

The Many Faces of Contemplation

What is contemplative engagement?

There are likely as many definitions of contemplation as there are persons considering this question. There can be a tendency on the part of some to see contemplation as something set apart, other worldly, for the few and chosen. Others may see contemplation as a withdrawing from the fray, stepping aside to rest, taking a welcome break. When we speak here of a call to *contemplative engagement* we are speaking of none of these. Rather we are speaking about something quite ordinary and attainable that draws us into deep immersion in the joys and sorrows, the challenges, possibilities, disappointments and promises of life fully lived in this very real world.



Take a moment to reflect on these quotes which capture this sense of contemplative engagement.

“God comes to us disguised as our lives.” (Paula D’Arcy)

*“The deeper level of practice is to lead our daily life in a way that we touch the absolute and relative truth You don’t have to [physically] die to enter nirvana or the kingdom of God. You only have to dwell deeply in the present moment right now.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching* (Broadway Books: 1998, 128))*

Cynthia Bourgeault says that contemplative engagement is not so much the absence of thinking as it is a visionary way of seeing and Dorothy Soelle says of mysticism that it is not a new vision of God, “but a different relationship to the world—one that has borrowed the eyes of God.” So we are talking about a way of seeing and being that ground, direct, and inform our ministry as elected leaders.

Contemplative engagement comes in many forms with many faces. Whether we are alone or with others, walking, sitting, being quiet or noisy, reading, reflecting, meeting, marching for justice or having dinner with friends we can be practicing contemplative engagement, if we do just three things:

*Pay Attention
Be Present
Welcome What Comes*

Pretty ordinary practices that make an extraordinary difference.



What is prayer?

Prayer is intimacy with the Great Mystery.
Be every moment aware of the Presence—
how you are loved!

. . . .So be awake to the Life that is loving you
and sing your prayer, laugh your prayer,
dance your prayer, run and weep and
sweat your prayer,
sleep your prayer, eat your prayer,
paint, sculpt hammer and read your prayer,
sweep, dig, rake, drive and hoe your prayer,
garden, and farm, and build and clean your prayer,
wash, iron, vacuum sew and embroider and pickle your prayer,
compute, touch, bend and fold but never delete
or mutilate your prayer.

Learn and play your prayer,
work and rest your prayer,
fast and feast your prayer,
argue, talk, whisper, listen and shout your prayer,
groan and moan and spit and sneeze your prayer,
swim and hunt and cook your prayer,
digest and become your prayer,

Release and recover your prayer.
Breathe your prayer,
Be your prayer

And so you are praying.
So you do what you be,
and all your being is blessed
and all your life is a prayer.
And all your acts are a blessing.

Excerpts from *What is Prayer?*
From *Moving to the Edge of the World*
By Alla Renée Bozarth, iUniverse 2003.
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Invitation

Paula D'Arcy tells us that "God comes to us disguised as our lives." Take some time to sit with these questions. Let them roll around inside you as you go about the various tasks of this day.

Over the past month what are some of the disguises through which the Holy One has come to you?
Which were easy to recognize?
Which were more difficult to recognize?
Where did you find yourself able to welcome the disguise of the Holy One with ease?
Where did you find it more difficult?

In her poem, *What is Prayer?* Alla Renée Bozarth invites us to make the whole of our lives a prayer. What does it mean, *concretely*, for you ~
to "play your prayer?"
to "argue talk, whisper, listen and shout your prayer?"
to "breathe your prayer" and "to be your prayer?"

Chose some simple practice you can engage in over the coming month that will help you to pay attention, be present, and welcome what comes. Some possibilities ~

As you go into your office in the morning, or as you enter a room to begin a meeting pause briefly and remind yourself that you want to be fully present in the moment. Make a conscious choice to stay in the moment.

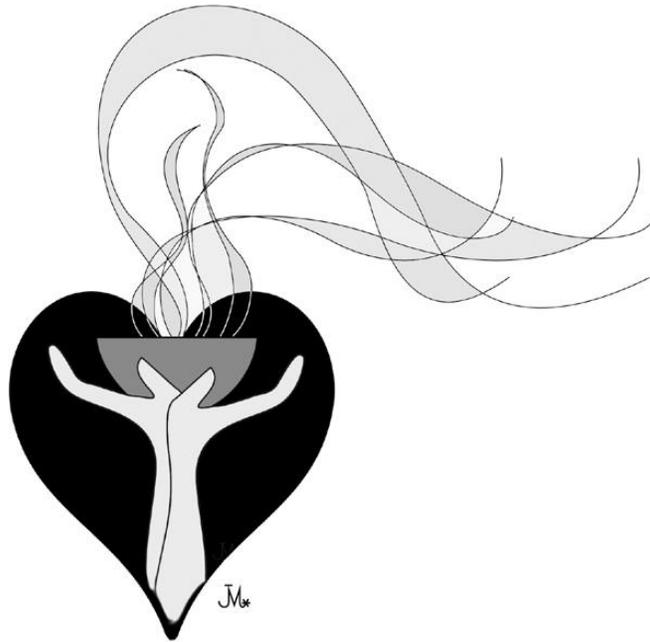
Resist the urge to multi-task. If you are on the phone be present to the conversation without doing other things at the same time. If you are in a meeting stay with the process and the conversation without looking ahead on the agenda or checking for messages.

At the close of the day take five minutes before going to sleep to notice where God came to you disguised as your life this day.



Invitation to Contemplative Dialogue

Gather with others (your leadership team, some friends, a group of colleagues, a mission group) to engage a deepening conversation around the ideas presented here. What does it mean to make of your life an offering? To breathe your prayer and to be your prayer? How does paying attention, being present, welcoming what comes shift how you engage your ministry of elected leadership? What are some of the practices that help you, individually and as a group, to live and minister from a place of contemplative engagement? What do you want to care with you from these reflections?



Additional Resources

[“Contemplation As a Way-of-Being-in-the-World”](#)—a reflection by Catherine Bertrand, SSND and Marie McCarthy SP

“Moving Into a Deeper Communion: Communal discernment Through Contemplative Dialogue”
Liz Sweeney, SSJ, Occasional Papers, Summer 2014.

Further reflections by Alla Renée Bozarth can be found by clicking on these links:

[Surprising Grace in The Prayer Imperative](#) (This page contains the full text of the poem “What is Prayer?”)

[Alla Bozarth Words and Images Welcoming Light in the Wilderness](#)