

## *Perspective*

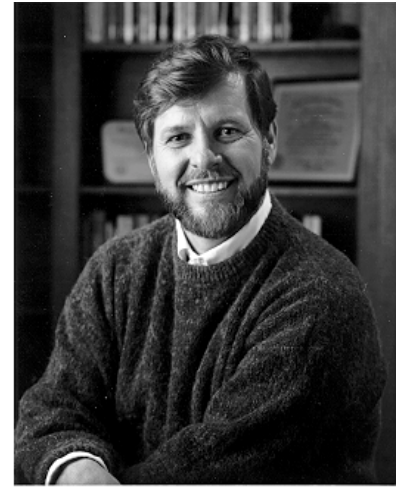
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### *Growing Edges*

July, 1994

In recent days I have been repeatedly drawn to the powerful poem/prayer of John Henry Newman, that great intellectual of the nineteenth century and a leader in the famous "Oxford Movement." It is known simply as "Newman's prayer." Allow me to share a few lines:

God has created me to do him some definite service.  
He has committed some work to me which he has not  
committed to another.  
I have my mission.  
I may never know it in this life  
But I shall be told it in the next.  
I am a link in a chain.  
A bond of connection between persons  
He has not created me for naught  
I shall do good--I shall do his work  
I shall be an angel of peace  
A preacher of truth in my own place  
While not intending it  
If I do but keep his commandments.



#### **The Smallest Act**

I hope you have that sense of mission, of service, of work. No one else can do what God has given you to do. If your offering of service is withheld, all are less; if it is faithfully given, all are enriched. And it matters not a whit if your work is unvalued by the culture. The smallest act of kindness can send ripples of joy throughout a community. "They also serve who only stand and wait."

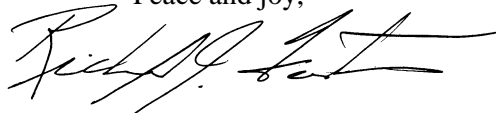
And from the perspective of spiritual reality I rather think that more is happening than we imagine. It is like the laws of mathematics have been superseded, or at least stretched in ways we do not fully understand. Evil has its effect, to be sure—to the third and fourth generation, as the Scripture says. But acts of love and justice and mercy . . . why, their effect goes on and on and on—"to the thousandth generation." So I tell you, never devalue the work you have been given—it is precious beyond measure.

Let me share with you the final lines of Newman's poem:

Therefore I will trust him  
Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away.  
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him  
In perplexity, my perplexity may serve him  
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him  
He does nothing in vain  
He knows what he is about  
He may take away my friends  
He may throw me among strangers

He may make me feel desolate  
Make my spirits sink  
Hide my future from me—still  
He knows what he is about.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

## ***Growing Together***

### **Learning to Pray as a Group**

Praying together in a Spiritual Formation Group or some other context, while a great privilege, can be frustrating at times. In the first place, any gathering of people brings with it very different expectations of prayer, even misconceptions. Then, too, the intimacy involved in praying together can be threatening to some. And, if these factors are not enough, the problem is further complicated by the fact that many people bring to the group poor models of corporate prayer, e.g. domineering, sermonizing, special religious jargon, etc. If you can identify with these problems, then here are a few ways to help you get past these awkward situations.

#### **STEP 1: Letting Silence Shatter Myths**

Because most of us tend to view prayer as talking, a quick way to shatter this myth is to learn how to pray without words. This will also help to put an end to the performance mentality. By sitting together in silence with each person focusing his or her attention on the presence of God, the group will experience a sense of unity. No one is on stage; each member is united by God's presence.

#### **STEP 2: Utilizing Previously Composed Prayers**

The liturgical churches have passed on to us several wonderful prayers that have stood the test of time. Previously composed prayers take away the feeling of being "on stage." Also, the content of many other prayers such as The Lord's Prayer or St. Francis' prayers are rich and powerful.

#### **STEP 3: Praying the Scriptures**

The Bible is a rich source of prayer. By using a passage or a verse as the focus of the group's prayer, each member is allowed a chance to interact with God's word to us. In doing this we take what God is saying to us and turn it into a

prayer we say back to him. It involves a more personal interaction than Step 2, but the content is already provided.

#### **STEP 4: Becoming Creative Through Self-Composed Prayers**

Many of us might feel more comfortable praying in front of others if we had a little time to prepare. One way to do this is to have each member, or one designated member for a meeting, write a prayer. This is more intimidating than Step 3, but it helps to develop a sense of group identity because the prayers come from the heart and life of one of the members.

#### **STEP 5: Conversational Prayer**

Many of us use a different language when we talk with God than with others, and those who cannot speak "Christianese" usually feel intimidated. In this exercise each member talks with God as they would a friend, using short, simple, honest sentences. Because the nature of the prayers are heart-felt, this is highly personal, but, because it is very informal, it is not forbidding even for people who have not prayed much with others.

#### **STEP 6: Breaking into Sub-Groups**

Even though a group may have only five or six members, it can still be intimidating for some people to share their concerns or to pray out loud. Praying in a smaller sub-group helps ease people into praying in a larger group. By breaking down into pairs the members are able to take their time, share a bit more, and feel less intimidated when praying out loud.

#### **STEP 7: Listening**

In this step the members share their private concerns and joys with the whole group. This is much like Step 6 except that here the group not only casts their collective cares upon God but also listens on behalf of one another.

James Bryan Smith

## *Going Deeper*

By now you may have guessed that our theme for this issue of the RENOVARÉ Perspective is prayer, hence we are featuring two new books that we hope many will find helpful.

### *Prayers From the Heart*

This is Richard Foster's most personal work yet, a book of prayers that seeks to lead us into experiencing "the reality of God in the midst of going to work and raising kids and cleaning house and paying the bills."

Drawing on the structure of *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard presents a collection of prayers for the three aspects of the human journey: looking inward to the heart, reaching upward toward God, and moving outward to care for others. These prayers speak to moments in our days and events in our lives.

Simply and powerfully expressing such basic human experiences as wonder, stillness, the loneliness of anonymity, and the search for faith, Foster shares thoughts that have shaped his prayer life and encourages readers to explore the transformative power of prayer that draws us into the love of God and gives Christian community its life.

### *Coming Home: A Prayer Journal*

Prayer is the key to a rich spiritual life—the path to personal transformation and deeper intimacy with God and others. Yet prayer—especially unanswered prayer—can also be a source of pain and confusion. Even Jesus in Gethsemane prayed until his sweat became blood-like, not receiving what he had asked.

In this elegant companion to the struggles, joys, and insights of *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster offers a wealth of quotations to encourage and guide readers on their individual faith journeys. Featuring space for recording special moments in our day-by-day communion with God, *Coming Home* is the perfect tool to deepen the understanding and inspire the practice of prayer.

## *Growing Pains*

As I'm writing this, we have yet to secure a lease on office space in Denver. This process started the second weekend in March and is moving slower than a tortoise. Our real estate broker assures us we will have a signed lease soon.

Of course, we can't get a telephone until we have an address. So until we know our new address, our mail will be forwarded to Lynda at her home and we will subscribe to a telephone voice mail service on which messages can be left. We may be a little slow in filling book orders, but we promise to respond as promptly as we can to our mail and telephone calls.

# Discovering Contemplation

I recently conducted the funeral of a man who lived just five short months after being told he had inoperable lung cancer. During those five months Peter's body deteriorated, but his soul grew immensely. While he was well, he loved to take care of his family. When he was sick, they took wonderful care of him at home. He contemplated life during those five months, and during that time both the seen and unseen worlds came into focus. He was not a churchman during his lifetime, but Christ because so real to him at the end that he could say to his best friend, "I'll see you up there," before he died in peace.

One of my own relatives was recently baptized at 69 years of age only three weeks after his wife died because he perceived that he wouldn't go where his "honey" had gone if he didn't. He had thought about it for a year, but her prodding "after death" awareness brought him to that sudden moment—while he was paying bills—when he saw everything whole. In front of a rather "staid" congregation he confessed Jesus Christ and was baptized. After the baptism, he said in a loud voice, "Yes! Yes!" and the congregation responded with a ringing clap.

## **The Ongoing Dialogue**

Philip Nary was the late sixteenth-century Italian saint whose inner joy and humor drew all classes and types of people to him for counsel. One day Nary was visited by a student of philosophy who was full of himself, bubbling with ambitious plans for his life. Like the wise counselor that he was, Nary restricted his part of the conversation to an occasional question. The student hurried on to tell Nary that he was now engaged in getting his Ph.D. in philosophy. "What then?" Philip asked. Then he would go on to get a doctorate in both civil and common law. He'd inherit his family's large estate and would marry brilliantly and have a fine family of his own. "What then?" Well, then he would win a name for himself in the courts and he'd achieve many honors, perhaps even be elected an auditor. "What then?" the old counselor/saint continued to ask him. Well, then he supposed he'd grow old surrounded by an illustrious family and die like everyone else. And, Philip Nary asked once more, "What then?"!

Within each and every one of us resides both the voice of the court philosopher and the questioning voice of the counselor/saint. When we become truly aware, there is something within us that asks these same questions about all we do and about the very direction our life is taking. There is in all human beings who have not been robbed of their birthright an interior dialogue, an inner conversation that never ceases. Sometimes this

conversation is buried beneath the threshold of consciousness for weeks or months or even years.

But then, like the ancient limerick about the "old man from Peru who dreamt he was eating his shoe. He woke in the night with a terrible fright and found it was perfectly true," a person can be startled out of his dark dream-like tunnel and discover that the dialogue is going on. Maybe it comes during an illness (as in Peter's case) or a crushing humiliation or a loss (as in the case of my relative) or a radical change. Or it can come through worship or prayer. Contemplation comes in various forms and degrees and is brought about in innumerable ways and at any variety of times.

Sometimes people are ravished by some beautiful scene. Our family visited Banff, Canada, a few years ago. I was simply overwhelmed by the breathtaking view of Lake Louise, so much so that I could only hold my breath. Great heroic acts deeply touch some people, while moving friendships or deep loves touch others. The best male friend I have ever had in this life was a man named Joe. He was everything a person would ever want in a friend—caring, accepting, generous, open, honest, and faithful. He once said to me about God, not meaning to sound haughty at all; just truthful: "You know, Willy, I know, you just believe." I wasn't offended. He had seen something I had not seen. He had contemplated life at a deeper level than I because he was dying of leukemia.

When this happens and the dialogue within is recovered; when the amazing sanctuary of the soul is discovered and the only place within, the God place, becomes clearly present; then, despite its having been ignored, everything changes—things that were important become unimportant and unimportant things become of primary importance. This strange and mysteriously awesome power enables us to carry on this inner questioning about "Who are we?", "Where did we come from?", and "What then?" This power penetrates the inner connections of our experiences in a meaningful way, and our life and the work of our hands and brains relate to what our knowledge and experience have communicated to us about the world we live in. This power is the power of contemplation.

## **A Penetrating Gaze at the Truth**

Contemplation comes from optical language and means to gaze steadily at something; to look at it calmly and continuously, attentively and searchingly. Thomas Aquinas describes contemplation as a simple, unimpeded, penetrating gaze at the truth. I am reminded of a scene I saw yesterday: a cat sat face-to-face one foot away from

a huge frog, each staring at the other, that is, until I grabbed the cat and the frog leaped to safety. I think they both knew the reality of the situation in the animal kingdom.

Somehow we recognize that we are confronted by a given that is not us. We are not identical with it. There is a cleft between the contemplator and the contemplated. All contemplation acknowledges this cleft. Even our past can never be fully identified with the eye that examines it.

In all Christian worship there is a sense of awe, reverence, and mystery. Adoration is the only appropriate response of a human being before the source of all being. God is other than me. He is totally other and yet chooses to be both transcendent and immanent. That God, in Jesus Christ, spent his first days in a manger in a stable is awesome. More awesome still is that he comes to live in a sinful human heart, creating the Body of Christ on earth.

At the physical level of contemplation not much personal involvement is necessary as, for example, in scientific observation. At the personal, ethical level (as well as all social levels) a higher response is needed by the contemplator. But the price to be paid by the contemplator at the deepest level—religious faith—is extremely high, involving total participation, total surrender, total involvement.

### **In the Midst of Intense Activity**

In the popular mind contemplation is often associated with leisure. Being relaxed in a lawn chair with eyes closed is a modern, idyllic picture of contemplation. In the study alone or walking in the woods holding the hand of someone you love is another picture of rhapsodic contemplation. While there is no denying that contemplation is naturally associated with a certain holy leisure, it can also take place on a bus, in the kitchen, in traffic jams, in a busy office, even at mealtime. True contemplation is an inward openness to the meaning of things. I know a man who I think contemplates all the time. Usually it is better to have certain times and places to contemplate, but it need not be that limited.

Contemplation can even take place during intense activity. One person I know contemplates constantly as she pulls weeds in her lovely garden. The work of contemplation is to sort out the activities, frame them, weigh them, and evaluate them. I have known some extremely busy people who did not neglect contemplation but constantly carried it on at a low intensity.

### **Possible for All**

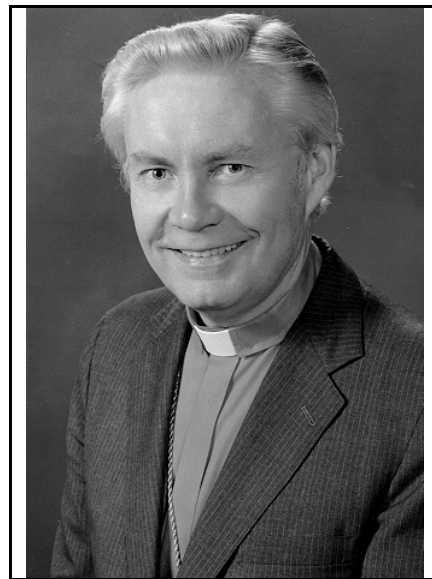
Not everyone is as gifted in contemplation as others, but I am aware of no evidence that certain psychological types or temperaments are more gifted and will always be

able to contemplate. There are no rules that say only specialists can contemplate. It is nonsense to believe so. Ordinary contemplation is possible for anyone. Without it, people are not wholly conscious or wholly alive. Even so great an authority as Evelyn Underhill says that "The spring of the amazing energy which enables the great mystic to rise to freedom is latent in all of us." It is an integral part of our humanity.

In desperation have you every looked into the abyss of your own life; or in depression or in humiliation or in search of God? Pascal says, "The infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object—only God Himself."

Our society today is haunted by the absence of contemplation. The Church is awakening to it, but we still don't know how to use this God-given power of relating and assimilating the experiences of work, worship, family, community, and world. It is the genius of contemplation to apprehend unity, to pierce through the surface, and to discover what holds things together underneath. I have come to see "as through the fog dimly" that in Jesus Christ "all things are held together" and in him all things have unity and meaning. The deepest level of contemplation and the greatest gift God has given us humans through his Holy Spirit is that of being able to contemplate the living God in Jesus Christ through prayer. Prayer is that attentiveness to God and its subsequent obedience.

William L. Vaswig



Bill Vaswig, a member of our ministry team, lives with his wife, Marcine, in Issaquah, Washington. He is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and is designated as an evangelist. Bill has written *I Prayed, He Answered* and *At Your Word, Lord*.