WISDOM SCHOOL REFLECTION

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> In my own efforts to live the gospel I have found that it is virtually impossible to reach and sustain that level of 'perfect love' without a practice of contemplative prayer ... Ordinary awareness always eventually betrays itself and returns to its usual postures of self-defense and self-justification... Only from the level of spiritual awareness do you see and trust that all is held in the divine Mercy... You can begin to reach out to the world with the same wonderful, generous vulnerability that we see in Christ.
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> —Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 17.

I attended the first Australasian Wisdom School in New Zealand in Te Moata in February, 2016. I thought that the Wisdom School offered a useful frame for considering the place and purpose of contemplative practices in the spiritual life. I will outline my understanding of Cynthia's vision of why we fail to live in accordance with Gospel values and what she sees as the remedy for this problem.

Cynthia posits that all action springs out of a self that lies beneath our thoughts and emotions. The only truly efficacious act, then, emerges from a purified self, the source of all subconscious motivations as well as conscious thoughts and emotions. However, if we act primarily out of self-centered thinking or a divided heart, the ordinary human condition, we are likely to perpetuate rather than resolve problems in the world. Contemplative practice is necessary then to purify the self, or transform our consciousness, so that we can embody the Gospel message.

The Human Condition

Cynthia employs a computer metaphor, the 'egoic operating system', to explain why we fall short. This system rejects the gift of divine being that is our birthright and replaces it with clinging and grasping for our needs. One of Cynthia's teachers, Fr Thomas Keating, suggests that as each of us conforms to family expectations and social norms, we collectively turn away from a relationship with the living God and seek to meet our perceived needs through our own machinations. Our three most fundamental motivators are the desire for (1) safety/security (2) esteem/affection (3) and power/control.

These emotional programs for happiness, as Fr Keating calls them, are collectively run by the egoic operating system, which manifests itself in four easily observable psychological traps. The first trap is that our thoughts and emotions are driven by an attraction/avoidance dynamic. We move towards our attractors (*e.g.* safety, esteem, power, *etc.*) and avoid those things that disturb or threaten our egoic needs. 'The egoically generated self seeks pleasure- experienced as the enlargement or affirmation of its selfhood; and it avoids pain—experienced as the diminishment of selfhood and depletion of its vital elan.' This tug-of-war between our desires and fears leaves our ego by turns inflated and upbeat on good days and distraught and anxiety-ridden on bad days.

The second trap is that our actions are intended to establish a distinctive persona in contrast to others, bearing the imprint of self-identification. Standing out means that we are in competition with those in our community, splitting our heart's affection between our own needs and the equally important needs of others.

Third, these psychological strategies of identification and competition enter into physical form through our body language—gestures, expressions, movements, clothes—which often expresses our self-protective behaviors or self-focused intentions.

The final trap is that we squander the power of attention. Rather than being able to remain in a heart-resonant relationship with God, we are habitually distracted by a multitude of stimuli that take us out of ourselves, causing us to be drawn to or repelled by external phenomena. At other times, our attention is drawn to our inner world where we mentally dwell in the past or worry about our future, taking us out of a moment-by-moment indwelling with God.

The outcome of these traps is that rather than being bearers of the divine image and agents of compassionate action, our thoughts are scrambled and our emotions divided, skewed towards our own self-focused desires. As we grapple with the social demands of family and society, we struggle to get what we feel we need to satisfy ourselves. Rather than being inwardly directed by divine generosity, we become outwardly focused on a quest for survival with the attendant grasping and judging mind.

The egoic operating system usually runs beneath our conscious awareness. We are asleep to its reality, living on autopilot and fighting for our personal needs, which cuts us off from the whole. The egoic operating system effectively sabotages our well-meaning attempts to act compassionately by the four traps of likes and dislikes, identifications, embodied gestures, and inattention.

The Remedy

The remedy to our human condition begins with repentance, which for Fr Keating means to 'change the direction you are looking for happiness.' Cynthia also redefines the term in helpful ways, deconstructing the Greek word *metanoia* into *meta* meaning 'beyond' or 'larger' and *noia* being 'mind.' Repentance, then, means to go 'beyond the mind' or 'into the larger mind.'

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Cynthia calls this larger mind 'three-centered awareness,' which can be understood as the intelligences of the body, the mind, and the heart. The body's intelligence is its ability to move into the world, bearing the presence of God through purified actions, gestures, and behaviors. The body seeks to connect with others, manifesting the divine mercy, intimacy, and purpose in life.

While the body has an innate desire to reach out, the mind's particular gift is questioning, critical thinking, and discernment. A mind that has been cleansed of its egoic tendencies can choose to act wisely on behalf of others without the traps of self-focus. The third dimension of three-centered awareness is the heart, which, when divinely-attuned, perceives from the perspective of wholeness. The heart's contribution is its intuitive ability to arbitrate between the body's affirmation and the mind's caution, leading to right action.

Overall, three-centered awareness enables people to step into a larger mind, changing the direction they are seeking for satisfaction from an ego-driven quest to a re-opening to God's sufficiency and abundance. The remedy of restoring body, mind, and heart to their proper skillful intelligences is enabled by contemplative practice.

The body, for example, can engage in conscious work, disciplining the mind to remain focused on physical experience (*e.g.* sensing the feet as one walks, listening to the

sound created by work, entering into bodily sensations, *etc*.). The mind can be trained through meditation, first, to understand its unsettled, grasping nature, and in time become cleansed of its baser motivations to become gently in tune with the mind of Christ. These body and mind practices can also purify the intentions of the heart, enabling it to carry out its divine task of coherent perception and purposeful action.

Essential to this task is the training of attention. The underlying ability that maintains three-centered awareness is an attention that habitually drops the egoic operating system's persistent interior monologue in favor of a body-mind-heart moment-by-moment opening to the fullness of God's presence.

Cynthia's preferred spiritual practice for purifying the heart and training the attention is Centering Prayer. Drawing upon Philippians 2:4-5, Cynthia explains that Jesus' method employs the practice of kenosis, which means to 'self-empty' the frenetic energies of the egoic operating system and return to an open state of dependence on God. Letting go of egoic drives opens space for a higher mode of living called non-dual awareness, which means to see from the perspective of oneness. All contemplative practices would aim to assist us cultivate this new way of seeing.

Jesus is identified, then, as the first teacher of non-dualism in the Western world to instruct followers how to overcome dualisms of like vs. dislike and me vs. others. Only then can Christians successfully love God and their neighbors with their full heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection all bear witness how to live out of this state of wholeness. While the remedy emphasizes human responsibility in becoming more God-like, the entire journey from the small self to the Larger Self, is animated by God's grace. The abundance, presence and providence of God pervades our lives and guides our individual and collective paths.

Conclusion

Three-centered awareness offers a restorative path for us to recover our original harmony with God. Developing a habit of spiritual practices allows us to pierce the dark clouds of egoic behavior that obscure the blue sky of our original nature. As the self comes to dwell more in God's presence, it slowly becomes purified of ignorance, attachment, and identification. This Larger Self becomes free to truly act with compassion. Combining focused attention with purified intention enables the body-mind-heart to act not only as a unified intelligence within ourselves, but in resonance with the 'mind of Christ'.

Cynthia observes that the Rule of St Benedict, with its famed '*Ora et Labora'* ('Prayer and Work') is an overarching template for sanctifying the self. St Benedict saw his monasteries as 'Schools devoted to the Lord's service'. By analogy, in our own non-monastic environments, this ancient prayer-work template can assist us in our twin tasks of inner awakening and compassionate action.

The Wisdom School has helped me better understand the role of spiritual practices. Whether one is of an activist or contemplative bent, we need to manifest our spirituality in the 'marketplace'. To summarise, Cynthia provides three useful pointers for framing the place and purpose of contemplative practice:

1.To upgrade our egoic operating system in favour of the divine image operating system.

2.To assist us cultivate three centered awareness which allows us to ground and channel the divine life within us so that we can respond to life more graciously and compassionately.

3. To enable us to move through our lives more effortlessly as we alternate between the rhythm of *Ora* (Prayer) and *Labora* (Work).