

Would you stop staring . . . Contemplative practice

by [Nancy Sylvester](#)



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My aunt had a cottage in Michigan City, Ind., and she would let each of her sisters with their families have the use of it for two weeks during the summer months. The drive from Chicago where I grew up took about an hour and a half. I would always want to sit in the back seat on the passenger side. There I would turn and just look out the window. I loved to see the cityscape turn to fields and wooded areas. I liked not talking but just staring. In fact, later when I was already in the convent and teaching at one of our high schools the sister I lived with often said “stop staring” as I would sit in the living room in the morning praying but obviously looking up and seemingly through her. In retrospect I think those moments hinted at my attraction to a contemplative practice!

Contemplation takes many forms. Being in and with nature is a common way that many of us begin to experience the presence of the Divine. I know that was part of those rides home from Michigan City as well as walking in the woods and laying on the beach feeling the warmth of the summer sun and watching the clouds skim across me and the sand. The use of our imagination in picturing ourselves in a Gospel story leads many of us deeper into encountering the Divine. “Lectio Divina” treats Scripture as the living Word of God and is a practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with God which many people practice. Walking meditation teaches us “mindfulness,” another way of becoming still and present. Poetry and art can move us to a different state of consciousness as well.

What I have been drawn to for the past 30 years or so is contemplation born in a form of “empty mind,” a silence or stillness that invites you not to thinking, not imagining, just emptying. I am an extrovert and a very rational person, so this attraction was a bit surprising. But as I became more steeped in the Vatican II understandings around Scripture and the many contextual theologies that emerged – ie. liberationist, feminist, womanist, mujerista, eco-feminist – I found that words that had expressed my faith for me became less meaningful and, in fact, often stumbling blocks to it. I found myself drawn to a less wordy form of praying.

A major focus is on “attention.” I would follow my breath as it flowed in and out. One could also use a word or phrase. Within the Christian tradition we talked about using a mantra, such as Maranatha, Jesus Mercy, etc. The purpose of following one’s breath or repeating the mantra with the in breath and out breath was to still our minds. They were ways to bring us into the presence of the Divine dwelling within us.

More recently I have begun to practice a type of contemplation that has become known as “centering prayer.” Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, has been a leader of developing this form of Western, Christian contemplation, and Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest, continues to develop it in ever deepening ways.

This form of contemplative practice focuses more on “intention” than on attention. There is still a word or phrase involved, but in this case it is a sacred word you choose or which chooses you. As you begin your sitting practice you pray this word gently, steadily. It is your way of acknowledging your willingness to be open to the presence and action of God during this time.

Every time you find yourself thinking a thought, feeling an itch, getting a good idea, discouraged that you can’t do this well . . . you say your word and it brings you back to the space you are creating in yourself to be open to the Divine.

It is a prayer of surrender where you keep letting go and dropping down into the place of stillness. Having practiced following my breath for years I still find it difficult to really let go, but I am experiencing some significant shifts in my life as I continue this practice.

It is not simply staring. So how do you start?

Then to sit straight. Our spine wants to be straight. Think about being a puppet on a string which the marionette pulls gently bringing you up just a little bit more. Then make sure your shoulders relax then lower and tuck your chin in a bit. You will find the position which allows you to be still and comfortable. Close your eyes (but if you start to sleep then open them).

Now you are ready to begin your practice. Say your word and then let it drop away. It is suggested that you do this practice for 20 minutes, once or twice a day.

This brief reflection may get you started, but there are many good resources available for you to really learn and deepen the practice. I would highly recommend, Bourgeault’s book, [*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*](#). In addition, the ICCD web site: www.iccdinstitute.org under “Engaging Impasse, Reflections” has reflections on contemplation and numerous resources for your use.

Let me end with Maya Angelou’s final tweet which embodies her contemplative spirit: “Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God.”

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