



the empty bell

Christian Prayer: Silence & Dancing Between Knowing and Unknowing

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All four Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed. He prayed alone on mountains and in the wilderness. He prayed on roads, in people's homes and in temples. He prayed alone with God and he prayed with and for others. He prayed out loud and he prayed silently, in his own heart. Those prayers that we hear in the words of the Gospel often reflect or even repeat the prayers we find in Jewish scriptures. Jesus prayed as a Jew and his prayers often taste like the Psalms. We can guess from his ministry that Jesus placed a higher priority on prayer than on religious duties and laws.

If God is sometimes depicted in Hebrew scripture as a personal presence with qualities and emotions analogous to human ones, Jesus's prayers indicate that he was selective in his references to Hebrew images of God. Most often, his prayers assume that God is a consistent loving presence--not an arbitrary, wrathful, jealous or vindictive One--who will always protect and guide him and never abandon him. Jesus's prayers assume that he is, in a way, in love with God and that he himself is the Beloved of God. His prayers also suggest that he knows himself to be simultaneously at one with God and also distinct from God.

Unfortunately, Jesus did not provide us with a detailed developmental program of prayer. In fact, the only explicit direction he gave is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew where he emphasizes solitude and a specific focus on God as Creator and Father. The prayer that begins, "Our Father in heaven" is probably the one prayer that Christians of all denominations have in common. By tradition it is called The Lord's Prayer:

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6: 6-13)

The various practices of Christian prayer began to be articulated more clearly in the third to the sixth centuries when desert monks and mystical theologians such as Cassian, Evagrius, Origen, St. Antony, St. Augustine and St. Benedict, and many others--such as St. Isaac of Syria, Maximus the

Confessor and St. Athanasius--who are claimed as sacred teachers in the Orthodox tradition. These early Christian writers, whose writings are fortunately collected and translated anew in the Paulist Press series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, wove together many wonderful stories, practical suggestions and theological frameworks for prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Throughout the history of Christian prayer, there are no firm definitions to distinguish the terms, “prayer”, “meditation” and “contemplation.” Still, we can often think of prayer as vocal prayer, uttered silently or out loud, alone or with others. In prayer we often speak and listen to words of address--talking with and listening to God. Meditation has often been used to indicate a kind of heartfelt reflection whereby we turn over in our minds the words of Scripture, an experience of liturgy or the memory of a meaningful interaction or prayer. Meditation requires the work of focusing our minds and ruminating on something in God’s presence. Contemplation is most often used to describe a later developmental stage of prayer and meditation whereby the seeker’s mind and heart have become calm and open to a deep listening. In contemplation one has stopped “doing” anything and is simply present to God, and God is present to that person. In contemplation, one no longer thinks, meditates, reflects or speaks, but is “all ears” in an ambience of love, a simple “being with” the God of Love.

In the first centuries after Jesus’s life and death, most Desert monk/writers were familiar with silence--their own silence, and the silence of God. Quite often, they emphasized “purity of heart” and a letting go of all thoughts that were not directed to God. They suggested that in order to enter into the light (or the darkness) of God’s presence, one should first focus the mind with a simple prayer. Single lines or phrases from the Psalms were often used for this purpose: “Oh God, come to my assistance, Make haste to help me,” or “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me.” Sometimes, the pray-er is counseled to recite the short prayer in a rhythm with each breath. When the mind has become still, St. Athanasius suggested that one simply “breathe Christ.” Sometimes, these mystical theologians understood the letting go of one’s thoughts and emotions as the “emptying” (Greek: *kenosis*), that is mentioned by St. Paul in Philippians 2:5ff, where Christ “emptied himself.” In silence, these mystical theologians sensed a unity with God that cannot be experienced if one is caught up in one’s own thinking *about* God. Their spiritual practice is sometimes called the *via negativa* or the way of unknowing--versus the *via affirmativa*, which proceeds by way of what we *can* know about God through our senses.

Gradually, an implicit architecture of prayer developed among the Desert Fathers and Mothers and blossomed later in medieval monasteries and convents. In the first step of prayer, *Lectio* (Latin for “prayerful reading”), we slowly read or recite a passage of Scripture. In the second step, *Meditatio* (reflection), we slowly repeat a word or phrase and let its meanings sink deeply into the soul. In the third step, *Oratio*, we express our spontaneous emotional response to God’s loving presence. In the fourth and final step, *Contemplatio*, we rest in God’s presence without words, images, or feelings. This last step of prayer is considered a gift; we cannot will ourselves to experience contemplative silence, but can only receive it. Contemplative silence honors the *via negativa* approach to God who is beyond all words, stories, and images--beyond our control.

Over the centuries, monasteries and convents evolved their own favorite methods of prayer and meditation, drawing from Scripture, tradition and experience. Some emphasized silent meditation or contemplation, while others emphasized sacred liturgies and the Eucharist, a prayerful reading of

Scripture, repetitive prayer, or prayers of intercession, gratitude and praise. Some religious orders preferred to walk the *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa* simultaneously in their daily offices by including extended periods of silence in their rich liturgical experiences.

The 16th century Protestant Reformation

After the Reformation in the 16th century, Protestant denominations drew parishioners' attention almost entirely to the Bible, to sermons and vocal prayer, and to the singing of hymns. These *via affirmativa* experiences were also called *kataphatic* (Greek: with images). They expressed faith in the possibility that the invisible God makes Himself/Herself available in our real, ordinary experience through sight, smell, touch, hearing and conceptual understanding. The *kataphatic* dimension of prayer lifts up the ways that our senses and our minds can mediate God's presence, and the *apophatic* (Greek: without images) dimension lifts up the ways in which God's real presence is beyond all sensual and conceptual experience. The Protestant Reformation emphasized the *kataphatic* dimension of prayer and almost obliterated the *apophatic*, contemplative and mystical dimensions.

Almost all post-Reformation denominations (except, e.g., the Quakers) focused (and still do focus) on the Word--reading the Bible, listening to sermons and trying to convert others by convincing them that our particular verbal formulations of scripture, of doctrine and of God's identity are true in themselves. For most Protestant denominations, the words of Scripture, doctrine and creeds are themselves identified as holy. These Christian brothers and sisters do not seem to be interested in contemplative silence or in the possibility that the Triune God can show up between, beneath and beyond our words and stories--even beyond our sacred words and stories. Unfortunately, it is not unusual to encounter Protestant believers who think that those who enter contemplative silence are opening themselves to the Devil. Apparently, these believers have not taken seriously a fundamental truth of our faith, that God is in all things, that Jesus himself sought out the silence of the desert to simply "be" with God and that Christ may be seeking us in silence. Apparently, such believers do not take seriously St. John's pronouncement in John 1 (2-5) that

Christ was in the beginning with God, All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Silence and the darkness of the desert are part of the created world, a world created by our God. By John's testimony all things, including, we presume, contemplative silence, came into being through Christ. By John's sacred testimony we can therefore assume that Christ is present to all creation, and present in silence. There is no place, including silence, that God is *not*.

So, it is unfortunate that the Catholic and Orthodox love for silent meditation and contemplative prayer was almost entirely rejected by Protestant churches during and after the Reformation. Perhaps there were good reasons for this spiritual re-focusing at that time in history, but the loss of the *via negativa*, the *apophatic*, and the contemplative dimension in prayer was a major loss for Protestant Christianity. When the Protestant emphasis on the words of Scripture and on vocal prayer is not balanced with a contemplative letting go of all words and meanings for God's sake, it is too easy to

miss God's presence *between* our words and theories, and to become attached to one's own verbal propositions about God.

Without the contemplative dimension, it is easy to slide into a fanatical fundamentalism in which we become convinced that our ideas and propositions about God are the best and only interpretation of the Divine--and that those who disagree with us are wrong or evil. We need contemplative silence to stay in touch with our humility, lest we become like the Bible Belt school board that garnered a brief mention in the New York Times years ago when, under pressure to teach Spanish in the public schools, declared "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us."

Contemplative Prayer & Interfaith Dialogue

The Empty Bell approach to Christian prayer seeks to honor both the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic* dimensions of the spiritual life. To borrow from the sacred language of the great 4th century Councils, we believe that the fullest expression of Christian prayer dances (Greek: *perichoresis*, a dance-around) between that which we can know, sense, say or sing, and that which is a Mystery in God. To pray and meditate in the Christian tradition is to dance the boundary between knowing and unknowing. In this dual emphasis we perceive more space for interfaith dialogue--especially with Asian spiritual paths such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism--than one finds in a purely *kataphatic* Christian spirituality. Contemplative prayer provides us with a disciplined practice that helps us to be light on our feet with regard to what we can know about God, and so allows us more inward spaciousness to learn from those who follow other spiritual paths.

In this respect, we at the Empty Bell believe that because we live in community with people of other faiths, dialogue with those who follow other religious traditions should be held up as an essential part of our social and ethical lives. Therefore, we applaud the ecumenical spirit of the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, which, in 1965, distributed a document entitled *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions). *Nostra Aetate* declared,

Ever aware of its duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, it reflects at the outset on what people have common and what tends to bring them together. Humanity forms but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (see Acts 17:26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. . . . So, too, other religions which are found throughout the world attempt in different ways to overcome the restlessness of people's hearts by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. . . . Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.

At the Empty Bell, we believe that the official Christian canon describes, in inspired language, a sacred story that can be salvific for anyone, but we also believe that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is free and larger than any human--even Christian--understanding. The Holy Spirit “blows where it wills”, sparking love, compassion and mercy among people of different cultures and religions. The practice of contemplative silence helps us to listen to this creative, life-giving, and often surprising, Holy Spirit.

The Empty Bell’s contemplative style of prayer roots itself in what we can know about the Trinity from the Bible, from the tradition, from our own experience and from the experience of Christians throughout the ages. And we also root ourselves in what one medieval Christian writer called “The Cloud of Unknowing” (William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* [14th c.], New York: Doubleday, 1973, 1996). There are things about God that we can confidently claim to know, and things about God that we do not know and can never know. At the Empty Bell, we hope that Christians will eventually become comfortable with this dance between knowing and unknowing. Because of this dual emphasis, the Empty Bell is more aligned with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations than with the Protestant ones, but we see no essential contradiction between ourselves and the spiritual vision of all major Christian churches and denominations. We like to think of ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, even if our Body includes members with whom we disagree. And we believe that this Body of Christ has relatively open boundaries, allowing us to learn spiritual insights and wisdom from non-Christians.

The Empty Bell in Dialogue with other Contemplative Communities

Two internationally known Roman Catholic organizations currently sponsor retreats, organize local prayer groups and offer website education: Contemplative Outreach, led by Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating, and the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), led by Benedictine Fr. Laurence Freeman. Their websites are bountiful resources for educating oneself in the history and practice of the Roman Catholic contemplative path. Please see www.contemplativeoutreach.org and www.wccm.org

Both of these organizations are keenly aware of the importance of the *apophatic* tradition and both teach meditative practices that are consistent with this emphasis. Practically speaking, both Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Laurence Freeman are more interested in silent meditation than in traditional Christian vocal prayer and the communal singing of hymns. Both men invite contemplative Christians to the meditation cushion to bring awareness to what is going on in the mind, emotions, and body. There, in the silence, followers are instructed to repeat a sacred word or mantra in order to quiet the mind and passions and to seek God in the gaps between thoughts and momentary feelings. The goal of these contemplative practices is simply to be, to dwell in the unknowing of God’s Mystery.

The Empty Bell community believes that the contemplative approach of Frs. Keating and Freeman is making a huge contribution to Christian communities in this country and around the world. Here in the U.S., those who are poor languish in unfulfilling lives that are dominated by the economic demands of daily survival. Those in the middle classes often live frenzied, pressured lives, multi-tasking from early morning until late at night. A significant number of people in America must hold two or three jobs to support their families. Meanwhile, those who are wealthy may feel burdened by possessions

and wonder how to assuage the inner emptiness that material goods cannot fill. Most Americans experience very little inner peace, for most of us have no time simply to be, no time even to notice what we are thinking or feeling, much less what is driving our thoughts and actions. For many young Americans, traditional Christian language seems strange and quaint, a holdover from pre-modern culture and irrelevant to their fast-paced, technologically saturated lives. To all these groups of people, the Christian contemplative tradition has much to offer.

Unfortunately, most Christian churches do not draw their parishioners' attention to – or help them to interpret – their actual inner experience. Parishioners who want to learn to pray may find that they have nowhere to turn. As a result, many parishioners may conclude that they have to settle for hearing and talking about God – a poor substitute for actually experiencing God. Thus, we at the Empty Bell welcome the work of Frs. Keating and Freeman, who are teaching a theological vision and sharing spiritual practices that connect Christians to the earliest Christian communities and that alert us to the ways that Christ's presence is immediately available to each person, just beneath the surface of our anxious and frenetic lives. Their work reminds us that God is as close to us as our own breath and that God is present within the interstices of our thoughts and memories, whether or not we are thinking about God. Their teachings remind us that God is present --sometimes in subtle ways--everywhere and in all things--even when we feel that our minds are “a tree full of monkeys”, as the Buddhists say.

The Empty Bell community shares the goals of Contemplative Outreach and the World Community for Christian Meditation. However, we also notice two apparent distinctions between our approach to the contemplative Christian life and theirs. Noticing these distinctions is not meant to be a criticism of their approach so much as an invitation to dialogue with them. We hope they will respond, and we will share their responses on our website, www.emptybell.org.

First, we feel that both organizations may overemphasize wordless silence and underemphasize other important *kataphatic* ways to experience God and to be “doing God's will”. We believe that the Trinitarian Christian way is essentially a relational spirituality that invites us to find God anywhere, anytime--sometimes in silence and sometimes in action or conversation, sometimes in calm meditation, but sometimes in a tumultuous encounter with secular political authorities. Ours is a spirituality of both unity and distinction where we are often invited out of our peaceful sense of unity with God into a desert or a city of encounters with sometimes strange and challenging people, animals or locations in nature or with a God who surprises and disturbs us. We should be careful not to imply that God is most powerfully present in contemplative prayer. God may be present in our ideas and words, and God may be present when we let go of our ideas and words. God is everywhere and we have no control over where or how God shows up.

Second, we feel that both the WCCM and Contemplative Outreach overemphasize a possible contemplative unity with God and others, and give insufficient attention to the “I-Thou” dimension of our lives. If, for example, I am in disagreement or conflict with another, I am called not only to sit quietly with my unsettled or angry feelings, to “let them go” and to seek God's unifying, wordless presence. Rather, I may be called to actually pick up the phone and invite the other person to have a conversation about the situation. Dialing that number may be more important than bringing awareness to a mantra or my breathing. If we perceive a problem in our lives--emotionally, spiritually, or materially--we should not think that contemplative silence is always the most appropriate way to deal with the issue. Very often, God calls us to creative engagement in conversation or action with others in community. Knowing whether to seek contemplative silence or active engagement is a matter of

moment-to-moment discernment.

In this I-Thou (and I-It) category of experience we are inspired by the work of Martin Buber (See his *I and Thou* [*Ich und Du*], Ronald Gregor Smith, trans., New York: Collier Books, 1958). If contemplative prayer emphasizes simply “being with” God in wordless unity, then the I-Thou and I-It dimensions draw our attention to the importance of connecting, subject to subject, with others, and even with ourselves. Sometimes, it is more important to reach out to ourselves and others in love, to work creatively with them, to help them or to be helped by them, than it is to sit in meditative silence with God.

We feel that some contemplative Christian traditions give insufficient attention to the discipline of discernment in the I-Thou dimension and to possible courses of action in the external world. We also feel that one who prays should be alert to the possibility that a sacred “I-Thou” invitation may occur between oneself and one’s own memories, worries or thoughts, or any other “waveform” or voice that emerges from our unconscious. I once heard the Roman Catholic writer, Ewert Cousins, say that God’s presence within us is like a Someone who is saying to us, “I see you, I know you, and I love you.” We should always expect to hear this voice of the Beloved right here, within the flow of our thinking and feeling, even as these movements emerge from our unconscious. In this emphasis we seem to differ with Fr. Thomas Keating, who perceives everything in our unconscious to be expendable. We do not mean to criticize these traditions and organizations so much as to alert ourselves to the limits of their ministries. We assume that every ministry, including ours at the Empty Bell has both something to offer and limitations.

***Jesus’s Ministry of “the Between”:
The Limits of Contemplative, Unitive Prayer***

Those of us who value contemplative silence should remember that Jesus did not teach wordless, contemplative prayer explicitly and he did not direct people to the meditation cushion, as Buddha did centuries before Jesus was born. Yes, Jesus did pray alone, often going into the desert for solitude, and we can infer from his life and teaching that he learned about himself, his mission and God in silence. But contemplatives should not ignore the fact that Jesus’s spirituality was thoroughly relational. Jesus discerned God’s personal presence as he studied Hebrew scripture, and he preached. The Gospel writers tell us that God’s presence was conveyed powerfully through Jesus’s words. Jesus’s ministry tells us that very often the Good News is spoken, one to another, and the effect on the listener may be more powerful, meaningful and redemptive than if that listener had sat in meditation or contemplative prayer.

Jesus suggested solitary prayer (Matthew 6:6), but his ministry and the New Testament scriptures demonstrate that sometimes our healing and redemption may come from Jesus himself, from the Holy Spirit or from another person who is blessed in the Spirit (Luke 10; Mark 5:8; Mark 5:27-28; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 12:9 & 28-30). Jesus modeled the power of sacred interpersonal contact by saying a word of blessing, and by performing miraculous healings, including raising people from the dead. Sometimes, he reached out and healed others with a simple, prayerful touch, and some were healed when they touched him. His ministry was lively, behaviorally dynamic and connecting. He spoke of

a spiritual power going out of him to others, and he declared that after his death he would send a living spiritual presence and power--the Holy Spirit--to his disciples and friends and to the world.

For Jesus, salvation did not come only through a reformation of our individual awareness via the discipline of silent meditation. He demonstrated the truth that very often, healing comes through connecting with God and others over time. The Gospel of John makes it especially clear that for Jesus, there was always an “other”, a Thou, who he was in relation to. In fact, we can assume that inwardly, he was in continuous contact with God as beloved other and with the presence of people and creation as “other”. Yes, Jesus’s spiritual life sprang from his unity with the first Person of the Trinity, the Divine Mystery, and from simply “being one with” God in a contemplative unity, but it also blossomed forth from a continuous, inward giving and receiving in relation to the otherness of God, people and creation.

Many readers have been inspired by the work of the early 20th c. writer, E.M. Forster, and some of us have quoted his phrase from the novel *Howard’s End*, “Only connect.” Of course, Forster was referring to a prevalent disconnect between prose and passion in the English literature of his time. But this phrase points to a larger truth, a truth that Jesus embodied. One has only to read Jesus’s great farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17: From beginning to end it is a discourse of connection. Jesus sensed God’s presence like a loving father and he knew that he had come from God and was going to God. He washed his disciples’ feet, blessing his friends with touch. And most strikingly, he espoused a rich theology and spirituality of connection. For example, Jesus tells his friends,

Whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. (John 13:20)

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (13:34-35)

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (14:2-3).

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (14-10)

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you

also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (14:16-21)

Clearly, Jesus espoused relationality and connection as essential elements of the spiritual life. His was the language of intimacy and love. He was comfortable with the phrase, “I love you” and even asked his friends, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). Jesus’s spirituality spotlighted “the between” where we meet others as friends or enemies. For him, this is where much of our spiritual work takes place. And this is the very place that can get lost on contemplative paths that overemphasize the individual work of meditation. Quite often in contemplative circles, the interpersonal, social and political dimensions of our lives are seen as a distraction from “my practice.” Too often, those who cannot connect well and appropriately with others choose the path of individual meditation as an attractive alternative to the challenges of interpersonal, social and political engagement. Too often, an imagined unity of oneself with the Divine substitutes for friendship, partnership and community.

We at the Empty Bell affirm the “overlap” of our individual consciousness and awareness with Christ: See e.g., 1 Corinthians 2:16; 1 Corinthians 16:10; Philippians 2 (verses 5ff), and especially St. Paul’s “now not I, but Christ in me” in Galatians 2:20. We affirm the possibility of living--feeling, thinking, perceiving and acting--from the perspective of our Higher Self in Christ. We simply assert that this transformation of our own awareness into Christ’s awareness cannot come about merely by focusing one’s attention on one’s own awareness and cultivating purity there. Christian meditation and contemplation must always be balanced with appropriate ethical behavior and connecting well with others in intimate relationships and in community. Some attention to the cultivation of the Mind of Christ in one’s individual awareness is essential, but it is not sufficient.

As Jesus said, there is no greater love than to give our lives for our friends (John 15:13). This declaration places connection to others and loving action at the center of our spiritual lives, whether or not we have attained to purity of awareness. Yes, we can work on our “monkey minds” and rid our awareness of all impurities, but sometimes the deeper and more challenging practice is to speak words of loving commitment such as “I love you” and then to follow through on the implications of that commitment over time. Sometimes, the most redemptive thing we can do is to go “out” of ourselves in empathetic engagement with others and to seek the love of Christ and the mind of Christ right there, in the “between”.

We at the Empty Bell believe that individual meditation and prayer should not take priority over connecting with others in creative engagement and in love. We believe that sometimes, revelations of God’s presence that happen in the midst of action are as salient, as meaningful and as powerful as when they happen on the meditation cushion. In any given moment, should one meditate on a sacred word or should one connect with another through words or with loving, respectful touch? This question can only be answered by each person in the moment, as one of the disciplines of sacred discernment.

In some contemporary approaches to contemplative prayer, there seems to be a de-emphasis on the interpersonal analogy--the I-Thou language of the second Person of the Trinity--in relation to the Triune God, to others, to creation and to oneself. There seems to be an over-emphasis on individual meditation practices that are directed to the first Person of the Trinity, to the unitive experience of the *apophatic*,

wordless Mystery of God. We at the Empty Bell believe that those who are drawn to the contemplative path should be careful not to over-emphasize simple presence in the field of one's own awareness and thereby de-emphasize connecting to others in love, or touching others through the God-given power of action or speech. We sense in some contemplative approaches a preference for cultivating a purity of individual awareness rather than simply helping others or joining with them in creative, justice-enhancing and joyful projects. Sometimes God's grace is expressed through us, even if our minds are unclear in the moment. We are capable of perceiving the world continuously in the Mind of Christ, but God does not need us to be wholly within that sacred consciousness in order for God to use us.

Of course, it would be nice to have enough time to both make time for silent meditation--to get a handle on our "monkey minds" while simultaneously connecting with others to create a more sustainable and just world. We can all get better at this. But sometimes, there isn't enough time and we need to act and to connect even though our minds are a mess. At the Empty Bell we take the moderate position that one should seek to connect to others, and to God, in love in each moment, and to assert that "connecting" can take place deeply and authentically in both silent meditation and in live interaction with others. In any given situation, one must discern how to bring one's own will into alignment with God's will, and there is no "cookie-cutter" agenda or paradigm of spiritual practice that will get us off the hook.

In the Empty Bell we value the Contemplative Outreach (CO) and World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) emphasis on silent meditation and the use of a mantra to help the mind settle down. Most of the time, this inward flow of information and self-talk sounds like a radio that is attuned to a random station. There is actually little of value in it, as it is mixed up with various anxieties and fears. Unfortunately, this inward static can influence behavior in negative ways that we don't even notice, and it is deadly with respect to prayer. Contemplative awareness first shows us to how chaotic our minds are--that's the bad news--but if we continue to practice, a feeling of spaciousness and inner peace gradually arises and we may become more available to receive the really Good News.

Once we've attained some inward spaciousness or detachment from the inward chatter, we should *not* seek to separate ourselves completely from the flow of memories, thoughts, fears and future-planning. All these things might be good for us and for others, and ways of connecting with ourselves, others and even God's will. We should not practice meditation to leave this world or our actual experience! In fact, contemplative silence sometimes quiets our minds enough for us to see that that the flow of memories and thoughts already has more depth than we imagined. After all, any of our inward experiences may be iconic--a gateway to God's presence or to God's message for me or the community.

Yes, along with CO and WCCM we ask, "How can one dwell in God's presence if our minds are so hopping with thoughts, worries, problem-solving and analyzing that we feel we're living in a tree full of monkeys." But memories and images, for example, are not always a distraction. Sometimes, God may speak to us or call our communities to a new action or identity through a memory or image. CO and WCCM tend to emphasize letting go of all conceptual thinking, inward story-telling and the flow of feelings and images, whereas the Empty Bell community advises that we sometimes pay close attention to what messages these inner experiences might bring from God. All thoughts are not classifiable as mere "thoughts", and so we must continuously discern which ones are irrelevant flotsam and jetsam, useful, creative or iconic and inspired.

In this, we disagree with Fr. Keating who argues in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Amity, New York: Amity House, 1986), that one should let all thoughts and feelings pass through the mind while meditating and that one should not focus on any particular memory or emotion. According to Fr. Keating, we should treat the flow of inner experience as so much garbage that arises chaotically from the individual's unconscious and should be "unloaded" (pp. 93ff). He writes, for example,

During the unloading process [of the unconscious] you may want to figure out where a particular smile, itch, pain, or strong feeling is coming from in your psyche and to identify it with some earlier period in your life. That's useless. The nature of the unloading process is that it does not focus on any particular event. It loosens up all the rubbish, so to speak, and the psychological refuse comes up as a kind of compost. It's like throwing out the garbage. . . . Do not resist any thought, do not hang on to any thought, do not react emotionally to any thought. . . . during prayer if you notice tears falling, lips smiling, eyes twitching, itches, and pains--treat them like any other thought and let them all go by. Gently return to the sacred word. . . . Thoughts, moods, or feelings of depression that might last for several days are ways the psyche has of evacuating the undigested emotional material of a lifetime. When these pass, you psychological insides will feel much better. (pp. 97-100).

It is worth noting that this approach to meditation is almost exactly the same as Vipassana (or Insight) Buddhist meditation as taught, e.g., at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts (see www.dharma.org/ims). In Vipassana meditation, and apparently in Fr. Keating's contemplative meditation, there is no significant, spiritually valuable difference between thoughts. Thoughts are mere thoughts, memories mere memories, emotions mere emotions. In this kind of meditation--Buddhist or Christian--there is no essential connection between the flow of my inner thoughts, memories and emotions and others (or God). We believe that there may be essential, engrafted, spiritually significant connections between our momentary thoughts and feelings and our vocations and ultimate destinies in God.

It seems that Fr. Keating discounts the possibility that a particular memory may be iconic and a vehicle for God's approach to us. Apparently, he also discounts the possibility that a particular emotion may arise, for example, to show us a meaningful or healing connection between a past event and a current relationship in which I need to act. Apparently, he discounts the possibility that any particular inner experience might be conveying to us an insight that provides us with the meaning and the power we need to change something in a relationship, in our neighborhood or in the world. He could alert us to the possibility that what looks to us like a mere memory might actually be a prayer.

Yes, when we are beset by monkey mind, we need to sit down, shut up, and listen in silence for our truth and for God's presence. But watch out! As our minds, hearts and bodies begin to relax in the course of contemplative practice, we should be alert to the possibility that in any memory and in every emotion or twitch of the body, Jesus might be tapping on our shoulder saying, "Let's go, brother!" We should be alert to the possibility that a particular memory of a particular person or event might be an invitation to pray or to make a sacred, imaginative connection to that person in an "I-Thou" way. For one example of how such a moment might appear, see my essay, "Cigarette Smoke and Incense"

elsewhere on this website. For me, it is a concrete example of a healing experience that would have been missed entirely if I had followed Fr. Keating's--and Vipassana Buddhism's--advice.

We can make ourselves available in silent meditation, but we cannot control how God will reach out to us. At the Empty Bell, we suggest that the Christian meditator stay awake on every level to the imminent arrival of God who may come beneath the radar of thoughts, images or memories, but who may also come expressly within and through memories, images or thoughts. We teach openness to Christ's presence in each moment, even if this means letting go of all conceptual meanings one moment, and following the path of remembered images or the flow of a remembered conversations in the next. It has been said that Christians are a people "of the story". Contemplative Christians should remember that while God's presence can indeed arrive in our actual experience if we spend more time in silence, God may also come in "the between" of our relationships and in sacred stories and memories that bring a fire of awareness, commitment and love.

