. It is the ‘spark of the soul’ of which Eckhart speaks. Teresa of Avila calls it the ‘interior castle’; Johannes Tauler calls it ‘the foundation’. Thus, the self is a kind of center in which bipolar reality becomes comprehensible as the One. Thus, the self is not the Divine, but the center where Ultimate Reality is experienced. It is the point of intersection where both aspects, mind and matter, meet and can be experienced as the Whole.”²⁶

So, we experience the self as part of the whole world and not in any way a problem. And all our neuroses and mistakes and weaknesses, our weeds among the wheat, become to us as songs are to birds. It’s just the way we humans are.

The Kingdom of God Is Among You

In Chapter 17 of St Luke's Gospel, we read that when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus responded, "The coming of the kingdom cannot be observed and no one will announce 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' For behold, the Kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21). In this passage Jesus is clearly not talking about a political kingdom. And not about the future, but the present. This day. This time. The Kingdom is among us. It is something whose coming we cannot observe yet can know of its presence without observing. He is saying clearly that it is something that is already here. We have to recognize it and realize for ourselves that it is already here. The kingdom of God, the essence of God, the presence of God, the reality of God, the LIFE of God is already here.

Now we know that the reality of God is beyond all concepts and all reason and all words and all religions. The reality that is what we mean when we speak of God and the Kingdom of God is far beyond what we can know with our intellect, and yet so close to us we do not readily experience it manifested in ourselves and in and among us. Eckhart called that reality the Godhead, the reality behind what humans can understand and theologize about with their human faculties. The reality that is the great Old Testament "I am Who am" (Exodus 3:14) and the great New Testament "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). In one of his sermons, Eckhart writes, "The union of God with the soul is so great that it is scarcely to be believed. And God is in himself so far above that no form of knowledge or desire can ever reach him.... Desire is deep immeasurably so. But nothing that the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God. Where understanding and desire end there is darkness, and there God's radiance begins."²⁷

That is why we sit in silence and let go of intellectual understanding and personal desires. This darkness in our consciousness, this emptiness, this unknowing, paradoxically allows us to see the "glimmer" of God around us in the physical world and in ourselves, not with our intellect, but in a wordless, inexplicable, but absolutely certain way. That's why we're here—to let go of our normal way of knowing and to open to this emptiness— which is the greatest fullness of all. Artists and musicians are sometimes led to this deep understanding. The Japanese sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, titles his biography, *Listening to Stone*. In it he writes that he has always endeavored, "to search the final reality of stone; (the essence, the I AM ness) beyond the accident of time, I seek the love of matter. The materiality of stone, its essence, to reveal its identity—not what might be imposed, but something closer to its being. Beneath the skin is the brilliance of matter."²⁸

The brilliance of matter—About 35 years ago I made a Contemplative Intensive Retreat with Fr. Willigis Jaeger. He had taken us to a deserted monastery high in the Swiss Alps for Holy Week. It

was springtime, but that was probably the coldest week of my life. There was no heat in the old stone monastery, and at the early morning sitting I had put on just about everything I had brought with me to retreat. I was trying not to think about how cold I was, when suddenly I was aware that I was looking into my office at home in the university where I was teaching at that time. And a beautiful light was pouring out of everything in the room. My desk, my chair, my books, my clock, my pictures on the walls—everything. It made me so happy! Each thing in this ordinary place in which I spent my ordinary days doing my ordinary work, living my ordinary life, was overflowing with light. It was an important insight for me, one which I still hang on to— a glimpse into the brilliance of matter, the kingdom of God. When I went to conference and told Willigis about what I had seen, he said, “Yes, yes, everything has its own light.” But then he cautioned me not to be expecting more things like that to happen during my sitting. And not to desire or wait for them. To just open and surrender to God. That we really progress in our practice only when image and consolation are no longer needed to help surrender. Then he looked me up and down and said, “You look like you have everything in your suitcase on this morning.” I said, “Yes, and if I could have figured out a way to put on the suitcase I would have.” But, you know, I didn’t feel as cold after that.

So, what can we do? How can we come to experience this unknowable God, this Kingdom of God—that is among us—so close to us, both within ourselves and in the material things that surround us? For Christians, we study the life and teachings of Jesus. We examine the Gospels to see how divinity inhabited humanity in Jesus. We search his words and actions for clues. And our contemplative practice, our sitting, is a means to opening ourselves to realizing this kingdom, this ultimate reality, this divinity. The divine life that is already in us, and whose manifestation we are, comes to consciousness. And we sense that we are part of something so much bigger, and that our intuitions about the importance of our sitting are leading us to something real both during our sitting, and during our everyday life.

This is not easy to talk about. We know we absolutely need our human words and language and reason and concepts and religions to talk about this, but none of them can truly communicate the transformation that happens when we empty out ourselves and the divine begins to fill us. We Christians believe that Jesus came to earth because God loves and wants to be one with us. Jesus is the manifestation of God’s love to us in human form. We do need words to talk to each other about this, about God. Talking about it helps to free us from our own egoism and to be part of the human community. And yet we can be misled and imprisoned by concepts and words, because God is so much bigger than any and all of them. Concepts and words can only tell us about God from the outside, but if we experience the divine life from within, if we become aware of who we really are, we gradually become able to experience God in all reality, in all the persons and events and things of daily life. We find a door, an opening, a gate, a path

to follow, but we know that, paradoxically, it is a gateless gate, a pathless path. It is not immediately or readily apparent to us. But one day we glimpse something—perhaps in nature—the way the light touches moss on an oak tree, or a deer suddenly breaks cover and reveals its presence—and something happens inside us. A piece fits, like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, though we cannot explain what it is or what it fits. It just makes us happy, and we cannot believe it is so simple.

Fr. Gregory Mayers, who began his practice with Aitken Roshi at the same time that Pat Hawk and I did, explains it this way: “One’s interior reality momentarily sheds all the patterns and habits that inhibit one’s interior view or consciousness...it is an entirely new and previously unknown and unanticipated *view*, a view-less *view*.”²⁹ In Zen this is called *kensho*. It is what John of the Cross meant when he said in one of his minor poems: “I entered into unknowing... and when I found myself there, without knowing where I was, I understood great things.... I shall not say what I saw for I remained in unknowing...this is the finest sense of the essence of God”³⁰

This sense of the essence of God in ourselves and in things, this access to experiencing the kingdom of God, is not constant. Our ego hang-ups and our weaknesses and the constant battering of our true selves by our inner and outer ego problems, keep it from being constant. The very fact that we live in time keeps it from being constant. But once experienced, once known even a little, there is no doubt and no turning back. We sit. We open. We empty. We are present to the great Presence. We sit.

And we go about our daily lives. And as we do, we begin to stop looking for our idea of God and more and more recognize that God is sharing divine life with us in the everyday things and experiences of our human life, mundane or exciting, interesting or boring. Each moment, each piece of time we spend doing our work, or study, or business, or leisure, is infused with essential reality, with God, if we can only forget ourselves and access it. For as Jesus told us, “Behold, the Kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21).

Only One Thing

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

This was a troublesome scripture for my mother, who, like many [women] who have read this passage through the years, did not like it that Jesus rebuked Martha seemingly for seeing to the details of hospitality. My mother wanted to come to the defense of Martha and ask Jesus why he rebuked her. She conceded that Mary had the better part—just sitting and being with Jesus—but why scold Martha for working hard and taking care of cooking and serving Jesus and the others he brought with him? Who else was going to do it? My mother wanted to know. Didn't he appreciate the service Martha was doing for him and the disciples? Wasn't he grateful? Wasn't what she was doing necessary for the good of all?

So many women and men, most women and men, spend their days seeing to ordinary details of their work and home lives, supporting their families, taking care of the needs of others. And this rebuke seems to be telling them that their work is not as valuable as praying, not as "holy" or "sacred." And yet the passage right before this section of Luke's Gospel is the parable of the Good Samaritan that clearly teaches, we are supposed to take care of each other. Isn't that the whole message of the Gospel— love God, yes, and love your neighbor as yourself? Because, "What you do for the least you have done for me." So, what's going on here?

Often, this passage has been explained as the two sisters representing the difference between action and contemplation, with Martha representing the active life and Mary the life of silence and listening and contemplative prayer—ending this explanation with Mary has chosen the better part because she is sitting and contemplating Jesus. But there is more here for us. We spend most of our lives, as did Martha of Bethany, taking care of ordinary daily tasks, to carry out our responsibilities.

Now we know from the Gospels that both Mary and Martha were friends of Jesus and that Jesus loved them as he did their brother, Lazarus. We know he went to Bethany to teach—and probably to rest and experience exactly the kind of hospitality that he seems to be devaluing by rebuking Martha. We know from history that both Martha and Mary were disciples and, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, became missionaries to other lands. And we know, again

from the Gospels, Martha's remarkable recognition of Jesus's identity in front of the tomb of her dead brother, before Jesus raises Lazarus. At that time, she says to Jesus, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." And Jesus, echoing the Old Testament God of Moses, "I am Who am," says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. One who believes in me shall never die." Then he asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" And Martha proclaims her astonishing insight and profession of faith, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:1-32).

So, Martha's understanding of, and relationship with, Jesus is intimate and deep and solid, though she is by nature a practical woman who deals with the realities of everyday life. When Jesus says to roll away the stone from the grave of Lazarus, it is Martha who says, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days" (John 11:39). And you know the rest of the story.

If we read the Martha-Mary passage more deeply, I think we find an important message for us who lead active lives and can only carve out time for long sitting at intervals. There are many more of us than there are people who can separate themselves from all else and do extended contemplation. We lead active lives, and we need help with how to attend to God even if we are not sitting in contemplative prayer.

This passage can also speak to those who are drawn to contemplation though they are not part of a religious order. You know, until quite recently in both the east and the west, it was widely thought that only monks and nuns could be contemplatives. The monastic movements grew up precisely to offer support for the contemplative life. The monasteries and convents offered a way for people to separate themselves from the responsibilities of family life, the constant concerns of making a living, and the many distractions of the world, in order to give themselves completely to God. It was a good thing to happen, and to this day contemplative orders like the Trappists make sure that there is constant adoration and attentiveness to God going on somewhere throughout the world every single minute of the day and night. Some monastery, somewhere in the world, is singing the psalms and attending to God in our name. They chant, "From the rising of the sun until its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (Psalm 113:3). And I like that that is happening. God certainly deserves it. And all of us need it. But this separation of the monasteries from the rest of the world gave rise to the idea that people who did not constantly separate themselves from the activities of "the world" could not experience deep contemplation. And that simply isn't true. It is only in the last decades that the idea became widespread that anyone, lay or monastic, with the devotion of time and energy, can learn and practice methods that lead to deep contemplation, and to deep experience of the divine in their daily lives.

I think the Martha-Mary passage tells us something important about the deepest levels of contemplation for both the active and contemplative lifestyles, whether one is lay or religious.

Jesus and his disciples have come to Martha's house to visit, and so it is her role to see to food and drink and hospitable service to those who come there. She is responsible for how things are done in her house. Of course she should serve her guests. But Jesus sees into her heart and talking on a deeper, more essential, level, offers a little friendly spiritual direction. He rebukes her not because she is working instead of sitting at his feet. She has sat at his feet plenty of times. That's how she learned about him, and they became friends. Jesus admonishes Martha because she is worrying, and judging, and should know better than to do that. She is thinking of herself, and she's judging Mary. Of course, she needs to do the tasks of preparing and serving the meal. But she needs to let go of anxiety and worry and just go about her work.

The one thing is to live life deeply whatever our role, whatever we are responsible for doing—to just do it mindfully in the present moment and not worry about what others are doing or not doing. "One thing is needful." Only one thing.... The one thing, whether in activity or in sitting contemplation, is letting go—letting go of anxiety and fear and judgment and control. The one thing is the emptying out of self and becoming one with the present moment whether at work or at prayer. Mary seems to be doing that. And the "Martha, Martha," that starts this saying of Jesus suggests that he knows Martha knows the one thing necessary as well, but has, like so many of us, temporarily forgotten.

We can sympathize with the forgetting. When we get under pressure, we often forget what we know and just feel what we feel. We forget that we need to let go. We hang onto our ego; we hang on to the controls as long as possible and try to manipulate things to go our way. That doesn't mean we don't know the one thing that is necessary. It just isn't easy, and we can't always do it. That's why we call it "practice." That's why we need to practice both attentive sitting and mindful activity. I like Martha. I relate to Martha. Martha is having a bit of an ego moment, *anxious and troubled about many things and one thing is needful*.

In our daily lives we are responsible for ourselves and for others—children, clients, students, everyone with whom we are in relationship—and of course we are anxious and concerned about them all. But I think Jesus is talking to his friend Martha, heart to heart, not denigrating her work, and not only about her outer life, but about her inner life, inviting her to let go of all the fears and controls that keep her from the one thing, which is becoming empty of self so that God can fully enter in, and we can be united in him, whether we are sitting or engaged in our activities. He is helping his friend, Martha, to let go. And we ask that he help us to let go, too.

Who is Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

At the beginning of the 18th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, we read: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And calling to himself a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'" (18:1-5).

Now what can this possibly mean for us? We have learned over and over that in contemplation we must learn to control the ego and NOT be like an ego-centered child who, because in the early stages of human development, can ONLY think of personal primacy and survival, and must LEARN to share and think about the needs of others. I think of the little third grader who was playing the part of an angel in a Christmas play. During rehearsal I overheard the little egoist say to the other two little angels standing with her, "Okay, you can be angels, too, but **I am** the Head Angel." Concern about who will be the greatest? No, this passage can't mean that we should be thinking only of ourselves and how we stack up against everybody else. That's childish and can't be what is meant here.

Yet Jesus did say, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Sometimes the passage is interpreted to mean that Jesus is saying that they must repent their sins and become as innocent as a small child. Some translations even use the word "repent" instead of "change" or "turn." But while we can repent bad choices and mistakes and sins, how can grown up people like us become like children? Children are innocent because they have no experience. As adults we can't erase our life experience and become a clean slate, again. It's neither advisable nor even possible. In fact, it is exactly our experiences, good and bad and painful, that have made us who we are. And it is this person we have become who is seeking the Kingdom.

"Unless you change"... "Unless you turn"... Scripture scholars tell us that the original Greek word here is *metanoia*, which means "to change your mind"—to turn toward a new way of thinking, a new way to engage reality. So, what is Jesus really telling them about children and entering the Reign of God? He's telling the disciples—and us— to change the way they imagine the Kingdom and themselves in it. He's saying they've got the wrong idea, the wrong image in their heads and unless they change it, they will not make it. The Kingdom of God is not grandiose. There aren't any greatest or least. It isn't a power struggle. It's not about status. Or how well we think we are doing...or how long we think it's taking to get there—indeed there is no there! Remember Jesus repeatedly told the disciples that the Kingdom of God is "at hand"

already here “within you” and “among you.” But the disciples could not yet recognize or realize it.

Meister Eckhart, the great spiritual master of the 13th Century has a wonderful sermon on the nearness of God’s Kingdom and of how we should think of it. I’d like to read part of it. He says, “...When I think on God’s Kingdom, I am compelled to be silent because of its immensity, because God’s Kingdom is none other than God Himself with all His riches.” (Eckhart says he’s compelled to be silent, but then he goes right on!)

God’s Kingdom is no small thing: we may survey in imagination all the worlds of God’s creation, but they are not God’s Kingdom. In whichever soul God’s Kingdom appears, and which knows God’s Kingdom, that soul needs no human preaching or instruction; it is taught from within and assured of eternal life. Whoever knows and recognizes how near God’s Kingdom is may say with Jacob, “God is in this place, and I knew it not....”

No one desires anything so eagerly as God desires to bring us to the knowledge of Himself. God is always ready, but we are very unready. God is near us, but we are far from God. God is within, and we are without. God is friendly; we are estranged....³¹

So, how do we become ready to recognize and realize God’s Kingdom, that is, experiential knowledge of God’s very self? Jesus is telling the disciples, “Unless you change your way of thinking and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This is where our practice comes in. As adults we can’t go back and erase or change our actual experiences—but we can engage in “emptying out” the images and the feelings that those experiences have given us and made of us. Our practice can help us let go of our anger, our obsessions, our fears, our hurts, our imaginations—all the bruises to our ego that we tend to harbor and prolong. And, as children trust their parents to give them what they need, we can learn to trust God to fill our emptiness with his very Life. We can learn to control the ego self that wants to make everything about ourselves—we can learn to experience directly, without judging or imposing learned ways of thinking, without clouding things up with concepts. Psychologists tell us that children’s ability to use logic and think about abstract concepts begins at approximately age eleven and lasts through adulthood. Before that level of development is reached, children experience reality directly, not through concepts. Little children don’t think about living; they live. No past or future—just experience of the present moment and their part in it. A little girl comes to mind who went to her first day of kindergarten and when she came home her daddy asked her, “Did you like it?” “Yes,” she said. So, he asked, “Did you like your teacher?” “Oh, yes,” she said. “Well, what’s your teacher’s name?” he asked. She said, “I don’t

know. I haven't named her yet." No societal categories or conventions. In charge of her world which she experiences directly. Like Adam before the fall. Like children....

Fundamentally, our own actual experience of reality is not different from that of a child, or an enlightened person, or one who experiences the Kingdom of God. Where we differ is that our ego places a kind of conceptual overlay, a kind of fog, over our experience, and then makes an emotional investment in that overlay, taking it to be "real" in and of itself. We must not cling to those imaginings and feelings. When we come to our sitting to watch and wait, we must become like children who do not have the myriad of concepts and memories and feelings that fog things up and keep us from seeing the way to the Kingdom of God.

We know that to mature in the spiritual life we have to tame our ego and let go of those things that keep us from attending to the reality of the present moment. In order to do that, Jesus is not saying to regress and BE childish, but rather to have the humility to change your mind, your ideas, your imaginings of the Kingdom and how you will be in it, (it's HUMBLING to admit you need to change) and become LIKE a little child—empty, full of potential, open hearted, loving, and eager to experience the Kingdom within and among us in the present moment.

Our practice helps us do that. If we persist with faith, and hope, and love, we come to realize how deeply we are connected to all people and creatures, and that what one of us does, however simple and small affects all. And so, we sit opening and emptying, realizing that what we do here is healing both for us individually, and for our whole hurting world of fires and viruses, and politics and homelessness, and all the stresses of these days. So let us continue our work.

Trouble

I'd like to begin with a quotation taken from *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. "Here's the thing," say Shug. 'The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifests itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord.'"³²

These lines from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* sum up quite a bit about the spiritual journey, I think. What this passage lacks in grammar, it makes up for in clarity and truth. We do come into the world with God inside us. And only those who have an intimation of this indwelling, or someone to help them understand it, embark on a conscious search for it. And, of course, they are not really searching for God, (though that may be how we have to speak of it) but they are searching for the REALIZATION of the God who is already and always in us and in all things. They are searching for ways to experience the truth of John of the Cross's famous line, "El centro del alma es Dios" *The center of the soul is God.*³³ And most search outside because often they think pursuing the quest inside is just too simple and therefore unbelievable, or they try for a while and decide it's just too hard. Even impossible. It's easier to avoid the issue—to engage ourselves on the outside and numb ourselves to the divine life within.

But sometimes it does just manifest itself even if, as Shug says, we're not looking. We experience a numinous moment that surprises and awes, makes us happy and maybe a little scared. It signals that a different kind of knowing is possible for us, and we embark on an interior journey. The memory of that first experience gives us energy to keep looking, but often we are now looking to find a way to repeat the wonderful moment we had. We go back to the same place where it happened and hope it will happen again. We read books and keep an eye out for somebody that might be able help us understand more about how to do it. And what helps us to keep looking inside? Or in Zen terms, "looking into one's own nature?" Well, usually, as Shug puts it, "Trouble do it for most people, sorrow."³⁴

Something goes terribly wrong in a relationship, or someone close to us dies or leaves us, or maybe we get seriously sick. We feel loss and sorrow and anger and fear, and we are forced to the hard conclusion that we are not in control of what happens to us. Sometimes we have a kind of inner trouble. We have gone along feeling that we have a strong relationship with God and a strong inner life and we are happy without thinking about it, taking it for granted, when suddenly our sense of it changes dramatically. There cease to be moments of spiritual experience or suddenly we have no sense of divine presence in our daily life. And when we look inside, or when we try to pray, we find nothing. We feel loss and sorrow and anger and fear, and we once again come to the startling conclusion that we are not in control.

In both outer and inner trouble, we don't understand why God would let this happen to us, even (we think) do this to us, when all we want is to love and serve Him, and have the experience of Him, the way we did before this happened. We want our old inner life back and make frequent pleas in the form of petitions and prayers, but to no avail. It is as if we are making repeated emergency phone calls, but nobody picks up. A kind of darkness descends upon us. Not darkness in the sense of evil or wrongdoing, but in the sense of a sort of blah—a sense of not knowing anything—being “in the dark” — about what's going on.

Many come to contemplation to find a way to deal with the outer or inner trouble in life they feel unable to handle. Trouble, Lord, sorrow. For many, our sitting helps us learn a way, not to eliminate pain in our inner and outer lives, but a way to accept, even surrender to the Reality that is ours. Our trouble can help us realize that perhaps God is not the way we thought. We discover we have to change our minds and expand our way of thinking about ourselves and about God.

We discover that we cannot confine God to a human image when God is the divine life of the Universe. In our Christian lives we begin by knowing mostly an anthropomorphic personal relationship with God. It is a comfortable speaking to God simply and directly in our human need, trusting that God understands and will help us as any good human father or mother or friend would do. God is personal and imminent, a friend, and we can converse as such—and this is good. There is nothing wrong with it, except that it is limited by our humanness. But when we come to experience that God is also transcendent, beyond ideas and concepts, and that no image we have can do justice to the great Reality, we also realize that we have to change our ideas about what God is like. Shug says “it” manifest itself, (not a person, an it)³⁵ God is both imminent and transcendent, personal and impersonal and here Shug is talking about the transcendent, awesome God of the burning bush—the “I am who am” of Moses in the Old Testament.

Over the centuries Christian mystics have given various names to the transcendent God, the God beyond all our ideas and images, the one we can never really name: “I am Who Am,” the Godhead, the ground of being, the Last Reality, Essential Nature, the Reign of God, Eternal life. This idea of God makes us feel very small and not very important. It also helps us to let go of ideas of God being just like us humans. It keeps us from anthropomorphizing God and expecting God to behave and feel as we would. We stop asking, “Why me?” when trouble happens. Or “How could someone who loves me let this happen to me?” And there aren't any satisfactory answers. The mystery of suffering is as deep as the mystery of God, and we will never understand it just as we will never “understand” God's life and love with our human minds. This acceptance of God as transcendent and unknowable and completely other frees us from images of what we think God “should” be and brings us to the awesome Reality of what God actually

is—hidden, though present in all things, never visible, cloudy, obscured by a holy darkness of love and life.

Paradoxically we find that this darkness, this unknowing, brings about a new awareness in us—but even this is obscure. It seems to be on a different level of consciousness, one not totally accessible to ourselves and not really expressible in a clear way to others. In her *Interior Castle*, St. Teresa says that the spiritual life is so obscure that it's hard to discern and harder to express what's actually going on, and that she needs much patience to “write about what I don't know.”³⁶ All she can do, she says, is offer symbols and images that fall short. Yet John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila both speak of this obscure time as *happy, grace-filled, glad, sacred*. John says it is the precious

and mysterious way that we are freed from our attachments and misconceptions and brought to the realization of our true nature.

So while we are grateful for those who try to describe the spiritual journey, they also are the first to say that every person is different, and that God draws each into his love and Life in unique and special ways—and that the descriptions they try to write for us can only use words—which conceal, as well as reveal, true meaning, true reality. It is only in silent, loving presence that we are schooled in the incommunicable ways of the spiritual journey. For what is ultimately most important to know is only learned in silence. It is helpful to have guides, supports, practices to prepare us to realize fully our true nature and the true nature of God, and that when we have realized one, we have discovered the other as well.

So, now, let us stop with the words and continue our practice, letting go of all that distracts us, embracing all of the reality that is ours, deepening and surrendering to the Silence.

Breath of God

Then the Lord God formed the human of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

This image of the breath of life, this picture that the writer of Genesis offers, expresses the mystery of God creating humans out of the stuff of the created earth, and then sharing divine life with us. This breathing of God's energy (which for Christians is the Love eternally generated among the Father, Son, and Spirit) into humanity helps us begin to understand God's great love for us, for God's life IS love. The Hebrew word *ruah* means breath of God, or spirit of God—for Christians this is the Holy Spirit that vivifies and unifies and sustains all things. We have this same divine life, this same love, this breath of God, this Holy Spirit, within each one of us. This is why children are taught in catechism classes that each of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. When we were children, we may have had varying images of that idea. My own initial picturing involved a little gold birdcage inside of me with a white Holy Spirit bird in there. Actually, we children of the catechism had little or no idea of what the indwelling of the Holy Spirit means. And we may not have had complete reverence for the whole notion either. I am reminded of the two teenage Catholic girls in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," who were cautioned by the nuns at their school to keep themselves pure because they are temples of the Holy Spirit. After hearing this they, in their innocent and insolent adolescence, take to calling themselves "Temple One" and Temple Two."³⁷ As adults we have to relinquish our childish images to a new understanding of the great mystery of God within each one of us. It is exactly the reason we come here and do extended contemplation—to experience the Holy Spirit of God within, the true self, the divine energy, the mystery of loving presence, the breath of God.

We know that breathing is what distinguishes the living from the dead, from a baby's first gulp of air, or a dying person's last gasp. Breathing is what enlivens and sustains our bodies in our physical, everyday lives, and our contemplation teaches us that breathing can do the same for us in the life of the spirit.

When we sit down to practice, to gaze into our deepest selves, to contemplate, we are filled with a mixture of good intentions, memories, desires, doubts, openness, worries, convictions, wonderments, weariness, awareness, boredom, love...and we could go on. Our ego self-separates us from that divinity, that breath of divine life and love, within us. But what we want to do, is to become one with the life giving breath of God that sustains us and everything else in the universe. We want to experience that. But our consciousness is like an ocean whose surface is the constant tossing of waves, but whose depths are peaceful and undisturbed. Sometimes we think we can concentrate our way into contemplation, but it really is not possible for us to

stop the waves of images and feelings simply by commanding them to cease—the way Jesus calmed the waters on the Sea of Galilee. We must find a way to quiet the surface so we can experience the silent, mysterious depths of the divine spirit.

From the earliest times, contemplatives in both the East and the West discovered that by controlling our breathing, we can intensify our attention and concentration, helping to create the fundamental condition necessary for contemplation. Correct breathing leads us into repose by calming the activity of the mind so we can experience a core, a power, the true self. As Willigis Jaeger writes, “We become aware that discursive thought is not the center, the true reality of the human person. Through attention to our breathing, we can reach a point where there is only the breathing without a breather, only experience without an experiencer.”³⁸

Often people tell me that sometimes when the bell rings at the end of a sitting they realize they have been thinking about many things and their monkey mind has been all over the place, and then they begin to fret about that, and feel guilty, and they spend the next sitting worrying about how they’re not doing something right. Sometimes they even come to the conclusion that contemplation is not for them. I always counsel them to attend to their breathing, whether it’s counting breaths, or watching breaths, or using a word in conjunction with the breath, this is a tried and true method of preparing for a quiet contemplation that is more and more liberated from the concepts and images of discursive thought. Perhaps because our first meditation teacher or book explained to us about starting with breathing, and that at some point we’ll probably reach a state in which we are not counting or attending to our breath, we can have the idea that controlled breathing is just for beginners. And we don’t like to think of ourselves as beginners. We have been at this quite a while and we have the sense that we shouldn’t need to pay attention to our breath anymore. But contrary to all those kinds of feelings, attentive breathing is always an appropriate way of quieting our mind and preparing it, the mind, the psyche, the soul, to leave discursive thought behind and open to a new and deeper level of consciousness, to Essence with a capital E—which is also Love with a capital L and Presence with a capital P.

There is an image that I think speaks to the breathing process in meditation. If you’ve ever made bread, you know what a contemplative activity it can be, especially the kneading. The rhythmic push and pull of the flour and yeast, the kneading of it, will gradually change into a lump of rising dough. The kneading of the dough in preparation for rising and baking is analogous to our attentive breathing in preparation for meeting the divine in us. Our breathing is a physical activity that leads to transformation to new levels of spiritual life in which we become more and more aware of who we really are, of the life of the Triune God within us, which is the life-giving Spirit of Love, the very Breath of God.

So, paying attention to our breathing is not simply an exercise that helps us focus, but, with faithful and loving practice, it is the very abandonment of our being and our breath to the Breath of God, during our sitting and outside our times of sitting, in our everyday lives in each present moment, responding to each situation that is presented to us.

A general guideline for this practice of attending to one's breath is to breathe normally, with as little manipulation as possible, but with the exhalation (breathing out) taking a little longer than the inhalation and with complete attention to both. If one uses a word, use it on the exhalation.

This practice can be especially helpful when we are in the midst of a painful situation or feeling hopeless darkness when we pray. Perhaps we've lost our job, or become ill, or injured. Perhaps we feel misunderstood or slighted and we keep replaying what happened and thinking up different scenarios of how we could have handled it. It is always beneficial in these cases to come back to our breathing.

Nobody has had more inner and outer difficulties than Job in the Old Testament with his boils and ashes and unhelpful friends. The Book of Job teaches us about steadfastness and humility in the face of unmerited suffering, and candid communication with, and lamentation to, the mysterious all powerful Lord God. It does not answer the question of why there is so much suffering in the world, especially of the innocent. That remains a mystery. But it does teach us that we will survive our difficulties if, like Job, we remember that we are made by, and share in, divine life. In the midst of it all, Job says, "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:42).

An Orientation of the Heart

Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it is not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation.... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.³⁹

(Vaclav Havel, Czech poet and first president of the Czech Republic)

In our journey into the mystery of God, this path of contemplation, on which we embark alone, and yet together, we encounter many inner and outer changes and transitions—in our thinking, our desires, our ways of doing things—in our families, our jobs, our churches, in our country, in the world.

We can feel things changing all around us, insisting that we change, too. Many are irreversible transitions from old to new, youth to age, superficial to deep, ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, our own habits of living to the current reality. Others are part of that reality, external events and needs that we may or may not choose, but which are inescapable. These changes challenge us to keep moving and invite us to try to be open to making the transition in an appropriate and graceful way when the time comes. As the saying goes, “The road is made by walking.” But how do all these transitions lead to the deepest transformation which is our deepest desire.

Individual spiritual transformation is usually a quiet and gradual process. It is the fruit of openness to what happens as we try to live our lives with integrity and intention. It is not so much something we do, as something we receive when we are faithful to our journey into the mystery of God, doing our best to be open to reality and make each decision, each life transition as it comes to us.

Usually, we do not know when transformation is happening to us. It is like walking in a thick fog. We can't see through it and forget that God is in the fog and also in our desire to see. If we have the courage to continue walking through the mist, we become saturated by it, and, gradually, we are transformed. The way is in the walking.

The same is true of our contemplative experience as we travel alone and together in our stillness. We can't see how it will all work out. We are feeling our way through the fog; yet God is closer to us than we can even begin to imagine. God is in our desire to be one, in our intentional living and loving, in our seeking ways to understand and serve, in our work, in our families, on committees and in discussions, in our concern for the earth and its people. God is in

our struggling forward, and in our stumbling. God is in our willingness to go on even when we can't see the way.

The living divine water of transformation is often in the form of mist. If we can just keep walking with hope and loving awareness, when a day of clarity comes, we will notice that our lives are shining with the living water we accumulated while walking through the fog.

These days, as you know, things throughout the world are not particularly rosy. The ecological, political, economic, social, technological, aspects of our day-to-day reality seem darker each day. Situations such as human slavery and trafficking, globalization, war, mass migrations, crime, cataclysms, hunger, nuclear power, worry us, and make us wonder what will happen to us in the future. Sometimes we ask ourselves and each other, "What does it mean? How will it all come out? Is there any reason to hope?"

When we are feeling gloomy or pessimistic, it is important to distinguish between *optimism*, and *hope*. *Optimism* is the belief that things are going to turn out the way we would like. **Hope**, on the other hand, as, Vaclav Havel tells us, is a state of mind and heart that gives us "*the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.*"⁴⁰

Optimism is based on estimating the outcomes of situations as we see them developing around us; **hope** is based on believing in the endless possibilities of God, regardless of how things are around us. *Optimism* is grounded in the possibilities of the situation, and on correct reasoning about the future. **Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God, and on the effectiveness of God's promise.**

So, it is not really meaningful to ask if there is reason to hope. Hope does not depend on reason, or cause and effect, or thoughtful prediction, or diagnosis of a situation. Rather it is, as Emily Dickinson tells us, like a bird in the soul that sings through dark and storm and cold, even under the worst conditions, and asks no food or support at all—no comfort, no explanation, no reason, no encouragement, nothing. It just keeps singing its beautiful, faithful song of hope. It is an orientation of the heart.

"Hope is the thing with feathers"

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all -*

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard - And sore must be the storm - That could abash the little
Bird That kept so many warm -*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land - And on the strangest Sea - Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.*⁴¹

And what we know about this kind of hope, we also know about our own life. Living a vital Christian life in today's world is not dependent on what is going on around us. It is, rather believing in the faithfulness of God, in doing what we can to make things better, and to alleviate the pain of those around us. We do not understand the mystery of suffering. We do not judge the universe. We bring our song of hope.

So, while developments reported on the evening news may not make us optimistic, they do not rob us of our hope. We can move forward positively and with meaning for ourselves and for those around us, attentive to the presence and faithfulness of the living God, because our lives are rooted in hope. It is an orientation of the heart.

Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it is not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation.... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.⁴²

Eph'phatha

Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they asked Jesus to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man's ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said, "Eph'phatha," that is, "Be opened." And the man's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak. (Mark 7:31-37)

This passage from the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel plays out before us as one of the great miracles of Jesus, foreshadowing the greatest one of all, carefully choreographed by Mark to recall the Old Testament passage about how we will recognize God when he comes to us. In Isaiah's 35th chapter we read: "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame leap like a hare, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy'" (Isaiah 35:3-6).

Both of these passages, have much to tell us about the inner life of each and all of us. We have come to this time together to open ourselves as best we can to the reality of God's presence in us and all around us. But we need God's help to get beyond our egos and our human concepts of God, and our hang-ups about ourselves, to be able to open completely. We need God to touch us; to open the ears of our spirits so we can hear the divine Reality in our hearts and in our world. We cannot do it on our own. And God will come. "Fear not," Isaiah writes. "Your God will come" (Isaiah 35:4). And not in some general or ephemeral way. He will speak wordless encouragements and will touch us as intimately and personally as a finger in an ear or spittle on a tongue and set us free from our human limitations. And we will see and hear the things around us in new ways, and we will find God in the daily realities of our lives and work—in nature, in people, in ordinary events, in our work, and even in our difficulties and pain. And we will find ourselves wanting to sing for joy—for no apparent reason!

This waiting for God's touch—which is what we do when we sit here in meditation—teaches us lessons in humility, for we find that God's ways are not our ways, and that God does not follow *our* schedule or comply with *our* plans. We discover that we are not in control of when or how we will experience God intimately. We can only present ourselves in faith, and surrender in wordless waiting, not really knowing what we are waiting for, or what to expect. Indeed, it is best if we have no expectation. As Master Shunryu Suzuki teaches, "When we do not expect

anything, we can be ourselves.”⁴³ And that, of course, is why we practice, to uncover, to recognize, to accept, to love our true selves.

The deaf-mute of the Gospel, whose ears and tongue were stopped up as a tomb, did not know what to expect. He just stood in silent need, and no doubt confusion. The people who brought the man asked Jesus to touch him, probably to test Jesus—to see what would happen. And Jesus, not wanting to provide an exhibition for the onlookers, took the deaf man aside. This gesture of privacy suggests something important about the inner life. Each person is unique and God comes to us in private, intimate ways, attending to our deepest personal needs. It is in secret that our ongoing transformation takes place, and others can only know about it by observing external changes in us. This iconic Gospel story of the deaf-mute, who privately encounters Jesus and then can't stop joyfully talking about it, is an image of what happens to us when Jesus touches our spirit and opens us in our prayer. Things that have held us back fall away, and we can't stop recognizing God in the things and events around us. And a joyful love rises in us. We are friendlier, more compassionate, more certain. The healing touch that opens us is private and personal and we should not even try to explain it to another, unless to our teacher. Others won't really get what we are talking about anyway and trying to tell it to someone who doesn't understand often diminishes for us the importance of our experience. Gradually we find that we are acting differently than we used to act, and that those around us recognize that we have changed as well.

We need to be faithful to our practice, asking God to open us more and more each day. Each of us is a unique part of a wondrous, divine whole, a unique image of God in a world awash with countless manifestations of the divine. Over time we may find more and more that when we are praying, we are uncomfortable with too many words, that the wordless loving Presence permeating the Universe is enough, and that we are able to open more and more to it. We come to realize that the ego, always viewing itself as separate from everything else, this view is, as Albert Einstein so aptly put it, an “optical delusion.”⁴⁴ For if we can let go of our dualistic view of reality and experience our true connectedness to God and to all things, we become more whole within the Great Whole of Life. The Energy that is God, is Love, and through this energy we are sustained individually, and though this energy, we are related to everything else. Our connections are by, and in, and for love.

Eph'phatha! Be opened! Open to the great Reality in which we live and move and have our being. Open to the infinite number of ways God comes to us and loves us and makes us whole, so we can be our true self, able to serve others even amid difficulties or misunderstandings or sickness or pain. Open to the boldness and largesse of this God of ours who creates an infinite number of unique forms of love for an infinite number of unique creations, one of which is you! Open to this humbling, life-giving, love, which the ever-present ego will tell us can't possibly be

true! But it is true. God is closer to us and loves us more than we can possibly imagine. Experiencing this truth is, I think, the Christian counterpart to what the East calls enlightenment. All illusions fall away and we are in the Presence.

I am reminded of the former Archbishop of Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen, who died several years ago at the age of 96. In the 1970's, he was well known for his commitment to justice and peace, withholding half of his taxes to protest war and nuclear build-up, frustrating both the White House and the Vatican with his outspoken plea for disarmament. All who knew him spoke of his unassuming ways and tireless work for the disenfranchised. He was investigated by the Vatican in the 1983 Apostolic Visitation of him. He came through that, though some say he was forced to retire in 1991. Twenty years later a reporter, who was interviewing him in his home in Helena, Montana, asked the retired, elderly Archbishop, "What do you do these days, Father?" "Oh," Archbishop Hunthausen answered, smiling, "Mostly I sit and let God love me."⁴⁵

And that's what we want to be doing, too. Sitting in openness, putting up no obstacles, just listening, surrendering, just receiving God's life, just letting God love us. Rejoicing as the risen Christ says to us and to the whole of creation, **Eph'phatha!**

Optical Delusion

A human being...experiences the self...as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness....

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature....⁴⁶ (Albert Einstein)

Try as one might, no human being's intellect, even an unusually powerful one, can overcome this separateness Einstein speaks of, though we do want to, and we do try. For many it is initially our thinking and reading (both intellectual activities) that bring us to search out ways to overcome this separateness, this optical delusion, and come to experience Oneness, to experience God. Thinking, of course, is not bad. Science, Philosophy, Literature, Mathematics, Theology and all the rest are wonderful ways of knowing about our world and thus about God. But these intellectual activities cannot lead us to the direct experience that we seek.

In fact, thinking is an obstacle to experiencing oneness with others, with the Universe, with God. As Einstein and Whitehead and Wilbur and other very intelligent physicists and philosophers tell us, an intellectual approach always creates a dualism, a subject and object, someone thinking and someone or something being thought about. And that makes it very hard to enter into the state of consciousness that is not thinking, beyond thinking, beyond waking or sleeping, that the Western Christian mystics call "unknowing," or sometimes, "oneing," and the Eastern religions and philosophies call "samadi." Our thoughts, even very spiritual, or religious, or holy thoughts, create a dualism that prevents us from attaining this state, and so we must find a practice that helps us do what the famous, anonymous, medieval English Christian mystic advises: that is, to enter what he calls the Cloud of Forgetting, so we can pierce the Cloud of Unknowing.

This is not easy because our ego would like our intellect to have all its questions answered—questions about life, and humanity, suffering, God, the state of the world, and our experience in it. We keep thinking about these and other things. We have the expectation that we can find answers. So, we read more books and try various practices: Transcendental Meditation, Zen, Centering prayer, Quaker prayer, mindfulness. Our ego wants to get enlightened, though we don't know exactly what that means, but we think if we could just get it, we would get the answers we're looking for and maybe feel something extraordinary. So, we read more books and go to lectures and search out teachers. And the teachers tell us that we have to stop thinking and expecting answers, to accept our questions as mysteries, and to open to our true self. So, we start to look inside, sometimes beating ourselves up, and even deciding we will never "get it." Whatever "it" is. That maybe we aren't doing something right. Maybe we're all wrong. And so, the thinking goes on....

And so do the expectations. And so does the separateness. But if we stick to our practice, we find we eventually learn, through long sitting, that those expectations do not fit with Reality. We come to realize that what we are doing is more about ourselves than about God, we begin to see that our expectations presuppose that this enlightenment thing, this experience of God, is something we can earn if we just work hard enough. And we finally come to realize that we have wanted God on our terms and in our image. Our sitting can help us to learn how to take our ideas and expectations of ourselves and of God and hide them in what the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls the Cloud of Forgetting. We open to mystery and forget the questions and expectations and images of ourselves and even our images of God, all of which come from intellect, and language, which also is the work of the intellect, and doesn't help us in this endeavor. Words, which we depend on to clarify things in the human, everyday world, cannot give us clarity about the divine. The best language can do, when talking about the great Reality is to offer paradox and parable—which destroy the logic of verbal communication, and point not to reason, but to a bigger Reality, a MYSTERY, that embraces and embodies all opposites and paradoxes in the silent Oneness of LIFE.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's great sprawling novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tells us the story of three brothers—Dimitri, a man of unbridled passion, Ivan, a person of towering intellect, and Alyosha, the pure-hearted, spiritual person who just wants to love God and all creation, as his mentor, Father Zossima, has taught him to do—as sort of a Christ figure if you will.

In the midst of the novel's several plots, there is a gem of a parable called "*One Onion*." It's about an old woman in hell. Now remember, parables are not to be taken literally. They are stories to tell us something, usually several things, even sometimes contradictory things, about reality, about God. So, this parable is meaningful not because of the depiction of hell or God's treatment of the old woman. Not at all. Like the hell in Dante's *Inferno*, it is a creation of human imagination, born of human fear and guilt. Hell doesn't need a lake of fire to be painful. Separation is enough hell for anyone. For separation from God, is indeed separation from ourselves and everything in the universe.

Now indeed, let me give you the context of the parable in the novel i.e. how it fits into the story: how it is a parable within a larger parable which might be titled, "Grushenka Meets Alyosha." The inner parable, "The One Onion Parable," occurs in the scene between the worldly, sensual woman, Grushenka and the spiritual, pure-hearted youngest Karamozov brother, Alyosha. Grushenka, who has long been the mistress of the degenerate father of the three brothers, has lured Alyosha to this meeting by telling him she needs his help. But her real intention is to seduce him. She feels that for too long she has been affronted by his purity and goodness. She feels judged by his intentional, loving life and intends to bring him down to her level, and show that he is not so pure and spiritual as everyone thinks he is. But when he arrives

and she experiences his presence, his goodness, his concern for her, and his willingness to help her, something happens. She finds that for the first time in her life someone really listens to her, really knows her, really cares about what happens to her; and she can't explain why, but instead of wanting to bring him down, she finds herself wanting to be better, to be the person she knows she really is, the person Alyosha sees her to be. She wants to change, and suddenly she blurts out that she brought him here to drag him down, shatter his goodness, to seduce him and laugh at him, and trample on his decency and kindness and virtue. Mystified, Alyosha asks her why she changed her mind and decided not to seduce him. And Grushenka, overcome by the new emotions she is feeling, cannot say what is in her heart, so she tries to help him understand by telling him this parable:

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and God was told that she did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So, her guardian angel stood before God and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to relate; finally, he said, "She once pulled up an onion in her garden, and gave it to a beggar woman." And God answered: "You take that one onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay the way she is." The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." He began cautiously pulling her. He had just almost pulled her completely out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman, and she began kicking them. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake, and she is burning there to this day. The angel wept and went away.⁴⁷

Now when Grushenka was finished telling the story, Alyosha said, "I don't understand. Why have you told me this parable?" Through her tears, Grushenka says, "Because you, Alyosha, you are my one onion." And she weeps. And, as we discover through the rest of the novel, Grushenka does not squander her one onion, as the wicked old woman did, but changes her whole view of life and loving, of compassion and service.

And so, we recognize the Presence not through intellect, but by being open to the kind of divine love that can rescue us from our separateness, the kind expressed by Dostoyevsky through his characters of Zossima, who teaches it, through Alyosha who lives it, and Grushenka who learned it. As Fr. Zossima has told Alyosha:

Love People even in their sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of

God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will understand it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.⁴⁸

Hidden God

Indeed, you are a hidden God, you God of Israel, the Savior (Isaiah 45:15).

The Oneness we seek to experience, the breakthrough to essential reality, sometimes called enlightenment or awakening, is hidden in the reality of our everyday lives. As we go about our daily routines God can seem very far away, concealed from our sight and sense. Yet, if we are prepared and ready to recognize divinity all around us, we find we can realize more and more the underlying source, the essential reality of wholeness, in each moment we experience. We begin to understand that there is, as Eckhart tells us, a seed of God within our own nature that, if it is to grow, we must cultivate with inner silence and outer service. Eckhart says,

“God’s seed is in us. If it were tended by a good, wise and industrious laborer, it would then flourish all the better, and would grow up to God, whose seed it is, and its fruits would be like God’s own nature. The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, the seed of a nut tree grows to be a nut tree, the seed of God grows to be God.”⁴⁹

Now we know that the seed of a nut tree has a hard shell around it, and that that shell must be broken if the seed is to come out and grow into a tree.

If we continue the metaphor of the seed of God in our own selves, we can think of the ego as the hard shell that must be cracked to get to the seed. We don’t want to destroy the ego but only to control it, so the metaphor breaks down as all metaphors do. But let’s stay with it for a bit. Sometimes in the spiritual life we are impatient and we try to get to the seed from the outside. We go to great lengths, travel long distances, seek out multiple teachers, try every kind of meditation or practice, beating on that ego shell. It makes me think of when I was a child and my mother would buy a variety of nuts in the shell at Christmastime as a holiday treat. My brother and I would try to use the nutcracker, but our young hands were not strong enough, and we didn’t want to wait for an adult to help us, so we would sneak down to my father’s workbench in the basement, and apply every tool we could find to open those shells. We would beat them with hammers, pry them with chisels, crush them with pliers. My brother’s favorite tool was the vise. He would place the little nut in the teeth of the vise and then slowly apply pressure until it cracked. It was fun, and we cracked lots of nuts that way. Now, in the spiritual life, even though it sometimes **feels** like there is a vise involved, trying to crack the shell from the outside does not work. As Eckhart tells us, that seed of God must be tended so its potential will increase and its strength grow until it can break through the shell from the **inside**. It is God who is in charge. Not us. What we need to do is be ready. So how do we do that? How do we recognize and protect and cultivate the seed of God hidden in ourselves and in our world so it will grow until the divine within us breaks through?

For us that readiness is cultivated through our practice. We practice our silence and our sitting, our stillness, our openness, so that we will be ready when realization comes, usually at an unexpected time, not when we are sitting, but when we are just going about our business in an unselfconscious way.

When we are doing formal sitting, we take notice of our breath, the unfailing sustainer of our life. Without even consciously thinking about it, we inhale the goodness that enlivens and nourishes us, and exhale all that is shadow, all that inhibits our openness to divine life. We practice holding our body, the vessel that holds the divine seed, in attentive stillness, for silence is the language of God that helps us learn to recognize the divinity hidden within us and around us. We hope that at least some of that stillness stays inside us as we then go about our daily tasks, and that it helps us realize how everything is infused with the life of God.

For Christians, the person of Jesus is the ultimate exemplar of God hidden in our human and material world. Jesus himself, both human and divine, matter and spirit, is the quintessential model of divinity hiding in the matter of a material body. Daily routines, hard work, celebrations, meals, travel, conversations, tiredness, misunderstandings, friendships, hostility—God is hidden in all of it. Jesus became incarnate to help us recognize this mystery, and his life and death and resurrection are the ultimate revelation of the nature of divine life as love infused in all. Yet after his resurrection, his friends and followers could not immediately recognize him. They weren't ready. They thought he was dead and that his followers—they themselves—were in danger. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus, thought he was some traveler from another part of the country. Their anxiety and upset is probably what kept them from recognizing him, just as our strong emotions often keep us from the awareness of God in ourselves and in all around us. I love the story of these two.

Listen to St. Luke's account: "Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' 'What things?,' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then

some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.' He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So, he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread." (Luke 24:13- 35)

In the simple, homey, setting of a meal, Jesus broke the bread and they became aware of who this stranger was. They became enlightened. We don't know if these two were at the last supper when Jesus gave himself to us by breaking bread, but they certainly knew about it from those who were there. And it was this unassuming everyday action that triggered recognition. On the road, their hearts were burning when he talked to them, but they could not recognize that it was Jesus. In the breaking of the bread they could see reality, unclouded reality, who he really is, and he had been with them all the time.

God is no less available to us, though like the two on the road to Emmaus we often do not recognize the divine. So, in our sitting, in our prayer, in our lives, we ask the risen, cosmic Jesus to help us recognize him and to stay with us, for evening is upon us, and the day is far spent.

Awakening

*Only the day dawns to which we are awake,
if we are to grasp the reality of our life while we have it,
we will need to wake up to our moments,
otherwise, whole days, even a whole life could slip by unnoticed.*⁵⁰ (Henry David Thoreau)

Henry David Thoreau was not a Christian or a church going man, but he was a sort of nature mystic. He was not satisfied with the noise and clutter and materialism of most lives he observed, and, like the other 19th Century New England Transcendentalists, he knew there was more. I call attention to him here not for his individualism or his civil disobedience, which are interesting and admirable, but for his motivation, and his exquisite expression of it—why he withdrew and lived very simply. As you know, he withdrew from the general populace for several years and lived on his own in the woods around Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Maybe some of you have been there. It's now a popular tourist place. In *Walden*, which is his famous account of his time there, Thoreau begins by telling us why he did what he did. He writes, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."⁵¹ Thoreau knew intellectually that there was an essential reality underlying all of life, and he wanted to experience it. Not far from why we are here.

Thoreau knew, and we know, too, that the first step to this experience is to wake up to the reality before us, to notice, to pay attention. In his words, "to grasp the reality of our life while we have it, we will need to wake up to our moments."⁵² And this is not so far from the Buddha's answer, when he was asked his about his identity. When asked "Who are you?" He did not say he was a teacher or a saint; he said he was "awake." In fact, his answer became his title because that is what "Buddha" means. The Sanskrit root *budh* means both "to wake up" and "to know." The Buddha then is "the Awakened One" and "the Enlightened One."

So, the first step to confronting the essential facts of life—to become enlightened—is to wake up, pay attention, notice the reality before us—live deliberately, detect the essential facts, grasp the authenticity of our lives. There are times, sometimes days, sometimes years, when we don't do this. In fact, it is quite human to not do it. It is easier. We are taken up with things our egos tell us are important—our income, our comfort, our status, our anxieties—and they are important, but not essential. If we want to front the essential facts of life, we do have to wake up and pay attention to the moments we are currently experiencing.

So how do we do this? How do we wake up? "How do we attend to our moments?" I think the operative word here is "attend," and I'd like to reflect on all its three important meanings.

We know that the first meaning of attend is “to be present” like attending a class or a lecture. Being truly present to a class is showing up, awake and ready to learn. I have to consistently and fully show up for my life! I have to show up for today alert and ready! This is the day the Lord has made! I have to show up for my moments. My possibilities to experience the essential.

Which brings us to the second meaning of “attend”—to pay attention. We get up, we try to show up and be present to God, we try to be present to our companions and everybody we meet. But it’s hard work. We have other things to think about— important things—people to see, places to go, things to do. There always seems to be one part of us that is somewhere else. In this second meaning of attend, pay attention, the focus is not on me and where I am; it’s on the other. I can’t just show up, I have to listen and take notice of what is going on if I am truly “attending” to the moment, whether that moment is at the breakfast table or in a meeting at work or when I am sitting. I have to notice the reality before me, what’s really going on. This can also be hard. And it doesn’t lessen feelings of bewilderment or anxiety about what has happened in the past or what might happen in the future.

The third meaning of “attend” is “to stand by.” Here we have the idea of an attendant—one who faithfully stands by in thick or thin and sees to what is needed. An attendant is both witness and server. So, to attend to the essential reality of our life is to show up for it, notice it, embrace it, support and facilitate it even in dark or difficult times. For God is in the realities, large and small, of every moment of our lives.

God is always with us. We can depend on a God who is ready to attend to us. Like a good mother, God is always attending in all its meanings. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Wisdom, we are given the beautiful image of a feminine, caring God sitting at the gates of our lives, waiting for us to wake up and notice her. In Chapter 6 we read:

“Wisdom is bright and does not grow dim. By those who love her she is readily seen, And found by those who look for her. Quick to anticipate those who desire her, She makes herself known to them. Watch for her early and you will have no trouble. You will find her sitting at your gates. Even to think about her is understanding fully grown. Be on the alert for her and anxiety will quickly leave you. “(Wisdom 6:12-16)

The Holy Spirit of Wisdom, who can come to strengthen and comfort the Apostles only after they let go of the physical Jesus, is the one who comforts and heals, builds and strengthens, blesses and sanctifies by sitting amid our daily lives, weaving fabric from the threads we offer. This image of God as a woman weaving is a powerful one. In faith, each of us creates the fibers of our experience and the colors of our character and gifts. We present the strands of our relationships and struggles, the many shades of commitments and actions, successes and

failures, and a persistent thread of desire for union, for God. Our wisdom weaver God strings the loom and weaves the fabric of our lives, integrating it into that of the whole cosmos.

In hope, we offer what we have and the Spirit of Wisdom weaves. The pattern, which we cannot see and may never understand, emerges very slowly. We must be patient and trust the Spirit to do her work. In love, we wait and serve, with a growing understanding that all parts of the warp and woof of the universe are intimately

connected, and that what we do in one part, our part, affects the whole fabric. And so, we continue our contemplative sitting, which, as Thomas Merton tells us,

Is the highest expression of [human] intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith.⁵³

So, we sit, awake and attending to the realities of our inner and outer lives. As we read in the second letter of St. Peter, "You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts ." (1:19).

Kenosis

As we sit in silence, longing for the divine, our contemplative practice ultimately leads us to what the writer of the *Cloud of Unknowing* calls an “awareness of our own naked being,”⁵⁴ and what Thomas Merton and others call “our true self.” This “true self” refers to our being without its egoic desires and delusions. This takes time, but with faithful practice we can come to experience, at least intermittently, a state of “pure awareness”—that is “awareness without one who is aware.”⁵⁵

To do this we have to learn how to deal with the inner video loop that plays in our head, and which we must learn to allow without interacting with it. We say to ourselves “I’m having thoughts” or “I shouldn’t be having any thoughts,” or “I’m so bad at this.” And always there is a voice in the background telling us who to blame or judge or who to compare ourselves with or how we should act in order to solve our problems and avoid any pain. These inner commentaries do nothing but embroil us more deeply. Rather than engaging this loop of chatter in our head, when we realize it’s going on, we must gently return to our Stillness, our inner Silence, our Presence.

If we think of our thoughts as a moving train, gradually our practice helps us to keep from getting on and going with the train. Rather we learn to just witness the cars as they pass before us and to look between the cars, so that the train doesn’t keep us from seeing through to the other side. Whether one uses a word or breath or just silent attentiveness to invite this state of betweenness, doesn’t matter. Gradually, we are more and more aware of the Presence within us and in our world and we come to learn that the contemplative experience is that of union amid multiplicity, stillness even amid activity.

Paradoxically it is also a kind of emptiness—but not a negative emptiness. Rather “emptiness” is the word, one of the few words we have, to try to explain the experience of the transcendent Ultimate Reality that cannot really be described or understood or named. St. Francis would say, “poverty.” Jesus tells us, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” In our spiritual life, we eventually come to realize that even words and ideas such as

God and Jesus, even the full experience of one’s own being, ultimately needs to be emptied out and transcended in order to experience the fullness of that life. And the way to this experience is through a practice of letting go of each thing that comes into our awareness as we sit, and as we live. We must learn not to cling to anything so that the Silence, the Stillness, the Presence can come to the fore. Our thoughts, our worries, our memories, our relationships, all our ego activities, both the good ones, and there are many good positive ones, and the not so good, indeed our very self must be emptied out to prepare for union with the divine Reality. This

emptying emerges as the pattern for the experience of mystics in the great religions of the world, both east and west.

Explanations and theologies and methods and philosophies and faiths may differ, but there is a numinous experience in all of them, and, in all of them, it involves an emptying out of self, of ego, and surrendering to transcendent essential, final Reality. In our Christian tradition Jesus Christ is the ultimate exemplar of this emptying, and we use the word “kenosis” to describe the foundational mysteries on which we base our Christian faith—the mystery of Creation, which was the first entry of God into matter, taking a myriad of forms and awarenesses, giving divine life and light to all creatures and sustaining them with the energy of divine love. As Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr puts it, “The first Incarnation was the moment described in Genesis 1, when God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything.”⁵⁶ We read in St. John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:1-5). Fr. Rohr adds, “We aim to see as God sees. **Light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else.**”⁵⁷

This mystery of Creation is, then, the first Incarnation of the Word, and the first kenosis of God. Not yet the human Jesus, but the mysterious Word, the Cosmic Christ,

who, when he does take on human form and enter the world of time and space and history as Jesus, he says, “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12).

So, the mystery of Creation is the mystery of God sharing Life out of love. It is the first (and eternal!) pouring out of the Life of God into matter, the first kenosis of God, so that God is mysteriously both infinitely beyond, and, at the same time, infinitely at one with creation.

And the mystery of the Nativity is the second Incarnation of God—the second kenosis of divinity surrendering to the world of matter and time and space and history in a specific, personal form—to take on flesh, to become fully human, with all its limitations. Living human life fully for thirty years—and then the emptying out, the laying down of that life in the great Pascal mystery. He empties his human life first in his living and working (just as we pour ourselves) and then in his ministry and teaching, and then in his suffering, dying, and conquering of death for us all, showing us how to live and die, showing us how to follow the path of kenosis. Showing that life continues after death, that death is the just the final kenosis before our final union with God.

This process of kenosis, this loving surrendering of ego, is the basic stance of our practice. We let go of our normal activities and for a time sit in silence. As we sit, we let go of each thought and concern and image as it presents itself to our mind. We do not cling to anything. This is the work and the prayer of kenosis. And only we can do it. We can't just read about it or talk about it.

This pattern of not clinging to what is important to us—of surrendering, letting go, even throwing away—is the path of kenosis, is the path of Jesus and of his followers. Time and again in the Gospels, we see people leaving everything they've been doing to follow Jesus—Abraham, Moses, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Zacheus, the man born blind.... One of my favorites is the encounter of Matthew and Jesus in the ninth chapter of Matthew's own Gospel. I love it not so much because of what is said, but because of what is NOT said. "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him." (Matthew 9:9). What passed between Jesus and Matthew, the tax collector? Matthew did not record any words. I think Jesus looked into Matthew's deepest self, and in that nanosecond, Matthew recognized that Jesus knew him completely, everything about him, and loved him anyway. Whatever it was, it was enough. Matthew got up and followed him.

As our practice deepens, we realize that we are embraced by a Living Presence that has known us from all eternity. In Jeremiah we read, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I claimed you" (1:5). And in this knowing, Loving Presence, Knower and known are as one.

Be Still

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

Whenever we begin an inward turn toward quiet prayer, we are usually met with a stream of thoughts, images, feelings, memories, boredom, fidgeting—and we use our breath or our prayer word or our counting to shield us from these ego activities. We try (as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says) to look over the shoulder of this flow of images, or through the openings between them as they pass before us.⁵⁸ We do our best to find the stillness in the depth of our being. We pay attention only to our breath or our word. We let the inner video play, but we try not to look at it or listen to it. We attend only to our own attention—to the activity of our own breath or word or count. And if we find ourselves reverting to the stream of images it is no matter, we just let them go in an emptying action of kenosis and return our attention to our breath or word or count.

At some point we begin to realize that there is more in this inner core of ours than we thought. As we grow in in our practice, we find that there is not only chaos and confusion, imagination and memory. There are also times of stillness, a stillness expansive yet intimate. A stillness to which we are very attracted, and that we regret interrupting when the bell rings to end the sitting. In the depths of this core in our own self, we sit attending to the Presence, the Oneness. We don't have to say anything. Indeed, we find we don't have anything to say. Here the great underground river alluded to by Eckhart, and again by John of the Cross, flows and refreshes and sustains us, as it does all things in the universe, even though we do not realize it. We just sit. We don't think there is anything wrong if it seems that nothing happens. Nothing is exactly what should happen. Stillness. Only stillness.

The aim of contemplation is not visions, but union. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). We know God in many ways, through the great diversity and beauty of nature, and art, and human connections, but this stillness is deep, non-intellectual, non-dualistic, intuitive, heart knowing. And without doing anything except attending to the Stillness, which is work that gradually gets easier to do, our sitting is nourishing and healing for us, and for our whole broken, but deeply connected, world.

Sometimes people tell me that they are sure they must be doing something wrong in their sitting because they just don't seem to be getting anywhere. They feel they should be making more progress. And spiritual writers do talk about the inner life as a journey, or as a progression with recognizable milestones, but that's because we have to use human language to communicate what is known about the inner life, and language is dualistic by nature, and can

only accurately describe the world of time and space. We do not have language to adequately describe the unitive experience. We have only stillness.

Silence, the mystics tell us, is the language of God. While our human images and words can help us understand some of what is happening, like just about everything in contemplative life, these descriptions are contradictory and paradoxical. For example, we are, and we are not, on a journey. Clearly, from our human standpoint, the image of a journey helps us understand that there are different experiences that people have when they pray regularly, that a person does not experience the same thing all the time and not necessarily in the same way that other people do. But these linear images of a journey imply a destination or ending and can make us think we can know what stage we are in, or which room in the castle, or what door we have passed through—and do not expect to pass through again—in other words, we expect to know what we have achieved. When, in fact, there is nothing to achieve. There is only Stillness, Oneness.

While we need to work to open ourselves in receptivity, to let go of the ego mind's activities, and to attend only to the Stillness, we know that experiencing the intimate, vast Oneness of God is a gift, opened to us only by God, not by us achieving it. Some people like to talk of levels of consciousness and ways of knowing in what stage they are on the journey. While this may be interesting intellectually, it is dualistic and ultimately unhelpful, for while we talk of the inner journey as linear, it is not. And different people experience it differently, and go back and forth between stages, and when there is a breakthrough, an opening to unitive awareness, it is a mysterious, simple blink-of-an-eye heart experience—a new inner knowledge that we are not separate from God or from creation—that we all and all creatures share the same life of God which is love—a truth we come to know experientially and with absolute certainty, but cannot adequately communicate to others, because we have only human, dualistic modes of expression.

Better to just sit and open to the stillness. Better to approach our sitting with what Zen master Suzuki calls "Beginner's Mind."⁵⁹ In the famous first line of his famous book *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, he states: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."⁶⁰ To receive the gift of realization we must be totally open, not thinking that we know exactly what we are doing, what stage we are in. We want to be open to everything and approach our sitting with a beginner's mind.

And we must be patient with ourselves as we become more aware of all around us and within us, of the great Oneness, the great Stillness, the great Life that is our portion and our destiny.

We must be patient. I am reminded of a passage in Nikos Kazantzakis's great novel, *Zorba the Greek*. The boss, who is the protagonist, is ruminating on the danger of what he calls, "prying into the future before it is born." He says, "I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing, and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand. That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize how wrong it is to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.... Ah, if only that little butterfly could always flutter before me to show me the way."⁶¹

If only we can patiently and confidently open to the Stillness, the Presence, the eternal breath of God. And as the Psalmist prays, "For you alone my soul in silence waits" (62:1).

Transfiguration

The more we sit in contemplation, the more we come to realize and appreciate the two aspects of the one all-inclusive Reality, which is the divine energy of love, the very LIFE of God. The first aspect of this Oneness in our awareness is, of course, the everyday world of time and space. It is the diverse, manifold world of matter that we experience with our senses and seek to understand with our intellect. It is the diverse world of things and nature and learning and science and art and physics and mathematics and drama and music and fishing and architecture and cooking and medicine and shopping and family and loving and on and on.... It is our human, everyday world. And it is a wonder. But it is limited by time and space and human capacity. So, it is filled not just with wonders, but also with all the limitations of our human finite world—misunderstandings, ignorance, illness, greed, prejudice, suffering, death. This is the material, impermanent aspect of the reality that we call life.

The other aspect of this same reality is the supernatural, luminous world of spirit and timelessness, of transcendence and divinity and eternity and Otherness and Oneness. Our practice helps us come to realize through experience, sometimes after many years, sometimes all in a blink, that these two aspects are the same Reality, one unity, not two, One, but distinct—like the two sides of a single coin, like the single deep sea, and its endless surface waves, like a huge tree with its countless branches and flowers and fruit, all interpenetrated by the same Grace, Life, Love. This is the divine milieu. Multitudinous yet one.

For us Christians Jesus is the prime exemplar or archetype of the unity of the two aspects of the one Reality, matter and spirit, finite and infinite. He is the eternal, divine Son of God, who was born into a human body and entered into the material world to show us, to teach by word and example, that we, too, possess divine life, that we are not separate from God, that we, too, possess the life of God within us, as does all creation, if we can only realize it and recognize it, and accept it. This is the good news of the Gospel.

Father Willigis Jaeger puts it this way: "If the whole of creation is an expression of the Divine, incarnation did not begin and end with Jesus Christ. Incarnation has always been the case. It will always be so. Apart from incarnation nothing exists."⁶² Here Fr. Jaeger quotes the Prologue to St. John's Gospel, "All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). Fr. Jaeger goes on, 'Jesus Christ is a *typus*—a type—in which all existence is summarized. The whole of reality flashed forth in his person, non-dualistic, one. In him, the Divine revealed its phenomenal aspect—God 'became flesh and dwelt among us.' And this is precisely what happens in the case of each of us. The whole thrust of Jesus' life, the essential content of the gospel message, is a calling for our realization of this fact."⁶³

For the most part, before his Resurrection, those around Jesus, even those closest to him, knew him only in the day-to-day material reality. They ate and walked and talked with him. They heard his parables and witnessed his miracles, even the raising of Lazarus, but they did not see his person in his divine reality until after the resurrection. The one exception to this that we know of is the time that he allowed three of the disciples to see him in his transcendent divinity. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 17 we read, “Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.’ When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and do not be afraid.’ And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else, only Jesus.” (17:1-8)

They saw “only Jesus”—the Jesus they knew, the human side of Jesus—they were frightened by actually experiencing the other side, the divine Jesus and the voice from the cloud.

The account of the same event in Mark’s Gospel says they were terrified (9:6). A direct encounter with God is so unexpected for humans, so Other than anything we have ever experienced, that we are afraid and don’t know what to do. Peter’s offer to do something—to build three tents—was interrupted by the Voice, which was even more terrifying to the disciples, and they fell prostrate and stayed down until Jesus touched them and told them it was all right. They could see that he was “only Jesus,” the human Jesus they knew. Luke adds that “they did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen” (Luke 9:36). I heard Fr. Willigis Jaeger give a homily on this Gospel passage once, and his take was that it was not Jesus who changed and was transfigured—that Jesus was just himself—but rather it was Peter, James and John who changed, having been allowed to see and have a deep realization of who Jesus really is—the radiant, all powerful, living God.

When a person has an experience of transcendence, it can be frightening. It is so not-what-we expect, and so OTHER than anything we know, we can be afraid. We can even tell ourselves we made it up, even though we know we didn’t. We cannot adequately describe the experience to others, and probably shouldn’t try, except to a spiritual director. The mystics all agree that if you can fully describe it, it wasn’t fully union, and that we should not try to prolong or repeat the experience, but just go on with our practice. We can have the expectation that after a deep experience of God, that our feelings of God’s Presence will continue, and that we will be in a constant state of peace and recollection. This account of the transfiguration can help us see

that this is not true. Think of Peter who, even though he had experienced this amazing event, was scared, didn't understand it or what to do about it, (he offered to build tents) and later got so angry and defensive and scared, he cut off somebody's ear and denied he even knew Jesus, not once but three times.

An experience of the transcendent does not eliminate a person's humanness. But, like Peter, people who have had deep experience, pull themselves together and come down the mountain with Jesus, and follow Him as best they can, and don't talk about what happened until it's time.

I'll end with a quote from the British Mystic, John Butler. He says: "The aim of meditation is not visions, but union. Anything that can be described is not fully union, for it presupposes a duality of subject/object. Therefore, the usual advice given to those who meditate is: Whatever happens, good or bad, go beyond."⁶⁴

So, let us confidently and lovingly open ourselves to the divine presence, and continue in our practice.

Chief Seattle

All things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the human... the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports (Chief Seattle).⁶⁵

We do not weave this web of life. We are merely threads in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect (Chief Seattle).⁶⁶

I begin with these quotes from Chief Seattle, an early 19th century Suquamish Native American, because he lived in our own Northwest, amid the same diversity and beauty and power of the natural world that most of us do. Our Christian contemplative tradition (St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi and others) tells us that there are two sacred books to teach us about the imminent and transcendent God we long for. One is, of course, the Bible, the book of Scriptures. The other is the book of Nature.

It is this book of Nature that I want to talk about today. I've noticed that often, it is in Nature that a contemplative person has numinous experience for the first time. Like Chief Seattle, it is in Nature that the contemplative comes to some awareness of the Oneness, of the web of Life, not with the intellect, but with intuition, with wonder, with the heart. A contemplative outlook prepares a person to sense the presence and beauty and love of God in a tree, or sunshine, or a vast field, or a flock of snow geese, or some other natural scene. At some point this heightened awareness of nature opened into a moment of Presence and Oneness and a kind of knowledge that cannot be lost or shaken. They may see the delicate patterned dragonfly wing, and sense something more than wonder. They may hear the shriek of the eagle and suddenly experience it as their own call. They may attend to the beauty and power of a great river, and for a moment out of time they somehow experience in themselves the beauty and power of God.

They have no words to adequately express what happens to them at these moments—most do not even try because words are so inadequate—but the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, attempts a description of this kind of experience in his character of Alyosha. In this novel about three brothers, the writer tries to depict three major facets of life, with each brother having the dominant characteristics of one major component of human nature. Dimitri suggests the sensual life, Ivan the intellectual, and Alyosha represents the spiritual, contemplative side of humanity—open to God—faithful and loving. This passage from the novel occurs following a visit with his spiritual mentor when Alyosha is on his way home. He comes upon a beautiful scene in nature and is caught up in a moment of Oneness. It is one of the few descriptions of such an experience in literature—first the scene, and then his reaction to it:

“The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless above him. The Milky Way ran in two pale streams from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth.... The gorgeous autumn flowers, in the beds round the house, were slumbering till morning. The silence of earth seemed to melt into the silence of the heavens. The mystery of earth was one with the mystery of the stars.... Alyosha stood, gazed, and suddenly threw himself down on the earth. He did not know why he embraced it....

...in his joy he was weeping even over those stars, which were shining to him from the abyss of space, and he was not ashamed of his tears. There seemed to be threads from all those innumerable worlds of God, linking his soul to them, and it was trembling all over....”⁶⁷

That’s the scene. Now here’s his reaction, his realization of the oneness.

“He longed to forgive everyone and for everything, and to beg forgiveness. Oh, not just for himself, but for all people, for all and for everything.... But with every instant he felt clearly and, as it were, tangibly, that something firm and unshakable as that vault of heaven had entered into his soul.... And never, never, all his life long, could Alyosha forget that moment.”⁶⁸

This is the realization of the incarnation of creation, the image and Spirit of God dwelling in and sustaining each and all creatures. What Chief Seattle calls the web of life,⁶⁹ and western philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead call the body of God, each creature a material manifestation of some aspect or characteristic of God, each a mirror image of divine life—each creation, though matter, enlivened and sustained by the one Great Spirit. This is not just a romantic or poetic idea. It is the reality and foundation of the universe. As the prayer in the eleventh chapter of the book of Wisdom says: “For you love all things that exist....You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living. For your immortal spirit is in all things” (11:24-12:1).

Laborers in the Vineyard

The parables of Jesus are stories he told to try help his listeners learn about the Kingdom of Heaven, about enlightenment, about Oneness with God. One of the most famous parables is that of the laborers in the vineyard. It is also one of the most problematic and paradoxical of all the stories of Jesus. This is because as Christians we are trying try to follow the two great commandments— to love God with your whole heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. This path of loving God and giving service to others, of showing our love for God by treating others as we ourselves want to be treated, with equity and respect and compassion, is the bedrock and measure of our lives. It is summed up by the Old Testament wisdom writer in the book of Micah, Chapter 6, “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Yet, as we strive to act justly, we meet this parable in the 20th chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ So, they went off. [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So, when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’ Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:1-16)

For those who work for justice for all people, and who know there is no peace in this world until there *is* justice and equity for all, this is a very problematic parable. The owner says he will give the workers what is just. But it just doesn’t seem fair that the workers who only work for an hour get the same wage as those who have worked all day. What could Jesus be getting at here when he says the Kingdom of Heaven is like this? What happened to “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...” (Matthew 5:6). How is the Kingdom of God like what happens in this parable?

What if this parable is not about human justice and equity, but about the transcendent life of God, the justice of God, the Kingdom of Heaven itself—not about how to get there, but about the realization of divine life which all can share, if they can only recognize and believe and accept God’s invitation to this sharing of Life.

What if the vineyard is history—the world of time—past, present and future—finite and personal, human and all it means to be human—born in a certain place, into a certain family and nation with basic human rights and needs for equity and justice and compassion? Born to the satisfactions and challenges, the pushes and pulls of being a human in a material, time-bound, dualistic world—a world divided into light/dark, self/other, black/white, rich/poor, compassion/indifference, good/evil, innocence/experience, neighbor/stranger, workers/owners, sickness/health, justice/injustice, and all the other divisions and dualisms in the human, temporal world.

What if the laborers in the parable are all people who are born into history— into the world of time—in different eras in different places and cultures and live their human lives for different lengths of time? Some individuals die young, even in infancy, having done little or nothing to earn (as the first laborers in the parable would have it) nothing to earn entry into the kingdom, or to even know about it. Some live for a century and work their whole lives, experiencing the indignities and failures, as well as the joys and successes of being human. Yet all who seek goodness— in terms of the parable—all who want to be hired—in God’s mercy and generosity are able to enter. Because the parable isn’t talking about human justice but of divine Life. Nobody can earn what is pure gift and grace. Nobody can earn God. And God is merciful and compassionate.

In the parable Jesus says, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” In the great economy of God, in the web of life of which we are all a part, there is no last or first; all are ONE in the infinite LIFE of God. What we finally discover is that the first IS the last and the last IS the first. Our neighbor IS ourself. In the Kingdom of God there are no divisions, no dualism. Rather it is the one great Reality, the one great Energy of Love, the one great living of divine Life. And we can’t imagine fully or use our reason to understand what that means because it is the life of God, and God’s ways are not our ways. We read in Isaiah, Chapter 55, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways.... As high as the heavens are above the earth, so my ways are beyond your ways, and my thoughts are beyond your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Our human intellect cannot reason to this new Life, this Kingdom of God, but, as the parable tells us, we should not question the ways of the infinite Creator—the compassion, the generosity, the boundless mercy of God. “What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?”

We humans tend to judge God by our human, dualistic standards, and puzzle over God's justice and compassion from our meager human perspective. We expect God to act the way we would act. The Book of Job has God give a very different answer when Job complains about the unwarranted, unjust sufferings he has endured and wants to know WHY he is plagued by them when he has done nothing but try to be a good servant of God. God answers not with reasons but with a long list of the wonders of creation, and then the ironic question to Job, "Where were you when I founded the earth?" In common parlance, "You don't know what you're talking about. You can't understand my infinite LIFE with your tiny human mind." For in the transcendent world, the world of oneness and grace and Presence—in the Kingdom of God—there is no division, no dualism, no better or worse, no male and female, no gentile or Jew, no slave or free, no black or white, no rich or poor, no worker or owner. The last shall be first and the first shall be last because in the timeless oneness of divine love, there is no first and last. There is only the fullness of LIFE.

Clearly division and injustice and suffering are inherent in dualistic human life. As the poet and musician Leonard Cohen has put it "Everything has a crack in it; that's how the light gets in."⁷² We don't understand it, but we know it's true. Jesus came to show us how to accept and embrace it and make it better for others so that we can rise into to new life in God. Perhaps the suffering of this world, the hurts and inequities, the diminishment and pains as we age, are just the birth pains of the Life to come. And this parable tells us not to judge God as he offers light and life to all.

I think this parable also has something to say about judging our own contemplative prayer life. Or really how we should NOT judge it. Sometimes we hear about spiritual experiences that other people have and expect that with all the effort and time we have put into our contemplation we should have those, too. We don't understand WHY we don't. It doesn't seem just. Like the laborers in the vineyard, it seems patently unfair that some have deep experience after a very short time, and others sit in faith for years and have only dryness. Here again, we are judging with our human faculties. And God's ways are not our ways. In response to Job's plea that he be allowed to see God and hear directly the reason for his suffering because he just doesn't understand it, the wisdom writer has the LORD answer not by explaining divine justice, but by saying:

"Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? Gird up your loins now, like a man; I will question you, and you tell me the answers!

Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its size? Surely you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid its cornerstone, While the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
When I set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door, and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves stop?
Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning and shown the dawn its place? "(Job 38:1–42:6)

We can't answer any more than Job could, and like Job, we recognize our ignorance, and bless the Lord at all times, and in our dualistic, human lives we try to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God.

Information Regarding Citations:

The works footnoted within these pages were originally not formally cited, as the intention was that these were to be given as oral presentations; not works to be shared with others in a published form.

We have done due-diligence to attribute quotes to their original sources, but it was not always possible to provide full citations. We also used a simplified version of academic citations rather than standard academic citations.

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