

Living Contemplatively*

Wendy M. Wright

This past summer I paid a visit to a friend of mine in France, an American Trappistine, who was midway in her year sabbatical with a sister monastic community located in the countryside outside of Grenoble. Three traveling companions and I had left the mountainous region of Savoy early that morning, taken the autoroute south and passed onto narrowing roads as we neared the monastery of Chambarand. The September mid-morning sunlight showed the rolling French pasturage and quaint antique villages we passed through quickly to advantage. In keeping with the classic Cistercian spirit, the monastery was far removed from any population center. For miles all we saw were fields, a few farm houses, an occasional village church, centuries old and still witness to the never changing cycles of rural life: planting and harvest; sunrise and set; spring turning to summer turning to fall; birth, marriage, and death. Overarching the entire landscape was a deep stillness in which the buzzing of a bee, the trickle of a nearby stream or a chill breeze were the only sounds to compose a chant in the waiting air. As we wheeled up the graveled drive the rotation of our auto tires burst upon the hush of contemplative silence that encompassed the monastery grounds.

The Chambarand Trappistines support themselves by making cheese, we gleaned from the displays of rounds, cubes and rectangles prominent in the gift shop window. Passing by the shop, which was closed for midday prayer and meal, we made our way to the main

*Editor's note: *This essay is an expanded version of an address given at a conference about "Everyday Spirituality" at the Aquinas Center for Catholic Studies, Emory University, March 9, 1996.*

entrance and inquired after my American friend. She was expecting us. As the three of us waited, the stillness of the place laid its mantle on us and we stood without speaking. A community member met us pleasantly at the door and ushered us apologetically (she spoke no English) into a chill parlor where my friend was to meet us. Thick stone walls built against winter's onslaught also kept the autumn sun from penetrating the room. But the shuttered windows that opened out onto the inner cloister were flung open, and harvest vegetables growing green and yellow in the sunlight were visible there.

My friend arrived in full habit, taking off the work apron she had been wearing while turning cheeses in the factory. As it was almost noon, she led us through the massive stone corridors of the monastery complex to the church for the midday office. There in the great, spare stone sanctuary the ancient rhythms played themselves out for perhaps the hundred-thousandth time. Summoned by the peels of the bell that rang out solemnly over the countryside, the community of fifty-two women gathered, gliding noiselessly into their respective choir stalls. All stood, bowed, and knelt in concert. Knees, shoulders, heads in common gesture, kinesthetic memory bending the body, and thus the spirit, to prayer. All listened attentively as the spoken word of Scripture called out bead after bead of ancient, depthless wisdom, fingered by the mind, the lips, the heart. All opened throats and with a single sound breathed a melody that has reverberated through cloisters for nearly a millennium.

The entire structure of monastic life, its rhythms, architecture, customs and disciplines, is designed to foster contemplation. It is designed to encourage the silent inward turning that ushers one finally into the silence of God. This silence undergirds all reality. Monastic life witnesses to that silence as the fundamental reality undergirding all our lives. But what of that silence outside the cloister? What of its disclosure in the fabric of daily life "in the world"? In this article I will explore the sort of contemplative experience that is not explicitly monastic, yet which breathes in a similar, suspended air that radiated that summer day from the Cistercian monastery at Chambarand. My intent is first, to consider the nature of contemplation and the contemplative dimension of life and to suggest what living contemplatively apart from the monastic structure might be like, and second, to turn to the arena of contemporary family life and explore its contemplative dimension. In the process, I will draw upon stories and illustrations of

my own and suggest ways in which Thomas Merton's world, the world open to what he called "the hidden ground of love,"¹ can be part of all of our worlds.

I. Drawn to the Life of the Life of the Soul

The summer visit to Chambarand was not my first monastic experience. I have for over a quarter of a century been a frequent visitor to any number of monastic foundations. If my visitations point to an ongoing quest to deepen my relation with God through the contemplative path, and I think they do, it is not true that monasticism has been the primary environment in which I have nurtured that relationship. I did not first learn to pray in the monastic context, nor do I now live in a manner that can in any way be construed as formally contemplative. My husband and I have three children ranging at present from twelve to nineteen years of age. I teach full time in the theology department at a Jesuit university in the field of history of spirituality and overflow too many days with the details of the academy—committees, advising, editing, writing, attending conferences. On top of this, I have been drawn to take on, in great part because of the labile nature of the field of spirituality, a variety of pastoral roles—retreat leader, spiritual director, author of inspirational literature.²

1. Merton makes reference to the "hidden ground of love" as that reality for which there can be no explanation and in which we discover the happiness of being one with everything in a 1967 address to students at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The phrase occurs, as well, throughout his letters and provided editor William H. Shannon with a title for his volume of Merton's selected letters. See *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1985).

2. My books include *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985); *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series, with Joseph F. Power, O.S.F.S., and Peronne-Marie Thibert, V.H.M. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988); *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), second edition (Leavenworth, Kansas: Forest of Peace, 1993); *Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God*, Spiritual Legacy Series (New York: Crossroad, 1993); *The Vigil: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ's Coming* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992); *The Rising: Living the Mysteries of Lent, Easter and Pentecost* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1994); *A Retreat With Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal and Aelred of Rievaulx: Befriending Each Other in God* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 1996).

Yet it was the monks and others in our history such as medieval holy women and desert hermits, kin to the monks in their quest for the contemplative life, who taught me, through the testimonies of their lives, that the deep down ache that would not go away and which compelled me at one and the same time to restless peregrinations and simply sitting still, was as important as I sensed it must be. This despite the fact that little else in my environment encouraged its cultivation.

It was as a late-blooming graduate student and after being keenly wounded enough in life's battles to have come to impasse on all fronts, that I first discovered the voices of those who we deem part of our Christian contemplative tradition—Augustine, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Br. Lawrence of the Resurrection—the familiar figures. These ancient witnesses spoke a language, uttered words from a fund of wisdom that resonated so insistently with my as-yet inchoate longings, that the pursuit of them became a passion. These ancient ones lived splendidly, even sensuously, into the deep place I sensed was central to my own life. Augustine gave it a name: "He is the Life of the Life of my soul."³

Further graduate work, which allowed an immersion into the lives of Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales, turn-of-the-seventeenth-century saints whose spiritual friendship I chronicled, allowed me to become more familiar with the languages and practices of the Christian contemplative life. Chronicling became more than an academic pursuit, it also became the occasion for self-investigation. I felt drawn—inexorably, palpably—to the still, full atmosphere of monasteries. Trappistine. Visitandine. Benedictine. Carmelite. Franciscan. I visited them all. Along the way I met Thomas Merton. First through a rather cursory reading of *The Seven Story Mountain* (whose excessive convert zeal verbiage I had a difficult time wading through). Then through a more attentive reading of *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *The Asian Journal*.⁴ I have one vivid memory of spending an afternoon trapped between floors in a university elevator, taking comfort in

3. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, book 10, chapter 6.

4. It was especially the famous passage in the *Asian Journal* penned when Merton visited the Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa that spoke to me. "Looking at these figures I was suddenly, forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya. . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233–5.

the fact that I had Merton's words as companion for my inforced eremitism.⁵ But mostly, it was Merton's life that fascinated me, as it has generations of American spiritual seekers. He was someone who had followed the deepest demands of his heart. I longed to do the same.

It was during a prolonged stay at a Trappistine community in the redwood forests of Northern California during the winter of 1976 that clearer sense of what it might mean to live contemplatively began to emerge for me. This was the community Merton had visited just before embarking on his Asian journey, and he was still present in the anecdotal memory of the sisters. It gave the place a certain aura, as though this place was a fitting launching pad for a journey from which one might never return.

That winter was a graced time in many respects. I lived a quasi-hermit's life, participating in the liturgical rhythm of the hours and in some form of manual labor during scheduled work hours. Beyond that, I was left free to rest in the impulse that had brought me there in the first place: the call to deeper solitude, the call to listen. I had been well advised by a psychologist friend before coming: "Don't think you even know the question you are asking by going. Just listen." Allow the various levels of conversation that constantly spin around in your head to gradually fall away. To the point where silence itself is its own question. Never mind the answer.

So I went. And listened. In that wonderful way that refuses to yield to analysis, commentary or interpretation. Where wind is wind. And the beating of a heart is the beating of a heart. But where you realize you have never genuinely heard wind or a heartbeat before.

Winter is off-season for the community so there were few guests. One week was even dedicated to a community retreat. A monk from a Trappist monastery on the East Coast arrived to conduct the days of reflection. In my listening mode, two things he said struck my ear with clarion clarity and became the basis for my later understanding of what the contemplative life is not, and what it is. He began by evoking an image of a young woman seated in a meadow alone, breathing in the beauty around her. In fairness to the monk, I'm not

5. I believe at the time I was reading his *Monastic Journey*. The section on the solitary life was especially pertinent. "The *eremos*, the desert wilderness 'where evil and curse prevail', where nothing grows, where the very existence of man is constantly threatened, is also the place specially chosen by God to manifest Himself in His 'mighty acts' of mercy and salvation." See *The Monastic Journey*, edited by Br. Patrick Hart (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1987) 190.

sure what his intent was in bringing this particular, albeit classic, image to the attention of the community. But it provided me with an image for understanding what the contemplative life is not. A contemplative life may in part be about the withdrawal to solitude and the aesthetic gaze upon the created universe. But it is not a life of idyllic fantasy, not something “other,” not a safe haven from the harshness of the world. Nor is it equatable with a stress-free existence or a state of unalterable calm. “Being centered” we would call it today.⁶

The other idea the monk presented has served me well in reflecting upon a contemplative life. He said that such a life is about facts. It is about what is. But what we deem “factual” is shaped by our perception. And the contemplative eye sees “facts” with a certain stunning clarity. It “sees” into the various levels of reality down to the core where the deep silence pertains.

This contemplative approach I speak of is not necessarily synonymous with the term “contemplation” used in traditional discussions of spiritual theology (based especially on the writings of the Carmelite mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross). In these a distinction is made between “acquired” and “infused” contemplation, and the contemplative life proper is equated with a lifestyle of withdrawal and an advanced state of interiority in which all human activity has ceased and the operation of God alone is evident. I am using the term rather in the way earlier authors like Augustine, Gregory the Great, or Bernard of Clairvaux used it.⁷ As a way of perceiving the world—a simplified, whole seeing—that gives birth to faith, hope and love. A way that tends to wordlessness and the unification of thought, feeling, and desire so that the energies of the whole person are gathered into focus. Contemplation, in this early Christian use of the term, might be defined as a listening awareness that allows the Word to take root in the heart and transform it.

6. The way the casual phrase “being centered” is often used today is quite different from the practice of Centering Prayer that Merton’s fellow Cistercians have made popular in the years since Merton’s death. That practice, associated especially with the names Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, is a modern adaptation of the contemplative practice advocated by the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*.

7. On this point see the classic work by Edward Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teachings of SS Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (London: Constable, 1927).

It is easy to recognize the monastic roots of this idea the way I have defined it. The ancient Benedictine practice of *lectio divina*, to which Merton as a Cistercian was heir, involves the cultivation of a distinct sort of listening awareness. In the profound and sustained silence of monastic enclosure, where words are few and those words uttered are primal—they are God’s Word—one cultivates a sense of the sources of a given word’s origin. One hones a sensitivity to the primal utterance. In the measured discipline of monastic routine, with life’s maintenance pared to a minimum, one can give oneself to the formative process of growing into the Word, letting the Word become the vessel into which one’s life is poured. Or, to change the metaphor, and stay even closer to the ancient tradition’s self-understanding, the contemplative life is, first and foremost, a life of becoming a receptive vessel into which the divine Word is poured. Bernard of Clairvaux and his twelfth century compatriots, along with a host of other pray-ers in the tradition, Merton among them, likened themselves to Mary at the moment of the Annunciation. Receptive, assenting, open to welcome the Spirit-seed which would inhabit, grow, and be born in her. The Virgin Mary is the model of the contemplative soul opening itself to God.⁸

The contemplative life is a life of prayer, but a distinctive sort of prayer. While related to other forms of prayer such as praise, petition, lament, intercession or meditation, contemplative prayer has a quality distinctively its own. To put it plainly: in contemplation one allows oneself to be acted upon rather than acting as an agent. This allowing is not passivity, neither is it a cowering nor a resignation to let what ever will be, be. Rather, it is a ready receptivity. Much like the readiness of the non-leading partner in a couple’s dance. One must be infinitely alert, instantaneously responsive, quick to dip and flow with the surge of the music and the practiced yet unpredictable step of one’s partner. Such is the responsive readiness of contemplative prayer.

Such prayer risks much. To remain open to the influx of Spirit is to be formed. To be formed is to enter into transformation. And contemplative prayer is about transformation, about being reshaped in the image and likeness of God which in humanity was originally created. To pray this way is to see, to hear, to perceive anew. The process of such a transformation is guided by the symbolic language of the cumulative tradition but it is always unique, always irrepeatably particular. It is

8. As an example see Merton’s early poem, “The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window” in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 46–8.

played out anew in each individual life. What can be said in all cases, is that such a transformation allows one to enter into a particular relationship with what is. Reality is thus not approached primarily as a problem to be solved, a cipher to be decoded, or data meant to be analyzed and controlled. Rather, reality is approached as a mystery to be plumbed, an astonishment etching its meaning into the marrows of our hearts. This does not imply that contemplative prayer does not ever issue in action, or prompt us to wrestle vigorously with the problems of our world. On the contrary, the action that flows from contemplation can be focused and impassioned, intent on transforming the world. But the seeing of what is, the listening, the running of the heart's tentative fingers over the terrain of the real, is done with reverence and as an encounter with mystery.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive aspects of contemplative prayer is that, while we ourselves are being refashioned, God, as we previously know God, also undergoes transformation. Or, to put it more accurately, we are led in contemplation beyond our earlier images and experiences of the divine. We are invited to continually let go of our familiar ways of knowing and encountering God. As we die to what we have been, God too seems to die. Thus the contemplative experience of dying, of penetrating deeper into reality and leaving behind all we have previously known, even at the seemingly most stable and foundational of levels, is simultaneously an entry into new, unfamiliar, less immediately apprehensible, encounters with God.

To approach it from another vantage point: contemplative prayer has to do with allowing oneself to be formed by and into an image that challenges the present images with which one lives. Contemplation invites vision that is constantly expanding, it offers a lens through which to gaze upon life that inverts and subverts present perception and gives at least partial access to a "God's eye" view. Contemplation is that risky and radical opening of self to be changed by and into God's own self. Thus it is a life of continual dying, of being stripped over and over again of the comfortable and familiar, of letting a reality beyond our own shape us. From another perspective, it is a life of emerging spaciousness, of being made wide and broad and empty enough to hold the vast and magnificent and excruciating paradoxes of created life in the crucible of love.⁹

9. Merton's most explicit work on the dynamics of contemplation is *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

On one monastic excursion to a Trappist foundation in upstate Oregon, during my graduate school years, I was given a fresh image of the contemplative life that I find myself coming back to again and again. I had gone partly as an academic exercise, to become familiar with monastic praxis. But I also came with my heart trained on the inward dynamics I was experiencing. A long inner greyness, a keen sense of absence had long plagued me. Analysis of the situation from many vantage points yielded nothing. I found it difficult to characterize what had been my sense of God for perhaps five years. "Gone" was perhaps the best description. I felt confused and alone, perhaps deluded. No one seemed to know what I meant. Then, during this classroom field trip, the young monk appointed to dialogue with our class illuminated my experience for me. We had been going around the circle, introducing ourselves, speaking in general ways about our religious backgrounds. I don't remember what I said, but he shot back, "Yes, I know what you mean. I've been there for a long time too." And I knew that he knew exactly what I meant—knew that our truest experiences mirrored one another. I was immediately confirmed and given hope. I recall little of the rest of his conference except one phrase, which I later learned was a paraphrase of the poet Rilke.¹⁰ But that phrase spoke volumes about where he and I found ourselves and about the nature of the contemplative life. "To be a Christian," he said, "is not to know all the answers. To be a Christian is to live in the part of the self where the question is being born." To live into the questions. To push the horizon of self back so insistently that one's reference point is the ever present act of birthing itself. To live in the presence of what can never be finished, found or known. To live in God's time. Open utterly to what is.

Contemplation is not an escape from the burdens of human existence. Rather, it brings us deeply into the heart of the world. Facts are the stuff of contemplation. But we must approach those facts with reverence, not primarily as problem-solvers, armed with our arsenals of established preconceptions, but as people willing to allow God, through our practices and the events of our lives, to pry us open so that our seeing and our loving begins to mirror the clarity and compassion of God's.

10. The Oregon Trappist was not the only devotee of Rilke. Merton spoke highly of him. See for example the audio cassette recording *Poetry and Imagination: Thomas Merton*, produced by Credence Cassettes, 60 min. (Kansas City Mo.: National Catholic Reporter, 1988).

II. A Contemplative Approach to Family Life

Very little in the structure and pace of modern American family life obviously lends itself to a classic life of contemplation such as I have begun to outline here. If silence, solitude, and an unchanging daily rhythm has been understood in our tradition as the essential matrix within which to form contemplative awareness, ordinary family life would seem an unlikely context in which to speak of such formation. And, we are all acutely aware, historic Christianity emphatically affirmed that the monastery and the family were two dramatically opposed institutions. One was for prayer. The other was for populating a Christian society. I will never forget, as a youthful, recently-married graduate student, picking up St. Jerome and reading his hurled invectives against the lot of the housewife: she flying from one end of the house to the other, fretful over her spouse, her children and her domestic duties. Where, fumed Jerome, is there time in all of this for thought of God?¹¹

This is not the place to chronicle the Christian religion's gradual positive affirmation of marriage and family life as first, a sacrament, and second, a place of prayer and the cultivation of a genuine spiritual life. This has occurred.¹² The thundering rhetoric about family values that issues from the pulpits of all denominations is evidence enough of this. Yet there still remains much hesitancy about the compatibility between a contemplative life and familial experience. To the extent that we equate contemplative with monastic, the hesitancy is an appropriate one. Familial life, even if some members carve out solitary time and space or adopt rules about silence or follow daily rhythms of shared prayer, is intrinsically different from its monastic counterpart. The spirituality born of monastic experience is primarily vertical and one-on-one (God and the individual); it implies a going apart, a renunciation of a life of intimacy with spouse and children, a relinquishment of property and the burdens of caretaking; it implies a certain

marginality, a view from the critical distance that silence and solitude and spacious time allows.

A spirituality forged from the experience of familial life, in contrast, is intensely horizontal; it is about the in-betweenness of persons, of relationships, about bodies and lives intertwined, the intimate proximity of others; it is about the busyness of tending and providing, about the stewarding of property, it allows for very little of the distanced perspective that silence and solitude offer.

Yet while monasticism and familial life proceed from distinct and different human contexts and thus tend to give articulation to distinct spiritualities, there is nonetheless a sense, a significant sense, in which both may be said to be mediums through which a contemplative approach can be cultivated.

While I would suggest that specifically monastic practices, such as extended solitude and silence, might be intentionally integrated into family life, it is not necessarily being quasi-monastic that lends itself to contemplation, but rather becoming aware of the natural contemplative moments and rhythms that present themselves in the daily course of life. Before I speak to these, however, I would observe that many contemporary practices work against this openness: the prevalence of constant noise—the omnipresent television, radio, and music as well as the constant din of city traffic so many of us live with; the lack of opportunity for self-reflection in most of our work days; the frenetic pace of modern life, filled as it is with meetings, schedules, car-pools, interruptions from e-mail, voice-mail, cellulators, internet, and answering machines. Contemporary family life is cross-hatched by all of these obstacles to the simple steady awareness of what is.

Blessedly, family life is not only about mortgages, grocery shopping, college education accounts, dance lessons, PTAs, childcare, discipline, soccer leagues, toilet training, or carpools. It is first and foremost about the intense and tender and often fierce interrelatedness of human beings. It is about the astonishment of being with each other. It is especially through parenting that I have come to appreciate the contemplative dimension of my life. And although I have perhaps had more opportunity to be articulate, both to myself and others, about the nature of such a contemplative path, I am not alone in my intuitions. I have rarely met a reflective parent who does not immediately resonate with my descriptions of the contemplative nature of parenthood even if their specific experiences or language is not quite mine.

11. The passage is found in St. Jerome, "Against Helvidius: The Perpetual of Blessed Virgin Mary," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 6 *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm.B.Eerdmans, 1954).

12. An overview of the development of the sacramental theology of marriage within the tradition is found in Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: An Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981).

As human beings, we locate the sacred. We discover the holy in space—in rivers, mountains, cathedral, grottos, and shrines. We sense sacred presence in time—as we enter the Sabbath, as we celebrate sacred seasons such as Advent or Lent or as we mark the anniversary of a loved one's death. We sense the sacred in certain people. Certain spaces. Certain times. Certain people. They are charged with a numinous aura that we respond to with awe. They are treasured. They are sacred. They are holy.

So too we locate the sacred in the times, place and people of family life. I have a favorite exercise I do with people on retreat. After defining family as any configuration of people with whom one finds oneself intimately connected through the course of one's life, I ask them to name the place in their own family's experience where they discover the "more," the experience of being greater than the sum of the individual parts. Ninety percent of respondents name the dining room or kitchen table. When I ask what is characteristic of that place, people say that they share more than food there, that there they tell of the day's events, that extended generations gather together. The table thus becomes a place of encounter with the deeper springs of mystery from which we drink. Tables are places of communion, of mutual need and nourishment acted out on several levels simultaneously. Our physical, emotional, and spiritual hungers are fed in a mealtime ritual as ancient as humankind. The table itself becomes the sacred spot where the ritual is accomplished. That this is keenly felt by people has become obvious to me in the way people speak of tables. One gentleman recounted that he owned the dining room table that had belonged to his grandfather. Every time he passed that table, he felt the presence of all the family members who had gathered there over the years. They were discovered in the presence of the table.

Tables are not the only sacred spaces of family life. Gardens, cars, bathrooms, vacation homes, tractors: the list is endless and varied. What they have in common is the fact that they are places of deep communion, of encountering others in a manner that exposes our primal vulnerability and hungers, and makes of us both feeders and fed. We enact the mystery of our deep interconnectedness. This ushers us ultimately into our shared hunger for God.

Sacred times in family life have a quality similar to sacred places. Entering them, we discover the depth of our connectedness to spirit. Holiday celebrations and anniversaries are chief among family sacred times. They function for family members much the way the

rhythm of the liturgical year functions in monastic life. They sanctify time. They pierce the opaqueness of ordinary time with a latticework of windows through which we peer into the depth dimension of our lives. Year after year we pierce more deeply, the celebration gaining in richness with each successive encounter. For each time we are greeted with all our previous experience. Layer on layer. A wedding anniversary gains texture and weight through the seasons of a marriage. Encoded in that celebrative time are all the varied experiences of the years—the first flush of romance, the busy nurturance of birthing and childrearing, the excitement of the first house, the new job, the disappointments and failures, the reconciliations, the shared labors. The cumulative story is contained in time: not only of a couple's life together but of their most profound dreams, the music of the spirit, their dance with God.

If the contemplative life is about the steady gaze upon the facts of existence, a gaze that searches for the still "I am" that undergirds all, then the family is certainly an arena which offers an uncushioned encounter with facts. To hold one's newborn child for the first time. To wait at the bedside of a dying parent. To suffer the agony of a life threatening childhood illness. To delight completely in and with a beloved spouse. To hold ancient, treasured memories in common with a brother or sister. These are the simple facts of family. They are also sure gateways into the astonishing, painful, joy-filled facts of human existence, an existence whose very fabric is woven through with the threads of divinity.

Perhaps it is because love binds us so closely in family that this deep piercing is possible. Love, that gravitational pull that draws us out of the illusion that we are isolated selves. Love, that primal knowledge of our common identity. Love, that binder and healer of our shared alienation. Our false selves, resistant though they are, can be stripped away in the crucible of genuine love.¹³

Family life does not have to be churchy or quasi-monastic to reveal its contemplative dimension. Some cultivation of self-reflection and the claiming of naturally solitary, silent moments would seem to be essential. But these moments do not have to be superimposed. Rather, they need to be recognized, protected and entered into.

13. The notion of the false self was, of course, made famous by Merton. See especially chapter 2 of his *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

Routines of folding laundry, rituals of putting a child to bed with a song or story, fishing together on vacation, walking the dog on a summer's evening, an automobile drive in the country, watching the sun set from a porch swing, sleeping out under the stars. All these and a myriad of others thread through our lives together. They are breathing spaces, opportunities for the simple factuality of what is to present itself in all its unspeakable fullness.

Certainly, more formal disciplines of prayer can encourage the listening attention of contemplation. These will differ from family to family. Some may be overtly contemplative. A husband and wife may be students of centering prayer and spell each other in babysitting duties so that they might each find time for their practice. Another family might have a shared ritual of morning prayer, dipping down into the vast well of the church's ancient liturgies to bring up the Word as a spring of living water. But not all members of a family may find cultivation of a specifically contemplative mode of prayer life-giving. Some may have their faith energized through the exercise of social justice—through contact with the poor at a soup kitchen or through community service. Others may find the path of intellectual engagement fruitful—through a study of the spiritual and theological classics of our tradition. In any of these cases, the contemplative undercurrent of our existence must be attended to in some way. That deep knowing is a portion of all experience. Awareness of it must thread through our study, our actions, and our interactions.

Nor does a family have to fit the description of the perfect, functional family to give access to the sustaining hidden ground of love that Merton described.¹⁴ The persistent, onward thrusting of life itself seems determined to find its truest expression. Most families have their contemplative glimpses, their acknowledgement of that foundational love. Most families can name sacred times and places unique to them. I think of a single mother who had escaped from a severely abusive marriage and who, along with her teenaged children, had grappled with substance abuse. This family's sacred space was at the kitchen counter, where two by two they would stand side by side, one washing and one drying the dishes. There, she claimed, they could begin to speak and cultivate the communion they had lost for so long. Not facing one another (it was too soon for that) they experienced

themselves "in a bubble," a time out of time, where they could begin together to heal.

If I were asked to give a formal name to this contemplative living in family, and to link it to the greater heritage of Christian prayer, I would first turn to the pages of the little Carmelite classic from late seventeenth-century France, *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Lawrence was a lay brother of the Paris Carmel. His work in the community varied over the years. Among the jobs he held were sandal-maker and cook. Despite his obscure origins and the even more obscure role he played in his monastic community and the religious affairs of his era, Brother Lawrence had a wide reputation and was consulted for his spiritual counsel by many. He promoted a simple path which he termed "the practice of the presence of God."¹⁵

It is that simple practice of finding God alive in the hustle and bustle, the burdens and delights, the wrenching sorrow and unspeakable joy that is common to us all, monastic and lay alike. The contexts differ and thus the dynamics and insights as well. But the loving attention, the refusal to engage with life primarily as a problem to be solved, a cypher to be decoded or a formula to be analyzed, the embrace of the facts of our existence as a question into which we live, a mystery we allow to enter and shape us, this we share. This is the contemplative life.

I will close with two images, drawn from my own experience. I trust they will encourage a contemplative claiming of our lives as familial people. The first image is one that I came to parenthood with. The second is one given to me in the course of being a parent. The first emerged during my first pregnancy. This was a luminous time for me, despite much fatigue and persistent sickness. I felt like I was at the center of the universe, aligned with the most powerful generative forces of life itself—which of course I was. Fantasizing ahead to an unknown future, I imaged an idyllic future with my child-to-be. In retrospect, it was rather like the image of contemplation presented by the Trappist father—of the young woman in a meadow rapt in reverie. I saw myself as the mother of a cherubic, tow-headed toddler, sitting on a park

14. Cf. note 1.

15. The latest English edition of Br. Lawrence's classic is Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, critical edition by Conrad De Meester, O.C.D., trans. by Salvatore Sciorba, O.C.D. (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1994).

bench as her child plays on the grassy knoll in the near distance. The whole scene was bathed in peace. Sunlight. Joy. I, free to reflect, was collected within myself, settled in delicious stillness as the beautiful young life cavorted in a pristine grassy, flower-filled park. Real motherhood soon taught me that it is never like that. One is never free as a mother of a toddler, or a grade school child or adolescent for that matter, to simply sit back and observe. An outing to a park has to be negotiated around naps and meals. And one is always on one's feet, trailing or restraining an unsteady walker, alert for dog droppings, for obstacles that may cause tripping, for enticing glittering objects that may end up in the mouth. And one is burdened with extra jackets, diapers, snacks, drinks, a treasured toy that cannot be left at home, aware that fatigue, hunger, frustration, tears, or the need to use the restroom might strike at any minute.

Yet to see the world through the eyes of a child is to begin a lesson in wonder. To radically entrust your heart to another growing, changing human being is to risk living into the question. To know yourself as inextricably joined to another is to cross the threshold of the vast, inexpressible network of mystery that conjoins us all.

It is that mystery that brings me to my last image. This past fall, my husband and I sent our first child to college. An ordinary action, performed by hundreds of thousands of parents each year. Yet for each parent-child configuration, the event is unique. Our daughter chose a Catholic university on the coast, halfway across the nation from our home. So the preparations and the dislocation were major. I went with her to see her settled in her dorm room, to hook up the computer, to help shop for what seemed like a thousand articles she needed to equip her to live independently from us. The university provided an excellent orientation program for new students and parents with just the right mixture of launching activities for students and letting go pep talks for parents.

It was a good weekend but one in which I found myself struggling with the welter of paradoxical emotions that threaten to swamp one at a time of such profound transition. As the weekend progressed, my daughter was less and less at my side. A residence hall meeting, a first year ice breaker, a dance, these claimed her, as they should. Late afternoon of the weekend's end, I took a solitary walk out to the campus edge. Her university is situated on a wide bluff that overlooks the central city in one direction and the ocean in the other. Dusk was gathering, and I found myself full throated with an explosive mixture of

pride, sorrow, joy, grief, anxiety and relief. I watched for a long time as the sun grew crimson over the sea, then started back to the central campus. As I rounded a tree on a grassy knoll, I noted a statue I had neglected previously. At first glance, it seemed a statue of the Virgin Mary, which in fact it was. But a Virgin as I had never seen her before. Standing, her body thrust slightly forward, arms lifted high, she offered up to the expansive sky an infant child. The gesture was at once tender and anguished, charged with the inexpressible protective love of motherhood that must relinquish to an unknown future that which is more precious to her than life itself. The statue was dedicated to the mothers of the university's students.

The statue imaged for me a familiar variant of the contemplative life. Here was Mary, the classic Christian embodiment of contemplation, not before the conception, at the moment of annunciation, but after the gestation, birth and nurture. Offering all—her love, her life itself—back into the arms of the unknown. A radical entrusting to what is. Risking the mystery. Living into the question.