

So you want to live as a contemplative in this computer age?

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This essay was originally written in April 2006 as part of my training in Spiritual Direction. I have revised and updated it during December 2009 and have rearranged its order.

A number of frustrations have begun to emerge in my life in recent years in response to my attempts to live a lifestyle which is more informed with contemplative practices while raising a family. These frustrations and issues have been expressed by Kenneth C. Russell in his article: *Merton on the Lay Contemplative: Explicit Statements and Refracted Light*. He identifies the 'special problems of lay people who feel called, not just to contemplative prayer, but to a life in which this is the principal preoccupation.'¹ Although I don't think I'm quite ready or the sort (of person), to devote my entire life to a contemplative orientation, and if one is seeking and attempting to build a lifestyle which is immersed in periods of prayerful silence, reflection and solitude (without becoming a monk), there are few theological models available and few practical examples to be seen. Russell writes: 'In fact, its [the spirit of this age] insistence on active involvement in the church and the world seems to bring into question the legitimacy of their withdrawal into quiet.'² Even when the value of a contemplative lifestyle is affirmed, it is done so on the basis that it will provide additional fuel to be more active and 'effective' when you engage in ministry and daily living. The inherent value or call to such a lifestyle is valued by a purely utilitarian criteria. The benefits are undeniable, but this is not and nor should it be the reason for pursuing a lifestyle which seeks to be infused with a contemplative stance or its practices.

Other factors discourage the establishment of a contemplative lifestyle: celibacy when you enjoy the gifts and blessings of marriage; responsibility towards one's family, busyness, the unquestioned assumptions about what constitutes 'success' that drives people to buy houses which are too big, to fill them with stuff they don't need, to impress people they don't really like or want to be around with.³ Then there is the whole issue of work. Most forms are imitable to contemplation. Work which demands long days, commuting on choked roads and incessant interaction with colleagues enervates the spirit. Noisy children (almost a tautology as most children are by nature noisy and demanding), make the self styled contemplative lifestyle difficult.

There are four aspects to a commitment to a life of contemplation: experience, practice, identity and lifestyle.⁴ All four areas need constant attention, monitoring and encouragement. A significant way of attending to each of these four areas is to engage in regular spiritual direction so that an area is not allowed to slip or become ignored. The spiritual director will ask questions such as: 'What was your experience when . . .', or 'How is this practice helpful for you in being aware of God in your life now?' Other questions might focus on your lifestyle, its values and how you see yourself in relation to God, the primary definer of our identity.

¹ p. 121.

² p. 122.

³ Not my thought, but taken from an magazine article in the *Age* newspaper last year about why some successful men have left the corporate world to do what they really thought was important.

⁴ Mary Frohlich, "A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation", *The Lay Contemplative* (Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000), p. 49.

Spiritual direction is rooted in the contemplative and liturgical traditions of the Church and deals with the texture of human experience and handles the tenuous experience of God as mystery in daily life, sifting, discerning and naming the points in our life that have been intersected by God's Spirit at work. A contemplative attitude nourishes the connection with the mystical aspect of faith which is not the focus of attention for example, a doctrinaire shaped faith or a faith driven by the impetus of social activism. The spiritual director helps a person recognize their experience of God 'in the now' of everyday living. This is one of the more common reasons why a person seeks spiritual direction as well as their desire to recover the significance of the experience or to clarify and discern its impact on our desire to seek God in all things. The contemplative tradition affirms periods of silence, reflection and immersion in the mystery of being with God, to allow us to become aware of God and ourselves. This experience both refreshes and cultivates a sensitivity to the presence of God in the life of both the spiritual director and the person pursuing their desire to live with an integrated spirituality of contemplation in everyday life. Periods of prayer, silence and solitude help the spiritual director to listen with an open heart and folded hands to the story of another who has come as a pilgrim on a journey seeking guidance and support.

In the ancient world, those wishing to spend time in contemplation had a natural advantage over us moderns. The vast majority of the population lived in a rural setting, mostly villages or small towns. Few were *urbanus*, meaning *of the city*. One would only need to walk a short distance from their house to be alone. The wonder and unpredictability of Creation was immediate: it was just outside the front door and dominated daily life. The weather patterns, agricultural patterns, tidal flows and seasonal changes including the migration of birds and animals, all played their part in marking the days and seasons. It was an agrarian society with the church's liturgical calendar and the seasons the chief marker of time, not a watch, a diary or a Palm Pilot. It was a society with a slower pace of life (mostly at walking pace) as many will attest who have had the experience of living in a third world country where time is 'elastic'. The absence of the electric light bulb meant early to bed and late to rise if it was winter. With no electricity, the dark crowded in and the moon and stars marked the night. A few hours walk would bring you into the 'wild places' and a day or two's journey, to a shrine or mountain. The establishment of solitude was notionally easier as the 'worldly influences' were smaller, confined and easier to leave. With the growth of cities and a movement away from eremitic asceticism into the establishment of monasteries, several solutions were provided to those embarking on a contemplative lifestyle. But walls had to be built both for protection of the nuns and monks and to keep the world out.

A corrective is needed however, to a common assumption which is perpetuated about the superiority of the country over the city and raw nature over manmade constructions. It is too easily assumed that the country will provide the atmosphere to help those who pursue a life of contemplation free from distractions.⁵ Here in Australia, the countryside is far from being a bucolic scene with fire watch required through our harsh summer heat and in winter, flooded bridges and washed out roads. We tend to see contemplation as a movement from entanglement or engagement

⁵ The recent book by Sara Maitland, [A Book of Silence](#) (London: Granta Books, 2008), has highlighted the frustrations in her pursuit of the ideal to live in the country without the distractions commonly experienced in the city. That she has achieved this to some degree is admirable, but for most of us, it will be unlikely to be a reality because of our need to raise children or care for aging parents (sometimes both at the same time), our need to work in the city and maintain networks of relationships in a particular location. For some, including myself, even the need to be close to medical services precludes any possibility of long term residence in the country.

with the things of this world, to a relinquishment and their abandonment so that we may be free to engage with God. This relinquishment is necessary, but it is done with a certain danger creeping in: that of dualism. Two great intellectual movements in Western thought, Neo-Platonism and Romanticism have both distorted our view of nature, the country and ourselves and due to the subtle influence of these two movements, a dichotomy has been established. Neo-Platonism is pervasive and stubbornly residual in our culture and worldview. It basically says that the body is evil or at the least, an impediment to the spiritual life; its hungers and passions should be subdued by ascetic discipline. There is also the irresolvable daily tension experienced of the secular/sacred separation in our civic life. We are seduced (as a consequence of Romanticism) into thinking that the country will provide a quieter and simpler life, one which is free from anxiety, when these qualities are found in God alone. A more recent arrival which has reinforced this view is Buddhism with its emphasis on the interior life, but with it has also come a strong emphasis on the need to be free from our bodily appetites. Buddhism requires vegetarianism due to its view of reincarnated life in animals, and ultimately for the serious seeker of Enlightenment, celibacy. In contrast is the Christian doctrine of Creation: that God created this world of matter and from this material human life. Marriage and sexuality were gifts to humankind. All this was affirmed as being 'good' in Genesis chapter 1 and 2. The problem emerges when evil enters the idyllic garden but it is a moral evil that enters the life of the man and woman, not a physical evil, although the entry of sin will have physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual consequences, notably death which is generally viewed as a separation from God. As an aside, Christianity holds out the offer that there is a spirituality that reconciles the world, our environment, our bodies with the spiritual aspirations that speak of the God who created us. It is through the reconciliation of Jesus who as God, became enfleshed in a human body in order to reconcile all things to himself. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Additional influences need to be identified as well. The legacy of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on empirical truth and the search for understanding the material world, has led to an overemphasis in some quarters with theological and Biblical 'truth', which uses the empirical methods to break Scripture open to our understanding. It is commonly assumed that the Scriptural text has a definitive meaning in a historical and grammatical sense but this is an overblown confidence in the ability of the exegete which may not have been quite in the minds of those who were writing it. One only has to ask a playwright or author what they really said and meant and compare this with the reviewer's essay to see how far wide of the mark we interpret things.⁶ The development of various methods of literary critical methods of the Biblical text have leached it of its force as 'God's word' which is received in a receptive attitude. Instead of allowing Scripture to speak to us, it is sometimes silenced by these critical hermeneutical methods. A purely rational exegesis of the text atomises and demythologises the text; the supernatural is excused (or excised) and God remains hidden behind endless attempts to reconstruct the text's original meaning which is often been obscured by the Biblical author's glosses or interpretation. Perhaps this is why *lectio divina* reading of the text has appealed to so many and is in the process of being recovered in many quarters of the Church today. In this practice, Scripture is received as it is and listened to, meditated on and allowed to become the basis of our prayer. The focus on *lectio divina* is not the nuances of meaning which an exegete mines, but moving into the text and through the text to find God, to hear his voice, to see his face, to sit in his presence.

⁶ This point was made first by C.S Lewis in his essay, "*Fern seed and Elephants*". Originally entitled '*Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism*', Lewis read this essay at Westcott House, Cambridge, on 11 May 1959. Published under that title in [Christian Reflections](#) (1981), it is now in [Fern Seed and Elephants](#) (Fontana Books, 1998).

But returning to our theme again: how does one who lives in the computer age, live a life of practical contemplation? Some suggestions follow.

I live in an urban environment. However, instead of an emphasis on moving out into an exterior place such as a monastery set in the country, or upon a mountain in order to find a place which will support my desire to immerse myself in prayerful contemplation, the emphasis should fall on the place where the heart can reside in peace. The focus should be on the interior life and a commitment to such a lifestyle rather than the locality which provides salvation. This approach attempts to see daily life as a 'monastery without walls',⁷ in that the regular activities and labours of daily life provide a rhythm which measure the day out into which periods of prayer and reflection can be inserted. To express this idea a little more clearly, instead of grumbling that I do not live in a monastery with a community of perfect friends, I have a space reserved at home, solely for the purpose of prayer, contemplation and quiet reading. I do not seek an exterior place to provide the context for an interior meeting of the heart with God, but use an interior place to meet with a God who fills heaven and earth (1 Ki 8:27; Acts 7:49), including my bedroom where my timber box resides on which I pray.

Merton, like many, is an advocate of manual work as an aid to contemplation. Yet he lived the life of an author and appears not to have wrestled with the drudgery of manual work and its stupefying effect. He seems oblivious that most manual work is tiring to the point of weariness with the result that concentration at the end of a day of labour is very difficult to sustain. To assist a lifestyle of contemplation, a person may need to take a job which offers reduced hours of work or an occupation which does not drain them of every skerrick of emotional energy or require them to undertake long periods spent commuting. However, manual work, when combined with prayer and periods of reading (as in the Benedictine practice of the Divine Office), provides a balance and refreshing break from each other. Some, it must be said, find commuting, a great opportunity to contemplate, sitting in the train on the way home; or in the traffic either in silence or listening to a piece of inspirational music. There are also those with a different constitution who, in spite of demanding lifestyles and occupations, are able with good discipline and strength of personality able to combine their demanding work with periods of contemplation, but they tend to be as rare as the Tasmanian Tiger (the Tasmanian thylacine). In other words, they are virtually non-existent.

Some guard periods of quietness and aloneness like gold. The closed bedroom door signals to my spouse that I am sitting in quiet, praying. Everyday affairs and activities will need to be placed in a secondary order or place so that a lifestyle may be rooted in the regular practices of contemplation if its fruits are to be grown within us. A degree of charity and common sense must prevail for those with family and spouses however.⁸ Marriage and its physical sexual expression can provide the deep relational dimension to contemplation and can be experienced as a way of nourishing the heart of contemplation.⁹ Like the relational demands of living in a community, be they monastic or religious household, marriage can provide the disciplines and blessing of relational living which one would experience or expect in a monastic

⁷ This expression was first suggested to me by my spiritual director who I later found was quoting from John Main's writings.

⁸ Frohlich, p. 48.

⁹ David Torkington, *The Mystic: From Charismatic to Mystical Prayer* (New York: Alba House, 1999) uses the intimacy of marriage and its stages of love as a way of illustrating the stages of mystical prayer.

community. It could also be said to provide a more intense intimacy which calls for greater spiritual discipline in love, sacrifice, service and daily obedience to another. People are selfish, with or without a monk's habit and equally, can be just as gracious where ever they live. The Benedictine vow of stability, to stick with a group of people, the community or an individual and allow them to be the means by which God uses them to transform us can be experienced in marriage as well as the cloister. It requires a real commitment to stability to remain in relationship with others, even when they are the source of pain to us by exposing to us the things we would prefer to hide from. A reduction in the amount of social club engagement, commitment to boards or committees may be required to reduce the sense of urgency, the harried lifestyle and the background static of stress. Abstinence and chastity can apply to both the area of our physical (sexual) expression as much as to our other expressions in public life and it is in this latter application that the word is first defined by the dictionary as the pursuit of a morally pure lifestyle in the civic society/world.

Retreats, bushwalks, walks in the park on an autumn afternoon nourish the attitude and awareness required to move back into the state of being awareness of God's pervasive Spirit. The beach, the icon of the Australian lifestyle (suggesting both hedonism and re-creation) can be walked on in silence, listening to one's heart and listening to the prayers that its gives rise to. The arts, such as those seen in art galleries and some music concerts, help break some out of their rut and free them to embrace a new openness, freshness and awareness of God. For many, actually doing something with their hands, particularly in the field of visual arts or in craft activities like quilting, can provide a springboard to contemplation. Gardening is another field that provides both a chance to breakaway from the mundane (which enervates the spirit), and nourishes a deep satisfaction in being able to watch nature grow as a result of our effort.

A theology that moves beyond a formal recognition that God is not only immanent theoretically in the world to one where God is actually experienced and felt to be operational in daily life, will help with a more positive view of the human body and our quirky characteristics. An attitude of self care and compassion for one's self with its frailty will lead to treating ourselves with more respect and awareness of how our lifestyle and choices impact on our body, soul and inner self. A theology which emphasises the immanence of God might find its expression in a commitment to ecological and social action, but will always keep the priority of nourishing the heart as its daily priority and the engagement in social action a secondary expression of its fruits of contemplation.

Merton called people living outside of the canonical monk/nun definition, 'hidden contemplatives'.¹⁰ Pursuing a contemplative lifestyle can feel solitary at times, but a supportive community from the local church, friends who are on a similar journey and religious communities provide encouragement. Some for example, have found it helpful to become oblates of a Benedictine Order for this support and guidance. For these, "The sacraments and liturgy are experienced as celebrating and enhancing this permeating divine presence rather than as being its primary point of entry into human life."¹¹ The humdrum of everyday life, with eyes and heart open to God, can transform the mundane; the Creation can be exegeted to reveal the face of God and evidence of his handiwork. Even a busy coffee shop can be a place of epiphany.

¹⁰ p. 122, quoting from Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life: A reappraisal, " *Commonweal*, 69 (1958-1959), pp. 87-88.

¹¹ Frohlich, p. 49.

The fostering of a sense of ritual and use of symbol is only one side of the coin. Many will create new expressions and ways of interweaving symbol and ritual into daily life. A friend of mine has a prayer bowl. On one side is a small basket of pebbles. Beside it another larger basket, behind which is a photo of people in a third world where he has been working as an third world aid consultant. As he walks past the table he takes a pebble from the small basket and places it in the larger bowl offering the same prayer for the particular issue of social need he has been active in. When the small basket is empty, he knows he has made the effort and kept their needs before God. The decoration and design of our homes, with either explicit or implied religious imagery can enhance our lifestyle values. The removal of clutter can assist also by helping to create space first physically, then psychologically and finally in our interior, the heart. The so-called 'simple life', romantically portrayed in women's home decoration magazines, was first promoted by the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 2-4th centuries for a good reason: household clutter was a sign of interior disorder and ill discipline and the accumulation of material things suggested a temptation toward idolatry. A reduction in the amount of television consumed and turning off the endless chatter on the radio might also be needed. The use of a 'No More Junk Mail' sticker or its swift transportation to the recycling bin can block the temptation by the 'powers of this age' to seduce us or foster discontent with our lot in this life. What we display (in our homes) or deliberately choose not to, is an exhibition of our aspirations, values and heritage. It requires some consideration.

Some embarking on a intentional contemplative lifestyle may have deep experiences without a particularly consistent sharp practice; others may practice in a disciplined way and strongly claim a contemplative lifestyle yet be rarely gifted with contemplative experience. It is one of the mysteries of life and God and is possibly a reflection of being at a different stage of the interior journey that St John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila have discussed in their works. However, the life of a contemplative is lived 'on the edge'; it is a liminal experience of standing on the threshold between heaven and earth, (the literal meaning of the word), between our past and future, between our known self and our unknown self of which we are uncertain; it is to live between this world and the world of the Spirit; between urban life and wilderness; between the island and the mainland; between the desert and the comfort of home. The great centers of contemplation often occurred on 'the edge' and from there they had a vantage point to look back and over where they had come from, the place they had left and renounced. In the age of the computer, the contemplative lives in this 'between place', somewhat solitary, sometimes living against the grain of society; even swimming against the current of activism which winds its way through our churches. The contemplative is able to stop and be aware of this in between place that they find themselves in, but simultaneously feel in the core of their very being, that God is with them in the ambiguity. It in the awkwardness of being with one foot in this world and its activities and yet within their hearts, a certain emptiness opens up and a paradoxical deep yearning to be with the One whose invitation they feel called by. This is the unresolved tension of the contemporary contemplative which has on occasion assailed me in such places as the isle of a enormous hardware store. Yes, I was there, amongst the rows of bolts, nails and other hardware and yet I was yearning to be elsewhere, with the One who has loved me and knows me by name.

I find that I am beginning to feel more comfortable in this place of ambiguity and liminality. It is a pace which provides a vantage point which is helpful to my practice as a spiritual director. But I feel no need to pronounce judgment on what is considered the norms of our church and society; the busyness, the hyper rational way of reading Scripture, or being driven by agendas which are toxic and sometimes rooted in philosophical values of a bygone age. To do so would be heard as

insensitive criticism and would possibly be understood as being judgmental. As one living in this computer age, I find the well known poem by Robert Frost a signpost:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The contemplative hears the invitation to choose the road less travelled; there is something about God that draws them to pursue this road which may result in there being costly choices, but these would be considered necessary. There is a holy singleness of purpose, not forced; a gentle and inner call; a restlessness results when it is ignored; that it is 'this road' this 'in between place' where God is experienced. The modern contemplative must listen to this call and be prepared to live in this in between place, the place of liminality. In summary: this call defines their identity, their faithfulness to nurturing their call shapes their lifestyle and regular practices support and renew their experience.