

## Silence on Fire William Shannon

### *The Prayer of Awareness*

*“Help me to live in Your Presence”*

*“May I experience the Joy of Life in Your Presence”*

*“I will walk in the Presence of the Lord in the land of the living” Ps 116:8*

### 1 – **Two Approaches to Spirituality**

*“It is Thou”*

When I become aware of God’s Presence, I can only say *“It is Thou.”* 16

**A spirituality of devotion** – more about *doing* than about *being*, more about *behavior* than about *consciousness*, more about doing God’s will by carrying out God’s commands and doing the devotional things that please God rather than about experiencing God as God truly is. It was clearly a “spirituality of dualism” that stresses the transcendence of God and God’s separateness from the world and from us. Even if divine condescension allows me to achieve some kind of communion with God, I must still speak of separateness when I speak to God. I must say “It is I.” 21

It would maintain that it is simply a misunderstanding of the transcendence of God to conceive of God as “there” and creatures as “here.” On the contrary, once God chose to create, God’s transcendence necessarily flowed into God’s immanence. 22

It is important that we realize that the transcendence of God excluded any notion that God is one existent among other existents. Rather,

***God is the Ground of all that exists.***

***God is the immanent One, that One who is present in all things as the Source whence they come and as the Ground in which they continue to be.***

***God is in all and all exist because of God and in God.*** 22

“We should have an immanent approach to prayer. God is not an Object... God is Subject, a deeper “I.” ***He is the Ground of my subjectivity. God wants to know Himself in us.*** Merton 22

How to attain **Union With God**: ***We must realize that we are already united with God. Contemplative prayer is nothing other than “the coming into consciousness” of what is already there.*** “We must love God as our other self, our truer and deeper self.” Merton 22

**The Two Pillars:** This understanding of “God as the Ground of all that is” and of contemplative prayer as “becoming conscious of what is already there” are the two pillars. 22

*“The **happiness** of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of love for which there can be no explanations.”* Merton 23

Underling all (reality), in the deepest depths that we cannot possibly see, lies an ultimate ground in which all **contradictories** are united and all come out “right.” For a Christian this ultimate Ground is personal, it is a ground of freedom and love. Merton 23

***It is in this “Ground of Love,” in which I am at all times, that I find my identity, my uniqueness, and my interrelatedness.*** Yet I can find myself and my interrelations with other people in God, *only if I am aware that I am in God’s Presence.* The **task of prayer**, is to help me to achieve this conscious awareness that I am indeed in God. That is why I suggest that if the truth of God as the Ground of love of all things is one pillar of contemplative spirituality, the other pillar is the understanding of contemplative prayer as the way of arriving at the awareness of what already is. I am in God. But I must realize it. What this means, in very practical terms, is that I don’t have to worry about “getting anywhere” in prayer, because I am already there. I simply have to become aware of this. 23

***We do not really become contemplative.*** For we are – all of us – contemplatives in the root and ground of our being. For at the root of our being we are one with God, one with one another, one with the world in which we live. Spending time in prayer, must not be looked upon as a means of achieving this oneness, but of recognizing that it is there. Prayer does not make us contemplatives; rather it can make us aware that we truly are contemplatives, but at a level of perception we do not often achieve. Prayer, silence, and solitude are moments of grace that can awake us to the contemplative side of our being. We need to be awakened to it. It is there for the awakening. 23,24

***Zen saying:*** “If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are.” We are all contemplatives in the center of our being, in that Hidden Ground of Love. That is the way things are, whether we understand or not. But what a difference it makes when we do understand! 24

If the **Two Pillars** of contemplative spirituality are (1) God as the Ground of Love in whom all things are and (2) awareness of God as the ultimate meaning of prayer, it may be said that the intuition that enables us to identify and articulate those two pillars is the experience of creaturehood or of radical dependence. 24

Awareness of God and of God’s Being become a light that reveals to me my own nothingness. I see only God in me. I am no longer there. I am able at last to voice the password of contemplative spirituality - *It is Thou.* 24

**Nondualism** - For I cannot be separated, even for an instant, from God who is the ground of being in whom alone I find my being, my identity, my uniqueness. The equation of prayer would have to be: God plus me equals, not two, but one. 25

***If I exist, I must exist in God. Where I am God is, or more properly, I am where God is. There is no place else where I could be. This I become alive to in prayer.*** 25

To sum up, the two poles of contemplative spirituality are God as the Ground of Love and prayer as awareness of this. 25

In contemplation, it is in forgetting myself that I find God and discover my true self in God. *Since my true identity is in God, I can indeed say - It is Thou.* 26

*Change of Consciousness* – Contemplative spirituality would agree with the devotional school of spirituality in saying that constant change or conversion, the biblical reality of *metanoia*, is a necessary imperative of the spiritual life. But where as devotional spirituality would want to think of such change primarily in terms of behavior, ***contemplative spirituality***, without being unmindful of this kind of change, would tend to stress the need for a change in consciousness. It is not enough that we behave better - *we must come to see reality differently.* We must learn to see the depths of things, not just reality at a superficial level. *This especially means we need to see the nonseparateness of the world from God and the oneness of all reality in God: the Hidden Ground of Love in all that is.* Prayer is a kind of corrective lens that does away with the distorted view of reality that, for some mysterious reason, seems to be my normal vision, and enables me to see what is as it really is. 27

*Two Concluding Points* – It is not enough to know what contemplation and prayer of awareness mean; we need to know also where they lead us. ***The answer is that they lead us to all our sisters and brothers...*** For if I am one with God, so are all of my sisters and brothers. The contemplative finds the Ground of Love in all reality. This is what Merton means when he says that contemplation is “an awakening to the Real within all that is real.” (New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 3). 27

In finding God Merton found the rest of reality and especially he found his fellow men and women; and he discovered them, not as a faceless mass, but as individual persons, each distinct and unique in the eyes of God, all bound together in a network of interlocking relationships, and each finding his/her identity and uniqueness in God Who is for all the Hidden Ground of Love. This is what human personhood meant to Merton and what it must mean to us: the discovery of our oneness with our brothers and sisters in God. When we come to realize our dependence on God and also the dependence of all reality on God, we experience a sense of interdependence with all God’s people, and at the same time the responsibility we have toward them. ***True contemplation inevitably creates a social consciousness.*** I must reach beyond the moral problems that engage me individually and become involved in the social issues confronting men and women of my day and age. ***I cannot really be aware of God if I am not at the same time aware of my sister and brothers. For they, like men and women, are – in God*** 28

Thus, when I find the One, I find the Many. 28

And yet I remain a contemplative. I do not think there is a contradiction, for I think at least some contemplatives must try to understand the providential events of the day. God works in history, therefore a contemplative who has no sense of history, no sense of historical responsibility, is not full a Christian contemplative... 28

Just as we must see that spiritually is not something we have as a part of our lives, but something we are, something we live, so more and more we need to realize that we shall come to understand contemplative prayer, not through words, but through experience. 29

I don't really want to write about "spiritual things." I have gradually developed a nausea about talking about (contemplation). Except when I really have to. The words sound too empty and trivial. I just don't feel like spinning out a lot of words about God and prayer. I feel in fact immensely poor and fallible, but I don't worry about it. ***I just live.*** (School of Charity, p. 323). Merton

***"I just live."*** These three brief words may well sum up all that I have been trying to say about contemplative spirituality. We just live – in God and with awareness that we are in God's Presence. We approach God in confident love with three other brief words: ***"It is Thou."*** These two verbal trinities ("I just live" and "It is Thou") produce different sounds, but their meaning is the same. 29

## 2 – Living in the Presence of God

*"Help me to live in Your Presence"*

Spiritual apartheid – 31

***We need to be truly aware that we are in the Presence of God.*** Everything that exists must of necessity *be* in the Presence of God, but only God's human creatures are able to *be aware* that they are in the Presence of God.... For we alone have the marvelous capacity, properly human, of being able to be *aware* of God. 32

We need to realize the difference between *being in the Presence of God* and *being alive to that fact*. Being in the Presence of God is the necessary condition of our existence. God is the *Source* of my being and the *Ground* of my existence which enable me to continue in being. In other words, ***being in the Presence of God is not something I choose – it is reality to acknowledge.*** 33

*Being in the Presence of God*, therefore is in no sense a problem that we have to deal with in our spiritual life. It isn't something we have to achieve. For it is already and always there: it is the essential condition that goes with being a creature. What very often is a problem for us is that we are not sufficiently aware that we are in the Presence of God. 34

***Awareness of God*** at its deepest level is not so much something we *do* but something we *are*. 34

*To be aware of something does not mean to be thinking about it. Awareness* is something very personal: an experience that in some way tends to be unitive. Thinking, on the other hand (whether about God or about anything else), tends to divide: it implies a subject thinking and a object that is thought about. Awareness or attentiveness is a very different experience. A *true sense* of awareness reduces the distance between me and what I am aware of. A *very deep sense* of attentive awareness *closes the gap* between me and that of which I am aware. It brings us together. It unites. 34,35

*Awareness* is not doing, but ***being***: being with something or someone. It means communion, oneness. In fact, in a deep experience of attentive awareness, the subject-object dichotomy disappears. I am not aware of *something*. **I am simply aware.** 35

**HE IS** and this reality absorbs everything else – New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 167

Conscious Awareness – Contemplation is “waking up,” is “coming alive” to this most important reality of my existence. In moments of silent, quiet, emptying prayer, this awareness may surface in my life and I experience this awareness of God – which is at the same time an awareness of myself and all things else in God. 37

Contemplation is the silent hearing of this question “Am I not your God who created you?” and the silent answering: “Yes,” but with the acute awareness that the question and the “yes” must be understood, not as something we hear and say, but *something we are*. *The question and the answer put me squarely in God*. Apart from God I am not an answer; I am not even a question. I am nothing. 38

Awareness does not see *God as an object*. For I as a separate subject simply do not exist. Nor can God ever be conceived of as an object even as an object of thought and reflection. As soon as we try to grasp God in our thought and reflection (that is, as soon as we make God the Object our thought and reflection) God disappears from our consciousness. What replaces our consciousness of God’s Presence is the construct of our thoughts and words: not God, but what we think or say about God. 38

Happiness of true self is “the happiness of being at one with everything in that Hidden ground of Love for which there are no explanation.” 39

The goal of any true spirituality is to make us aware – aware not only of God but of ourselves and of the great wide world of people and things. Becoming aware is really an awakening: we are roused from the sleep of spiritual apartheid and we become truly alive. 39

“Continual Prayer” – continual openness to God, attentiveness, listening, disposability, etc. 40

In terms of *Zen*, *it is not awareness of but simple awareness*. So that if one deliberately cultivates a distinct consciousness of anything, any object, one tends to frustrate one's objective – or God's objectives. If one just thinks of it in terms of loving God all the time in whatever way is most spontaneous and simple, then perhaps the error can be avoided. 40

We are always in God, whether we are aware of it or not. 41

Repeating this prayer – often – can be most fruitful. For it is *awareness* of being in God's Presence that changes our lives. The goal of our prayer, is to become aware of the divine Presence and continually to deepen that awareness. Deepening our awareness of the Holy Presence means that we shall come to *live* in the Presence with greater attentiveness during the whole of our day. 41

### **3 – Experiencing the Joy of God's Presence** “*May I experience the Joy of Life in Your Presence*”

Exodus, Ch 3 – one of the most important sections in the Bible for directing our thinking about God. 45

The Christian answer is deceptively simple. First God is *always present* as a ‘Saving God.’ Second, there is only one sign of God's Saving Presence and that is the ‘experience of being saved.’ 47

It is only because we are in God's Presence that we are preserved moment to moment from falling into the abyss of nothingness. Every second of our lives, we are being saved by God: saved from annihilation, extinction, nothingness. In the very fact of existing at all we are experiencing God's Saving Presence. 48

Other ways in which God is continually saving me. Not just from annihilation, but from sin and stupidity, from possessiveness and acquisitiveness. Not that we do not put up a fight at times to hang on to our sinfulness and greed and self-seeking. But God is ever there calling, encouraging, and waiting. 48

If we are truly to have this experience of joy, we must heed the warning about spiritual apartheid, the “apart-hood” that tries to set up divisions in our lives and tell us what is “spiritual” and what is not. We must not allow this spiritual apartheid to make us think that there are some areas of our lives that related to salvation and other areas that have nothing to do with it. Especially we need to avoid the attitude that, if we enjoy it, it probably is unrelated to salvation; and if it's hard, it may well have something to do with salvation. Or worse still, the attitude that if it's a “sacred” object or action, it has something to do with salvation; but if it's a “secular” object or action, it probably doesn't have anything to do with salvation. Or the mentality that if it's done in church, it probably has to do with our salvation, but if it is done at home or at work, it probably doesn't. 49

The Ground is not an abstraction, much less an intellectual construct. The Ground that gives being and sustenance to all that is (including the highest beings of all – people) must be personal. The words we use to describe personal giving is “Love.” God is the Hidden Ground of Love, or according to John “God is Love.” 53

I can say “I shall withhold my love from this person” but God cannot say this. For the God whom Jesus has revealed to us - in striking ways different from the God of the Hebrew Bible – is a God of unconditional Love. Love does not flow from God to us because God sees something in us that moves Him to love us. No, love flows from God because of what God is in Himself: **God ‘is’ love.** 53

God’s very Being demands that God’s Presence be a Saving Presence. God is always present to save. Another way of putting this is to say that God does not punish. Our sinfulness or sometimes evil ways may bring hurt to us, but this is not punishment from God. For God’s love for us does not depend on what we do but on who God is. 53

“**Healthy Guilt**” – It is those who feel no guilt whom we should really fear. Feeling guilt is a grace, a rich organic manure, just the thing for healthy growth. Let us be loud in its praise and sing in chorus: we may be guilty, but we’re feeling fine. 54

Understanding God's Love means that we must banish forever the notion that God ever deals with us in a hurtful way. This understanding can also take us a big step toward deepening our perception of what it is we are talking about when we refer to contemplation and to the prayer of awareness. Thus far we have struggled through two basic truths. The first is that we are always in the Presence of God (and can be “nowhere” else): the second is that prayer (especially wordless prayer) is being aware, being conscious, of that Presence. Now we are in a position to take our thinking a bit further: if God is Love, then “our always being in the Presence of God” can be re-expressed as “always being in Love,” and our understanding of (wordless) prayer as “awareness of the Holy Presence” can be defined as “awareness of Love.” 55

Since we are talking about the love that is the very condition of our existence, to “fall out of Love,” would mean falling out of existence. It would mean ceasing to be. To be God’s creature is to ‘be’ always ‘in Love.’ To prayer is to ‘be aware’ that one is always ‘in Love.’ 55

May the invitation be to reflect on the saving character of the Holy Presence, always with the realization that it is the Presence of Love, and to say quietly, deeply, and often the prayer: “May I experience the Joy of Life in Your Presence.” 55

#### **4 – From Awareness of God to Awareness of People**

*“I will walk in the Presence of the Lord in the land of the living” – Ps 116:8*

Nothing exists “apart from God.” For God is the Hidden Ground of Love in which all reality finds its being, its identity, its uniqueness. Once God chose to create, it became impossible to think of God without thinking of all of us and all of reality. 56

The Tendency to Make God an “**Object**” – When we think of God as an Object, then we compare God to “other objects” and we think that true contemplative prayer means preferring God to all these “other objects.” 57

The unutterable confusion of those who think that God is a mental object and that to “love God alone” is to exclude all other objects and concentrate on this one! Fatal. Yet that is why so many misunderstand the meaning of contemplation and solitude...” 57

We do not turn away from the world to find God; *it is rather that in finding God we discover our world in a whole new way.* True contemplation involves a *total emptiness* (i.e., being empty of all separateness) and a *total fullness* (being at one with the Source and Ground of all things and at one with everything else in that Hidden Ground). 57

By “*being attentive*,” by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained; the happiness of being at one with everything in that Hidden Ground of Love for which there can be no explanation. 58

The “dualities” seem real to us. Merton ‘locates’ true happiness in “being at one” with everything. And that oneness is no pantheistic or impersonal experience, for it springs from a “hidden ground” and that “Ground” is personal, for it is the “Ground of Love.” 59

This happiness cannot be ‘explained;’ nor can the Hidden Ground of Love in which it is to be found. But it can be achieved by *attentiveness*, by *listening*. For most of us, Merton seems to be suggesting, “listening” – which should be as natural to us as breathing – is in fact something we have to discover in ourselves or, ‘recover’ (for it is always there). 59

Merton is telling us is that when we discover God – not our ideas or someone else’s idea of God, but “the living God,” *the God who is beyond words and thoughts and ideas* – we experience the joy of being in God and, because we are in God, we experience the joy of “being at one with everything.” And this oneness is not something anonymous and impersonal, but involves the deepest possible communication with God and with our sisters and brothers. 59

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but “*communion*.” It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. 59

“**The Living God**” – This experience of oneness comes, when we become aware of the ‘living God;’ not of a God whom we have constructed in our minds, with our thoughts and ideas, or a God whom some theologian has constructed for us, but truly the “living God.” Hebrews states “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” It is so easy to be content to live with a God who is not really “alive” – a God who is an abstraction or a God whom we approach only at times of worship – and even then

generally through an intermediary. Sometimes our God may be no more than a projection of our needs, our fears, or our desires. In genuine contemplation (and also in moments at least of the prayer of awareness) one meets the 'living God,' bare-handed, with no gloves on, so to speak. The experience can be fearful, even dangerous. For it turns our world inside out and upside down. It transforms our consciousness and forces us to see 'reality' in a new and totally different light. It makes us see reality as God sees it. It takes us beneath or beyond the superficial consciousness that knows only seeming separateness, alienation, manipulation, and dehumanization of people. It sees what so many cannot see, that "being at one" of all things in the hidden ground of Love. In terms of persons it enables us to see "the whole Christ," the "cosmic Christ." In experiencing this wondrous reality – that all men and women are linked together with one another in interlocking relationships that make them truly one – we are really experiencing (in a Christian context, at least ) what Paul means when he speaks of "being in Christ." 59, 60

"**Prayer**" ceases to be simply a prayer-exercise and becomes an ongoing dimension in one's life. It's not anymore just something we 'do' at certain times; it is something we 'are' habitually. We begin to live our life in conscious awareness of this "at-oneness" of all things. 60

The **World** is not just a physical space traversed by jet planes and full of people running in all directions. It is a complex of responsibilities and options, made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all. 61, 62

*We have to create a world in which people genuinely care for one another.* And the way to begin this is to start with ourselves: namely, genuinely to care for all those whose lives we touch and even more – those whose lives we could touch if we made the effort to do so... It is a matter of 'the way' we treat people. Just as we must take seriously the need for inclusive language, so we have to take seriously the responsibility of inclusive care. We must not pick and choose those to whom we offer our care – we must care for those whom God has place in our lives, insofar as we have the time and the resources to do so. 63

We need to have a vision before we can realize it. We need to have a dream before we can bring it to fulfillment. Three attitudes on our part are called for, if we are to be *genuinely caring persons* – first, a willingness to enter into 'dialogue' with people with whom we don't always agree; second, a deep sense of 'compassion' (which means the ability to enter into the sufferings of other) and, third, a deliberate, chosen stance of 'nonviolence' in all our relationships. These are the attitudes that will enable us to "walk in the Presence of the Lord in the land of the living." These are the ways we must deal with the people we meet "in the land of the living." 63

'*Dialogue*' has to do primarily with things of the mind, especially where we have differences with people about how we should think and act. '*Compassion*' is primarily a matter of the heart that goes out to those in need regardless of how we may disagree with

them and their way of thinking. '*Nonviolence*' is a spirit that characterizes our love for others. What it especially does to our love is to make it unconditional. 63

"Dialogue" – has as its goal a sharing of the truth. It is not just that I want to share my truth with another. It is also that I want to share the truth the other has that I do not have. A dialogue differs from a debate. The "debate" comes from Old France and means literally "to batter someone down."

"Debate" is a verbal exchange in which you try to win, to get the better of your opponent. But the other is seen as an opponent, an adversary, whom you must "batter down," not physically, but with words. 64

"Listening," truly listening, really hearing what the other has to say is essential for true dialogue. 64

"Compassion" – the movement of the heart striving to share the pain of another. 64

"*The bowels of mercy*" may indeed sound earthy, but it makes very graphic the fact that true compassion rises out of the center of our being: where we are most fully ourselves and most profoundly aware of our oneness with God and with our sisters and brothers. The Gospel picture of Jesus' compassion calls us to get inside ourselves and draw forth the marvelous reservoir of mercy and compassion that are there. 65

We need to be ready to touch people with the bowels of mercy: to be compassionate as Jesus was, as our Father in heaven is compassionate. This surely is "to walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living." 66

"**Nonviolence** – it's about the way we deal with people, especially when there is disagreement or conflict... One can be caught in violence's webs before one knows it. The need to justify ourselves, to prove what we are right and the other person is wrong – there are very human weaknesses that easily lead to violence. Violence not in vicious ways, but in thoughtless ways, in ways that bring out the worst in people instead of the best. 66

**Nonviolence** is not passivity. It has to confront the other with the truth. But how to do this in a nonviolent way and without giving the smug impression that I have all the truth – this is the problem and the challenge that nonviolence offers. Also there is the problem and the challenge to see the truth that is in the other, the truth that the other is trying to say, but may be saying so poorly that I can never hear it unless I am truly practiced in nonviolence. There is so much needless misunderstanding between good people, and I am convinced that so often it is cause of hidden aggressions in ourselves that we don't even recognize. 67

The other side of nonviolence is unconditional love. 67

We are to **love**, ‘as He loves us.’ In loving we must, become Him. We must love with this kind of love. 68

The root question must always be: do we love one another as Jesus love us? Are we striving (earnestly, however unsuccessfully ) to live what He did: unconditional love? 69

## 5 – **Obstacles to Awareness**

*“The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure lying buried in a field.”* Mt 13:44

One of the problems about our prayers that we have to face concerns not so much what we do at the time we are praying, but what we are doing the rest of the time of our day. So often our awareness of who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it is at a kind of semiconscious level. “We have the instruments for exploring all sorts of things, but we can no longer see directly what is right in front of us” – Merton 72

*Age quod agis* – “**Do what you’re doing.**” “Do the thing that you are supposed to be doing here and now, not something else.” 73

We must do what we are doing and give our whole attention to it. This is really what “ordinary awareness” is all about: it means doing one thing at a time with full attention, watchfulness, and consciousness. 74

We all have the tendency to live with only one foot in the present and the other in the past or the future. When this happens, we miss the richness of the present, because we are not really fully aware of it. ***We aren’t fully aware, because we are not fully in the present.*** So often we do something in order to be able to do something else: our thoughts are so concentrated on the ‘something else’ that we don’t really experience what we are doing. We are continually jockeying back and forth between past and future so that we often are not really there to the present. We are not truly aware of what is ‘now.’ We don’t enjoy what we are doing now, because our thoughts are on what we are going to be doing next. And because our thoughts are diverted away from the present, we are never fully aware of what we are doing here and now. 74, 75

The **Zen** master once said to his pupil: “When you walk, walk. When you eat, eat.” Many people, when they walk are only intent on the place to which they are going. They are not really experiencing the walking. They do not even notice that they are walking. And many people, when they eat, are more involved in making plans about what they will be doing after they eat. This inattention to what they are doing means that they scarcely advert to what they are eating or to the fact that they are eating. They certainly are not taking joy in the awareness of the fact that they are eating. 75

This kind of absence from the present moment makes it difficult for us to be truly aware. For the ‘past’ is the reality that was, but is no more; the ‘future’ is the reality that will be but is not yet. It is the ‘present’ that is real. If we are out of touch with the present, we

are really out of touch with the truly real. This makes it almost impossible for us to shift our attention when we go to pray and have that simple awareness that will enable us to be in touch with God.. 75

All this is to say that attentiveness to the present moment can be a great help toward deepening our awareness of the Presence of God. For such attentiveness to the present moment gathers our being into one. This makes it possible for us more easily to experience our oneness with God. 75

Factors that make it difficult for us to live in the present moment – (1) certain things that are a part of our culture and (2) certain things that are a part of our personality structure. Three things in our culture as deterrents to true awareness – (1) busyness, (2) the addiction of our culture to productivity and efficiency, and (3) quite simply, the noise that saturates our lives so pervasively that we don't seem to be able to escape it. 75

The appointment book is the symbol of our age. So many of us are slaves to our schedules, keeping this or that appointment, with one eye on the clock lest we miss the next one. While we are doing one thing half our attention is on what we will be doing next. ***We act so often as if we belonged to time and had a responsibility to it instead of time belonging to us.*** We have to learn the lesson that there is no way of being aware “in a hurry.” There is no way of seeing what is in front of us if we are always looking past it. You can't build friendships on the run. You can't see a flower unless you look at it. “**Don't think; look**” – Wittgenstein. 76

“Still – in a way – nobody sees a flower – really – it is so small – we haven't time – and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes times” - Hoffman, 76

***To see takes time.*** Friendship takes time. Arriving at a sense of well-being takes time. So too prayer takes time. To hasten though prayer is hardly to pray. 76

Another deterrent from a true awareness of what ‘is,’ and that is the production-oriented culture we live in and the relentless influence it exercises on us, sweeping us into its feverish compulsion always to be doing things that are useful. Such an attitude is almost fatal to prayer, especially prayer of awareness. For this kind of prayer is not intended to produce anything. Its whole meaning is simply to make us more fully aware of God and of all reality, in other words to make us aware not of something new, but simply aware of what is. 77

We can be so obsessed with ‘doing’ that we have no time and no imagination left for being. As a result we can be valued not for what we are but for what we ‘do’ or what we ‘have’ – for their usefulness. When a person is reduced to his function, he is placed in a servile, alienated condition. He exists ‘for’ someone else or even worse for some ‘thing’ else... Even the fun we have is for a purpose. It is justified not by its gratuity, its simple celebration, but by its utility. It makes us feel better, therefore helps us to function better... get ahead in life. Merton 77

Why we aren't happy according to Merton: Because of our servility. The whole celebration is empty because it is "useful." *'We have not yet rediscovered the primary usefulness of the useless.'* From this loss of any sense of being, all capacity to live for the sake of living... comes the awful frustrated restlessness of our world obsessed with "doing" so that even "having fun" becomes a job... a veritable production, even a systematic campaign. 77

We have to learn to let go of some of the things that clutter our lives so mercilessly. ***We have to strive to be less busy and more quiet.*** We have to find a quiet time each day and perhaps also a quiet day at least once a month. God tells us through the psalmist: **"Be still and know that I am God."** God is One whom we experience in our present. ***If we want to learn to be aware of God's Presence, we have to learn also to be more fully aware of the present moment.*** 78

Bad thoughts to be concerned about – thoughts that divide us, that fragment our being, that undo our inner unity. Thoughts that keep us chained to the past or that thrust us out of the present into the future. Thoughts of anger, not just the momentary anger that a particular situation may give rise to, but the anger that is harbored and nursed, the anger that wants to show up another, get even with another, prove yourself right and them wrong. Thoughts of dissatisfaction with one's life-situation. Not the momentary thing but something that is dwelled on, something one holds others responsible for and continues to sulk, interiorly, because no one seems concerned to change the things that one thinks ought to be changed. Thoughts of selfishness and self-seeking and wounded pride. Thoughts of jealousy and distrust, the desire to "get even" with someone who I believe has mistreated me. Thoughts of animosity and violence.

Thoughts of resentment, bitterness, and hurt feelings that can be an especially damaging temptation to people who don't always have a strong "support system." 79, 80

These brooding, disturbing thoughts in us represent what is really a false, illusory self in us, a self that is untrue to our best instincts, a self that is untrue to the image of God that we are. It is this false and illusory self that can prevent one from being one's true self, able to live in full awareness of the present moment and therefore properly disposed to that awareness of the Presence of God – which is the heart of prayer. 80

## 6 – Helps to Awareness: Letting Go, Waiting, Accepting

*"The meaning is in the waiting"* R S Thomas

"Letting Go" – This is a time of letting go of the things that encumber us. For we come to prayer, at least this kind of prayer, not to solve our problems, but to set them aside – so that by doing nothing and becoming empty, ***we can restore some measure of unity and depth to our lives.*** 83, 84

There is a certain value in just disciplining oneself to be "empty" and to spend a certain time ***doing nothing.*** Those who can try an hour a day of this will soon find that instead of going nuts they may profit by it more than they expected. Walking in the garden is

permitted in such “empty” periods, but no talking, no reading, no formal prayer, just plain nothing. Merton 84

We do need to let go, if only for the short period of our prayer, and do nothing. 84

We have to learn to recognize God’s Presence in these tasks that our life-situation place upon us. God’s Presence in the land of the living. ‘Letting go’ of everything for a brief time each day and ‘*simply being*’ during that time, will help us to grasp an essential principle of well-being, namely that, no matter how much there is that we must do, it is not our ‘doing,’ but our ‘being’ that enables us to identify who we are. A life spent in doing can be very destructive of a human person, if they never come to know the personal identity of the one who does all these things. *Well-doing by itself can never bring well-being.* 85

In many areas of our lives “letting go” needs to be, not just a momentary experience that continues only for the brief time set aside for prayer; it has to become a way of life for us. 85

There is a fair amount of excess baggage we still carry around with us from our past. There are the wounds and bruises we have experienced in body and spirit, as we have traveled life’s journey from childhood onward. Some hurts may be such that we need help to be able to let go of them. Others we hang on to, mostly because we enjoy nursing them. It is a kind of psychological greed in us or, if you will, a lack of true poverty. For the opposite of poverty is not wealth, but greed, not possessions, but possessiveness. Possessiveness is the desire to have, to cling to things, to clutch them to ourselves. The most destructive form of possessiveness is not a clinging to material things, but to less clearly definable realities. There can be a possessiveness that refuses to let go of our prejudices and biases. A possessiveness that clings to my time and my convenience and is unwilling to let go of these when others may need me. There can be a clinging to old, familiar, trodden paths, when God and the needs of the Christian community may be calling us to venture into the realm of the new, the untried, the unfamiliar – with only the Gospel to guide us. And there is that final clinging we have to let go of, whether we want to or not: the clinging to life that is prompted by the fear of death. 85, 86

We all swim in a ocean of divine love and mercy. But we have to become aware of it. This can only happen when we let go of all that we cling to and abandon ourselves joyfully to that love and mercy. And the last thing we have to let go of is the self that clings. When at last we are able to do this, there is then nothing of us. There is only God and we are in God. 86

*Let go for a better hold.* 87

*We have to let go in order to be ‘aware.’* 87

“*Waiting*” – The waiting is living with the mystery that is to come. It is watching it unfold. It is readying the atmosphere that makes that unfolding possible. Waiting is sinking into the meaning of the mystery. 88, 89

My task as a Christian and indeed as a human being is to accept reality in its fullness. This means accepting the fact that my spirituality encompasses my total existence, not just a part of it. It means accepting the truth of who I am, but that truth in its concreteness and historicity. Accepting who I am, included affirming the “when,” the “where,” and all the circumstances of that concrete historicity. 90

Accepting reality means being ready to live with the choices I have made. 90

Solitude helps us to realize our solidarity with other people. 92

“*Spiritual Narcissism*” – narcissistic solitude is a substitute for the responsibility of living with people. At the other pole is the crass activism that delights in company and noise and movement and escape the responsibility of living at peace with God. Anyone who is intent on living a true inner life must avoid both these extremes: a narcissistic solitude on the one hand and a crass activism on the other. Both – though they move in different directions – are forms of escape from life and reality. ***Our whole life must be a dialectic between community and solitude.*** Both are tremendously important, and our contemplative life subsists in the fruitful antagonism between these two terms. Merton 92

Accepting reality helps me to pray the prayer of awareness. For my prayer means accepting the most important reality of all, the ***reality*** that underlies all else that is real: namely, that ***I am in God, which means that I am in Love. God’s Love contains me, sustains me, even as that Love has given me my very existence. There can be no greater joy than that which comes to each one of us when we accept the fact that God accepts us.*** 94

## 7 – Talking about God

“*One who speaks about the Trinity lies*” – Meister Eckhart

But when we have the experience, when we are fully aware, when we look at the Sun, we not only cease “stammering,” because we have nothing to say; we also no longer use the matches. We can’t even see them (nor do we have any desire to), for the brightness of the Sun blinds us by its brilliance. We really see because we can’t see. We really are silent, for we have no words (and no desire for any). But when the inner eyes of the minds are darkened and I am no longer ‘thinking about’ or trying to ‘talk about’ God, then the inner eyes of the heart are opened and I am able to grasp God (or there be grasped by God) in the embrace of love. Awareness of God is not so much something we do but something we are. Reminder: we are not ‘thinking about God.’ 96, 97

What is it that we ‘are’ when we are aware of God? I would venture to say that our whole contemplative tradition would back me up in assuring that we are contemplatives

because we are ‘lovers of God.’ The anonymous work of the fourteenth century that has come into such prominence in recent years, ‘The Cloud of Unknowing,’ speaks for that tradition when it says: “**God can be taken and held by love, not by thought.**” 97

“You have a difficulty in that you have a problem about the existence of God. You would surely have much greater difficulty if God has a problem about your existence.” 98

*Open your heart to the possibility that you can experience that which transcends you and yet somehow is within you.* 98

“You will never find God by looking for proofs that God exists. In fact, you will never find God by looking outside yourself. You will only find God within. It will only be when you have come to experience God in your own heart and let God into the corridors of your heart (or rather found God there) that you will be able to ‘know’ that here is indeed a God and that you are not separated from God.” 99

“*One knows by not knowing – knowing through not knowing*” 104

*God still remains preeminently mystery. And mystery is not a problem that we must set out to solve; it is rather an invitation to deeper and deeper insights in the Unfathomable.* 104

Names of God – Savior – Redeemer – Deliverer – our Strength – our Rock – our Shield – our Stronghold – our Fortress – our Helper – our Refuge – our Vindicator – God is King – Ruler – Lord of hosts - God is Father, Mother, Lover, Husband – Friend – Shepherd – Protector – Guardian – the Father of orphans and the Defender of widows. God is the Builder and the Vine-dresser – God is the Holy One – Judge of all. 108

1 Cor – If we have everything but not love – then in reality we have nothing. 109

God deals with us not with a natural ‘therefore,’ but with a miraculous ‘nevertheless.’ The sequence is not: we are unworthy, ‘therefore God reject us; but rather, **we are unworthy, ‘nevertheless’ God accepts us.** Karl Barth 113

One of the keys to real religious experience is the shattering realization that no matter how hateful we are to ourselves, we are not hateful to God. This realization helps us to understand the difference between our love and His. Our love is a need, His a gift. We need to see good in ourselves in order to love ourselves. He does not. **He loves us not because we are good, but because He is.** - The New Man, p. 96 – 113

“**The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but ‘the faith that one is loved.’ The faith that one is loved ‘by God.’ The faith that one is loved by God although unworthy – or rather, irrespective of one’s worth.**” - Merton 113

In the Gospel of St. Thomas Jesus is reported as saying: “the one who is near me is near the Fire.” That Fire is God’s Love that purifies us and, once we are cleansed of all that is

alien to It, the Fire consumes us so that we become as it were indistinguishable from the Fire, finding our identity in It and, in the finding of our own identity, coming to know the Fire Itself. F114

We shall find that fire only if we look first within ourselves. Or, if I may paraphrase the words of Meister Eckhart again: If you look outside yourself, you will never find God. But if you look within yourself, you will discover God. And you will discover God ‘not only there, but everywhere.’ “I shall walk in the Presence of the Lord in the land of the living.” “May I experience the Joy of Life in your Presence.” 114

### 8 – **Who Am I? My Search for the True Me**

“The happiness of being at one with everything in that Hidden Ground of Love” Merton

Whatever of us there is that is real or worthwhile is from God and in God. 119

1 – Awareness (*Attentiveness* is the word he uses) opens the door to happiness.  
2 – It does so precisely because (a) it pushes us beyond the dualities that life seems to press upon us and (b) it gives us the consciousness of “being at one with everything.”  
3 – Yet this oneness with everything that generates happiness is no pantheistic or impersonal *mélange*. For it is rooted in a Hidden Ground; and that Ground is personal, for it is the “Ground of Love.” This happiness that springs from the experience of “oneness” is something I find when I find God; for in a Christian context at least, the Hidden Ground of Love is God. When I truly experience God my subjectivity becomes one with the subjectivity of God; I experience not separateness but oneness; and it is in this oneness with God that I come to experience my oneness with myself (my own identity) and my oneness with my sisters and brothers and with all else that is. This oneness, with the love and compassion it calls forth and the creative energy and selfless giving it engenders, constitutes true human happiness. It is the recovery of the original blessing of self-identity experienced in total awareness. 119, 120

“Cosmic dance” – final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. 121

The two simplicities are one. They form an *emptiness* in which there is no addition, but rather the taking away of name, of form, of content, of subject matter, of identities – “identities” that do not truly identify because they isolate us from the Ground in which alone we have being. In this meeting there is not so much a fusion of entities as a disappearance of entities. 121

In that *emptiness* that knows no dualities, but only the oneness of simplicity, the walk of God with human creatures in unison and tranquil accord is poetry, not prose. That is to say it is the dance. For what is dance but harmonious movement in perfect oneness and beyond all dualities and multiplicities? In the dance there are not many movements, but one movement. *The dancers forget themselves: they lose themselves in the dance and thus are emptied of any separate self. And it is in that emptiness that the movement of the dance goes on.* 122

Yet when God created us, God made us free. We have a choice. We can be a self that refuses to lose itself in the dance – which means that we are unwilling to rise above the dualities that illusion projects on reality. Or we can be a self that is aware of its nonseparateness and of its oneness with all of reality and with its Divine Source. And when we are aware of this true self – which is emptiness, for it ‘is’ only in God – then, in all truth, we belong to the dance. To put it in Merton’s words: “*If we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious cosmic dance.*” 122

Growth involves an ongoing transformation, whereby we are liberated from selfishness and grow in love so that, in some sense, we become love or “at one with everything in that Hidden Ground of Love,” which we can only experience but never explain. We die to selfishness and come alive in love. 125

Death is being in the Hidden Ground of Love in full attentive awareness... It is possible to realize one’s true self only in the experience of contemplation. Contemplation is the highest form of the “spiritual life.” It means that one is totally empty (i.e., of all separateness) and at the same time totally full (i.e., at one with all that is and with the Source and Ground of all). 125

In contemplative prayer I become *aware* of myself, not by an act of reasoning, but rather by an act of intuition that is beyond the duality of subject and object. For this experience of my ‘Inner Self’ is an experience of my total and radical dependence on God. Hence it is an experience of God on whom I am totally and radically dependent. It would be wrong to think that we are talking about two different experiences. No, it is one and the same intuition in which I experience God and find my own identity in God. When I find God I find my deepest self. Merton put this well in ‘The Climate of Monastic Prayer:’ “Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of Him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on His saving and merciful knowledge.” 127

The discovery of my true self in God is a return to my original identity. It is a reentry into the cosmic dance. It is a recovery of that at-oneness-we recover an older unity. We have always been one, but we have not always known that we were open. Thus through total awareness I do not become something that I was not; rather I become who I am or, rather, I come at last to know what had been hidden from me for so long: namely, why I am and always have been.. 127, 128

My dear brothers and sisters,  
And what we have to recover is our original unity.  
What we have to be is what we are. 128

**9 – The Awareness of Jesus the Christ**  
“... so that God may be all in all” 1 Cor 15:28

When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son,  
He will then subject himself  
To the One who made all things subject to Him,  
So that *God may be all in all.* – 1 Cor 15:28 140

**10 – Church: Community of Those Who Are Aware**  
*“We are Easter people and ‘alleluia’ is our song” – St. Augustine*

‘The goal of all true spirituality is to achieve an awareness of our oneness with God and with all of God’s creation.’ 160

**Conclusion**

“Not the intense moment Isolated, with no before or after, But a lifetime burning in every moment” T.S. Eliot

The highest form of this prayer, which transcends words, concepts, images, is contemplation, in which one experiences God in total awareness. Contemplation is not the awareness of God as an Object or of myself as a subject. It is not awareness of ‘any thing;’ it is pure awareness, in which my subjectivity becomes one with the subjectivity of God. My nonseparateness from God as the Hidden Ground of Love of all reality is no longer simply a theological proposition that I assent to; it becomes a personal experience that opens to me to whole new way of living at reality. I am no longer a victim of spiritual apartheid. 165

Prayer of Awareness – effort to spend time each day in silence and solitude. This is a time of letting go of all that clutters the mind and the heart – even the good things that are there. It is experiencing our silence as fire: sometimes a warming fire that points the way we must go; sometimes a consuming fire that empties us of all that is not God, so that in emptiness we may be filled with God’s fullness. 166