

SPIRITUALITY  
*for a* RESTLESS  
CULTURE



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sublime when we have all but lost our capacity for sublimation?

Celebration, as mentioned earlier, is an organic process. It is created by a dynamic interplay between anticipation and fulfillment, longing and inconsummation, ordinary and special, work and play. Life, love, and sexuality must be celebrated within that fast/feast rhythm. Seasons of play must follow seasons of work, seasons of consummation are contingent upon seasons of longing, and seasons of intimacy can only grow out of seasons of solitude.

Presence depends upon absence, intimacy upon solitude, play upon work. Even God rested only after working for six days!

Today the absence of genuine specialness and enjoyment within our lives is due largely to the breakdown of this rhythm. In a word, Christmas is no longer special because we have celebrated it during Advent, weddings are no longer special because we have already slept with the bride, and experiences of all kinds are often flat, boring, and unable to excite us because we had them prematurely.

Premature experience is bad precisely because it is premature. To celebrate Christmas during Advent, to celebrate Easter without fasting, to short-circuit longing in any area, is, like sleeping with the bride before the wedding, a fault in chastity. All premature experience has the effect of draining us of great enthusiasm and great expectations (which can only be built up through sublimation, tension, and painful waiting).

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## Prayer and the Monasticism of Daily Life

It takes only a slight shift of emphasis, and the point of aloneness in dynamic stillness becomes the point of consummate union.

David Steindl-Rast

## The Monasticism of Daily Life

David Steindl-Rast has commented that leisure is not the privilege of those who have time, but rather the virtue of those who give to each instant of life the time it deserves.

That is a valuable insight, especially today when everywhere life seems dominated by the constraints of time. Always, it seems, there is not enough time. Our lives are dominated by pressure, the rat race, demands that are all-absorbing. The factory has to run and, by the time that is taken care of, there is no time or energy for anything else.

And we are conscious of our pathological busyness. We know that life is passing us by and we are so preoccupied with the business of making a living and the duties of family and community that only rarely is there any time to actually live. It seems that there is never any unpressured time, unhurried time, undesignated time, leisure time, time to smell the flowers, simply to luxuriate in being alive. We lament about this over our coffee, but are unable effectively to change anything.

Is there something frighteningly wrong with our lives? Is there a need to drastically change our lifestyles?

Perhaps. Obviously in our lives there is too little family time. But we are also compounding our problem through misunderstanding. Philosophies of "taking time to smell the flowers" have sometimes led us to understand leisure precisely as the privilege of the rich and unoccupied. What Steindl-Rast challenges us to do is to understand time correctly.

Time is a gift. When T.S. Eliot says, "Time, not our time," he is pointing out that there needs to be a certain detachment from time, a certain monasticism in our lives.

In monasteries life is regulated by a bell. Monks and nuns know that time is not their own, that when the bell rings they must drop whatever they are doing and move on to what is be-

ing asked of them next. When the bell rings, St. Benedict said, the monk must put down his pen without crossing his "t" or dotting his "i." He must move on, not necessarily because he feels like doing something else, but because it is time—time to eat or pray or work or study or sleep. Monks' lives are regulated by a bell, not because they do not have watches and alarm clocks, but to remind them, always, that time is not their own and that there is a proper time to do things. Monks do not get to sleep, eat, pray, work, or relax when they feel like it, but when it is time to do those things.

There is an astonishing parallel between that and what happens in our own lives and we can be helped by understanding it. There is an in-built monasticism to our lives. We too, at least for the more active years, are called to practice a certain asceticism regarding time—to have our lives regulated by "the bell."

In our case "the bell" takes a different form, though its demands are the same as those of the bell in a monastery. In our case the bell is an alarm clock and the dictates of our daily lives: a quick breakfast, a commute to work (carrying sandwiches for lunch), staying home with small children, demands at work or at home, driving kids for lessons, dealing with them and their demands, household chores, cooking, laundry, taking out garbage, calling in a plumber, church on Sundays. Like monks we sleep, rise, eat, pray, and work, not necessarily when we would like to, but when it is time.

And this is true, not just for our daily routine, but as well for the seasons of our lives. We go to school, we prepare for a career, we enter the work force, are tied down with kids, mortgage payments, car payments, and the demands of family and work, not necessarily because we always feel like it, but because it is that time in our lives. The play of children and the leisure of retirement come before and after that season.

During all of the most active years of our lives we are reminded daily, sometimes hourly, that time is not our own; we are monks practicing a demanding asceticism.

There will not always be time to smell the flowers and we are not always poorer for the fact. Monasticism has its own spiritual payoffs. To be forced to work, to be tied down with duties, to have to get up early, to have little time to call your own, to be burdened with the responsibility of children and the demands of debts and mortgages, to go to bed exhausted after a working day is to be in touch with our humanity. It is too an opportunity to recognize that time is not our own and that any mature spirituality makes a distinction between the season for work and the sabbath, the sabbatical, the time of unpressured time.

Most important of all, recognizing in our duties and pressures the sound of the monastic bell actually helps us to smell the flowers, to give to each instant of our lives the time it deserves—and not necessarily the time I feel like giving it. We are better for the demands that the duties of state put on us, despite constant fatigue. Conversely, the privileged who have all the time in the world are worse off for that, despite their constant opportunity to smell the flowers. Monks have secrets worth knowing—and the pedagogy of a monastic bell is one of them.

## Monasticism and the Playpen

There is a tradition, strong among spiritual writers, that we will not advance within the spiritual life unless we pray at least an hour a day privately.

I was stressing this one day in a talk, when a woman asked how this might apply to her, given that she was at home with young children who demanded her total attention.

"Where would I ever find an uninterrupted hour each day?" she moaned. "I would, I am afraid, be praying with children screaming and tugging at my legs."

A few years ago, I might have been tempted to point out to her that if her life was that hectic then she, of all people, needed time daily, away from her children, for private prayer among other things. As it was I gave her different advice:

"If you are at home alone with small children whose needs give you little uninterrupted time, then you don't need an hour of private prayer daily. Raising small children, if it is done with love and generosity, will do for you exactly what private prayer does."

Left unqualified, that is a dangerous statement. It suggests in fact that raising children is a functional substitute for prayer. However, in making the assertion that a certain service—in this case raising children—can in fact be prayer, I am bolstered by the testimony of contemplatives themselves.

Carlo Carretto, one of our century's best spiritual writers, spent many years in the Sahara Desert by himself, praying. Yet he once confessed that he felt that his mother, who spent nearly thirty years raising children, was much more contemplative than he was, and less selfish.

If that is true, and Carretto suggests that it is, the conclusion we should draw is not that there was anything wrong with his

long hours of solitude in the desert, but that there was something very right about the years his mother lived an interrupted life amid the noise and demands of small children.

John of the Cross, in speaking about the very essence of the contemplative life, writes: "But they, O my God and my life, will see and experience your mild touch, who withdraw from the world and become mild, bringing the mild into harmony with the mild, thus enabling themselves to experience and enjoy you" (*The Living Flame of Love*, 1977).

In this statement John suggests there are two elements that are crucial to the contemplative's experience of God: withdrawal from the world and the bringing of oneself into harmony with the mild.

Although his writings were intended primarily for monks and contemplative nuns who physically withdraw from the world so as to seek a deeper empathy with it, his principles are just as true for those who cannot withdraw physically.

Certain vocations, for example, raising children, offer a perfect setting for living a contemplative life. They provide a desert for reflection, a real monastery.

The mother who stays at home with small children experiences a very real withdrawal from the world. Her existence is certainly monastic. Her tasks and preoccupations remove her from the centers of social life and from the centers of important power. She feels removed.

Moreover, her constant contact with young children, the mildest of the mild, gives her a privileged opportunity to be in harmony with the mild and learn empathy and unselfishness.

Perhaps more so even than the monk or the minister of the Gospel, she is forced, almost against her will, to mature. For years, while she is raising small children, her time is not her own, her needs have to be put into second place, and every

time she turns round some hand is reaching out demanding something. Years of this will mature almost anyone.

It is because of this that she does not need, during this time, to pray for an hour a day. And it is precisely because of this that the rest of us who do not have constant contact with small children need to pray privately daily.

We, to a large extent, do not have to withdraw. We can often put our own needs first. We can claim some of our own time. We do not work with what is mild. Our worlds are professional, adult, cold, and untender. Outside of prayer we run a great risk of becoming selfish and bringing ourselves into harmony with what is untender.

Monks and contemplative nuns withdraw from the world to try to become less selfish, more tender, and more in harmony with the mild. To achieve this they pray for long hours in solitude.

Mothers with young children are offered the identical privilege: withdrawal, solitude, the mild. But they do not need the long hours of private prayer—the demands and mildness of the very young are a functional substitute.

## Just Too Busy to Bow Down

Theologian Jan Walgrave commented that our present age constitutes a virtual conspiracy against the interior life. That is a gentle way of saying that, within our culture, distraction is normal, prayer and solitude are not. There is little that is contemplative within our culture and within our lives.

Why is this? We are not, by choice or ideology, a culture set against solitude, interiority, and prayer. Nor are we, in my opinion, more malicious, pagan, or afraid of interiority than past ages. Where we differ from the past is not so much in badness as in busyness, in hurriedness. We do not think contemplatively because we never quite get around to it.

Perhaps the most apt metaphor to describe our hurried and distracted lives is that of a car wash. When you pull up to a car wash, you are instructed to leave your motor running, to take your hands off the steering wheel, and to keep your foot off the brake. The idea is that the machine itself will suck you through.

For most of us, that is just what our typical day does to us, it sucks us through. We now have radios with alarm clocks, which go off before the alarm actually wakes us. Hence we are already stimulated before we are fully awake.

Then we rise to shower and dress and ready ourselves for work, stimulated by news, music, commentary. Breakfast and the drive to work follow the same pattern. We listen to the radio, engage in conversation, plan our agenda, stimulated and preoccupied. We spend our day working, necessarily preoccupied, our minds on what we are doing. When we return home, there is TV, conversation, activities, and preoccupations of all kinds. Eventually we go to bed, where perhaps we read or watch a bit more TV. Finally we fall asleep.

When, in all of this, did we take time to think, to be contem-

plative, to pray, to wonder, to appreciate, simply to enjoy, to be restful, to be grateful just for being alive, to be grateful for love, for health, for God? The day just sucked us through.

I suspect that your coffee circles are similar to mine. Where I live, in the few contemplative moments that we take, we sit around talking: "It's a rat race. We should do something. We drive too hurriedly, we live too impatiently, we eat too fast, we work too hard, we are too preoccupied, too busy, we don't take time to smell the flowers!" But nothing changes.

As Mark Twain said: "It's like the weather—everyone complains about it, but nobody does anything about it."

Socrates commented, "The unexamined life is not worth living." I suspect that our age would counter, "The un-lived life is also not worth examining." We have taken to examining our lives less and less.

The effect of this is the same everywhere. We see it in the way we eat, in the way we drive, in our inability to relax, in our lack of humor and reflectiveness and—need I say—in our lack of prayer.

I do not want to be judgmental but I suspect that most persons in our culture pray very little, at least in terms of private prayer. I suspect that the average person's prayer life consists of a short hurried prayer in the morning, an even more distracted and hurried prayer before meals, and another hurried prayer before retiring at night. That's precious little.

But our inability to be contemplative does not only show itself in our lack of private prayer. That is merely a symptom of something more deeply amiss. What our hurried lifestyle and our propensity for distraction is really doing is robbing us of solitude. As solitude diminishes, life seems less and less worth living.

Ironically most of us crave solitude. As our lives grow more

pressured, as we grow more tired, and as we begin to talk more about burnout, we fantasize about solitude. We imagine it as a peaceful, quiet place, ourselves walking by a lake, watching a peaceful sunset, sitting in a rocker by the fireplace. But even there we make solitude yet another activity, something we do. We attempt to take solitude like taking a shower. It is understood as something we stand under, endure, get washed by—and then return to normal life.

Solitude, however, is a form of awareness. It is a way of being present and perceptive within all of life. It is having a dimension of reflectiveness in our ordinary lives that brings with it a sense of gratitude, appreciation, peacefulness, enjoyment, and prayer. It is the sense, within ordinary life, that ordinary life is precious, sacred, and enough.

How do we develop such a dimension within our lives? How do we foster solitude? How do we get a handle on life so that it does not just suck us through? How do we begin to lay a foundation for prayer in our lives? How do we come to gratitude and appreciation within ordinary life?

Eric Fromm was asked to give a simple recipe for psychic health in a culture that is as pressured as ours. "A half-hour of silence once a day, twice a day if you can afford the time. That will do marvels for your health," he answered.

Fromm's answer was not intended to be a religious one. He was no Thomas Merton. But it might have come from Merton. I can think of no better spiritual advice to give to a culture that conspires against interiority.

Try prayer and silence. One half-hour a day. Twice a day, if you can afford the time. It will do marvels for your health. As well, in a culture that conspires against the interior life, it will be a political act.

## Praying Through a Crisis

We all have our moments of chaos and crisis. Loss, death, sickness, disappointment, hurt, loneliness, hatred, jealousy, obsession, fear; these come into our lives and often we find ourselves overwhelmed by the darkness they cause.

What can we do about them? How can we pull ourselves out of the dark chaos they put us into?

The simple answer of course is prayer. But that answer is given far too simplistically. We have all heard the phrases, so true in themselves: "Pray it through! Take your troubles to the chapel! Give it to God! God will help you!"

I can speak only for myself, though I suspect that my experience has its parallels in other lives, and I have found that often when I try to pray through some deep hurt I find no relief and, at times, end up more depressed, more immersed in the chaos, and more obsessively self-preoccupied than before praying.

Often I end up sucking the prayer into my own narcissism.

Too often when we try to pray when hurting, the prayer serves not to uproot the hurt and the narcissism, but to root it even more deeply in self-pity, self-preoccupation, and darkness. We end up further letting go of God's Spirit and, instead, giving in to panic, fear, chaos, non-forgiveness, obsession, and resentment. In a word, to the posture of masturbation, of non-prayer.

Why? Is God not willing to help? Is it simply a question of patience? God will eventually help, but not yet?

God is always willing to help, and, yes, we must be patient; healing takes time. But there is more involved. When we pray and our prayers do not help, then we are praying incorrectly. I have learned this painfully through years of mistakes.

Prayer is a focus upon God, not upon ourselves. When we are hurting or obsessed, the problem is that we are able to think

about only one thing, the object of our hurt or loss. That concentration becomes depressive, oppressively focusing us so much upon one thing that we are not free emotionally to think about or enjoy other things. Depression is an over-concentration.

For this reason, whenever we are caught up in depression, it is important that our prayer be completely focused upon God and not upon ourselves.

If we do what comes naturally when trying to "pray through a crisis," we will end up thinking about the crisis, wallowing in our own sufferings.

Instead of freeing ourselves from the sense of loss or obsession, we will pull the wound inwards, make the pain worse, and the depression even more paralyzing.

When we pray in a crisis we must force ourselves to focus upon God or Jesus or upon some aspect of their sacred mystery, and we must resist entirely the urge to relate that encounter immediately to our wounded experience.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Imagine yourself suffering the loss of someone you deeply loved. Hurt, unable to think about anything else, you go to pray. Immediately the temptation will be to focus upon your heart, your obsession. You will try to "talk it through," however sincerely. But the result will be disastrous. You will find yourself becoming more fixed upon what you are trying to free yourself from. Your depression will intensify.

Conversely, if you force yourself, and this will be extremely difficult, to focus upon God—for example, as God is revealed in some mystery of Christ's life—your depression will be broken. You will experience God, slowly but gently, widening again the scope of your heart and mind. With that will come an emotional loosening and freeing.

When a wounded child climbs into her mother's lap, she draws so much strength from the mother's presence that her wound becomes insignificant. So too with us when we climb into the lap of our great Mother God. Our crisis soon domesticates and comes into a peaceful perspective, not because it goes away, but because the presence of God so overshadows us.

But this means we must genuinely climb into the lap of God. Like the wounded child we must be focused upon the mother, not upon ourselves. Concretely this means that when praying in a crisis we must refuse to think about ourselves at all; we must refuse even to relate the mystery we are meditating to ourselves and our wound. Like a child, we must simply be content to sit and be held by the mother.

That will be hard, very hard, to do. Initially every emotion in us will demand that we focus ourselves back upon our hurt. But that is the key; do not do it!

Do not, under the guise of prayer, wallow further in hurt. Rather focus upon God. Then, like a sobbing child at her mother's breast, in silence we will drink that which nurtures and brings peace.

At the breast of God we drink the Holy Spirit, the milk of charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, mildness, long-suffering, faith, chastity, hope, and fidelity. In that nourishment lies peace.



## Getting Angry With God

A woman suffering from a curious resentment came to see me. She was angry at God. Her feelings were vague and not clearly focused, but she felt that somehow God was to blame for her unhappiness.

Life, she felt, was rapidly passing her by and she had already missed out on many chances for really living it. She was, and had been, a good woman, religious, moral, generous, living for others, faithful to her commitments.

Now in her mid-fifties she felt anger and resentment growing within her, an anger and resentment she was unable really to explain, accept, or control. She was confused and unhappy. On the one hand she did not regret her past life. She had been faithful, unselfish, and religious. Yet, on the other, with her youth, health, sexual prowess, and opportunities fading, she felt frustrated, unneeded, unfulfilled, used, locked-in, and haunted by the thought that perhaps she had never made a decision for herself in her whole life.

Viewed one way, her virtue seemed like an accident, a conspiracy of circumstances. She wondered whether she had really chosen this or whether it had been forced upon her. Whenever she felt like that she was filled with regret and resentment. She regretted that she had always been so moral, religious, and proper. In these moments too she would have to admit to herself that she secretly envied the amoral, the unvirtuous, all those who never felt, as she did, the yoke of domestication that eventually comes with morality and religion.

At the root of all this was the feeling that she had been had, seduced by God. God was to blame. God, she assured me, had always been just real enough to hold her, but never real enough to fulfill her, at least not emotionally.

So she was angry, and angry with herself for being angry.

She was full of resentment and full of guilt for being resentful. Prayer was difficult for her because she could not admit to herself that she was angry at God and so whenever she tried to pray it seemed artificial and contrived.

What does one say to a person like that? One begins by pointing out that her resentment and anger are already a high form of prayer, at least potentially so.

Too often we are under the impression that God does not want us to struggle, since, as we see it, God prefers sheep who docilely acquiesce (even as we swallow hard on the bitterness that so spontaneously arises in the emotional, psychological, and sexual mechanisms that were built into us).

But God wants to be wrestled with. As Rabbi Heschel points out, ever since the days when Abraham argued with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jacob wrestled with the angel, those close to God have also occasionally engaged in similar arguments.

The refusal to accept the harshness of God's ways in the name of his love is an authentic form of prayer. Indeed the prophets and saints were not always in the habit of simply saying, "Thy will be done." They often fought, challenged, squirmed, and begged as a way of saying, "Thy will be changed!" I suspect that they did sometimes annul divine plans. God wants to be struggled with, especially if we have been living in God's house for a while.

Why? Why would God want this? How can wrestling be a form of prayer? Wrestling can be a form of prayer precisely because it can be a form of love. People who live together in love for a long time must resolve many tensions. There is constant wrestling, much anger, and occasional bitterness. But the struggling together, if persevered in, always leads to a new depth in love.

The woman I am describing was in fact standing at the very edges of a new phase of love. She needed to pray through her bitterness first. As she stood at the edges of that new phase, bent under the weight of God's yoke, bitter and with the jealousy of Cain in her eyes, the same Father who had pleaded with the older brother of the prodigal son was also pleading with her, to enter a new circle, the circle of those who feel compassion for God.

Rabbi Heschel tells the story of a Polish Jew who became bitter and stopped praying "because of what happened in Auschwitz." Later, however, he began praying again. When asked why, he replied, "I felt sorry for God."

This man had reached a new phase of love, that of affinity, of compassion. God's concerns, God's cause, God's house were now his too. But such a point is only reached after struggle, when anger and bitterness are transformed.

God invites, and I dare say, enjoys the struggle. As Nikos Kazantzakis puts it:

Every person partakes of the divine nature in both spirit and flesh. The struggle between God and the human person breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation. Most often this struggle is unconscious and short-lived. A weak soul does not have the endurance to resist the flesh for long. It grows heavy, becomes flesh itself, and the contest ends. The stronger the soul and the flesh, the more fruitful the struggle, and the richer the final harmony. God does not love weak souls and flabby flesh. The Spirit wants to have to wrestle with flesh that is strong and full of resistance.

May we all win—by losing!

## A Heart With Many Rooms: Social Justice

When we come to the end of our pilgrimage and reach heaven, God will ask, "Where are the others?"

Charles Peguy