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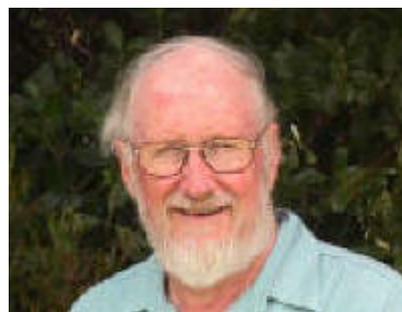
Refresh

**Winter 2004 ISSUE:
"Meditation"**

Spiritual Growth Ministries has published a newsletter twice yearly since our inception in 1981.

In the Winter of 2001 this became the **SGM Journal of Contemplative Spirituality**, *Refresh*.

Each issue works with a theme that is both relevant and stimulating of thought, prayer and discipleship. In this issue we take a look at meditation.



Refresh Editor Andrew Dunn

We place a nearly complete selection of key articles from each issue of *Refresh* on the SGM website. The full Journal is available by mail. There is a suggested donation of \$5 per issue (New Zealand subscribers) to help cover costs of publication and postage. Simply email our Administrator, Carole Hunt, with your name, postal address and email address and you will be added to our mailing list:

Email Carole Hunt: sgm@clear.net.nz

**Selections from the Winter 2004 issue
of Spiritual Growth Ministries Journal of Contemplative Spirituality:**

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"Meditation"

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COMMENT by Andrew Dunn

In this issue of *Refresh* we continue our exploration of spirituality by offering a wide range of articles, poems and scriptures relating to meditation. We haven't tried to "iron out" the differences of approach to, or understandings of, meditation. Indeed they are important to encompass the breadth of practice and invite us to explore more widely than our own favoured ways and inherited insights.

The word meditation suggests a process of the mind and heart in which ideas and words, events and stories are pondered and savoured so that discoveries are made, new glimpses of God's grace in our world are seen or heard and our relationship with God is deepened and enriched.

It is a process in which grace, the energy of God's loving, is available to us for our refreshment, encouragement, change and growth.

Various ways of meditating include:

- Sitting in silence, centering, waiting and inviting God's presence.
- Use of a verse or passage of scripture, or other helpful book.
- Use of a repetitive saying or mantra such as "God is Love", "Maranatha - come Lord Jesus", "Jesus" etc.
- Reflecting on your life's events.
- Examining the events, discoveries, joys and pains of the day.
- Listening to and making music.
- Focussing on something in creation, in art or a symbol.
- Being in creation.

One of the important issues of concern for many believers coming to meditation, at least initially, is whether it's safe or not. Sheila Pritchard seeks to allay these fears.

Another way of coming at this issue of safety is to ask ourselves how comfortable we are to draw near to God, to sit in the presence of Jesus, to dwell in the holy, to be met by the searching Spirit of God. With disciples from every age entering this school of prayer there is always the

challenge of how open and vulnerable we are in meditation. That is, how likely we are to be challenged, to be taken to the cleaners, to be loved uncomfortably and in out-of-control ways (well out of our control anyway). And perhaps that's a central issue here - how readily and fully can we give ourselves to the profound and searching gaze of our true, pure, holy, no humbug Creator and Lover? How will our hearts and minds react and seek safer ground when met by the absolute silence of God, the wholefully healing love of pure Agape, the extraordinary expansiveness of Life that invites us out of our safe places built to protect ourselves, the undeniable invitations to go with God wherever we're led? That's where it's really unsafe and often distinctly uncomfortable!

Even then, yes of course it is safe to meditate because, as Ross Miller pointed out at a recent meditation day, in Christian meditation we always meet the risen Lord Jesus Christ! And it is safe because in meditation we expect that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith as we are being rooted and grounded in love. With St Paul we too can pray that we will have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:16-19). Now that is some prayer!

Another important matter is the distinction between meditation and contemplation. In one sense they are distinct and separate, as in the *lectio divina* (holy reading) sequence of meditation the *meditatio* is a step along the way to the *contemplatio*. Many of us find this a helpful distinction to keep in mind. However, others find the two blending into one and some writers talk of the two as one and the same. You will note these distinctions in material presented here. One helpful idea for me is Don Ferguson's "contemplative meditation", the title of his booklet published in Whakatane by the Titoki Healing Centre Trust: "In the silence of Contemplative Meditation our aim is to increase our awareness of Christ as ever-present with us, and so to receive His Spirit into our heart and mind that in daily life we may bring His Peace and Wisdom and Love to bear on all we do" (P.3).

In this issue we touch into a few of the ways of meditating and hope for our readers that these will stimulate a rich discovery of how our meditative/contemplative faculties work - yes, and how fruitful they are for prayer and life.

IS IT REALLY OK TO MEDITATE? by Sheila Pritchard

Meditation is almost a buzz word these days! It's something practised by people from all walks of life and many religious traditions. Sadly this very fact makes some Christians nervous or even fearful. Questions arise like: "Is it really Christian?" "Do I have to empty my mind?" "Won't I be opening myself to evil forces?" "Isn't it really 'New Age'?" Such questions are asked with sincerity and deserve a thoughtful response.

Let's start with "is it really Christian?" The short answer is a resounding Yes! Psalm 1 tells us that a person who meditates on God's word is like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit. In season and having leaves that don't wither. The background to that enticing picture is that in the Old Testament meditation was regarded as an essential aspect of godly living. The Israelites were to ensure that God's word was repeatedly recalled and remembered in every aspect of daily life.

"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the Lord swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth." Deut 11:18-21 NIV

In more contemporary language it seems to me that God is saying: "My words are your source of life so soak yourself in them in every way you can. This will involve your heart as well as your mind. Use various kinds of symbols as powerful reminders. Ordinary conversations will help you chew over the implications of my words to daily life. You can ponder them as you walk and write them down so you don't forget. My words will restore you as you lie down to rest and motivate you as you get up to face the new day. Use all these ways to draw life from me so that your days will be full and fruitful."

Although the precise word "meditation" doesn't appear in this passage it covers the many ways in which people were encouraged to "soak up", "dwell on" and "chew over" God's words and God's character. That's what meditation is about!

Jesus would have been taught to meditate¹ in this way as part of his Jewish upbringing. When he was being sorely tempted in the wilderness the word of God was already in his heart and mind, rooted there by years of meditation and accessible in a time of great stress to enable him not to "wither" under pressure.

Looking at this Biblical background answers some other questions as well. Not only is meditation deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage but it is clearly not about "emptying our mind" in a way that leaves us open to "other forces". We are invited to meditate *on* something - namely the character and word of God. Yes, meditation is practised by people of other faiths - or none. This tells us that meditation is universally seen as a powerful way to enter into a deep and quiet place to focus on what matters most to the person meditating. What matters most to Christians is being open to the Spirit of God, the word of God and the presence of Jesus. Meditation is simply a process to enable that to happen. Common features of the process include finding a quiet place, having an erect yet relaxed posture, breathing gently and deeply and being open to the chosen focus.

When Christians fear that "meditation is New Age", my (rather provocative!) response might be: "Yes it is. Isn't that wonderful!" And after they recover from the shock I'd explain that this shows that those loosely gathered under the "New Age" heading are seeking a deep and personal spiritual experience and are willing to have a disciplined practice of meditation as part of their spirituality. Maybe they can teach Christians a thing or two! How many Christians have a disciplined spiritual practice of meditation? Talking about meditation might be a wonderful way to build bridges and learn from each other.

Of course, as already mentioned, the *process* of meditation spans many religious traditions and is practised by those who would not describe themselves as "religious" at all (including most New Agers). It has its own universal benefits of quietening the mind, relaxing the body and generally bringing one into a peaceful, centred place. Those are wonderful reasons for meditating anyway, without any particular religious focus.

However, when we come to meditation with the desire to be open to the Spirit of God, we can, I believe, trust God to meet us. After all it was God's idea in the first place! Jesus told his disciples that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to lead us to the truth.² Excessive fear of "emptying my mind in case something ungodly comes in" really doesn't give much credit to the power of God's Spirit!

A good place to start if Christian meditation is something you haven't explored before is to learn the simple steps of "spiritual reading".³ I call this the bread and butter of Biblical meditation. It follows closely the scriptural injunction from Deuteronomy quoted earlier. In its most simple form the steps are: take a short passage of Scripture, read it slowly and stop as soon as something catches your attention. Chew over the phrase or image that has attracted you, believing that the Spirit has something more to say to you about this idea or sentence. Be curious and open to the connections God may want to make with your life. Don't hurry on. Stay with it until these few words are imprinted on your heart to bear fruit now or later.

Another wonderful way to meditate on the character of God as revealed in Scripture is to take any Gospel story where Jesus is interacting with someone and put yourself in the scene. Don't just read the story, be part of it. Hear the sounds, smell the smells, see the scenery, imagine it as fully as you can. Then step into it as a member of the crowd or a key person in the story and notice your own reactions to Jesus. Are you joining Peter in stepping out of the boat, or hanging back wanting to watch someone else go first?⁴ Do you push through the crowd to touch Jesus' cloak or do you give up because you think he wouldn't have time for you?⁵

There are deep and wonderful things to discover about our own relationship with Jesus by meditating in this way. Too often we only *read* the story as someone else's experience. *Meditating* on the story takes us right into a personal encounter with Jesus.

Jesus demonstrated yet another focus for our meditation. He often used creation as a starting point for meditating on the character of the Creator. Well known examples include "Consider the lilies of the field..."⁶ "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing..."⁷ "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed."⁸ Jesus didn't want people to stop at *seeing* creation superficially. He wanted them to go deeper, to *meditate* on what the creation says about the Creator.

In essence meditation is about taking time and making space for something important to go deeper. Whether it is a verse of Scripture, an encounter with Jesus or an aspect of creation, meditation is one of the best ways to take seriously the life-giving resources God offers us.⁹ After all if meditation is the way to let our roots go deep into springs of living water maybe the question should be: "How could anyone *not* meditate?" !

¹ Matt 4:1-11

² John 14:16-17, 26

³ Often known as *Lectio Divina* from its Monastic origins.

⁴ Matt 14:22-32

⁵ Luke 8:40-48

⁶ Matt 6:28

⁷ Matt 10:29

⁸ Matt 13:31

⁹ For a fuller description of these and other types of meditation see *The Lost Art of Meditation* by Sheila Pritchard (Scripture Union, 2003)

JESUS AND MEDITATION

What some writers are suggesting:

James D. G. Dunn

... we can conclude meaningfully that a boy brought up in Nazareth in lower Galilee in the early years of the first century CE is properly described as a 'Jew'. That description would presumably have included a pious upbringing by his parent(s) and education in Torah at the local village assembly/synagogue. Whether he could read for himself or not, Jesus' knowledge of and familiarity with Scripture indicated in the Synoptic tradition is entirely plausible, even for the son of an artisan. ... he would have been familiar with the Temple and its functionaries, priests who served locally as teachers and magistrates, and the requirements of tithing and purity. He no doubt said the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4), probably as a daily obligation, (cf Mark 12.29-30) and prayed, probably two or three times a day (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 4.212). We can also assume that the adult Jesus observed the Sabbath, attended the synagogue, and 'gave every seventh day over to the study of our customs and law' (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.43), even though only Luke 4.16 indicates that synagogue attendance was his normal custom. The references to the 'tassels' of

his garment suggest that he himself was a pious Jew who took his religious obligations seriously (Matt. 9.20/Luke 8.44; Mark 6.56/Matt. 14.36).

Jesus Remembered.
Eerdmans 2003. 315-317

Margaret Magdalen

There was obviously something very special about the prayer life of Jesus that led the disciples to say, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' What he taught them and what they have recorded for us of his own practice have been left for us as clues he invites and intends us to pick up, ponder, share and appropriate in our own path of prayer. ... we come to see Jesus the mystic, Jesus the contemplative, Jesus the intercessor, Jesus the faithful son of Abraham, recipient of the Hebrew scriptures and liturgy of his faith, Jesus who wept in prayer and cried out in bewilderment to his Father, ...

Jesus Man of Prayer. 15. Hodder 1987

Peter Toon

Jesus certainly meditated. How could he do otherwise when the classic portrait of the godly and righteous person in the Hebrew Scriptures includes meditation day and night upon God's law! Yet the modern, Western reader of the four Gospels does not see any obvious references to Jesus actually involved in meditation. ...

When we carefully read and reflect on the recorded teaching of Jesus in the four Gospels, we cannot avoid the conviction that Jesus was throughout his ministry constantly meditating on the Scriptures. He clearly loved, knew, and had memorized the contents of the Hebrew Bible, but his lively use of the sacred text and his profound development of its teaching reveal much meditation. Cf. Matthew chaps 5-7, and the parables in Matthew 13. ...

Jesus encouraged meditation in all kinds of ways, even though he did not present a method of meditation to disciples. ... some of these teachings (are):

His call to "Consider"
- Matthew 6:26, 28.

His call to "Hear"
- Matthew 7:24.

His call to "See" and "Understand"
- Mark 4:11-12; 8:14-21.

The Call to "Read"
- Mark 11:17; 12:10, 26, 35-37.

His Call to "Remember"
- Luke 22:19.

We may say that Jesus taught meditation not by a spoon-feeding method but by arousing the spiritual curiosity and aspirations of his disciples. ***He left it to others to provide methods by which genuine meditation could begin, continue and flourish*** (emphasis mine - Ed.)

From Mind To Heart - Christian Meditation Today. Baker 1987

Selections from Chapt. 2 - The Example of Jesus.

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES by Andrew Dunn

People who have sensed that God is meeting them, calling them, loving them, have always found great value and nourishment in meditating on the word of God. Here are some of the ways this has been done over the centuries. They can be wonderfully fruitful and encouraging today and we suggest using each of them from time to time as ways of keeping meditation fresh and fruitful.

“Meditating on the law of the Lord” day and night (Psalm 1) suggests constant repetition, a ‘persistent murmuring’ (Joyce Huggett). Helpful descriptions for meditation are: *ruminating, chewing it over and over, seeing new light, drinking water, the rocking of the heart* (Cassian), *like clothes tumbling in a dryer* (Margaret Magdalen).

However meditation occurs, there is a sense of being met and spoken to that changes and deepens us. “We can only be formed by entering into a relationship with God, who alone has the power to transform us. Reading the scriptures prayerfully is one way we may seek God face-to-face” (Timothy Kelly). Here are five simple ways of meditating on Scripture.

1. LECTIO DIVINA

- Holy Reading

It comes from the 4th century AD and was used by Benedict of Nursia in his Rule and is a rich treasure for today from Benedictine spirituality. It is reflected in some of the Bible reading methods offered today.

The sequence is:

Select your piece of Scripture for the day (Worship Lectionaries are a rich source of suitable material)

Ask for God’s illumination as you read and meditate.

1. **Read** (*lectio*) - slowly. Pause when something grips you and ...
2. **Meditate** (*meditatio*) - ponder, ruminate and enjoy.
3. **Pray** (*oratio*) - active prayer springing out of what we see, hear or glimpse.
4. **Contemplation** (*contemplatio*) - a gift of God’s presence and love. Dwell here!
5. **Repeat** the process as time allows and journal your discoveries. Stay with the same passage for as long as the water flows!

2. EVANGELICAL PRAYER

When Augustine of Hippo heard the words “Take and Read” he read Scriptures which spoke directly into his situation and he became a Christian. The ancient text speaks in lively ways into our lives and experiences so that we too can say that we hear God, Jesus comes to us, the Spirit catches our attention. It is the immediacy of the Scriptures speaking into our lives and contexts that is good news to us - hence the title “evangelical prayer” or Augustinian Prayer.

How To Pray This Way:

Choose a passage. Ask God to apply it to your life. Read it carefully and note its message for you. Meditate on these discoveries and assimilate them into your life and faith. This simple way of praying Scripture lends itself to relaxing with the Psalms, a few chapters of the Gospels, a New Testament or Old Testament book or passage. Journal your insights.

3. IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

Using our imagination to step back into the biblical stories enables us to participate in the action, to hear the words spoken by Jesus, to be encountered back in the text itself. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century was profoundly touched like this and it often bears his name. But it has been a way of entering the biblical stories from the beginning.

Praying this way:

Select a passage of Scripture, an encounter story or a narrative. In your imagination place yourself into that passage, encounter or story and be an observer or participant. See what is going on, hear the sounds and what is being said. Experience the scene, action and teaching as applicable to you. You might be the one Jesus speaks to, touches, forgives, heals, looks or smiles at. Let Jesus be for you who he wants to be. Revel in the discoveries and thank God for them. Become a more dedicated and convinced disciple of His. Journal your experiences.

4. PRAYER FOR THE "THINKING" PERSON

Some people naturally have a more questioning, thoughtful approach to faith, to Scripture and their journey with God. We can use this gift as a basis for prayer by doing a study of a Scripture passage, using all our skills, knowledge, lexicons and commentaries to break open the meaning of words, ideas and passages. Meditate on the discoveries, journal them and use them to feed you and expand and deepen your relationship with God.

5. THE JESUS PRAYER

From very early in the Christian Church people took the words of blind Bartimaeus when he called out to Jesus for help, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me" (Luke 18:38).

It became, in the Eastern Orthodox churches, a rich way of keeping in touch with Jesus and is a treasure used more widely today. It can be expanded by using any rich verse of Scripture, biblical words, names for Jesus. This is especially useful when under pressure, when time is short or the pain and darkness profound. Suitable words of joy and delight can also be used very creatively.

It is an excellent way of keeping in touch with Jesus when other forms of prayer have grown empty, when we are ill, or doing menial tasks. It is a rich way of focussing and drawing near again. And no one knows you are praying!

From *Praying The Scriptures*, Oasis Brochure No. 5. 1994

'MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU'

Meditation and the Psalms by Anne Hadfield

What is it about the Psalms which captivates us and endures? People who rarely attend a church choose to read Psalm 23 at family funerals. Boney M turns Psalm 137, *By the waters of Babylon*, into a pop song winner. Is it because the book of Psalms is not sentimental but poetry which captures the guts of universal human experience? Such poetry about the real world transcends history and culture. It touches us and verbalizes what we struggle to express.

There is always a psalm which captures my current situation. I may be feeling lonely and criticized by those I have sought to love. *'It is not enemies...but you my equal, my companion, my familiar friend'* (Ps 55). Like the psalmist I may be brought to a similar devastating feeling of betrayal. Or I may be aging and realizing my old bones are not as reliable as before (Ps 71). I

may be fearful or in danger, *walking through the darkest valley* (Ps 23) or joyful and exhilarated and wanting to praise God (Ps 148). Perhaps what I feel today is that enigmatic space in my soul which longs for God *as a deer longs for flowing streams* (Ps 42).

The Psalms also put my little ego in perspective. As the psalmist contemplates nature he is reminded that all of life is interconnected. I too am one of God's creatures in the midst of many others of God's creatures in God's vast universe. Contemporary Quantum Physics is realizing that behind every new discovery there lies another question, another mystery. There are limits to human knowledge and power and it is good to be reminded of this. *When I look at your heavens the work of your fingers...what are human beings that you are mindful of them* (Ps 8).

A third quality of the Psalms which calls me to prayer is their expression of our total dependence on God. The warrior may have become King and won many battles but in the end is dependent on God's mercy to liberate him from guilt and wrong doing. *Create in me a clean heart O God and put a new and right spirit within me* (Ps 51).² This heartfelt prayer reminds me that God's grace is central to my ongoing transformation.

The Psalms have therefore been regarded as a rich treasure chest of prayer down through the centuries. They still provide the foundation of the monastic Office or regular prayer of religious orders. One who practiced this form of prayer was Thomas Merton. He commented that *All good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God*.³

This is reinforced when we examine the Psalms for content about meditation. There are several Hebrew words⁴ translated as 'meditation' in the English version of the Book of Psalms. *Higayon* is used in Psalm 19:14 as prayer. Some preachers preface their words with these words: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord my rock and my redeemer*.

This kind of meditation or musing is to be found in Psalm 1:2 where the pray-er is assured that so deep will be its effect that s/he will be *like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in season and their leaves do not wither*. The soul of the pray-er will be *satisfied as with a rich feast* and burst into praise as s/he meditates in bed at night. In Psalm 143:5 the poet is meditating *on the works of your (God's) hands* and this causes him to stretch out to God in a plea that his soul's thirst might be quenched. The dynamic between meditation and the soul's need for God is one of ebb and flow. Meditation both satisfies and creates a deeper longing for that which alone can satisfy, the Source of all life.

A second root Hebrew word, *Sahchah* and its variations is translated as 'meditation' in English. It has several shades of meaning but each expresses an element of acknowledging one's own humility before God. These vary from voluntary obeisance to being humbled or cast down. In the words, *My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be my understanding* the poet is recognizing that it is in the practice of meditation that he receives further understanding and this gift enriches his words beyond intellectual scholarship or understanding (Ps 49: 3).

The passion of the psalmist for meditation on God's word overflows in Psalm 119. The poet seeks God through meditating on the Hebrew tradition through its precepts (v 15), the law *Torah* (v 97) and its decrees (v 99). The whole psalm conveys the feeling of a love affair: *Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long* (v 97). This really is *prayer without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Such prayer expresses not only passion about the Word but has become internalized. It has passed from a conscious remembering of the text to become a living script which often emerges to consciousness and at other times is praying within the pray-er.

One of my earliest experiences of the power of such a living script was when I was expecting my first child. Due to circumstances I was left alone in a small hospital while a woman screamed in the next room and the medical staff rushed to an emergency. Panic arose inside me and threatened to overwhelm me. I began hyperventilating but managed to say shreds of Psalm 23 in my mind. Gradually I calmed and my breathing became normal. At that moment a midwife came

into the room to check my progress. Suddenly it was all action as I was wheeled into the delivery theatre and shortly afterwards a healthy daughter was born.

Meditation using the Psalms can be a simple but profound exercise. First of all choose a Psalm which has resonance with your present situation. You may wish to first of all study something of its background and purpose. Then memorize it or a few relevant stanzas. It is important to let the Psalm become part of you by saying it daily for a period of time. Now it is time to approach the Psalm with the heart. One way to do this is to use part of it as a mantra for meditative prayer. For example if Psalm 62 is chosen I might choose verse 1: *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.* A mantra is more easily remembered if it is less than seven syllables so I might abbreviate the verse to *God alone* or *my soul waits*. Then say the words on every in breath and as you exhale allow all worries and rush to exit. When you find your mind distracted, gently draw it back to the mantra again. Signal the end of the time of meditation in some way such as with the sound of a chime bar or by blowing out a candle.

In conclusion I would like to say that I perceive the Psalms as wonderful poetic expressions which encourage us to create psalms which are grounded in our own environment in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Let feathered psalms soar skyward* says Michael Stevens and I immediately visualize a coastal panorama of blue sea and golden toi toi waving in the breeze. Joy Cowley's psalms have struck such a chord in us that they have been reprinted many times. At a recent parish retreat at Stella Maris overlooking Whanganui a Tara, Wellington harbour, members of Ngaio Union Church composed this psalm collectively. It became the focus of their prayer for the next few days. May it also inspire you to meditate using the psalms.

Lord, we are the people of Whanganui a Tara,
The blue harbour cradled by hills,
Hills of green, gold and purple.
Stately pine trees look down,
Water sparkles with fun and laughter.
Your wind stirs our spirits.
We thank you for all these gifts, this diversity.
Even when the mist envelopes us
You are there.

- 1 All Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 2 Attributed to David after he had committed adultery and murder.
- 3 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 1981. (New York: Farrar, Stauss & Giroux) P.48
- 4 I am grateful to JoEllen Duckor for help with the Hebrew etymology.

BEING WITH YOU

Meditation on the Run by John Franklin

"More love, more power, more of you in my life." So goes the popular worship song. More of you in my life. Sounds good. But how...? On the run. That's how. Mobil does it. So can we. On the run I can have more of you in my life. Well, there can be more conscious invitation, awareness and reflection in the midst of everything else that's going on. So let's try it.

I wake, and the sky is blue. "Nice job. You are the light waiting for me. Good morning." I pause and welcome you before my mind races off to remind me of what I am supposed to be doing, delivering and being today. "Be my light."

Feet to the floor. You are my rock, my standing place. And off to the gym. You got there first and I sense your presence as I pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," while pedalling furiously to get the

heart going. Heart. Yes, give me heart. And bless the next person who gets on this bike with heart for the day. Now weights. 62kg upward press. I am choosing this, but your yoke, your burden is light if I choose it. I am carrying a lot. Thanks for the reminder that I do not need to lift it alone. I see those two guys are helping each other with the weights. Co-operation. They may know you too. There is something light and wholesome about them. Let them know the empowering weight of your hand on them today.

Shower. Cleanse me, Lord. Scrub me down. Exfoliate the dead stuff off me. Freshen me up. Yes, I am baptised! I have identity in your streams of living water that make all things new. And I'm feeling good with all the endorphins the exercise releases. But you are more than feel-good factors. You are my very life. My happiness lies in you alone, the Psalmist reminds me. Countless millions have found the same thing over three millennia. I do indeed have a goodly heritage that both holds me and asks for my faithfulness (Ps 16). And thinking of the masses, what shall I wear? Clothe me with your righteousness. Dress me with your presence so my presence in the day bears witness to you. I choose to be sharp for you.

Into the traffic. I wonder where all these people are going and what they are doing. You know. You are sovereign over all. Direct all the choices that these people will make for the good of the community. Especially him! Doesn't he know that the speed limit is 50? Not 45! We're running late. Stupid old... Shouldn't be allowed to drive! Oh dear... Sorry. I guess I keep people waiting too. And what's a couple of minutes when the billboard tells me I have all eternity to be dead. I'm not planning to see you too soon.

The music is a bit loud. Life FM. Live it Loud! Sure. As soon as I drop her off at Girl's High, I'll see what's on the Concert Programme. Old people's music, my son tells me. Ageism! No. May he grow to value his heritage. And here is your Spirit pervading us more than radio waves. "Where can I go from your Spirit?" Nowhere, obviously. But how well tuned am I? Am I actually listening, or are you just another background noise.

And home to morning prayer. Hello again. You beat me. You go ahead and prepare a place for us, I recall (Jn 14). Please go ahead and wait for me in next week's rather heavy responsibilities. And right now, to be honest, I don't have the energy to 'pray'. You know it all anyway. I will just sit with you for a while and be open to "the fullness of joy in your presence" (Ps 16).

Five people to see today. A ministry of presence; a ministry of listening with suspended judgement; a ministry of deep listening to you and the person you put before me. "God be in my head and in my understanding," and may my welcome signal your hospitality. She laughs with delight. His tears surprise me. Clarity, waffle, focus, depth, wonder and chat. It's all here. And here you are at work again showing me that your grace is greater than my tiredness. I marvel several times at what you are doing. We struggle constantly to find meaning, significance and belonging and find that our lives are mysteries over which we have no ultimate control. So reassuring to remember that you "are acquainted with all my ways" and you will "lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139). Another good reason to attend to you on the run.

The day moves inexorably on. And it is still sunny. Nice job thanks. I love the mellowness, the colour, and the unexpected warmth of your autumn. I guess I am in life's autumn afternoon with hair falling (but not as fast as leaves!). Jesus tells me you know how much there is left (Matt 10). Not too excited about the colour change though. "Wear it as a badge of achievement" says Kevin my hairdresser. That's a good spin. Which raises the question of who is informing my narratives. Who is the editor or the critic? The Spirit within is praying with sighs too deep for words says Paul (Rom 8). Well, Holy Spirit, why don't you up the volume a bit and help me hear what God is saying to me about me?

Dinner. What shall we eat? Our ancestors may have ploughed the fields and scattered, harvested and stored. I go to Countdown. "Give us today our daily." And it all has a price, which implies an income and financial management. You are indeed the provider. I want to be

smart with your provision. And as I walk through the grocery store, I wonder who the people are behind everything on the shelves. So many lives, so many stories. And you so loved the world that you came and ate with us to remind us that bread alone is not enough.

And around a dinner of Thai chicken green curry, we live it loud again. Extraverted or introverted preferences on the MBTI don't count here. It's all out there competing for space. I sense your laughter in it all. This is life. It is a now event. This moment is every bit as important as the 'serious' stuff. "Do you like the chicken, Lord?"

And off to choir. "Come into his presence with singing" (Ps 100). Yes, I will sing to you in company with a parade of mothers and fathers who have sung you well. There are words that push past our reasons, melodies that move us into deeper waters, cadences that locate us in faith's home, and tunes that can move us beyond the need to fix and solve things, that move our futures from despair to hope. Well, I prayed something to that effect in church last Sunday night and I am still with it. I'm listening, to join your song, the song that the birds and the insects know, the mountains and streams know, and the stars and the planets know.

Day ends, never to be repeated. Thank you. You are the faithful one. I commit all of its words and actions and reflection to you. Tomorrow will be another day on the run. "Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ in the midst of it all, and rest with him in peace."

The Lord grant us a quiet night and a perfect end - not to mention a robust and engaging experience of life on the run with you tomorrow. Amen.

MEDITATION IN TIMES OF TRANSITION by Andrew Pritchard

When I write an article I usually allow the topic to percolate (I'm a 'real' coffee drinker!) for several weeks before putting fingers to keyboard. I am sure that this is based on the sound foundation of experience and self-knowledge that knows that there are wells of inner knowledge to be tapped but that will only yield to contemplative space. I am equally sure that, despite having a strong J preference (planned, organised) I often work best when a deadline looms or is just passing!

Now, the troubling thing is that having followed my normal practice for both of the above reasons, the word that sits like a big stone blocking the mouth of the well is the word DON'T! ... and somehow I know that I must write about that first if anything else is to flow.

So, what is it about the theme "Meditation in Times of Transition" that causes the word DON'T to resonate so loudly for me? What is the message? What is the word DON'T saying? Clearly it is not saying literally "don't meditate when you are in times of transition." Rather what it is saying is that the time of transition is not a good time to begin to meditate or to learn to meditate or to turn to meditation as a way out. It is saying that the practice of meditation, to be fruitful, especially in times of transition, is best when it is a practice grounded in the routines of life, learned in times when we don't "need" it, comfortable, familiar, a home base that we know instinctively and well. A base that evokes memories of presence, insight, revelation, of experiencing God's love, comfort, challenge, affirmation and correction.

There is a wonderful story told in Brennan Manning's book, *Abba's Child*. It is about a free-spirited Jewish boy named Mordecai whose parents are concerned that his free-spirit should be balanced by self-discipline. The story closes with

"Mordecai himself grew up to become a great man. People who were seized with panic came to him and found peace. People who were without anybody came to him and found

communion. People with no exits came to him and found a way out. And when they came to him he said, "I first learned the Word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against his heart." (Emphasis mine.)

Here it is! In the practice of meditation and other forms of contemplative prayer we experience being held silently against the Great Rabbi's heart. Out of this lived experience will flow the fruits that we and others are needing in times of transition: peace to replace panic, communion to replace loss and aloneness, a way out where there is no exit. But the being held silently against the Great Rabbi's heart is an experience to cultivate for the whole of life, not a panacea to be grasped for in the midst of turmoil and transition.

Two examples of transition from my own life experience may help us to explore the topic more deeply.

The first ambushed me in my early 30's, when I was fully enchanted by the rush of young adult, male achievement. I was a husband and father of a primary schooler, a toddler and a baby. I was on a rapid rise professionally, lecturing in Telecommunications and Computers, Head of School in a large Technical Institute with a staff of over 30, all older than me, seconded to another Government Department on a national project for 2 days a week. Our church had a shared leadership, 6 of us, all working in other jobs, sharing leadership, preaching and pastoral roles in our 'spare' time. You can guess the rest! ... Burnout and dark depression. These were things I had only read about, been aware of vaguely at safe arm's length in others, but never remotely experienced. Now here I was in the midst of them.

This was certainly transition! One week in church, leading, preaching, praying with people, the next struggling unsuccessfully to hold back tears, wanting to look at and be looked at by nobody. Hearing and seeing little but the darkness inside. Going from leader to 'cot-case', pray-er for others to medicated by anti-depressants and in a charismatic church at that! I must say that the other leaders were wonderful, none more so than my friend and mentor, Tom Marshall. I still remember the huge relief when he returned from overseas and came straight around. The relief that he knew and was there was enormous. He didn't say much, really only that he knew that the tunnel was black, with no light right now, but that the light would come and that I would emerge from it in time. The faithful, unconditional love and support of my wife Lynn and other close friends were key to me through this time of transition.

But what of meditation? In this transition, on my part, there was none, or at least very little. For a start in the depths of depression I could barely think, let alone meditate. Emotionally there was nothing there. While at a very deep core, the 'knowing' that God cared, loved and was at work never deserted me, there was mostly no motivation or energy to read or to pray. Furthermore, at this stage of my spiritual journey, I had hardly encountered contemplative spirituality and the resources I was used to for nurturing spiritual growth were largely limited to bible (and other) reading, intercessory and petitionary prayer and participation in church. So meditation in any common usage of that word was both foreign to me and would have been beyond my reach at that time. What did help was rest, 'doing' nothing but 'being' dependent on God, and walking in the beauty of creation. Looking back, from the vantage point of twenty plus years, I see of course that all of these have meditative and contemplative roots! The other major element was that when I could not pray the family and faith community prayed on my behalf.

A second more recent transition also ambushed me, but, in relation to prayer and meditation, was very different. Some seven years ago, in the midst of considerable work responsibilities and stresses I was concerned that my energy levels were so low that I may be approaching burnout again. A visit to my GP showed abnormal blood tests, which some 12-18 months later had me in surgery for bowel cancer. (This turned out to have originated as cancer of the appendix, so rare that I am written up in a medical journal!) Now I was in hospital as a patient for the first time since I had my tonsils out as a child. Trusting my body and all its functions to surgeon and nurses. This too was major, unchosen transition. But radically different to the earlier one.

The intervening years had seen meditation and contemplation become a vital part of my spiritual disciplines. They were familiar practices that had become a natural part of me. So, for example, as awareness returned when I surfaced from the anaesthetic I was praying the Jesus Prayer, or perhaps it was praying itself in me! The Jesus Prayer was to be the main intentional vehicle of prayer and meditation for me over many of the following weeks.

At this stage I had neither energy, concentration nor stamina for reading. Annie Dillard's "Tinker at Pilgrim Creek", which had given delight and insight and been a source of rich dialogue with God a day or two earlier, was as inspiring as a foreign language dictionary now. But the Jesus Prayer was like breathing - natural, refreshing, life-giving, instinctive. In the depths of pain and desertion the day after the operation when the epidural didn't work properly and my mind was still floating in anaesthetic the Jesus Prayer was my real connection with God and in it I knew I was not alone.

In the somewhat better days that followed, when the pain was more controlled but most of my systems were obstinately refusing to function, I became my own case study. I experimented with altered states of consciousness (I was on an epidural not morphine so I'm not talking drug induced!) where I shut down most of my awareness of what was happening around me and could largely block out the pain that leaked through from the still only partially successful epidural. At the same time I engaged in interior dialogue with God that was rich and, when I was well enough to reflect and journal a month or so later, contained significant insights.

Music was another helpful, and growthful vehicle for meditation. The beautiful and sensitive singing and guitar playing of friends who visited was healing and bathed me in peace. The inspiring music that I listened to and communicated deeply with God through was not Christian music. That was too familiar and had too many associations, that for me, were unhelpful. The music that helped my psyche and spirit to soar when my body would barely move was Simon and Garfunkel, particularly material performed on tour in Africa! The beauty of the music, and the fresh and prophetic depth of the lyrics, evoked in me a response of praise and gratitude to God and was the catalyst for significant times of meditation and dialogue with God.

So, meditation in times of transition, what are the major lessons based on this statistical survey of one!

In transition our resources and creativity are limited.

- Only what we are familiar with and know intimately may be accessible to us. So disciplines we have used and grown into faithfully during the routine, less remarkable times, will be important.
- Sometimes we may not even be able to draw on or find nourishment in these. Then the spiritual life of our community of faith may be vital. If this is so then the current trend, where many people feel less nurtured by and connected to 'church' and withdraw to a more individual faith journey, needs the balance of new forms of living connection with other pilgrims, faith community.
- Externally structured disciplines, praying the Daily Office for example, or using a Bible reading notes may be helpful.

In transition we may feel as if we have lost our faith.

- The transitions I have described were life events which certainly challenged my faith, but they were not initially faith transitions. Some transitions are primarily changes in our faith. Our ways of understanding and relating to God no longer make sense, don't work, no longer bring peace and fulfilment but agitation and anxiety. No wonder we feel as if we are losing our faith - in a real sense we are. The old familiar ways of relating to God are slipping away and we have no stability and comfort in what will emerge to replace them. In these times

trust is important, our activity, even in meditation less so. For the time being we may have lost God, but God has not lost us. The image I have in these times is of "being in the place where God can find me". Rather than choosing to hide from God as Adam did in the creation account, I choose to put myself in places where God can find me, continuing spiritual disciplines - prayer, meditation, scripture reading, meeting with others - even when a mausoleum has more life in it!

God is found in transition and in stability. May the disciplines of prayer and meditation that we follow in times of stability form us well for times of when we may not be able to meditate.

MEDITATING ON LIFE

Lectio Divina in daily life by Faye Johnson rsm

Cardinal Newman once stated that a life not reflected upon was a life wasted.

To assist in the task of reflecting on life events, the four-step process of *lectio divina* can be very helpful. *Lectio divina*, or sacred reading, has its roots in Judaism and evolved into its classic Christian form in monasticism. Today, it is practised widely by people from many different spiritual backgrounds who share a desire to discover the presence of the divine in their lives.

The first step in the process is **Paying Attention**. If we examine our lives as a sacred text, we will view them differently, perhaps with a new freshness, with increased faith, hope and appreciation of the divine life moving within us. Such may have been the experience of Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish woman, who drew strength from a patch of blue and could write:

*"I know not what may lie in wait for us...
Yet I find life beautiful and meaningful."*

The second step in the process of sacred reading is **Pondering**. As we ponder on the events of our lives many paths of reflection are opened to us. Our memory may be stirred and throw light on current events. Our imagination may be awakened and we may gain insights about our lives and resolve upon steps needed for change, for growth or for action. We may just want to ponder and follow the impulses we sense within us and stay with the process as faithfully as we can. We may just want to carry them around with us for stretches at a time without any specific response.

In the third step of this process, we offer a **Response** to the One whose voice we have heard. Our response comes spontaneously and it will depend on what we have heard. We may be joyful or sad, angry or enthused. Our aim in this movement is not a particular type of response; it is to recognize our heart's desire in response to the "word" and to express it in a personal way.

In the traditional method of sacred reading, this step was called prayer, expressing perhaps praise or gratitude, seeking help, or asking forgiveness. If we encounter the divine presence in ourselves, we may wish to respond to that presence in our own words. We may find that the best way to respond is not verbally but physically - in art or dance, by playing music or going for a run. Whatever form the response takes, it is not so much a matter of seeking a final resolution as a way of summing up the inner movement of our spirit and carrying it forward.

The traditional name for the fourth step is contemplation. Contemplation begins where all our efforts at meditation and prayer end and we find ourselves caught up in the movement and presence of God. Such an experience is a gift, not something we can cause or accomplish. We can engage in spiritual practices that open us to such experiences, but we cannot create them.

All we can do, as the mystics say, is dry the wood and stack it carefully so that when the match is laid, it catches fire.

This step is called **Surrendering**. We may find a word or a phrase which serves as a mantra that can carry us through the day or the week and help us to cultivate a contemplative awareness and in doing so enable us to surrender our hearts to the One who has called us.¹

¹ Robert M. Hamma, Earth's Echo, (Sorin Books), Notre Dame, IN. 2002, p.26

LEARNING TO MEDITATE by John Main

To learn to meditate we have to learn to be humble... What does it mean to be humble? It means to begin to acknowledge that there is a reality outside ourselves, that is greater than ourselves and that contains us. Humility is simply learning to find your place within the greater reality and...learn to live in our place. The first thing to understand is that you are your own place. To come to terms with all reality, we must first come to terms with our own reality. It is in the stillness of meditation, the stillness of body and spirit which reveals the unity of body and spirit, that we enter the experience of knowing really that we are. We come to know this with absolute clarity and absolute certainty. Only then are we ready to go to the next step which is to go beyond ourselves, to rise beyond ourselves. The tragedy of the egoist is that the egoist does not know his or her place. The egoist thinks that he is at the centre of everything and sees everything...only in relation to himself.

Meditation and the constant return to it, every day of your life, is like cutting a pathway through to reality. Once we know our place, we begin to see everything in a new light because we have become who we really are. And becoming who we are, we can now see everything as it is and so begin to see everyone else as they are. The truest wonder of meditation is that we even begin to see God as God is. Meditation is therefore a way to stability. We learn through the practice and from the experience how to be rooted in our essential being. We learn that to be rooted in our essential being is to be rooted in God, the author and principle of all reality. And it is no small thing to enter reality, to become real, to become who we are, because in that experience we are freed from all the images that so constantly plague us. We do not have to be anyone's image of ourselves, but simply the real person we are.

Meditation is practiced in solitude but it is the great way to learn to be in relationship. The reason for this paradox is that, having contacted our own reality, we have existential confidence to go out to meet others, to meet them at their real level. And so the solitary element in meditation is mysteriously the true antidote to loneliness. Having contacted our conformity with reality, we are no longer threatened by the otherness of others. We are not always looking for affirmation of ourselves. We are making love's search, looking for the reality of the other ...

Meditation is demanding. We must learn to meditate whether we feel like it or not, whether it is raining or snowing, or the sun is shining or whatever is on television or whatever kind of day we have had. In the Christian vision of meditation...we find the reality of the great paradox Jesus teaches: If we want to find our lives we have to be prepared to lose them. In meditating, that is exactly what we do. We find ourselves because we are prepared to let go of ourselves, to launch ourselves into the depths ...which soon appear to be the depths of God.

John Main. *The Heart of Creation*. Continuum. pp9-10

MEDITATIVE COMMUNION

Eucharist worship space by John Hebenton

About 20 years ago I was invited to my first silent communion service. It was a straight forward Anglican liturgy, yet it was profound. We each had a service sheet with the words on it, including the bible readings, and the movement from one part of the liturgy to the next was marked by the ring of a bell. I had never been to anything like it.

At a retreat at Muriwai beach 2 years ago I redid the service sheet so that it had a lot more actions, rather than mostly sitting and reading the words. I thought it went really well, but one of the retreatants asked some helpful yet disturbing questions. Why was it so long? Why did everyone have to move at the same pace? Could it be more flexible.?

I spent a few months wondering how to answer her. The result was a Eucharistic (Communion) Worship Space. With some fear and trembling I tried it out last year. I wondered if it would be Anglican enough? (it was for a group who were training for Anglican ministry) Would people get into it? Would they find it helpful? I was amazed at the depth of the experience for myself, and the feedback I received then and when I ran it again in another setting.

So what is a Eucharistic Worship Space and how does it work?

It is offered as a space to be with God both corporately, and as individuals. It is also offered as an experimental space, both in the style of worship offered, and for those taking part to experiment with different ways of worshipping than normal.

Seven stations are offered in which to meet Christ. They are:

1. A space to "be" with God in contemplation.
2. A space for confession. Tissue paper is offered on which to write with a felt pen those things that separate us from God, from others, from ourselves. The tissue is placed in a bowl of water. As the writing dissolves those participating are invited to find an action to acknowledge the forgiveness that God freely offers.
3. A space to "hear" the word of God, and to respond to that word. A sheet with four choices of "praying scripture" is made available, Participants are invited to choose one, and to be bold in that choice.
4. A space to intercede. A slide projector and slides are offered as a visual aid to evoke concerns, passions, compassions for this world in which we live, and those who live within it.
5. A space to receive the bread and wine from Christ himself, As the participants eat and drink, they are invited to use all their senses to experience the fullness, (texture, taste, feel, smell) not only of the bread and wine, but of all God offers.
6. A space to give expression or respond to the worship experience through art and writing.
7. A space of blessing as you take this experience of God, and live Christ in the world beyond. As they leave, participants are invited to cross themselves with water, both as a symbol of their reacceptance of their baptismal call to be Christ's love in the world, and that God both blesses them and journeys with them in that call.

Each person attending is given a sheet of instructions. We usually gather outside the worship space and enter together. They are welcomed, given some brief instructions. The welcome includes an abbreviated prayer of great thanksgiving, so that it is as far as possible a "real" Communion service. Then those attending are free to go where they wish. They do not need to visit all of the stations, but only those that seem right. Nor do they need to visit these stations in

any particular order. They are invited to spend as long as they like at each station, and in the worship space itself.

I have been fascinated to see people beginning at every station (but the last). One person stayed for half an hour. Others have stayed for over an hour and a half. What has intrigued me most is the real sense of being in this space with this community of people. While on my own journey, I know that these others journey with me, and that we are in this together. I think this real sense of community is one of the reasons why there is such a deep sense of God's presence. I look forward to the next time I can offer this space, both for myself, and for those who will worship with me.

SYMBOLS AS A WAY OF FOCUSING

Creating an atmosphere for meditating by Shirley Fergusson

"Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (1Kings 19)

The contemplative tradition encourages awareness and possibility of encounter with the mystery that we name "God". Encounter is a gift of God - but, like Elijah, we can enhance the opportunity for experiences of wonder, awe and reverence which leave us feeling that what we have experienced is a deep sense of the reality of God.

Elijah seeks the symbolic place where God has been made known to Moses - he discovers there an atmosphere in which God's presence may more easily be experienced, but God is not in these wonders of nature, but through and beyond them in the stillness, in the silence.

The use of symbols in our devotional life can help to create an atmosphere which can enhance an attentive awareness, an interior stillness, in which we become open to the mystery of God. Creating an atmosphere in which we can become still and centred by using an object, words, sound, scent, touch, activity and/or mental images as a base to centre our attention in the present, allows us to free our minds and wandering attention, to become still and empty before God, ready to become aware of the whisper of the Holy Spirit in the silence.

The use of symbols as a base to bring our attention back from all the past and future experiences usually going on our minds concentrates and calms and deepens our attention so that we may experience God in and through the present moment and more fully experience the fleeting eternal "now". Symbols give us something for our wandering minds to return to. They are a stepping-off place for the freedom and openness that may enable us to be aware of God, the reality beyond all images and objects. To become aware in that open simple present of God the Creator, the life-giving Spirit at work within us, enabling us and urging us to allow ourselves to grow. We become more open, more discerning of God's Spirit, more in touch with our own inner depths, the centre of our awareness, or our "beingness".

The word "symbol" derives from the Greek *sum-ballein* - to throw together. It was used in ancient times as a means of identification. One common way to make a *sum-ballo* was to take a piece of pottery and break it - if the two pieces match the person is who they say they are. The piece of broken pottery is not me, yet it identifies me. There is in symbols a power and depth which enables them not so much to represent reality as to disclose it by making it present. A symbol points to a reality while uniting us with it, bringing us and it together, relating us.

A word of caution though. It is important to choose a symbol that will allow your mind to become focussed and then still. A snapshot of an enjoyable holiday, or the painting your tutor has just been critiquing at art class will only invite your mind to begin remembering, or analysing - this kind of symbol will simply become a distraction.

Noticing an object which demands our attention, which "speaks" to us of God, which draws us into the "eternal now" is what is helpful. Almost any object - a flower, a weed, cloud formation, a pebble or shell off the beach, a leaf, a candle, water, a picture - provided it does not have the kind of associations that will be distracting - can serve to focus the attention until our awareness is free and we are open to the "still, small voice within". My Journal contains a number of photographs - a chair in the bush, a beautiful sunset - occasions on which I have been able to "lose myself" and become centred, open to the reality of God in the present. These can re-create for me at atmosphere in which I can move from the symbol to a fuller awareness of the present and to God's Spirit, but they are always just a base to come back to - a stepping off place to openness.

*To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.*
(Blake, Auguries of Innocence)

A BENEDICTINE VIEW OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER by Ross Miller

The Benedictine monastery of Christ the King in North London has a meditation centre to which anyone may come, and in the entrance hall are these words from Mother Julian of Norwich: *Utterly at home, He dwells in us for ever.* This is precisely where the Benedictine understanding of contemplative prayer starts.

The first word in the 6th century *Rule of St Benedict* is "Listen..."

*Listen carefully...and attend...with the ear of your heart.¹
Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times.²*

Nothing in Benedictine spirituality is more important. Not only monks and nuns, but oblates around the world, all who follow this contemplative path, are taught by Benedict that both prayer and work start and end in silence and attention.

In silence and stillness we listen to ourselves, to what life is making of our breathing and metabolism, aches and pains, memories, relationships, here in this place and here at this moment. We listen to the world and to other people, their threats and their menace, the love and goodness we know of. And we listen to God, God's word in scripture and wherever we find it, and the Spirit in our hearts.

But contemplative prayer is not discursive prayer. We are not going through any mental agenda, however worthy. Rather, we develop the skills of being fully present to ourselves, to the world and to God, in the present moment, with "the ear of the heart" open.

And since this seems huge, we may simplify it as much as we can by attending in prayer to one word or phrase, our "mantra". We say it "interiorly" from the start to the finish of our time of silence, gently returning to it every time we realise we have become distracted by "thinking about" things, planning, daydreaming and so on. The mantra starts to resonate through the rest of life, the times when we are not, cannot be silent - and it produces, as it were, a context of silence and stillness in which we seek to do everything.

Joan Chittister writes:

*Prayer in Benedictine spirituality is not an interruption of our busy lives, nor is it a higher act. Prayer is the filter through which we learn, if we listen hard enough, to see our world aright and anew, and without which we live life with souls that are deaf and dumb and blind.*³

At a recent contemplative school, time was taken for a brief ceremony to admit a couple of us as Benedictine Oblates. Others present who practise Christian Meditation were intrigued by this direct reference to the Benedictine Order, and one man found and thumbed through a copy of the *Rule of St Benedict*. He came to me later and said, "There's not a word about prayer in it!" Well no - except that the entire thing is about prayer.

The *Rule* sets out a way of living together in peace, love and order, and this way depends entirely upon contemplative silence and stillness. Much of the *Rule* is indeed about the ordering of worship, the Daily Office, about humility, about care of the tools and goods of the monastery, about dealing with faults, about food, and so on. Benedict calls it *a little rule for beginners*; he says there is to be *nothing harsh, nothing burdensome* - and he lays it down that by far the worst offence in the monastery is grumbling (Latin: *urmuration*). Benedict sees grumbling as the opposite of both fellowship and devotion to God - an insight which may have some relevance in parish life!. But over all, at all times, is the discipline of silence, until silence, stillness, listening become not only a requirement of the community but also a continuing personal interiority.

This is well exemplified in the ancient contemplative discipline of *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio* is a way of daily attention to the bible, but also to other suitable spiritual writings,⁴ in which we lay aside for the moment the need to "study", sift, evaluate, compare, refine understanding, decide whether we agree or not. This discipline, when I first encountered it, was hard; I have been raised and trained in a scholarly approach to the biblical material and languages, and found it a very curious thing indeed to be simply present to these writings, available to "receive" them, as we used to say in Presbyterianism, *simpliciter*, and thus to encounter the voice of God - not as a general message, or something for others, and certainly not to be mentally filed away for use later in some sermon or teaching, but for me, now. Note pads and highlighters are really out of place in *Lectio*.

The Psalms, for instance, have leapt to new life. Even the "difficult" imprecatory Psalms, and the ones in which there seems to be a bland assumption that if I am righteous all will go well, have mysteriously come back for me as a gift of grace. Often they seem stunningly apposite to the deep realities of the present moment. The discipline of *Lectio* teaches that, in reading, we pause when we encounter a word of God in the present moment, making sure we are receiving that - and we may in fact read nothing else that day, but live with what God is saying now, existentially.

My point however is that *Lectio* is an integral part of contemplative prayer and life, in Benedictine understanding. It requires the same stillness and silence, attention, and openness to *conversatio mori*, daily conversion. In Benedictine practice there is rarely if ever prayer without *Lectio*. Neither should be seen as any sort of intellectual discipline or agenda.

Soon after I moved in to stay in a Benedictine monastery in Montreal for a few weeks, some years ago, they assigned me to daily kitchen duties. This was something I knew all about, as an experienced house husband. After the morning "offices" I would make my way down to the kitchen and get ahead on the vegetables for the main midday meal, including the confounded swede turnips they seemed to get cheap in vast quantities from the city market.⁵ But one morning one of the monks whispered to me that it was inappropriate to be wandering around and working while all the monks were doing their *Lectio*. Turnips came after *Lectio*. So they should, of course, and so I stopped pretending to be Brother Lawrence.

In this gentle but rigorous discipline of simplicity, silence and stillness we find ourselves coming to some very serious insights and lessons. For instance, as another writer, Esther de Waal, points out:

I (may) have to recognise that the tensions I find within myself may not be resolved after all, and that perhaps I have to learn to live with the contradictions and try to see that at their heart lies the mystery of God...⁶

This allows me, she adds,

to live with the muddle, the untidiness, the incomprehension. I no longer expect there to be some neat pattern in things, a wonderfully fulfilling coming together... In the end there is only mercy, the most perfect expression of God's love. I hold on to the promise of the Rule, "Never to despair of God's mercy"⁷.

It is not a path to Nirvana. It has much more to do with the kind of spirituality we find in St Paul, for instance, in II Corinthians 12: 7ff.

John Main, one of the luminous teachers of the contemplative path in our day, was a Benedictine monk. So is the current leader of the World Community for Christian Meditation, Fr Laurence Freeman. Through such teachers there is growing up a "monastery without walls", in many countries, in which thousands of people are learning the practices of contemplative prayer and life, and some come to offer themselves as Benedictine Oblates.⁸

¹ *Rule of St Benedict*, Prologue, 1.

² 42:1

³ Chittister: *Wisdom Distilled From The Daily - Living The Rule Of St Benedict Today* [HarperSanFrancisco, 1991], p.17.

⁴ Benedictines traditionally confine Lectio to the bible and to the writings of the "apostolic fathers", although I think there is a rather more liberal interpretation of that these days.

⁵ In a monastery the occasional combined odour of incense and boiling swedes can put a presbyterian right off high festivals, and even heighten the use of the imprecatory Psalms.

⁶ Esther de Waal: *Living With Contradiction - An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Morehouse 1997), p.136.

⁷ op.cit. p.136-137.

⁸ The WCCM website is <http://www.wccm.org>. The Australian WCCM website is <http://www.christianmeditationaustralia.org>.

ART AND THE RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

A theoretical teaser by Matthew Jack

If you are sitting in front of an artwork, feeling that, somehow, it has enhanced or facilitated your experience of God, then you are experiencing what millions of Christian people before you have felt. You are also on the edge of some very complicated tensions. From the earliest times of our faith, people have felt that God has been warning them away from idolatry, and the making of religious images. Particularly within the Protestant tradition, there has been a great reluctance to give sanctuary space, or devotional space, to artworks. Nevertheless, people have filled their churches with stained glass images, beautiful music, poetic liturgies, and the ubiquitous flower arrangements. Even though we obediently believe that artworks can be a distraction to our worship, we can't stop ourselves bringing artworks into our devotional life. (It is worth noticing that even the Dutch Calvinist Church, which shares its founder's extreme suspicion of art, allows decorations to be painted on its organ shutters, pointed windows to be

installed in its church buildings, and various other embellishments to be made to liturgical spaces. It is interesting to note, further, that when Calvinist reforms were instituted in Holland, and religious artworks were outlawed in public sanctuaries, there was an explosion in the commissioning of religious pictorial art for private homes.) Human beings, even when committed in intellectual principle to the rejection of art within religious life, seemed deeply attracted to appreciating artworks, and reluctant to let such appreciation go. When Jeremy Begbie noted that religion and the arts had had a "persistent relationship", he was saying nothing beyond what many people easily observed over the years.

Recently I have given some thought to this persistent partnership. Assuming both that God exists, and also that the purpose of our various religious and devotional traditions is to bring us into an awareness of the presence of God (that is, to have a "religious experience"), I have been asking after what role an artwork might play within our coming to apprehend God. It seems to me that if we are trying to work out what the artwork might do within our becoming aware of God, we will need to work out what we think is actually happening to us as we become aware of the presence of God (that is, as we have our experience of God).

Aquinas, of course, said that we don't so much experience God, as much as we experience God's work, and extrapolate, by reason, that there must be one who is behind the work. If this model were right, then art's role would seem to be to present us with God's work (creation and redemption), or to enhance our tools of reason, such that we might be inclined to extrapolate from the beauty of the work to the work's creator, and again to the supreme Creator. (This doesn't provide much of a role for art, though, since the best expression of God's own creativity would surely be creation itself, rather than its rendering by anyone else. Any artwork would be derivative and distracting from God's original work. We'd be better to go for a walk in the bush.) Calvin said that experience of God was something that came to us, not by way of the regular five senses, but by way of an almost completely ruined, special sixth-sense - the *sensus divinitatis*. (Given, however, that artworks deal in five-sense-qualia, there is no clear role, under this theory, for artworks to play in religious experience - which might explain why Calvinist churches are, in general terms, anti-art.) A promising recent theory of religious experience, which values the role of the artwork, is that of American philosopher William Alston. Alston maintained that experience of God was essentially a perceptual event. We just saw God, and interpreted what we saw by drawing on beliefs we already held about God and the experience of God. In like ways, we just saw (or heard or touched) artworks, and interpreted them by drawing on various beliefs we already held about the sorts of things presented in the artworks. Art and religion were both about the presentation and interpretation of things. If God was presented in an artwork, then that artwork had facilitated our apprehension of God.

Serious art-philosophical problems descended on Alston though. If art was about the presentation of God, then you should be able to explain where God was in any particular artwork. You should also be able to declare non-representational artworks as being of no spiritual use. Clearly, though, abstract artworks and various other non-representational works *are* of devotional use. The devotional usefulness of the artwork cannot, therefore, singly lie in its power to represent God, or to convey information about God.

This is where new theories of art can be useful. In the 1970s, Kendall Walton started talking about the "world behind the work of art". He likened the artwork to a game played by children. Just as children step into the world of a game (say a game of making and playing with mud pies), where a set of rules apply, and where make-believe principles are in place, so those who appreciate a work of art step into the world of that work. To read a novel is to enter the world of a literary work. In the case of Anna Karenina, it is to enter the world of pre-revolutionary Russia, where there is snow, double standards, and romantic tragedy. To appreciate the work is to explore the world of Anna, and to experience, as if from within her, the vivid experiences of a frustrated Russian woman. To appreciate Bruegel's "Haymakers" is to enter the world of peasant farm-workers, to feel (with one's full empathic imagination) the thirst, and the ache of shoulder muscles, after a day of tossing hay. To enter the world of an

artwork is not to become confused about the real world, or one's place in it. It is just to entertain, through one's imaginative capacities, the possibilities of various scenarios - to feel utterly engaged with the author's projection and to learn things by suggestion of possibility rather than by command of actuality. Such entertainment can hone one's own practical skills, challenge one's values, enable one to see real situations differently, and entertain various solutions towards one's own real-life problems. Appreciation of art is not essentially, then, seeing things, or hearing things (although it does involve that). It is about stepping into a world of possibilities, in which one's values, strategies, and single perspectives become influenced by vivid experiences of the perspective of another.

This theory of art relates very closely to what my religious tradition says revelation is about. When God reveals himself to humanity, he extends to me his own world (his own vivid perspective on things, along with his own feelings, his own unique style, his own question "what would you do?"). This extension of creative, value-shaking, whole-person perspective is not something I merely look at. It is something into which I must step, with all my creative, imaginative faculties at work. I must subject myself to its claims and perspectives, and explore it with my whole intelligence and imagination. Alston inadequately said that God is one who is observed. He said, similarly, that an artwork is merely an object to be observed. More adequate art theorists, though, have said that artworks are not objects to be observed, but worlds into which one must step completely. If the artwork is a useful tool in our experiencing of God, it is not because the artwork looks pretty, or even because it conveys information that is correct or useful. It is because it calls us into a thoughtful interaction which is similar in operation to what happens when God communicates with humanity.

God has never been one to be reduced to simple propositions. Nor has the artwork. The kinds of skills we employ when appreciating a secular or religious artwork are exactly the kinds of skills that are useful within the spiritual encounter. I think that this is why art and religion have enjoyed a persistent relationship, and why many people find art playing a rich role in their devotional life.

HOLY ICONS by David Prosser

The sacred icon has been used for centuries to refer to images of holy subjects painted on wood. The term *icon* is derived from the Greek *eikenai*, "to resemble," and refers to an image believed to be sacred in itself that can aid in connecting with the represented figure.

The painting and veneration of icons is an ancient tradition, which was well-developed by the 3rd century AD. The iconoclastic movement starting in the 8th century, condemned icons as idolatry, and led to the destruction of much religious art throughout the Byzantine Christian world. It was not until the next century that icons were restored to their former position of honour in religious observance. Over time painted icons of Christ, the Virgin, and various saints (often grouped into an *iconostasis*, or large screen) became the primary religious images of the Byzantine, Greek Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox churches.

Icon painting follows a set of rules very different from the artistic traditions of the West. At first glance they appear to be distorted (even grotesque), stiff and lifeless. They do not immediately appeal to Western emotions or imaginations. Only after patient study and prayerful reflection do these ancient icon images begin to speak to us. When they do connect they speak to our inner heart searching for God. They are rich in symbolism, attempting to give us a window into the divine, rather than a realistic portrayal of earthly or historical scenes. They provide in pictures what the sacred Scripture provides in words.

Iconographers (icon *writers*) follow ancient rules and prototypes. Their goal is to render the sacred images faithfully, not to express their own artistic creativity. The process is akin to the translation of holy Scripture. Form and colour depend on venerable traditions handed down for generations. Only occasionally will modifications, or even new images, enter the tradition through the prayerful inspiration of an iconographer.

Over the last few years I have developed a (devotional/contemplative) hobby mounting printed full-colour reproductions of traditional (and contemporary) Icons onto wood (ebony black stained, untreated *pinus radiata*). Some of my work was exhibited at the ACSD conference in Christchurch last year.

Limited numbers of my Icons are available for sale (non-commercial quantities only). They make a very special gift. Indicative prices range from \$10 for a small prayer card size (approx. 70mm x 100mm) up to \$50 for the largest size I do (approx. 275mm x 345mm). I also have some in Dyplich and Tryptich formats.

Please feel free to phone, e-mail, or write to me:

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MUSIC AND MEDITATION by Jane Simpson

People seeking spiritual solace today have no shortage of sources. On public library music shelves they can find ‘easy listening’ CDs which market Bach, Vivaldi and Mozart as ‘Classic Stressbusters’. Chants for Great Lent sung by the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate Choir jostle with multiple drumming shamanic meditation and ‘Melodies for the bath tub’. As with personal growth or ‘New Age’ books, the variety of choice is bewildering.

What about the church today? What musical resources can help retreat directors create a meditative space? In the last sixty years the ancient tradition of chant has been rediscovered and shaped into highly accessible music by two ecumenical communities, the Taize Community in France and the Iona Community in Scotland. Their use of simple Latin texts and living languages from throughout the world heightens the sense of the universal. In Taize services in mainstream congregations and in retreat settings, such chants, repeated over and over, help to create a sense of stillness and open the way for meditation. After some minutes, in the ‘gathered silence’ of the worshipping community, people may sense that they have passed through a boundary into a new sense of sacred space. Music created the frame and marked the boundary of that space.

What links music and meditation? For me, as a poet and composer, it is breath. Since I write words and music together, my work is breathed to life from a deep, meditative space. When I am writing poetry and music, breath and prayer become one. Rather than using a single word or phrase to eliminate distractions, or empty the mind of images and attain an inner stillness, I am in a deeply receptive and active state, open to new words, ideas and images. Like the fourth century Hesychasts, I seek to ‘breathe God’. In such prayer the movement of the breath through the nostrils, down the lungs and into the heart, becomes an effective symbol, a sign, of our inner journey from dispersal and fragmentation to simplicity and primal singleness in God. As the poet W.B. Yeats said in his book *The Celtic Twilight* (1893):

God guard me from those thoughts men think
 In the mind alone.
 He that sings a lasting song
 Thinks in a marrow bone.

In this state, instead of rejecting whatever is primitive, archaic, or off the beaten path, I am able to integrate it with my familiar logical thought processes and find a new synthesis. New hymns and songs emerge, sometimes whole, complete, at other times in fragments. Meditation for me is not an end in itself, but an indispensable part of a creative process, where I regress, more or less at will, without losing contact with the surface, and integrate and express what I find 'in the deep' in forms that enable people who read and sing my work to discover new depths for themselves. My desire is that these hymns and songs come off the page and are sung, breathed to life. Embodied in the singer and in congregations, they can then 'sing in a marrow bone', expressing what was previously unexpressed. They can then give voice to new things that God is doing.

Having composed 23 new hymns and songs since 2000 and released them on a CD, I was delighted when a retreat director told me she used two tracks successfully in retreat settings. *Shake the day!* is very simple and I wrote it for my son before he could read. Only one word changes in each line, so it can be memorised. Those words are: love, truth, joy and peace. I imagined children approaching each day with the sort of excitement they feel on Christmas Eve, when they shake their presents and guess what is inside! Children in church schools and state primary schools have grasped the metaphor of 'shaking the day' very easily and felt energised by singing this song.

The other hymn which has worked well in a retreat setting is a meditation on the beauty of the enclosed garden. Each verse is a word painting and only one word changes, this time in the second-to-last line: speak, sing, shout, show and seed. There is an unexpected Taize-like Latin refrain, 'Veni, Creator Spiritus. Veni, Sancte Spiritus' meaning 'Come Creator Spirit. Come Holy Spirit'. I wrote *Anawim, all little things, praise* out of the sense of loss following the death of a close family friend, Katrine Brown (1913-2000). She was passionate about the downtrodden or *anawim*, loved her garden and delighted in the arts. I wanted the music to create a sense of dignity and grandeur. You can almost hear the pitter patter of little feet when you hear it. The track is sung *a cappella*.

Anawim, all little things, praise

1. Honeysuckles, sage bushes,
 jasmines, pinks, and lavenders,
 gardens our delight,
 Little things speak your truth,
 O Lord of love.

Refrain

Veni, Creator Spiritus.
Veni, Sancte Spiritus.

2. Pungent roses, loud sunflowers,
 wintersweet and tiny buds,
 gardens for the blind,
 Little things sing your truth,
 O Lord of love.
3. Jewelled cobwebs, sun's greeting,
 bumblebees on buddleia,
 sparkling water poured,
 Little things shout your truth,
 O Lord of love.
4. Subtle changes, new seasons,
 cleansing frost and hope of spring,

autumn ripe with fruit,
 Little things show your truth,
 O Lord of love.

5. Little ones, the anawim,
 lonely widows, broken men,
 children of the poor,
 Little things seed your truth,
 O Lord of love.

Words © Jane Simpson, 2000

Music © Jane Simpson with Peter Low, 2000

This hymn sums up one woman's spirituality, living the ordinary at extraordinary depth, meditating on psalms and hymns and spiritual songs as she gardened, walked, and worked for social justice. Her song, which she never heard, now inspires others to do likewise.

PRAYER ROPES by Glenda Prosser

One cold and wet day in July I had a close and painful encounter with the infamous tiles in Christchurch's Cathedral Square. After a week on crutches and chair-bound, a "sitting duck" for our 18 month old grandson and his books, I was desperate for some "creative therapy".

I had spent some time during the week thinking about prayer beads, so once I had dispensed with the crutches I hobbled off to the local bead shop - and then on to The Warehouse. (Prototypes must be cheap!) Shortly after I arrived home I had finished a string of 100 prayer beads (complete with home-made cross designed and constructed by my daughter) ready to give to my husband. Chunky but functional.

With only a small amount of leather thonging left over, and the creative need not yet diminished, I turned to the Internet. My search discovered information and history about Anglican Prayer Beads. Soon a rustic version of Anglican Prayer Beads (also complete with homemade cross) took up residence in my pocket.

Now material-depleted but creative urge intensified, I returned to the Internet. A slightly modified search led me to a site that promised to teach me how to tie Orthodox Prayer Ropes. Now, here was a challenge! Fired with enthusiasm, a quick trip to town next day saw me coming home with a ball of wool. Three hours later I had tied my first knot! (Legend has it that an angel taught a desert monk how to tie the knots to help him overcome distractions in prayer. I can well believe this legend! I defy any human to devise a knot that uses every finger on the left hand in construction and ends up with a knot composed of 9 interlocking crosses!) Another 3 hours later and I had completed my first 33 knot prayer rope. Not a pretty sight - but what a sense of achievement! The next day I was off on the hunt for a more suitable material and a new hobby was born.

The making of prayer ropes has undergone an interesting evolution within me. From Creative Need to Creative Challenge to Contemplative Practice. The original instructions I downloaded from the Internet suggested starting the rope by praying for its successful completion. I have now found the act of making the rope to be prayer in itself. Making the rope is a contemplative act and the results are similar to those I experience after prayer. I have found, for example, that I cannot make a rope while I am angry - the knots don't pull up properly, I lose my way halfway through the knot, or the final knot is misshapen, or I just end up with a mess of thread that would suggest the presence of a playful kitten! I have to set aside the rope and deal with my anger (by prayer, or journaling, or even having that conversation I have been avoiding!)

With equanimity restored I can then resume tying the prayer rope.

I use my prayer rope in a variety of ways in specific times of prayer. If I need centering, I use it with the Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner); sometimes a mantra or breath prayer will arise from current events in my life and I finger the rope as I repeat the prayer; sometimes I use it in the initial stages of my *Lectio divina*. In typical Anglican fashion I use my prayer rope as and how I need to at each particular moment. It too resides in my pocket and is a useful reminder as I go about the day's activities of God's all-encompassing, ever-present love.

Traditionally prayer ropes come in 4 sizes (33, 50, 100, and 300 knots) and are made of wool (which I found surprisingly hard to find). I now use synthetic cord to make both 33 and 50 knot ropes. A 100 knot prayer rope would use around 23m of cord - 100 prayer beads are definitely easier to deal with! I'm not even going to think of the 300 knot prayer rope well, not yet . . . then again . . . (hmm).

My husband still uses his prototype prayer beads at home but the 50 knot prayer rope does present a considerably streamlined look in his pocket! And prayer ropes don't set off airport security like my rosary does!

If you want to know more about Orthodox Prayer Ropes, a brief history, photos and hints on use can be viewed on www.johnoconnor.net.nz/prayer_ropes.htm.

JEWISH MEDITATION by JoEllen Duckor

The rabbi was asked: What do you do before praying?

The rabbi answered: I pray that I may be able to pray.

Many Jewish people have sought spiritual meaning in other traditions and are excited to discover that meditation is part of the Jewish tradition.

The perceived lack of meditation in the Jewish tradition was partly due to the 19th century's emphasis on rationality. Judaism embraced the modern, intellectual sophisticated life and the meditative practices while not exactly lost, were largely forgotten. Most references to meditation vanished from mainstream Jewish literature about 150 years ago. After a century of indifference, much had been forgotten.

Jewish mystics generally accepted that the first ones to engage in meditative methods were the patriarchs and prophets who used them to attain enlightenment and prophecy. Meditation was central to the prophetic experience. The Bible tells us that prophets used chants and music to attain higher states of consciousness. Although there are many allusions to this in the Bible, the scripture is virtually silent when it comes to providing explicit descriptions of their methods.

The most common word for meditation in Judaic literature is *kavannah*. This word is translated as concentration or feeling or intention or devotion. The literature speaks of worshipping with *kavannah* or maintaining *kavannah* while performing a *mitzvah*, (a commandment or good deed). When we look at the origin of the word, it comes from the root *kaven* which means to aim. *Kavannah* denotes aiming consciousness toward a certain goal. Directed consciousness. *Kavannah* is most often used in relation to prayer or worship. The line between prayer and meditation is a fine one. Meditation is often used as preparation for prayer. "I pray that I may be able to pray"

Our sages tell us that pious men of old had to meditate for an hour in order to attain the state of *kavannah*. *Kavannah* means to direct the heart to the text or the content of the prayer. *Kavannah* is more than paying attention...it is attentiveness to God, an act of appreciation of being able to stand in the presence of God.

There are many ways to attain *kavannah*. This article will discuss three ways:

Through meditation on a Hebrew letter, through meditation on God's name, and through meditation on a biblical verse or prayer.

The rabbis used to say that you should let yourself dive into the letters of the prayers and picture the Divine Presence that resides in the letters.

Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (c.1240-1292) was among the most important Jewish mystics, due to his development of a meditative system based on the Hebrew Alphabet. He referred to "knowing God through the method of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet." In the ensuing centuries since Abulafia created his meditative system, many Jewish thinkers have acknowledged the spiritual power of the Hebrew alphabet.

The rabbis teach that the whole world was created through the combinations of the twenty two Hebrew letters.

In a commentary on the Book of Exodus, we are told that Bezalel, the artist who built the Tabernacle, knew how to combine the letters through which heaven and earth were created.

A meditation on the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet: Aleph.

"Aleph is the first Hebrew letter. It is the only letter that makes no sound of its own in a word and yet from it arises the entire alphabet of sounds and infinite meanings. The sages regard Aleph as signifying that everything each of us accomplishes, however important in daily life, first emanates from stillness and silence...In Kabbalistic lore, the Aleph is the outward thrusting energy that seeds the cosmos. It is the primal force of Creation that exists before any form can be visualized, for the Bible itself begins with the second letter, Beit, not the first...Aleph represents the number one...the greater our spiritual awareness, the more intensely we experience that everything in the universe is interconnected and composed of Divine Oneness... To bring greater energy into your everyday activities, meditate on the Aleph..." (The Hebrew Alphabet)

Contemplate the letter aleph on a card for several days.

This helps to fix the image in the mind

Focus on the aleph, letting it fill the mind. Then gradually carve away the images around the aleph, replacing them with a white fire. Imagine the white fire burning away the other images. Begin with a small spot of white fire at the top of the aleph, using it to burn away a small spot of imagery. Let the white fire expand, burning away larger and larger areas. As it moves around the aleph, it is burning away images on all sides. Finally, one sees the aleph alone, written in black fire on white fire.

According to the Midrash (a collection of stories about the Bible), the Torah was written as black fire on white fire.

Another meditative technique is to contemplate God's sacred name, made up of the four letters Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh or YHWH. This contemplation has a number of important advantages, the most obvious being that since it is God's name, it provides one with a direct link to the Divine.

The name is unpronounceable; it is linked to every spiritual level.

Yod
 Heh
 Vav
 Heh

Ancient Kabbalistic/Mystical teaching states that these four letters contain the mystery of charity.

The letter Yod is small and simple like a coin

The letter Heh looks like a hand that gives the coin

The third letter Vav looks like an arm reaching out to give

The fourth letter Heh is the hand of the one who accepts the coin.

This is the essence of charity on a mundane level. However charity can also be understood on a divine scale.

The Yod represents the coin, but not a piece of copper or silver but existence itself. The Heh is God's hand which hold the existence He wants to give us. The Vav is His arm reaching out to us to give us existence. The Heh at the end is our hand which accepts that existence.

As we meditate on the four letters of God's name, one can actually see this.

The method of basing a meditation on a biblical verse or prayer, known as *gerushin*, was used by the mystics of Safed (a holy city in Israel) in the sixteenth century. The simplest way to use a verse as a meditation is to read the verse and then use it as a point of departure for unstructured meditation. You may wish to make the verse the entire subject of a meditation. Your meditation would become a conversation with the biblical verse. The verse can be used either visually or verbally.

Our prayers are sacred because they are composed of the Hebrew letters.

The Mystical texts say: God looked into the letters of the Torah and created the universe.

A meditation on the *Shema* prayer:

"Shema, Listen, Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"

(Deuteronomy 6:4)

The *Shema* is a meditation in its own right. The *Shema* tells us to listen- to listen and hear the message that God is One with every fibre of our being. It is telling us to open our perceptions completely, so as to experience Gods unity. It is also significant that the name Israel is used in the beginning of the declaration. The name was given to Jacob after he wrestled with a Divine being. According to the Torah, the name Israel means "he who wrestles with the Divine" (Genesis 32:29) The *Shema* is addressing the Israel in each one of us. This Israel is the part of us that yearns for the spiritual. The *Shema* tells Israel to listen, to quiet down the mind completely and open it up to a universal message of Gods unity.

The *Shema* can be said as a prayer or a declaration of faith and it is said as such by Jews all over the world. But if the words are said very slowly, and if a person prepares mentally, the *Shema* can be an extremely powerful meditation. You can dwell on each word for as long as fifteen or twenty seconds. During the silences between the words, let the meaning of each word penetrate your innermost being.

The *Shema* can be understood on many levels. However, as a meditation, the main thing is to allow the simple meaning of each word to penetrate the mind. One must understand the words not with the intellect but with the soul.

Shema: Listen.

“Set these words which I command you this day upon your heart”

(Deuteronomy 6:6)

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WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION by Peter Murphy

The World Community for Christian Meditation came into being at the John Main Seminar held in New Hampshire in 1991. Since then it has spread through 60 countries involving over 1000 groups. The inspiration of the community came initially from John Main, a Benedictine monk, who recovered this method of prayer in the 1970s and began teaching it in London, from where it spread very rapidly. John Main himself died in 1982. His successor, Fr. Lawrence Freeman OSB, took over and became the founder-director of the community and works out of the London headquarters of WCCM.

John Main's initial experience of this method of meditation was with a Hindu Swami in Malaya. He knew from their initial meeting that he was in the presence of a very holy man, so he had no problem in praying with him. At the time Main was working with the Colonial Office. Some years later he entered a Benedictine monastery but was forced to abandon his meditative practice “because it wasn't Christian”. He later discovered the method in the Conferences of John Cassian describing the spiritual practices of the desert fathers and mothers in the North African desert around the third and fourth centuries. The same method is described in the late medieval English classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Once he was assured of its practice within Christianity, he resumed meditating this way and later began to teach it to ordinary people convinced that it met a real need for people in this age.

The method is best described in a communication put out by the Community:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Breathe calmly and regularly. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase MA-RA-NA-THA (Come Lord Jesus). Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything - spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.

Meditation is Christian because the faith of the meditator is in Christ. The prayer *maranatha* is one of the most ancient Christian prayers. St Paul ends his first Letter to the Corinthians with it. When John Main first came into this experience he re-read the New Testament and recognised this prayer as an ideal mantra. The minimum of twenty minutes is proposed for it generally takes

that length of time for the mind to become reasonably still. The method is very similar to Centering Prayer, the only difference being the recommendation of a specific mantra.

John Main's genius in recovering this method of prayer was that he was able to describe the **How to pray** in a simple and economic way. Many spiritual writers, including the great Thomas Merton, have written very eloquently on prayer but none has described the *how* in the way that John Main has. It was on these grounds that Bede Griffiths, also a Benedictine monk, described John Main as the greatest spiritual teacher in the Church today.

While the practice is simple, it is not easy. Meditating for 20-30 minutes twice a day, every day is a life changing experience. Some are so ready for it that once they are introduced to it they do not look back. But they are a minority. For most it is a stop-start process sometimes over many years until it finally "clicks". Another feature of the practice is the development of meditation groups. These are generally small groups but their impact is often far reaching simply because of the impact of the practice on the lives of the members. In the absence of true spiritual directors, the meditation group offers that support in the practice which is so badly needed especially in the early phases. There are groups spread throughout New Zealand. An international quarterly newsletter is Fr Laurence's means of keeping in touch with individual meditators.

For more information, contact www.wccm.org or petermurphy54@hotmail.com (Ph.09-833-7420) or, for subscription to the newsletter, stanman@xtra.co.nz (Ph07-544-7955).

MEDITATION WEBSITES by Warren Deason

Typing the word "meditation" into a search engine will give a bewildering list of possible sites. As you might expect there is money to be made from the spiritual search and there are no shortages of sites willing to offer on-line demos with the hope that you will purchase their CD, book or program.

The practice of meditation is widespread in many religions and also offered as a non-religious, stress reducing, life-enhancing technique but I have chosen to focus mainly on sites that work within the Christian tradition.

Here is a selection worth investigating.

www.wccm.org World Community for Christian meditation website. Follows the writings of John Main and Lawrence Freeman. Offers on-line meditation group as well as weekly readings and general information about the practice of meditation.

www.mediomedia.org Another site which uses material from John Main, Lawrence Freeman and Bede Griffiths and links to WCCM site.

www.jesuit.ie/prayer Sacred space is a website run by Irish Jesuits. The site offers a "Sit at your computer screen" interactive guided meditation which takes about ten minutes.

www.prayerwindows.com This site, run by Jesuit and artist Bob Gilroy, offers pieces of art, scripture passages and reflections as material for meditation. "Prayerful images can inspire viewer's faith as well as their desire to be more creative."

www.concentric.net/~Cosmas/centering_prayer.htm This site offers a method of meditation based on the writings of Thomas Keating.

www.centeringprayer.com The website of contemplative outreach which, among other things, promotes the practice of centring prayer.

www.snowmass.org The site of St Benedict's monastery where Fr. Thomas Keating is a monk.

www.innerexplorations.com This site has a great deal of material on the mystical tradition and the dialogue between East and West.

www.beliefnet.com A general site exploring spirituality of all major religious traditions. Includes material on meditation and contemplation.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION RESEARCH PAPER PRAYING WITH ICONS by Andrew J. Brown

A theological definition of this form of spirituality, how it would normally be performed by a directee, and it's relevance to the art of Spiritual Direction.

Icons have been part of Orthodox spirituality for over 1,500 years and are a central aspect of Orthodox religious practice. Icons are more than simply just another smart technique to be added to a person's spiritual direction tool kit. They are a major vehicle to be used for viewing and understanding reality in a complete, holistic way, i.e. a spirituality. As John Baggley, in his book *Doors Of Perception*, says, "In studying icons and in using them for devotional purposes we come into contact with a tradition of theology and spirituality that is very different from that familiar to most Western Christians."¹ I am, therefore, going to examine the theology and spirituality of icons before I explore some of their relevance for Spiritual Direction.

The sole purpose of icons is that they offer access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. They lead us to the contemplation of the divine. As Constantine Cavarnos tells us, "The icon stands for something other than itself. It is designed to lead us from the physical to the spiritual realm. The icon is an image of a real, sacred person or event, and is designed to lead us to it."² Key words often used in the context of icons are that they 'lift up the soul to God, instruct, remind, and arouse our emulation.'

An icon is, in effect, the equivalent of a sacrament whereby the people depicted are personally present.³

"It provides an existential encounter between men and God. It becomes a place of an appearance of Christ, provided one stands before it with the right disposition of heart and mind. It becomes a place of prayer... An icon participates in the event it depicts and is almost a recreation of that event existentially for the believer."⁴

This means that through an icon Christ, and the saints, can become 'present' with us. The icon, therefore, becomes a place of divine presence and an instrument of grace because it transmits to us the sanctifying presence of Christ and lifts up to God our hearts and prayers.⁵

The way in which an icon does this is by providing an opportunity for encounter through the use of sign and symbols. Symbols and signs are normally known as 'border-crossers' in that they allow us to cross the boundary between our conscious and unconscious, and they allow us to cross the boundary between the material and spiritual. In a sense they exist on the border of these two worlds. Symbols are a powerful way by which the created can explain and approach the uncreated.⁶

Now the Orthodox approach to icons and prayer is based upon the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ for the Orthodox believe that "the moment God became man it became lawful to make a

picture of Him.” They believe that anyone who denies the appropriateness of icons also denies the reality of the incarnation.⁷ Effectively, they state that because God has chosen to reveal Himself through human flesh, then it is appropriate to utilise material means as a vehicle of grace when used in faith. (The Second Commandment forbidding the making of idols is, therefore, by-passed by the incarnation of Christ, and consequently art, images, symbolism, and sign are now valid ways of apprehending God).⁸

The practical power of an icon (despite it’s theological significance) is primarily it’s appeal to the eye.⁹ The eye is widely described as being the ‘Pope’ of the senses. For example, “If the word and song of the Church sanctify our soul by means of hearing, the image sanctifies by means of sight, which is according to the Fathers, the most important of the senses.”¹⁰ Indeed St. Basil the Great and St. John Damascene taught that icons and the word accompany one another in a parallel appeal to the visual and aural senses.¹¹

Because the Orthodox accord such a high status to icons it is valuable to note that all traditional icons have a complex set of guidelines for their creation, or what could be described as a ‘canon’. For example, the Orthodox church stipulates that all icons are to be made to give the impression of eye-to-eye contact with the person(s) depicted. They are generally shown full-faced, not in profile, so that their faces offer the largest possible space for contemplation and communion. Other rules affect colour, physical composition, etc. Space is handled through the use of perspective, and time through the layout of people and events surrounding the central panel. This ‘canon’ helps keep the quality of icons within accepted Christian bounds, and places them in Orthodox eyes on par with Scripture.

The way in which a directee would use an icon is to “Gaze at them with complete attention and to pray with them.”¹² They would mediate upon their content and allow themselves to move from one idea to another in prayer. This requires a sense of being completely present to the icon, and intentionally gazing upon it in silence and stillness. This is an ascetic discipline that requires presence and attentiveness. The pray-er enters into a sense of seeing and being seen, and then responds to the interaction that comes out of this.

What happens as a result of gazing is that the directee focuses very deeply upon God. As Leonid Ouspensky says, “The icons never strive to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another natural human emotion, but to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all other faculties of human nature on the way towards transfiguration.”¹³ Or as Sister Olga puts it, “An icon is not touching or sentimental, nor even to magnify human feelings. It is to orientate all of our minds, feelings, oneself towards the holy.” In other words it is a tool of focus and mediation which sharpens the faculties for the reception of divine grace. As St. John Damascene said, “Icons evoke our hunger for God.”¹⁴

In many ways, therefore, it could be said that icons are an invitation. They invite and lead to a sacred place (or space as some writers prefer) of interaction between the pray-er and the God ‘behind’ the icon. This is particularly understood, for example, in the sense of time. For when pray-ers respond and worship God, they don’t just remember the Christ of the icon, they live and partake in the life of Christ and heaven now. They (through the icons) dwell in the eternal present today. Everything is ‘contemporised.’

The result of this encounter is personal transformation. By gazing upon the icons a person gains a true perspective of themselves and of life. As Henri Nouwen puts it, “The ‘powers and principalities’ control many of our daily images. Posters, billboards, TV, video-cassettes, movies and store windows continually assault our eyes and inscribe their images upon our memories”, therefore we must keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord and icons enable us to do this.¹⁵

Now I believe that from my study there are at least three important ways in which icons are relevant to the task of spiritual direction:

1. Firstly, icons are a significant part of the Christian kataphatic tradition, and as such should be familiar to every spiritual director.

For a start an experiential knowledge of icons would be beneficial for a spiritual director's own spiritual growth¹⁶ by enhancing their sense of the sacramental aspect of all life. It would put them more in touch with another aspect of God's dealings with humanity, as well as adding to their own personal practice and skills.

It would also increase a directors appreciation of the role of symbols and sign play in direction. There are logical connections between working with images, drawing therapy, dreams, visions, and other symbolic, incarnational aspects of life. Many directees encounter God in metaphor, and need a sympathetic director who has the confidence and openness to help them deepen and explore this experience.

2. Secondly, a knowledge of how icons function provides us with some criteria for the evaluation of 'new' spiritual direction techniques. For example, during the recent second year gathering at Waikanae we were briefly introduced to the use of drawing in psychotherapy, and also Interactive Drawing Therapy. An understanding of icons enables us to question and refine the use of such techniques in spiritual development work. For example, icons lead us to encounter Christ in the 'now.' So how do we guide artistic techniques so that people actually encounter Christ? And how do we use drawing so that they encounter God in the 'now,' and not just in the past?

Icons also have a 'tight' canon defining what are spiritual symbols and what are not. This could lead us to ask in direction, 'What are the God signs or symbols found in what we are doing now?'

Icons are also a communal tool in the Orthodox church. They are either in the iconostasis of a church building or in the shrine of a household. They are primarily liturgical, and are specifically for the service of the whole Church.¹⁷ To what extent, then, are modern practices (and even experiences) self-gratifying, individualistic, or linked to a living community of faith?

These are just sample questions but they illustrate how a knowledge of Christian tradition in this area can be beneficial for exploring and enhancing the use of visual tools.

3. Thirdly, icons provide us with another way of looking at the spiritual direction relationship itself.

For a start spiritual direction can be seen as an icon of the divine. An icon is an object which embodies and points to a reality beyond itself with which the pray-er interacts and meets. Without wanting to be too egotistical, it seems that this definition could well apply to a spiritual director and the spiritual direction relationship. For example, Thomas Merton said that the spiritual 'father' was "a kind of 'sacrament' of the Lord's presence in the ecclesiastical community,"¹⁸ and St. Simeon the Theologian said, "A man who has acquired active faith in his father in God when seeing him thinks he sees Christ Himself."¹⁹ Kenneth Leech, quoting Tolstoy's comments on his visit to the *startsy* Amvrosy, says "When one talks with such a man, one feels the nearness of God."²⁰ So the ministry of spiritual direction is in itself an icon.

But beyond that the spiritual direction relationship has many similarities to icon work. For example, in the relationship there often develops a sense of sacred space. As the director and directee mutually gaze upon the workings of God in the human spirit there is an awareness of the Holy Spirit and of sacredness. There is a sense of existential encounter happening 'now',²¹ and the recognition that a third party is involved. There is revelation and mystery.

There is also an element of concentration and focus. There is a need for the director and the directee, in their own way, both to be present and to be still as one is present and attentive with an icon. Joseph Allen defines the quality of this presence for the director as comprising four parts. There is the 'intention' to enter the directees experience. There is the 'focus' upon

the inner meaning of what is being said. There is the need for 'interpretation' (discernment), and eventually 'articulation' (feedback) which leads to dialogue.²² All these could also typify what happens when we interact with an icon. Possibly the same qualities could also be listed for the directee, but overall a quality and clarity of engagement similar to that found in icon work is necessary when working with a directee.

There are also other parallels as well. For example, one learns to value the material, and even mundane, as the place of incarnation. All of life is of significance, even turkeys!²³ Spiritual direction takes up the concrete daily experiences of our lives and gives them sacramental significance, just as the icon picks up a mixture of paint and wood, and becomes a window on the divine.

Spiritual direction like icon work is also a place of transformation, where our innermost values are sifted. So there are many similarities, but essentially the attributes needed for good icon work are also those which are valuable for the role of a spiritual director. Despite the apparent unusualness of icons in the West, maybe the skills needed to forge a spiritual life are not so different wherever we go!?

A favourite icon quotation:

'I saw a door open in heaven' *Revelation 4:1*

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¹ Baggley, J. *Doors of Perception*, p44.

² Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p182.

³ Limouris, G. *Icons-Windows on Eternity*, p110.

⁴ Coniaris, A. *Introducing the Orthodox Church*, p174.

⁵ Limouris, G. *Icons-Windows on Eternity*, p107.

⁶ Ouspensky, O. *Theology of the Icon (I&II)* p40.

⁷ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p172.

⁸ The debate is obviously a lot more complex than this. For a fuller explanation concerning the Iconoclast Crisis, the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and the distinction of the veneration of icons from the worship of God, refer to 'Icons: Windows on Eternity' and, in particular, 'St. John Damascene's Teaching about the Holy Icons' by George D. Dragas.

⁹ This is in contrast to the Western Church which was primarily concerned with the ear, i.e. 'listening.'

¹⁰ Ouspensky, O. *The Meaning of Icons*, p193.

¹¹ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p183.

¹² Nouwen, H.J. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord (Praying with Icons)*, p12.

¹² Ouspensky, O. *The Meaning of Icons*, p39.

¹³ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p184.

BOOK REVIEWS

WE WELL PEOPLE

A Celtic Spirituality of the senses, of awe and wonder and delight
John Hunt. Caxton Press, Christchurch, NZ. 2003 103 pp. \$19.95

Reviewed by Neil Churcher

John Hunt is a fascinating, delightful, impressive sort of person. Whenever I'm in Christchurch I try to go to St. Giles, Papanui, so that I can experience worship under John's leadership. It is always satisfying, intelligent, and inclusive. It also has about it an ingredient of mystery and a depth of prayerfulness that come from John's understanding of who he is within the love of God, an understanding enveloped in his experience of Celtic spirituality.

Not surprisingly, "We Well People" is like John. I think the secret of its success is that it is so personal and so genuine. It is full of simple stories which, though they are mainly out of John's own experience, yet engage easily because they encourage others to match them out of their own experience. The stories lead into suggestions for prayer, often a simple Celtic verse and some lines of John own.

The first part of the book is a very helpful introduction to Celtic spirituality and the Celtic story. Part Two is a month's devotions following the seasons of the year. What a bald description of so many helpful insights! But you have to read it, experience it and pray it for yourself. Then you will be able to accept the suggestion at the end of each page, "Dwell in your sense of well-being".

John's first book, "We Spirited People", has been through a number of printings and is still selling well. This new book has already sold over 1000 copies. Order one soon.

THE GOD WALK

Anna Johnstone. Published by Johnstone Photography. 2003. 80pp \$25.50 posted
Available from the author 2/143A Manuka Road, Glenfield, North Shore City, 1310.

anna@johnstone2.co.nz

Phone/fax 09 444-8409.

Reviewed by Warren Deason

This book is a product of significant imagination and creativity. Creative verbally and creative visually. In a partnership reminiscent of Joy Cowley and her husband Terry Coles, Anna

Johnstone has produced a beautiful volume of meditations and reflections visually enhanced by colour photographs taken by herself and her husband Kerry. Anna has been writing for several years and this volume, *The God Walk*, is the first time a selection of her work has been made available to a wider readership. Anna has a supportive foreword from Eddie Askew and those familiar with his style of written conversation with God will recognise something of that approach in Anna's work. Many of the reflections are based on readings drawn from the three-year lectionary. Anna allows the bible text to become a partner in dialogue - searching to find a heart response within herself that she can share. This response sometimes conveys the affirming recognition of God in loved familiar things as well as the surprising graced joy of new discoveries:

I think of all the years
 I carried a warped picture
 In the album of my heart
 My head knew you loved me
 I couldn't question that...
 I thought I loved you to bits
 But that you "put up with me"
 Because of your job description
 (from 1 John 4:7-19)

Those meditations that don't have a direct connection to a particular text are reflections drawn from Anna's own journey, her own *God Walk*. Some of these engage with much of the stuff of the inner struggle that most of us know as we seek to free ourselves of limiting ways of responding to God's mystery:

I love this soft place of unknowing
 Free to wander
 gentle paths of colour
 content to hold
 hazy thoughts
 allowing them
 to flow unhindered
 then letting words themselves
 slip from my mind
 leaving peace of gold
 which mirrors your heart

This book will be one that you can use for your own meditation, as you seek to deepen your own conversation with the Holy One. Both the words and the photographic images will provide ample fuel. Preachers may find the lectionary-based meditations useful to follow their own exposition. Anna writes that her gift was "discovered late"; fortunately for us, not too late, and we eagerly anticipate future volumes.

ENCOUNTERING THE STILL POINT

A Practical Introduction to Christian Meditation

By Phil Dyer. Tawera Press, 2000. 200 pp

and

THE FOUR PATHS - A Pilgrim's Guide to the Universe

By Phil Dyer, Tawera Press, 2003. 198 pp

Reviewed by Glenda Prosser

Phil Dyer's first book (*Encountering the Still Point*) is a comprehensive explanation and exploration of the art of Christian meditation and contemplative living. The book draws on insights from both the Western and Eastern Orthodox branches of Christianity, as well as the work of Ira Progoff, Anthony de Mello, Matthew Fox, and present day monastic practice. Each of its three parts focuses on one particular type of meditation.

In Part One Phil utilizes four Practicums and Commentaries to introduce the reader to apophatic or Contemplative Meditation. He covers the basics such as relaxation of the body, the use of breath, prayer words (mantras), journaling, incense and oils, music and chanting, as well as some helpful suggestions for dealing with distractions.

Part Two, Reflective Meditation, introduces readers to Lectio Divina and Ignatian prayer and concludes with a four week bible reading programme. Here the Blessing/Creation-centred paradigm is introduced.

Part three, Creative Meditation looks at praying with icons, praying with and understanding dreams, mandalas, dialogue prayer and an introduction to herbalism.

First published in August 2000, The Fifth Printing with revisions (2001) is an Index Edition and now has 4 new appendices. Here, the reader will find that some of the technical details previously included in the body of the book have been separated out for ease of use. There is also a list of local justice and charity groups, and an excellent synopsis of Contemplative Meditation.

The Four Paths, Phil's second book, is a sequel with a difference! This book is written in the style of a novel but it draws much of its structure from the Blessing/Creation-centred paradigm introduced in *Encountering the Still Point*. In *The Four Paths* we meet John, a newcomer to a rural Christian community called "Te Wha Huanui - the Four Paths". Together with John we encounter the members of the community and the teachings of their enigmatic leader, 'The Teacher'. The readers witness John's struggles, as he grows from sceptical newcomer to participating member (and pray-er) within the community, as The Teacher leads him along the four paths of Creation-centre spirituality - Via Positiva, Via Negativa, Via Creativa, and Via Transformativa.

The Four Paths is not just a book to read as one would a normal novel, however - this is a book to be prayed through, to be lived through. To help this process, Phil has devised short reflective exercises at the end of each chapter. These 'invitations to pause awhile' allow the reader to make connections between John's experiences and struggles with prayer and their own.

I have enjoyed both Phil's books. *Encountering the Still Point* is a useful overview of a very broad subject. It is well written, easy to read and very practical. *The Four Paths* is both intellectually satisfying and emotionally engaging. I appreciated the way the Creation-centred approach was enlivened even if I did find the vague figure of The Teacher disturbing. I benefited by thinking and praying through both reactions!

Both books were published by Tawera Press and copies can be obtained from Tawera Press, C/- Wangapeka Study & Retreat Centre, R D 2., Wakefield, Nelson. (or tawerapress@hotmail.com)

BIRDS OUR TEACHERS and PEOPLE MY TEACHERS

Two beautifully presented books by John Stott

Reviewed by Ruth Rosser

Birds Our Teachers.

Candle Books 1999 pp96. \$38.95

John Stott's knowledge of birds, his stunning photography and the scriptural and spiritual applications he reflects on, make this book a very worthwhile devotional and 'coffee table' book.

His interest in birds and the environment began when as a five or six years old he was taken by his father for walks in the countryside being told to "shut my mouth and open my eyes and ears".

Wherever he has gone in the world he has taken his binoculars and camera to pursue his hobby. Such topics as Freedom, Joy, Shelter, Space, Work, Self-esteem, Faith are reflected on and related to birds, encountered in different parts of the world. Sparrows and hummingbirds, eagles and hens all feature to reflect his contemplation on the lessons from God's creation.

There is a intriguing chapter on "The Head of Owls - Facing both ways" with information about the owl's ability to face one way with its body while its head is looking in the opposite direction. He relates this to various aspects of our lives as Christians including the 'already' and 'not yet' of our salvation.

People My Teachers**Around the world in 80 years**

Candle Books 2002 pp140. \$33.95

This book contains some wonderful pictorial images from photographs taken by the author on his travels round the world over many years. People, scenery, animals, buildings of historical interest, dry deserts, busy market places, the portrayal of the icy cold of the Antarctic bring this book to life. His love of our 'feathered friends' is apparent also.

John Stott has drawn an imaginary circle round the globe and plotted sixteen stopping places, where he pauses to introduce a person associated with that place, with whom he has a personal link of some kind, and he says "each has had a distinguished career from which we are still able to learn today". From the first century to the twentieth century, from Wales to Egypt, Africa to India, Nepal to China, and on to Australia, Antarctic, South America, Galapagos, North America, and back to England he introduces seventeen people. "All of them are either committed followers of Jesus Christ or had come under his influence and inspiration." There are "lay people and clergy, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican, explorers, bishops, evangelists, missionaries, scholars, authors, doctors and martyrs."

An interesting combination of geography, travel, history, scriptural reference and spiritual insight makes this book a fascinating read.

SCARRED BY STRUGGLE, TRANSFORMED BY HOPE

Joan Chittister. Eerdmans 2003

Reviewed by Ross Miller

This profoundly strengthening book flows from two things. One is Joan Chittister's own account of how as a young nun she was required to abandon her dream of becoming a writer, and how as the years went by she received the gift back again in a new and wonderful way. The other is the paradigm of Jacob's struggle with the mysterious stranger at Peniel, told in Genesis 32: 22-32.

One of the fundamental monastic requirements is obedience, a quality not well understood in the modern church, and certainly anathema to much of the culture we find ourselves living in. This book tells us how this woman's encounter with obedience turned out to be a rich journey indeed. The word obedience comes to us from the Latin *ob-audire*, which has primarily to do with listening, being available to hear, to learn, to understand.

I found the constant return to the story of Jacob and the stranger intensely moving and illuminating. Joan Chittister's chapters start with loss and suffering, bewilderment and sorrow - and then, chapter after chapter, alternate between Struggle and Gift:

The struggle of change
- the gift of conversion

The struggle of isolation
- the gift of independence

The struggle of darkness
- the gift of faith

The struggle with fear
- the gift of courage

The struggle with powerlessness
- the gift of surrender

The struggle of vulnerability
- the gift of limitations

The struggle of exhaustion
- the gift of endurance

The struggle of scarring
- the gift of transformation...

..all leading to the final chapters on hope and resurrection. We follow Jacob through his encounter in the darkness, and recognise our own stories on just about every page.

The church at its best is a company of the wounded, the violated, the sinful. Jesus said there was not much he could do for other sorts. The remarkable young Frenchwoman Simone Weil, who scarcely survived the Nazi occupation of her country, distinguished between suffering - which she saw as the normal wear and tear of life, although often very severe - and affliction (*Fr. malheur*) which she said makes God appear to be absent. She writes that the soul has to go on loving in this abyss, or at least wanting to love. This is the depth at which Joan Chittister is writing.

(It is interesting to note that Joan Chittister is to be the guest speaker at the annual John Main Seminar of the World Council for Christian Meditation, this year in Vermont, in July.)

OTHER BOOKS

Lilian Barger

Eve's Revenge

Women and a Spirituality of the Body

Baker Books 224pp. \$33.95 A woman-friendly perspective on traditional theological questions.

Frederick Buechner

Beyond Words

Daily readings in the ABC's of faith
Harper, San Francisco. 2004. 448pp. \$US13.97

Ross Clifford and Philip Johnson

Jesus and the Gods of the New Age

Communicating Christ in Today's spiritual Supermarket
Lion. 2001 224pp. UK 8.99 pounds

Iona Abbey Music Book

Wild Goose. 155pp 61 Songs. \$49.95

Conversations

A new journal of "conversations" round 5 themes: Honesty About the Journey, Life Together, Transformational Theology, Streams of Living Water, Classical Spiritual Exercises. Editors: David Brenner, Larry Crabb, Gary Moon. Two issues a year, \$US 21.00. Website:
www.conversationsjournal.com

Alan Jamieson

Called Again

In and beyond the deserts of faith
Philip Garside 168pp \$29.95

Sheila Pritchard

The Lost Art of Meditation

Deepening your prayer life.
Scripture Union 2003. 120pp. \$22.95

David Tacey

The Spirituality Revolution

The emergence of contemporary spirituality
Harper Collins, Australia. 250pp. \$34.95

Tacey argues that the growing popularity of alternative spirituality is a sign of a new phase in the spiritual development of the West.

Through The Whirlwind

Proceedings of Disability, Spirituality and Faith Network Aotearoa New Zealand conference "Through The Whirlwind" held in Wellington in May 2003. 150pp. Includes contributions from Christopher Newell, Mary Caygill and Huhana Hickey plus coverage of 22 workshops. \$22.00 NZ orders, \$30.00 overseas orders from dsfnetwork@whirlwind.dns2go.com

Kay Lindahl

The Sacred Art of Listening

Forty reflections for cultivating a spiritual practice.

Wild Goose Pub. www.ionabooks.com 2002 140pp. \$39.95

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Thank you to all contributors for the material included in this issue. It makes a rich resource. Our theme for the next Refresh is pilgrimage and we invite writers to submit material for consideration - or if you have an idea for an article check with the Editor.

FOR REFLECTION

*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you
in the watches of the night.*

Psalm 63:5-6 NRSV

* * * * *

*This is the Body of Christ
broken that we may be whole.
This cup as promised by God,
true to his word, cradles our Lord.
Food for the good of the soul.*

Wild Goose Worship Group CD
There is one among us. 7

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SACRED SILENCE
Joy Cowley

As we come near holy ground,
we undress our minds

and lay the garments of habitation
 at the side of the road.
 We do not carry the judgements
 that we place on others and ourselves.
 We let fall our notions of evil,
 our desire for goodness.
 These too, must go by the way.
 Next we take off our religious shoes,
 all those ideas about worship,
 and the words we use to measure God.
 They have a place in our lives
 but not in this inner sanctum.

Do we feel naked?
 Do we feel vulnerable?

Then it is time to proceed,
 bare and simple, to the place
 where we will be clothed
 in the radiance of Love
 far beyond human thought.

* * * * *

Luxury
 sheer luxury
 Time to sit
 sprawled out
 in body and soul
 to watch the leaves
 dance shadows of pink
 to smile the peace
 which gentles me
 to breathe in
 jewels of contentment
 Still water rest
 flows softly through
 my spirit
 Soft words
 float past my soul
 drawing me deeply
 into you

Anna Johnstone

* * * * *

Anselm learned the balanced crafts of labour, rest and prayer. After twelve years of monastic life, the elements of living a fulfilled life were broadly in position. A planetary motion of doubt, certainty, joy, anguish, loneliness and boredom, each on their own trajectory, encircled an evolving contentment. And very, very occasionally, when he wasn't looking, the Lord of the Dance brushed past.

William Brodrick

The Sixth Lamentation. P34

* * * * *

I am the unbeliever
Waiting at an empty tomb
For so long now I have been outside
And mourned your leaving

But someone came by today
As I washed my calloused knees
Asked me what I was doing here
That you had long since gone

How is that I never knew
Waited so long in this place of death
I thought that I would always know
Where your presence fled

But somehow in the pride of me
I had forgotten who you are
Lover of the free and wild
Uncluttered by the teaching of man

I looked at the clothes I wore
Coloured with the hues of Pentecost
Layered with the doctrines of years
Embroidered in patterns of flesh

I no longer felt the breath of wind
As it washed my heart with presence
My feet were covered with sandals of pride
Unwilling to walk in the stench of poverty

I am the unbeliever
Waiting at the abandoned tomb
Surrounded by the faithless ones
Kneeling in their selfish hope

But someone came today
As I fondled my rosaried heart
Asked me why I still remained
Prostrate before the emptiness

I will take my leave now
Discard the robes of emptiness
Walk naked through the streets again
Feeling your breath in my shame

For I know no other pleasure
Than your caress on my heart
Your kiss upon my spirit
The pain of walking barefoot

Anna Dixon
Easter Day 2004

* * * * *

A SONG OF THE SEASONS
John Hunt

For summer, autumn, winter, spring,
A celebration song I sing.
I sing for every season's treasure,
Each season's gift of love and pleasure.

I love the summer's gift of sun;
The autumn's gold for everyone;
The winter's mountain-top snow-scene;
And spring-time's coming, warm and green.

I sing of seasons past and new,
The threshold times we journey through;
The ending, new-beginning days,
The promise of God's love always.

I sing of seasons of my years,
Of summer smiles, of winter tears,
Of autumn death, of spring new-birth,
My life as one with all the earth.

* * * * *

O wind that sways no branches,
fire that does not burn,
unimaginable light
that does no blind,
fountain of life that has no end,
infinite river of joy,
flawless mirror
of God's power,
kind laughing agent
of God's mirth,
gentle consolation
of God's mercy,
O Holy Spirit of God,
abide with your people;
come to us now ...

Garth House

* * * * *

We have all seen more

than we let on,
even to ourselves.
Through some moment
of beauty or pain,
some sudden turning
of our lives,
we catch glimmers
at least of what
the saints are blinded by;
only then unlike saints
we tend to go on
as if nothing had happened.

Frederick Buechner

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