

Contemplation and changing consciousness



by [Nancy Sylvester](#)

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“Be the change you want to see in the world” is a phrase I am sure you have heard. Changing, however, is not always easy. Having wanted to be perfect when I was a little girl, I was not attracted to change. Change implies giving some things up and receiving new ideas, insights, values, etc. Why would you want to do that? We were taught that God is perfect and unchanging and that in our culture leaders were leaders if they never changed their minds – if they didn’t blink! You were to develop your identity, values and beliefs and maintain them throughout your life.

So what is so great about change? We are learning from quantum physics that change is our one constant. Everything around us including ourselves is constantly evolving and changing. Every interaction we have affects us and helps shape who we are becoming. But it is not just through what I have studied that I now value change. It is also through my experiences.

Having grown up a Catholic and white on the South Side of Chicago in the ‘50s, I was gifted with a set of lenses through which I viewed the world. A whole set of assumptions, beliefs and values shaped me and provided a way of navigating through my world. At different stages of my life I either read something or experienced something that made me pause. All of a sudden what I knew didn’t fit what was before me. I couldn’t make sense of it. It was as if I was blind sighted . . . I couldn’t see it because my lenses were too restrictive.

Those moments, when I faced into my white privilege or my church’s unequal treatment of women or a new understanding of how the Universe came into being or the clerical abuse scandal, were invitations to change. They were moments where the lenses with which I made sense of the world were broadened and I was invited to let go and to integrate these new realizations into my consciousness.

For me, bringing these experiences to prayer has been lifesaving. When I go through a shift in my consciousness – the way I view the world; the assumptions, beliefs and values I operate out of – I can feel so alone. My “critiquer” who sits on top of my head is full of admonitions, negations, doubts and warnings. The egoic self which I have cultivated for so many years does not want to change. It takes a lot of work to open myself up and allow the truth of these new realizations to shape me anew.

I believe that contemplative practice softens our hearts and minds in ways that can embrace the changes that are part of our becoming more complex, evolved human beings. There is much written today about how our consciousness changes in developmental ways. Our becoming more is what we are called to as members of the human species and as persons of faith.

We are called to encounter what Thomas Merton called *le pointe vierge*. It is “a point of nothingness at the center of our being which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God”

The journey to that point passes through contemplation. As I have practiced contemplative sitting, I discovered I want to change. I want to change how I am with others and with myself. I find that as well among the women and men whom I encounter in my work.

Here are some ways of listening that I have found helpful as I journey toward “le pointe vierge.”

1. Be soft, spacious and welcoming to that which is strange, threatening or different.

Too often my initial reaction to what I don't like is to resist it. I get hooked and begin to respond in predictable ways defending my position; dismissing or demeaning the other's position; walking away; avoiding the topic or the person at all costs. We have inherited the fight-or-flight response from our earlier mammalian ancestors. I believe we are being challenged to develop a more complex response that comes from that deeper space within us.

What if we welcomed in that other – be it an idea or a person? What if we embraced her, it, and them? What if we made room for what they are offering to us? How would that begin to change us? How would that begin to shift our assumptions about who is right and who is wrong? What is truth and who has it? Who belongs and who doesn't?

2. Be open, maintain boundaries and be hospitable.

Too often I can be open to others more easily than I can be to myself. As I mentioned earlier I envision my egoic self, ready to critique everything I do, sitting on top of my head. Front and center. Nothing gets by her. When I face up to a bias or a prejudice, she either makes me feel that it is justified or the opposite – how awful I've been to act like that. As I've cultivated my contemplative practice and keep surrendering, I can be more open to who I am in my multi-faceted self, capable of quite a spectrum of behaviors and thoughts, and in that realization becoming more and more aware of the unconditional love of the Divine.

When I think of boundaries I usually think about keeping something or someone out. Here I want to address keeping oneself “in” – the process, the journey, the moment. As you begin to want to change how you are listening to yourself and others I've found the importance of being faithful to the present moment. This is a challenge in a time when multi-tasking is seen as a high value! Distractions are as close as that click on your smart phone announcing that something more important is possibly happening than what you are currently doing or whom you are currently with. These distractions take us away from the other but also from ourselves. Contemplative practice helps us keep our boundaries. We set the intention and we sit. Over time the distractions lessen. Faithfulness to the practice is keeping boundaries.

Like the disposition of welcoming, being hospitable is opening ourselves to receive the new, the different. It is to pursue an idea or a thought that someone has offered or which has come to you in a dream or a moment of reflection. Cultivating an attitude of being hospitable invites you never to dismiss someone's comment or ignore someone in a conversation.

The world we are living in is in need of change. In cultivating a more contemplative heart and way of listening I believe we are developing a consciousness more aligned with the Gospel values of right relationship, justice, non-violence, love and compassion. We can begin to live the

Gospel as we become the change we want to see in our world. That change is worth it. That's why we change.

In the upcoming reflections I'll share more about how engaging in contemplation invites you to change behaviors as well and how we can begin to exercise contemplative power.

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