

## **Finding Contemplative moments**

Cistercian monk Thomas Merton said that “Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active and fully aware that it is alive”. To contemplate is to take delight in God’s creation, which is interconnected, unfolding, self-emerging and increasingly complex. That thought alone is worth contemplating!

In Laudato Si, Pope Francis wrote, *“Humanity has changed profoundly, and the accumulation of constant novelties exalts a superficiality which pulls us in one direction. It becomes difficult to pause and recover depth in life. Let us refuse to resign ourselves to this, and continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything. Otherwise we would simply legitimate the present situation and need new forms of escapism to help us endure the emptiness”* (113). He adds, *“If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple”*. (215)

Physical surroundings are a great starting point for contemplation and if you haven’t got ready access to such a place, they are easy to find...go to a reserve, a lake, a bush track, the sea, even your garden. Go somewhere where you can not just smell the flowers, but watch them, appreciate them, and watch and listen to the birds and insects as they interact with their environment.

The universe/earth is the primary revelation of God. Earth speaks to us; we just have to listen. What’s around us allows us to experience God’s presence, action and abundance. St Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists, wrote this advice, *“When you are walking alone, listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sun, the sky and the whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to proclaim the greatness of the one who has given them being”*.

Unfortunately we can spoil the best of environments with noise, so we need to leave mobile phones switched off, digital music put away and headphones off, so we can listen to the sounds of nature, and allow them to touch our spirit.

In the Biblical tradition, the desert, mountains and wilderness (remote locations) were places of spiritual encounter. The gospels record that Jesus left his house “long before dawn” or spent “the whole night”, in prayer. If Jesus needed this space and time, then so might we!!!!

Today there is a drive for busyness and a conspiracy against silence (TV, Internet, emails, texts, MP3’s, mobile phones.... ‘noise’). Expectations of availability have increased with mobile phone, email and social networking etc.

There is an ever increasing need to know about things (e.g. through Google searching) or to know what friends are doing anywhere on the globe; even what they are thinking and whether you agree with them (Like or Dislike). This is sometimes called FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Television producer Andrew Denton says, “the very thing that makes social media so intoxicating - being able to know, and comment on, what everyone else is up to - can also be a stark reminder that you may not measure up. Then you have anxiety, stress, depression - and an inability to look away from the dark mirror”.

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He does not engage in social media because “I just don’t want the noise. I believe in daydreaming; for me, the most fertile creative state. The simple act of allowing your brain to freewheel can lead to connections and solutions previously hidden in plain sight. To daydream properly you have to actively seek silence. For most of us, that takes a real force of will. I have tried to carve out some thinking time by bypassing the endless conversation-come-popularity-contest that social media demands”.

It is so easy with our access to modern technology to constantly engage with a device rather than to clear our heads of these everyday matters that once were beyond our immediate attention. This makes it increasingly difficult to think, to just be and to pray. Is it possible for us to catch JOMO (Joy off Missing Out)?

Too many people spend their lives either living in the past or the future, as Eckhart Tolle highlights in his book, ‘The Power of Now’. Tolle advises, “Be at least as interested in what goes on inside you as what happens outside. If you get the inside right, the outside will fall into place”. Jesus too, was concerned about getting the inside right and about living in the present. Jesus cautions, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose themselves” (Mark 8:36) and he says, “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will look after itself; each day has enough problems of its own” (Matthew 6:34).

When we focus on the present we become mindful. This is different from meditation which seeks to still the mind and only ‘works’ for a minority of people. Mindfulness helps with your thoughts so that you become a witness to your own consciousness. In this process it is not important to stop the thoughts. What is important is to observe and appreciate them as you are.

Some good spiritual advice links with this experience, "Pray as you are, not as you are not". This attitude encourages us not to try to become something we are not. Rather we take who we are and how we are, into our prayer and reflection. Focusing on God's presence is easier said than done because everyday life is at the forefront of our thinking, planning, reviewing and considering. These things can completely absorb us. We can find ourselves wasting a lot of energy reliving things that have already happened, or anxiety over what might happen.

Tolle suggests, "Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry — all forms of fear — are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence"

Many people spend their lives either living in the past or the future. "*To be identified with your mind is to be trapped in time: the compulsion to live almost exclusively through memory and anticipation*" (Tolle). We can't live in the past or present – we live in the now. We need to pay attention to what is happening now and we need to focus on our kinship and community. Note the difference in the words **Illness** and **Wellness!**

The modern media invades every nook and cranny of our lives. Advertisers are taught how to get our attention, and to put tunes and images in our minds that won't go away. These advertisers get to us through radio in the car, through TV at home, our MP3 when we are out walking, through telephone or internet access all hours of the day and night wherever we are. We can shop in stores or even online every day of the week, night and day. Shopping has become a religion and advertisements are the sermons. The ads always tell us we need to have more (this or that) stuff to make us happier. Eckhard Tolle advises, "Pleasure is always derived from something outside you, whereas joy arises from within"

So what can we do? We have to make a decision to be contemplative and practice ways of being attentive to 'the now', to this moment. We have to reduce our wants, because they are not our needs. We have to appreciate what we already have. We have want to stop and reflect. Then we have to make choices that will help us achieve this. We can strive for peacefulness.

### **Some practical tips:**

Try to get some silence!

Limit your TV viewing.

Don't take the ipod for a walk

Don't turn the radio on in the car all the time or every time

Limit the number of activities you are engaged in.  
Don't pick up all the sales catalogues. Remind yourself that you don't 'need' anything they are selling  
Make some space for quiet uninterrupted reflection

Remember the Sabbath was important enough in ancient times; maybe we need it more than ever (it doesn't have to be the day we spend 'catching up'). Let your heart have time and space for the good things

Avoid being frenetic and slow down! Just 'be'. We are human beings not human doings. "To be free of time is to be free of the psychological need of the past for your identity and future for your fulfillment".

Take five minutes! It could be - when you first wake up, before retiring at night, while waiting in traffic or at a supermarket checkout; before the next class. Use those five minutes to centre yourself. Choose to appreciate: Stop and look; and reflect. Choose to be surprised; learn from young children; be delighted; enjoy flavours, taste and savour life. Recognise this moment and its power. The Chinese thinker Mencius suggested, "*The entire purpose of education and human existence is to recapture the mind of the child*".

Eckhart Tolle suggests "any disturbing noise can be as helpful as silence. How? By dropping your inner resistance to the noise, by allowing it to be as it is, this acceptance also takes you into the realm of inner peace that is stillness. Whenever you deeply accept this moment as it is – no matter what form it takes – you are still, you are at peace".

Remember what John Lennon learned through his sabbatical. He came to see that he was not a songwriter. That was just one thing he could do. He was a human person" He later wrote '*People say I'm crazy, wasting my life away....."I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round*'. His observations led him also to write, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans".

We have to attend to our 'inside' (the real me, not the false ego). This echoes Jesus' caution, "*What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose him/herself*" (Mark 8:36). Tolle suggests, "*The most common ego identifications have to do with possessions, the work you do, social status and recognition, knowledge and education, physical appearance, special abilities, relationships, person and family history, belief systems, and often also political, nationalistic, racial, religious, and other collective identifications. None of these is you.*" (Tolle)

Creation is a manifestation of the divine. We are not separate from creation. We are part of a web. Stop, look, listen and appreciate.

Contemplation is losing yourself in the wonder, awe and magnificence of life. What does it mean to reflect on what Brian Swimme says, "*Everything we see around us has developed from the boiling cauldron of the earth. The Earth was once molten rock and now sings opera*", or "*No matter what being we are talking about on the planet, we are related in terms of energy; we are related in terms of genetics; we are all in one way or another a form of kin. It's overwhelming*".

Contemplation is losing yourself in the wonder, awe and magnificence of life. It is getting knocked off your feet; having to catch your breath; sighing from the heart. It is felt in your body.

It is never far away, but it is possible to ignore it or become dulled to it. One of the most important things you can do, to enrich your spiritual life, is to take time out to contemplate. It's up to you to find the moments.

As we increase in age and slow down physically, life is beckoning us to be attend to our inside. We cannot do this if our inside is filled with noise. Activity is good. Over-activity can be an escape. Many people today do not have time to sit and appreciate a sunset, so they take a photo of one instead! Because we can store information today and watch replays, we sometimes miss the real event. If we want to be wholesome people, our activity needs to be born in contemplation.

When asked, "what is the secret of your music?" Mozart answered, "the silence between the notes."

John O'Donoghue in his book *Anam Cara*, wrote, "Everywhere you look these days, you see people watching television: in homes, in airport lobbies, in restaurants. If they're not watching television, they're driving their cars listening to their radios or talking on cell phones. By filling up their hours and minutes with chatter, they further distance themselves from the spiritual world".

Kahlil Gibran in 'The Prophet', wrote ""You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts; And when you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips, and sound is a diversion and a pastime. And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered. For thought is a bird of space, that in a cage of words many indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly".

Brian Traynor CP  
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See two following pages.....

## Contemplation

“Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active and fully aware that it is alive”. (*Thomas Merton*)

Jesus set before me the book of nature. (St. Thérèse of Lisieux)

Accustom yourself to seeing God in everything, because nature is a reflection of God. Oh! How God sparkles, shines, dazzles and is radiant in the invisible and the visible. (Padre Benedetto Nardella)

The whole world is asleep, and God so full of goodness, so great, so worthy of all praise, yet no one is thinking of God! See, nature praises God, and humans, who ought to give God praise, sleeps! Let us go, let us go and wake up the universe and sing God's praises! (Blessed Mariam Baouardy)

“When you are walking alone, listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sun, the sky and the whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to proclaim the greatness of the one who has given them being”.

“If you walk in the garden, ask the flowers you see there, ‘Who are you?’. They will not reply ‘I am a flower’. No, but they will say, I am a preacher. I preach the power, the wisdom, the goodness, the beauty of the great God. Imagine that you hear this reply, and then let your heart be absorbed by it, penetrated with it, entirely steeped in it.” (St Paul of the Cross)

All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord. (Num 14:21)  
The earth mourns and fades, the world languishes and fades; both heaven and earth languish. The earth is polluted because of its inhabitants, who have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the ancient covenant. (Isaiah 24:4-5)

How desirable are all God's works, and how sparkling they are to see! All these things live and remain for ever; each creature is preserved to meet a particular need. (NRSV Sirach 42:23)

Yours are the heavens, yours the earth; You founded the world and everything in it. (Psalm 89:12)

Earth is completely full of things you have made: among them vast expanse of ocean, teeming with countless creatures, creatures large and small, with the ships going to and fro and Leviathan whom you made to amuse you. All creatures depend on you to feed them through the year, you provide the food they eat, with generous hand you satisfy their hunger. (Psalm 104: 25-28)

O all you works of the Lord, bless the Lord, to God be highest glory and praise forever. (Daniel 3:57)

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of God has done this? In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." (Job 12:7-10)