

Chanting the Psalms - Cynthia Bourgeault

Chapter - The Psalms as Psychological Tools

would like to build on her insights and look at how this alchemy actually happens.

The Unloading of the Unconscious

If you begin a contemplative practice, you will encounter the shadow. It is inevitable, for deep contemplative prayer brings us face-to-face with parts of ourselves that we would perhaps prefer not to acknowledge.

One of the great breakthroughs in our understanding of the art of contemplative prayer came in our own time when Father Thomas Keating, principal architect of the method of Centering Prayer, recognized that when people meditate for long periods of time—whether by Centering Prayer or some other method—they sooner or later hit some patches of rough sea that he calls “the unloading of the unconscious.”⁵ As meditation relaxes the inhibitory effect of our usual egoic consciousness, buried memories, pain, and undigested emotional and physical trauma can and do begin to surface.

Keating teaches that this unloading is both normal and profoundly healing—in fact, he calls it “the divine therapy”—for the unrecognized and unintegrated shadow material is precisely the part that keeps tripping us up in our life journey. In Centering Prayer intensive retreats, trained staff are constantly available so that as participants begin this unloading, the material can come up in a safe place, be processed, held as precious, embraced, and released.

In the classic contemplative tradition, I believe this is exactly the role played by psalmody.

You will recall how the psalms were already being depicted by John Cassian in the fifth century as “carrying all the feelings of which human nature is capable.” In their various moods and amazingly shrewd insights into the human condition, they really do seem to contain the entire gamut of human emotional experience, from the heights of exaltation to the

depths of desolation. And in a week of chanting the Psalter in its entirety, you will run through that full gamut.

Two psalms sung back-to-back at Saint Benedict's Monastery in Colorado on successive mornings make this point only too well. On Tuesdays, lauds included “I said in my good fortune that nothing could ever disturb me” (Psalm 30); on Wednesdays, there was “I said in my alarm, no one can be trusted” (Psalm 116). These two psalms reflect diametrically opposite places in life; I'll bet you'll recognize them both.

Consider the deep spiritual yearning expressed in Psalm 63: “Oh God, for you my soul is thirsting, my flesh is longing / like a dry, weary land without water.” Or the deep agony of the cry in Psalm 43: “For you are the God of my strength; / why have you put me from you?” Or the vindictive fury of Psalm 140 as the psalmist rails against his foes: “Let hot burning coals fall upon them; / let them be cast in the mire, never to rise up again.” Or the exaltation of Psalm 96: “Sing to the Lord a new song; / sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.” Or the quiet calm of Psalm 131: “Lord, I keep my soul at peace, like a weaned child on its mother's breast.” Or the deep trustfulness of Psalm 31: “Into your hands I commend my spirit, / for you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth.” Like a vast cornucopia of personal experience, the psalms overflow with all the joy, despair, agony, and hope of which we human beings are capable.

What I believe happens when we introduce the psalms into our consciousness—and even more so into our *unconscious*—through the practice of contemplative psalmody is that they begin to create a safe spiritual container for recognizing and processing those dark shadows within ourselves, those places we'd prefer not to think about. There are times in the spiritual journey when anger is a very real part of our life, just as jealousy, abandonment, helplessness, rage, and terror are. All of these emotions are in us, and they're all in the psalms. Perhaps we're not terribly pleased with ourselves when we find ourselves praying, “Destroy all those who oppress me, O Lord,” but most of us have felt that way.

Releasing the Shadow

Acknowledging the shadow is only part of the healing process, albeit an important part. The other and even more important part is letting it go. This is a place where standard psychotherapy often bogs down. It's not that difficult to raise the issues, to become more conscious of your wounds and neurotic defenses. But without some means of releasing this shadow material, it's all too easy to get stuck in it and even possessive of it; your woundedness becomes a kind of identity badge. Contemplative psalmody provides a graceful way of moving on.

To begin with, while the psalms are intensely personal, they are never simply all about *you*. Remember how I said back in chapter 1 that their emotion is collective more than individual? They belong to the great stream of humanity, and their very antiquity is part of their power. They acknowledge and validate your own emotional reality, but through the mirror of nearly three thousand years of common human experience. "Others have felt this way," they remind you. "Others have passed through these dark places and experienced what you are now experiencing." The psalms offer themselves as transpersonal containers, allowing us to acknowledge our feelings fully without getting stuck in them. And because they belong to the liturgy, the great language of worship and prayer, they also serve as a kind of confessional, allowing us to place our shadow side on the altar of prayer and find our release there.

The process went on even for Jesus. Remember how in those last harrowing moments on the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Those words spoken in his agony are from Psalm 22, which in the rabbinical tradition (which Jesus would have known) was the psalm sung at the hour of death. From the depths of his own suffering, he intuitively found his way to this psalm with the last breath of his life.

As you chant the psalms as part of a daily spiritual practice, you are ac-

tually preparing a place deep within yourself, a spiritual sanctuary wherein you can acknowledge and pass through violent inner emotions unscathed. You begin to see and trust that what emerges from your unconscious during those times of "unloading" and shadow work is not overwhelming or isolating because others have walked this way before, and prayer upholds you as it did them. Both pain and shame take on a more universal context as you allow yourself to receive help, not only from the psalms themselves, but from the spiritual reality to which they bear unflinching witness. Because staying present to those emotions, even the dark and shadowy ones, is a way of lifting up before God all that you are, your personal woundedness can become the very marrow of your prayer.

The other important aspect of this transpersonal purification is that the Divine Office goes its way with serene indifference to the ups and downs of your own personal psychodrama. You can enter the choir all merry and upbeat from a good day only to be faced with "Even my best friend has abandoned me; my only companion is darkness." Or you can arrive down and despondent and find yourself singing, "The heavens proclaim the greatness of the Lord," or "You have changed my mourning into dancing." The kaleidoscopic emotionality of the psalms unfolds as it will, without any regard to where *you* happen to be in your own emotional kaleidoscope that day. In and of itself, this process eventually tends to build in a certain detachment from the emotional hurly-burly of your life. You begin to see that all emotions are ultimately just energy events in time and will come and go of their own accord if you don't strain too much to hold on to them. That in itself may be the most important lesson you will ever learn for moving beyond the narcissistically personal into the deeper waters of transformed life.

Thus, contemplative psalmody is a powerful tool for acknowledging the emotions, but an even more powerful tool for releasing, for learning to detach from the surface of yourself and enter into the deeper places of the heart. Kathleen Norris expresses this idea beautifully when she says, "In

the dynamic of this liturgy one rides the psalms like a river current . . . I felt as if I were becoming part of a living, lived-in poem.”⁶

The Tempering of Being

As long as there is in human nature one dark corner of violence, one dark corner of jealousy, one dark corner of loneliness or abandonment, the psalms will be familiar and relevant. In fact, some of the most profoundly transformed Christians I know have spent a lifetime struggling with the psalms, working through them, and through this work of prayer confronting their own inner darkness at deeper and deeper levels.

I remember a very interesting conversation I once had with a wise elderly contemplative about that line in Psalm 143: “Destroy all those who oppress me, for you are my redeemer, O Lord.”

“How can I pray these words and still call myself a Christian?” I asked her.

Without batting an eye, she replied, “This used to bother me too. But what I’ve come to understand is that this prayer really means destroy in *me* that dualizing tendency of the mind that divides my world up into friends and enemies. Let me see through the eyes of divine Oneness that my so-called oppressors are all projections of my own deepest fears.”

She looked at me and twinkled. For sixty years of monastic life, this woman had been taking into her heart the deepest Christian truths of forgiveness and love and laying them unflinchingly alongside her own darkest places. The fruits of this process were plain to see.

Helen Luke, another stellar wisewoman (she died in 1995 at the age of ninety-four) once wrote: “Wholeness emerges out of the acceptance of the conflict between the divine and the human in the individual psyche.”⁷ There’s profound truth to her observation. She realizes that as human beings we live in creative tension with ourselves. There is a divine striving in each of us that “yearns for the courts of the Lord” (in the words of Psalm

84). There is also a human being, shadow and all—not just a cleaned-up and edited version—who longs to come into being. The genuine integration of these two yearnings is the crucible of our own wholeness, and the psalms hold our feet to the fire.

In their deep, earthy honesty, the psalms help us to stay grounded in our own being so that our spiritual practice doesn’t become an escape from the psychological work that must be done. This is another reason why intentionality is so important in chanted psalmody. We do not use the psalms to escape into beautiful aesthetic or mystical experiences. Rather we stand there in our woundedness and authenticity and allow the work of purification and healing to unfold within us through our conscious participation and confession.

And unfold it does. In the next chapter, I will add some nuances to what I am about to say here, but for now it will suffice to return to another keen insight from Kathleen Norris: “The psalms are always instructing the heart.”⁸ In a language all their own, both concrete and powerfully archetypal, they speak directly to the heart, guiding its progress through the dark patches of the unconscious in its journey toward balance and wholeness. That is why contemporary revisionist criticism that finds fault with the violence of the imagery is misplaced in contemplative psalmody. The psalms are psychological tools. They describe the interior warfare, the desolation, the shadow, and its transfiguration. When you actually take up the practice of chanting the psalms, this will all become very clear to you.

So should we clean them up or not? Kathleen Norris contributes the following vignette: “In recent years, some Benedictine houses, particularly women’s communities, have been censoring the harshest of the psalms, often called the ‘cursing psalms,’ from their public worship. But one sister, a liturgist, said after visiting such a community, ‘I begin to get antsy, feeling *something is not right*. The human experience is violence, and psalms reflect the violence of the world.’”⁹

Perhaps this is so. But if the wisdom of contemplative psalmody is fully understood, one could take this observation a large step further and suggest that the psalms, processed in the contemplative heart, *transform* the violence of the world. That, at any rate, has been my own deepest experience of this sacred tradition.



The PSALMS *as* SOUL MUSIC

UNLIKE MOST OF THE GREAT WORLD TRADITIONS of sacred chanting, which rely on the rhythmic, almost hypnotic repetition of a single prayer phrase or mantra, Christian psalmody is fast paced and mentally demanding. Rather than stilling the mind, psalmody floods it with images and emotions and requires a compassionate engagement with the meaning of the words themselves. The immediate experience may be that the chanting feels less ecstatic, more “mental,” than in other sacred traditions. So it may come as a surprise when I say that contemplative psalmody is actually a total immersion program in learning to think with the heart.

Yes, images and emotions go swirling through you. Contemplative psalmody operates at the level of the archetypal imagination. While we saw in the last chapter that some of this work has to do with the integration of the shadow and the healing of the personal unconscious, the real power of the psalms lies in their uncanny ability to awaken the unitive imagination.

Unitive imagination means the ability to think with more than just the linear mind, to engage those faculties of intuition, sensitivity, creativity,



and conscience that lie deep within the psyche and support a “wisdom” way of knowing. Another way of describing this full-spectrum thinking would be “thinking with the heart.”

Like all the Western religions, Christianity is a religion of the Word. But that Word is a unitive Word; a heart word. It does not yield itself up easily to a linear, or cause-and-effect, way of thinking. At the literal level, elements in the tradition such as the Virgin Birth or the mystical body of Christ may make no sense at all. But to the awakened unitive imagination, they become precise road maps of the path of inner transformation, increasingly verifiable as those depths of inner silence and recollection increase.

In fact, for much of early Christian tradition, this movement beyond the literal was the whole goal of the spiritual journey. To awaken meant to awaken to an increasingly subtle recognition of the hidden power contained in the language and imagery of scripture, a power capable of sustaining both spiritual and moral illumination. Monks diligently applied themselves to their *lectio divina*, or sacred reading of the words of scripture, confident that as their hearts were purified through prayer, moral vigilance, and ascetic practices, they would become more and more capable of understanding the sublime truth preserved like finest wine within the sturdy casks of the sacred writings.¹

The Four Senses of Scripture

According to monastic tradition, this deepening understanding unfolds in four stages, commonly known as the four senses of scripture. They are the milestones on the journey to unitive understanding. While the various monastic orders diverge in their nomenclature for the two middle stages, the basic scenario is the same.²

The first stage, the *literal*, is all about facts and linear causality. Did the Virgin Birth really happen? Does Jesus really intend me to cut off my hand