

REFLECTIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

1. SPIRITUALITY

Very special thanks to Brenda Maiman for these contributions on Spirituality for the Spiritual Director. These first appeared in "Continue the Journey", a newsletter by Forming the Self.



Beginners' hearts

I am reminded of the words of Thomas Merton, "We do not want to be beginners [at prayer]. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!"

Every moment...every encounter...every gentle nudge from God that we submit to ...offers us an awareness of an opportunity to consent to God's presence. This awareness leads to a deepening desire to be supple in God's hands; or stated another way, to be open to God's will.

As spiritual directors, suppleness invites us to quietly attend to any nuanced impulse coming from God. Our receptivity and attentiveness to these impulses deepen as our hearts accept the novice stance of a beginner. As we await whatever promptings of grace are to be revealed, we fully seek abandonment to marvel with child-like trust. May we pray to have beginners' hearts!

from Thomas Merton, [*The Climate of Monastic Prayer*](#)

2. TREES

As others are drawn to the irresistibility of a puppy or small kitten, so am I inexplicably drawn to trees. Everything about trees mesmerizes me ...their magnificent towering grandeur, stately quietness, and intricate xylem cells through which God furtively waters the furthest leaves.

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Yet simultaneously their root systems, resembling the neural networks in the brain, chemically communicate with neighboring trees by an underground network of fungi! Trees have been known to share nutrients at critical times to keep each other healthy; carbon, water, alarm signals, and hormones can pass from tree to tree through these subterranean circuits. Trees, serving as living witnesses to God's promises of abundance and supportive presence, exemplify God's quiet attentiveness to our needs.

Trees evoke a calming acceptance of what simply *is!* They pass no visible judgment upon me as they stand steadily, soar erectly and yet bend gracefully to dance with the wind. Images of patience, strength, provision, peace, shelter, and fruitfulness all spring forth as one considers God's immensely grand creations.

Psalm 1 reminds us that *we*, too, are "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither." God has planted each of us in the exact time and place God thinks is best for us.

- What "streams of water" nourish my soul?
- How do I detect God's tender care "rooting" and steadying me?
- When have I felt "out of season," possibly withering from a bout of spiritual dryness?

3. IN QUIETNESS AND TRUST

In quiet and trust shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)

When did I last choose quietness? When did I last choose to sit with God as I attended to the gentle rhythm of breath?

Can I honestly say that I am *drawn* to sink into quietness?

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Theologian Cynthia Bourgeault writes that quietness “has substantiality, heft, force. You can lean into it and it leans back. It meets you; it holds you up.” What an evocative image of sitting as a child on the ground pressing back-to-back with a friend, relishing the sensation of another’s body pressure stabilizing my own posture!

As spiritual directors God desires that we lean into God in a similar manner. The postures of our spiritual practices...prayerfulness, gratitude, acceptance of self, openness to others, forgiveness... find a hefty sense of equilibrium with God as our partner. Like batteries recharging, we lean into divine energy when we engage in sacred pauses in our direction sessions. The quiet moments offer a buffer zone so that we may attend to the Spirit of God...which, after all, is our sacred task.

4. THE DEEP BREATH PRAYER

Among some of my readings regarding synodality, one comment by Cardinal Grech (of Malta) really caught my attention. Emphasizing that we all have a role to play in this process, he specifically “urges the men and women of monastic and contemplative communities to be custodians of the “deep breath of prayer” as the Church undertakes the synodal process.”

Something instantly sparked within me as that phrase ricocheted around in my heart. Surely this was not intended to be an exclusive invitation of custodial prayer to only those living monastic or cloistered lives. We the laity *also* have a role to play here!

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As spiritual directors engaging in contemplative prayer, are not we called to embrace this custodial stance? In the words of Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, SJ, “Our hearts are our monasteries and at the bottom of every activity, every reflection, every decision, there is silence, the kind of silence that one shares only with God.”

We experience an interior beckoning to sit with God, awaiting the gentle emergence of “the deep breath of prayer.”

While Cardinal Grech knew he could count on monastics and contemplative religious communities to prayerfully undergird the synod, my sense is that spiritual directors, too, *habitually* invoke an awareness of “the deep breath of prayer” as we provide scaffolding for directees.

Perhaps the greatest offering we bring to direction sessions is our conservatorship ...stewardship ... guardianship of our inner well of prayerfulness.

5. HOW DO I WAIT?

As a volunteer at Catholic Outreach in my community, I encounter homeless people requesting a panorama of help... for food, clothing, shower passes at the YMCA, bus passes around town, laundry expenses, utility hook-ups, or the opportunity to spend a night in a rather ratty motel, etc.

What continues to amaze me is the patient stance of waiting which these folks embrace. Granted, I too would want to linger inside an air-conditioned lobby (as they often do) to request help when it is 105 degrees outside. But even standing outside in tolerable temperatures the homeless wait imperturbably for assistance.

There is no indication of irritability or impatience.

Witnessing this has prompted me to ponder how I am perceived as I wait.

Do I carry a heart of stillness in the daily complexities of my life? Or do I rush and openly exhibit frustration?

Does my *perceived* status spark a tinge of entitlement when I am asked to wait?

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Is there an assumption that my needs may be more important than those of people who are not so cool or who lack status?

Simone Weil says: "The foundation of the spiritual life is waiting in patient expectation." Although presumably referencing a deepening interiority, her words also apply to everyday invitations that we adopt the relaxed benevolent tempo of the Holy Spirit...and slow down to notice God!



6. Look Inward

This comically bizarre sign alerts pedestrians to a railroad crossing near my neighborhood.

However, the sign is posted about 15 feet from the sidewalk in a pasture of knee-high weeds.



Sometimes it seems this sign reflects how we live our lives ... we look around to notice who might be watching us, maintaining a safe distance while giving the appearance of leading lives of prayerfulness.

Yet in quieter moments ... if we dare to cautiously look inside ... we sense someone whispering, "**Look inward. That's where the action is!**"

A profound reality far, far richer than the external world awaits our attentiveness.

How often do I slow down to access my inner sanctuary?

What is my sense of looking for the God-given goodness within myself ... even when I am standing in a pasture of knee-high worldly weeds?



7. NOW I KNOW TEQUILA IS TRULY “CATHOLIC!”

On Wednesday evenings I teach English as a Second Language to adults at a nearby Baptist Church. Our curriculum includes useful thematic conversation as well as stories from the Bible. My current class is comprised of students from Columbia, Ecuador, Thailand, Japan, Brazil and Mexico.

Recently our lesson was identifying fruits and vegetables in English. One of my students from Mexico was trying to explain that she puts butter on her broccoli, but she could not come up with the English word, “butter.” Turning to another Spanish-speaking student, she used the Spanish word (mantequilla) to ask for help for the English word.

Hearing only the ending of “mantequilla,” my astute student from Japan blurted out, “You put TEQUILA on your BROCCOLI?”

At that moment, an enormous wave of the Holy Spirit swept through the classroom as delightful peals of laughter created a chorus of joy.

Evidently Tequila is one of those words that is truly catholic...universally known across the globe!

When have I experienced the Holy Spirit as joy and laughter?

How often am I aware of the struggles of non-English speaking people in America?

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8. Must Trust

You must trust that you being the best possible you matters somehow.
That trying to be an honest and tender parent (*or grandparent*)
will echo for centuries through your tribe.
That doing your chosen work with creativity and diligence
will shiver people far beyond your ken.

Brian Doyle, "The Final Frontier"

What is my experience of my soul being "shivered?"
How do I sense my spiritual energy "shivering" others?
What would I like to share with God about this possibility?



9. THE IRIS

An iris bud is on the verge of glorious eruption in my flower bed! I kneel beside and before it in unabashed awe. Budding cells silently stretch toward the sun while root hairs simultaneously snuggle into the darkness of damp soil.

It is the complete *silence* of this miracle that captivates me. God is obviously orchestrating this tender emergence; budding cells must have a "docking station" that link up with God's communication.

There simply are no words to express my reverence as I ponder how this miracle in my flower bed is occurring in zillions of irises throughout the world...silently...silently.



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10. SPOON-FEEDING SOULS

I recently read an article written by a monk who was in Biafra during the great famine of the 1960s. He remembered gently spoon-feeding refugees because their emaciated bodies rejected solid food. They were fed spoonfuls of juice, a sip at a time.

He commented, “I began to think about the spiritual starvation in our world today—how people in this state can only handle the gentlest spoon-feeding of religion or their psyches will automatically reject it.”

His pondering was insightful regarding everyday comments I make to others. I’m becoming more intentional about cautiously “spoon-feeding” my views on the importance of sacred silence to a particularly unpleasant family member.

Moreover, I began to reflect through the lens of a spiritual director.

- Have I gently offered an open-ended question to unbind perceived resistance?
- Have I quietly suggested the “Breath Prayer” as a threshold to enter into the Presence of God?

I sense that wounded, timid souls cautiously open to soak up the graces of God one sip at a time.

