

INTRODUCTION

The spiritual journey, as I have experienced it, has not been about comfort. It's been about the birth of wonderment. My journey has been about letting go of everything I've known for an exquisite Unknown—for a delicious Mystery that keeps me baffled and babbling.

My approach has come from my conviction that the most mature among us are comfortable and at home in ambiguity and mystery. Demanding half-baked answers is a form of dysfunction and dis-ease.

The mystic John of the Cross stood out from the crowd. As a result, he spent years in a dank, dirty dungeon. Mysticism is threatening to the crowd. Henry David Thoreau was called a mystic. And in the next breath he was called a malcontent and a gadfly.

To blend in with the crowd is safe and at first it is preferred. Yet, the beauties of sustained practiced mysticism give us the courage to stand out—not because we want to make some social statement. We have the courage to stand out because we have slowly come to accept our uniqueness. Before our forays into mystic silences and retreats from the crowd we feared our uniqueness. We wanted to simply play along and fit in. Then, in time, we finally experienced the deep affirmation that allowed us to celebrate our distinct selves.

In mystic communion, we gain unshakable assurance that God celebrates our uniqueness. Then we come to celebrate it. We also come to celebrate the uniqueness of others. We come to a genuine appreciation of diversity. We give up the need for others to conform to this standard or that. We discover the inexhaustible, inclusive love of God, which includes us, of all people. From that standpoint, we want to share what we have been given, even if it makes us stand out, even if it invites hardship.

Our journey toward knowing the truth and living in the freedom of that truth (John 8:32). This truth is subtle and hidden. It's the still small voice of a wanderer, not the big primetime voice of a newscaster (1 Kgs. 19:12).

Don't get me wrong. I have not arrived at the mysterious Light. But I am on a journey of perpetual arriving. Each time I peel another layer off the onion, only to discover that there is another, then another. Still, there are times when the Light is all-pervasive and I feel that I am indeed home. My writing then flows from a yearning to share that exquisite homeland. May we find that homeland together, not you in front and me behind, and not me in front and you behind, but side-by-side.

■ The Lobsters Analogy

In the nineteenth century lobsters were so plentiful in New England that they became a nuisance. They got caught in fishnets and washed up on beaches. They were so abundant that people shoveled them onto their fields for fertilizer.

Only the poor, who had no other options, ate lobster. Imagine that! A dramatic shift happened in the twentieth century. All of a sudden, people got a taste for lobsters and they became gourmet. New England fishermen figured out how to ship them, and they introduced them to the rest of the country, and the world, as "rare" and "precious." What happened with lobsters is true of Scripture.

The Bible can feel commonplace, old hat. Colleagues in ministry confide in me that Bible verses feel like nuisance lobsters shoveled out at church services.

Part of why the Bible can feel cumbersome and unsavory is because, especially in Protestant history, it has been used by dualistic minds to prove who is right. The ego's need to be right, to prove that it has the correct interpretation, created a monster that divided and re-divided the Church. In other words, the book of poetry that ultimately points to the love of Jesus and to justice for the oppressed became a wedge to divide us. This led to over thirty thousand Christian denominations worldwide.

The divisive legalistic approach to the Bible baffled mystics through the ages. It led mystics to pronounce, "Why has Christianity preferred the courtroom to the bridal chamber?"

The focal point of the Bible should be the marriage of the soul to God—the unity of Jesus's divinity and humanity, which can be mirrored in us. The passionate romance of the Song of Songs⁸ should be central, not legal deliberations.

But, of course, the problem is not the Bible, just as the problem was not the lobsters. The problem is our approach to Scripture and the way it's taught. I resonate with author Kathleen Norris: "Children . . . begin to reject both poetry and religion for similar reasons, because the way both are taught takes the life out of them."⁹

The unitive, compassionate mind of Christ illumines the Bible for us, not the dualistic egotistic mind (Phil. 2:5). In other words, Scripture doesn't need to change any more than nineteenth-century lobsters needed to change. The way we see the Bible needs to change. This book is about reading Scripture with a mystical mind—a mind that's open to non-dual thinking and to Mystery.

It is not only the Scriptures themselves that are mystical. The state of our mind that we bring to Scripture can be mystical. Our perspective will determine whether or not we "see" (or interpret) that portion of the Scriptures as mystical or not.

If I have a hammer in my hand, I tend to approach everything as if it were a nail. In the same way, if my frame of reference is holistic, which is another name for mystical, when I read Scripture, I will see it as a whole. The words and sentences will have a synthetic quality because the nature of my mind is synthetic.

This book has to do with the Scriptures selected. It also has to do with a particular approach. When we are absorbed in desert solitude, silence, and stillness, we begin to see and understand the books, chapters, and verses of the Bible in a whole new way.

Part One:

ENTERING THE DESERT

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

—LUKE 5:16

*Jesus fasted in the wilderness for
forty days and forty nights.*

—MATTHEW 4:1-2

CHAPTER 1

Awareness, Deep Listening, and Contemplation and Action

■ Awareness

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness God called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

—Genesis 1:2–5 (NIV)

Something subtle and profound makes us uniquely human. Something illusive yet extraordinarily powerful animates human genius. In its pure form, it "hovered over the surface of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). At the world's genesis, it separated the day and the night by name. It's a power that arrives at the age of reason (usually about twelve or thirteen). It is what some refer to as "full reflective self-consciousness." This is a more technical phrase for the familiar term, awareness.

I am amazed how many times people can hear the word awareness without fully recognizing its penetrating primal meaning. For a long time, I thought I knew how to grasp it. I thought I was aware. Only recently, however, I've discovered how little I can claim hold of this illusive powerhouse term.

I, like so many people, regularly slip into unconsciousness. On some level I tune out, space-out, check-out. "Out" is the key word. I'm no

longer present. If there was a roll call, an astute observer would record "absent" after my name.

There are many intervals throughout the day when I check out. When I make my breakfast, I'm most often absent. I've made breakfast so many times in the same way that now I can do it in my sleep. When I sit down to eat after a long day I sometimes pull my chair without thinking—it's unconscious. I'm not aware of what I'm doing. Then I chew my food while thinking about something else, without tasting it.

When I sit in front of the television, like so many Americans, I check out. I just take in the sound bites and the newscaster's glossing of the news. I don't think about what comes into my senses. I allow mental laziness to creep over me. I just accept what's said wholesale, even when it insults my intelligence. It's always easier to tune out. It is always easier not to question—to just accept what we are fed through mass media. It's always easier not to look beneath the surface, not to listen when it stretches or hurts, not to be present when we pull up a chair. It's also easier not to check in on our familiar destructive habits. It's easier just to let things slide. We effortlessly pop the tranquilizer that shuts off awareness. We switch to auto-pilot.

It's always easier to cut class, but when we get older we can no longer obtain the permission slip to be absent. We no longer have an excuse to simply check out. To be an adult in the best sense is to be present. It is to be attentive to our children, to the written and spoken word, to dinner, to brushing teeth, and to our world.

Even when we read, we are distracted and check out for a paragraph or two. This is normal. But, do we know that we have checked out and do we know which sentences we missed and why? Or are we so absent, we don't even know that we're absent?

When people check out and appeal to instinct, our world turns to indifference, apathy, bigotry, and violence. But when people check in and appeal to reason, our world turns to beauty, new mystical ways of understanding, compassionate responses to life, and simple poise.

"Let there be light," God said in Genesis chapter one. Roll call. Are you in or out?

■ Deep Listening, Part 1

If you love me, keep my commandments. I will pray to God, who will give you another Counselor that he may be with you forever,—the Spirit of truth, whom the world can't receive, for it doesn't see him, neither knows him. You know him, for he lives with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you.

—*John 14:15–18 (WEB)*

Ruth specializes in family counseling. One time I asked her, "What makes a good counselor?" She said, "Foremost, a good counselor listens deeply."

I asked Ruth what this deep listening looks like. She said that after a client finishes speaking, she takes a long pause, then rephrases what the client has said in a fresh way to give assurance that she had listened.

In Ruth's estimation, a good counselor only speaks about five percent of the time. "Mostly a good counselor just listens." What a gift. If only there were more good listeners in the world, there would be much greater understanding.

Listening skills make the Holy Spirit the Counselor in our lives (John 14:16). As a result of deep listening the Counselor understands our hearts.

Sometimes I think I've listened and I think I understand when I don't. Not so with the Counselor. The Counselor understands our false self, our pretensions, our evasions, our self-centered motivations. The Counselor is not fooled even when we manage to fool ourselves. The Counselor's deep subconscious knowing reveals itself in dreams, when we're on a morning run, or in conversation.

The Counselor listens deeply to our lives, and then at times, if we listen, the Counselor ever so gently nudges us. Sometimes the nudge is

as simple as a phone call to make, an email to write, or a person to meet. Sometimes it's as easy as making a list of "things I am working on now." An item on my list as I write this is to listen deeply.

My intention when a parishioner named Paul walks into my office is to set aside everything else and give him my full, undistracted presence. My intent is to focus on his eyes, the contours of his forehead, his words, the tone and inflection of each word as it leaves his mouth, his body language. My intent is to reprogram. "This time is about you, you matter to me. I am listening to every word you say. I have abandoned my interior dialogue. I have dropkicked the distractions that vie for my attention, because in this moment you matter more to me than anything else." That's my intention, but I haven't realized such exquisite attentiveness.

On my best days, the person I listen to becomes the focus of my meditation.

Has someone ever focused on you with undivided attention? Such listening can create a space for words that have never been spoken before, for transformation. That's how the Counselor listens to us—inviting our true self to make an appearance. "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity," said the philosopher Simone Weil.

■ Deep Listening, Part 2

Ruth's counseling, which puts deep listening first, is instructive. How do we find the path to God and how do we stay on it? Listen deeply, and in the silence of our hearts the Counselor will speak.

This is demanding. How can we silence the din around us and in our minds long enough to listen deeply? And if we do make the time and have the patience to listen deeply, are we sure we'll hear the Spirit?

I visited my ninety-eight-year-old grandfather in New York City. It took patience to listen to him. And even then I missed a number of his words. It was only when I leaned in with my ear next to his lips that I understood more. He spoke in a whisper. To hear the counsel of the

Holy Spirit we have to lean in. Like my grandfather, the Counselor speaks in hushed tones.

Sometimes in prayer we feel as if we're leaning in to listen carefully, but to an empty chair. At that point, we feel we've entered into a one-way conversation. We sometimes feel we're "talking to the wall."

Teresa of Avila wrote, "The biggest mistake we make in prayer is praying as if God is absent." This is the problem we encounter. We're immersed in a culture of doubt. We have no reason to believe that there is a deeper truth beyond our senses. All we have ever known is our senses.

The turning point in prayer is when we finally stop talking, then stop thinking. Then we slowly begin to trust that the Counselor is there. Then, we lean in and listen for as long as it takes. As we wait, the empty chair begins to feel occupied. We feel the warm breath against our cheek. We brush up against an actual Being. We glimpse the Ancient One who was sitting there all along. We commune with the Counselor—the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9, 22).

■ Deep Listening, Part 3

No one can see shortwaves. They are imperceptible to the eye. Yet, if you have a shortwave radio, you can receive those shortwaves. Similarly, no one can see the Ancient Counselor. But if we dial in long enough and listen with our whole hearts we begin to perceive the Counselor's presence. Just as the wine taster's palate needs to be trained to decipher wine nuances, so too the spiritual faculties need to be trained to hear the Counselor's fine-tuned frequencies.

The Counselor requires wait time. When we exercise the patience to wait we gradually begin to hear a faint whisper like the still small voice that is mentioned in 1 Kings 19:12.

As we begin to hear the shortwaves come through the receiver, they may at first come through sporadically and with distortion. Patience is required.

When I was growing up overseas my dad tinkered with his short-wave radio, trying to get BBC news out of England. Sometimes he'd fiddle with the dials and antennas for a long time. Then the "aha" moment would come and a voice came through, crisp and clear.

If we persevere in prayer we will also reach that "aha" moment. And when the still small voice finally becomes audible we'll say, "I was deaf and now I hear. The ancient Counselor was there all along." "I hear BBC, even in this remote place."

Most people give up too soon. Don't! The essence of faith and trust is that an answer will come even when there's no sign of one.

Don't give up on the Holy Spirit. God's Counselor is our lifeline when everything else in life lets us down. Jesus says: "I will ask God and God will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever" (John 14:16). "I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you" (John 14:18). This is God's promise.

To listen deeply for the Counselor is a lifelong vocation. It is like seeking the best counselor, except you don't sit on a couch in a decorated office. You lie down in the grass. And instead of looking at a psychologist you look up at the stars.

The more we listen for the Counselor, the more comfortable we become in our own skin and the more at home we feel in our circumstances, whatever they may be. . . . Then we're less prone to distraction. And we feel less need to "get away." We're at home right here, right now.

It's normal to feel discontented and restless. That's the human condition. Yet, there is divine counsel. No matter what may go on in our lives and in the world, it's always available. It's not outside, but inside. And it's familiar. It belongs to us. It's our spiritual home.

■ Contemplation and Action, Part 1

Mary . . . sat before the Master (Jesus), hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."

—Luke 10:38–42 (MSG)

Mary and Martha symbolize the contemplative life and the active life.

We all have some sense of the active life. It's common. We know what it means to be busy. What we need to clarify is the contemplative life. It's a life of prayer, of reflection upon what matters. It's a life of wrestling with hard questions, a life that's familiar with silence and stillness and that accepts hardship.

Mary is the contemplative. She stills and empties herself in order to absorb Jesus's exquisite, transparent Presence, dipped in eternity, radiating primordial freedom. An artist carves out a bowl before we can put anything in it. A builder cuts out a window before we can see through it. We empty out the clutter in our minds before we are able to listen. A life of prayer makes room to listen. We empty ourselves like Mary.

Contemplation can be defined as progressively quieting the mind. Contemplatives can be counted on to listen because their minds aren't full. Their minds aren't preoccupied. They are not distracted by broken records that play in the background.

It's hard to describe someone who's at home with prayer. There's a quality about such people, a quiet composure and dignity. Someone who's at home in prayer knows three words: solidity, peace, and freedom. Prayer orders priorities. It connects us with the love of God so that we can reflect that love in a consistent and reliable way. To reflect

that love does not require know-how. It requires letting go and getting out of the way so that Light can shine through.

Contemplatives are people like Mary, who prioritize their relationship with God, and who courageously back away from the relentless vacuum of deadening busyness. Mary put aside her "duties" and made Jesus the priority. Then Mary laid aside her thoughts and opened herself to Jesus's presence and utterances.

To lay aside thoughts is like training a puppy to sit in the center of a circle.¹⁰ You gently bring the puppy to the center, then it wanders. Then you bring the puppy to the center again and it wanders again. This happens over and over. After a few days of this most people give up attempts to still the mind. Only after heaps of encouragement and determination will we stumble upon contemplation. Lo and behold, the puppy sits in the middle of the circle for an entire minute. This is a triumph! Then with time, the puppy sits for longer and longer periods. Slowly the mind finds deeper stability free of the constant wandering.

Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God." So, prayer wades through the restlessness and distractions until we reach a still point. In that stillness we find what the book of Philippians refers to as "a peace that surpasses understanding" (Phil. 4:7). This is what Mary sought. For this we were created.

Thomas, a disciple of Jesus and the apostle to India, taught that there are three vocations. There's the active life, the contemplative life, and a mixture of the two. Thomas taught that the most exquisite path is the mixture. The contemplative life, focused primarily on liturgy and prayer, is suited to some, but is not the most balanced way. The active life, focused on work and efficiency, is also ultimately unbalanced. Thomas sought a combination of the two.

To skillfully serve God and each other we need a deep well of stillness and the unshakable interior resources that follow. From this interior well, we can drink and never grow thirsty (John 4:14). From this deep well of stillness we can satisfy the thirsts of this world. We can become people upon whom others can lean.

■ Contemplation and Action, Part 2

I'm amazed how many times I've seen Mary and Martha referenced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers and by *The Philokalia* writers. Jesus's words, "Mary has chosen what is better," affirms a contemplative approach to living.

For the Desert Elders the Mary and Martha story affirms the decision to renounce all and enter the desert. In the twenty-first century, the story sometimes simply confirms the decision to renounce the laundry and sit on the cushion for twenty minutes. It's not the desert, or the cave in the desert, or the cloister, or the monastery that ultimately matters. What matters is our desire to let go of all secondary busybody pursuits in order to pursue the spiritual life—in order to gaze upon Jesus, like Mary. "The hesychast, in the true sense of the word, is not someone who has journeyed outwardly into the desert, but someone who has embarked on the journey inwards into his [her] own heart," says Kallistos Ware.¹¹

We strive for the integration of Mary and Martha. When steeped in the spirit of Mary, Martha's work is touched with the perfume of mindfulness. When contemplation infuses our actions, it adds artistry and elegance.

After many years of steering the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Richard Rohr now emphasizes the primary importance of contemplation. In the absence of the contemplative mind, activism can have the right objectives but the wrong spirit. In other words, activists can have the right goals. They might work for a worthy cause and commendable solutions. But they, themselves, don't embody the solution. Their presence makes people nervous. Their zeal isn't tempered with spaciousness, humor, and compassion.

In my own life, centering prayer and regular retreats are what keeps me balanced between Mary and Martha. When the two sisters are friends, I find that life becomes luminous and harmonious.

There's a reason why the Mary and Martha story appears directly after the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37). The two narratives balance each other. The first is about solidarity with those who suffer. The second addresses the primacy of silent devotion to God.¹² Solitude and solidarity: a powerful duo.

A Quaker elder once told me, "There's one thing that's required of us: to do absolutely nothing and to do it very well." When we do absolutely nothing in solitude—when, after years of practice, all thoughts are but a distant planet—then another dimension of life opens. It is a holistic dimension in the bosom of God. Thoughts plunge us out of delicious union as the unknown fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes: "God may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought, never."¹³

Beyond thought, words, images, and sounds, there's unity. At first the unity feels like darkness. It's darkness to our reasoning minds—to the left brain, which distinguishes and verbalizes everything. But when we frequent that uncomfortable darkness, we find home.

In her book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, Cynthia Bourgeault writes that in the beginning the deep stillness of centering prayer is a place we go to. In time, it becomes a place we come from. It goes from foreign landscape to familiar homeland, like a lover who we've taken years to get to know.

■ Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- 1) How important is awareness to your everyday life? Please explain.
- 2) On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest) how would you describe your level of awareness?
- 3) When you compare the contemplative life and the active life do you think the contemplative life is "the better part"?
- 4) What does a contemplative life in the twenty-first century look like to you?