

he tries to universalize it, I for one felt like an outsider. Finally, totally missing in this book is any indication that service to others or entering into their suffering has any meaning for the spiritual life or Christian transformation. This is the story of one good man's journey lived independently of others. The first commandment is explored in this book, but not the second.

Dana Greene

BOURGEAULT, Cynthia. *Chanting the Psalms: A Practical Guide with Instructional CD* (Boston: New Seeds Books, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2006), pp-xv-275. ISBN-13: 978-1-59030-257-6 (hbk). ISBN-20: 1-59030-257-5. CD, Tracks 1-39, Total running time: 53:58. US\$ 18.95, CAN \$24.95.

I.

Contemplative prayer, once the prerogative of cloistered monasticism, has broken out of those confines and is now practiced worldwide by tens of thousands, through simplified methods such as Centering Prayer (furthered by, for example, the Cistercians Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, and indeed by Bourgeault's own excellent recent investigations of the same. But **chanting the psalms** still seems esoteric to Christian seekers. Bourgeault wants to see this change and offers her book as a way of furthering that change.

Chanting the Psalms: A Practical Guide . . . might well have used as its sub-title the title of the author's previous book—a guide to *Inner Awakening*. [1] For the insights she offers into the role of music-making in the journey of the spiritual life are nothing less than that, i.e. a guide to using our voices to bring us into the awareness and the presence of the Numinous. This is an imminently "practical" book, both in the word's meaning of "useable" and in the sense of spiritual "*praxis*."

Bourgeault admits head-on two major problems associated with psalmody in our era: first, that of the psalms themselves as suitable Christian prayer; and second, the almost exclusive identification of psalmody with Gregorian chant, and this chant's suitability for contemporary life and worship. Her considerations take both problems seriously, are beautifully nuanced, and able both to affirm the tradition and offer fruitful alternatives.

Why are the psalms so important, she queries? Her answer, an excellent *apologia* for the psalms as prayer, spread over several

places in the text, is one of the valuable aspects of the book, a strong endorsement for their continuing validity as foundational Christian prayer. "For Christians on a path of inner transformation, the psalms have traditionally been a non-negotiable cornerstone. . . . For two thousand years they have been the backbone of the monastic program of spiritual awakening (x)." All our spiritual heroes have chanted them, from Cassian and Benedict in the fifth century to Thomas Merton and Joan Chittister in the twentieth, not to mention Jesus himself in the first. The author's pursuit of the "why?" is perhaps the most important and original contribution of this volume, namely its explanation of how "[t]he psalms have an intentional and effective part to play in fine-tuning the instrument of spiritual transformation—that is, *you* (x)." The book provides practical and specific ways of how **anyone** can gain access to this fine-tuning, to the "hidden wisdom in psalmody that makes sense of the practice [of chanting] itself" and which in so doing also "pulls a lot of the other elements in the Christian contemplative path together (xi)."

Already in the fifth-century the contemplative master Cassian had noted that the psalms carry within themselves "all the feelings of which human nature is capable" (15). Drawing on the psychological insights of later spiritual teachers such as Thomas Keating (of *Centering Prayer* and *Contemplative Outreach*), Bourgeault explains what intimacy with such a "vast cornucopia of personal experience" can do for us "when we introduce the psalms into our consciousness—and even more so into our *unconscious*—through a practice of contemplative psalmody." "They begin to create a safe spiritual container for recognizing and processing those dark shadows within ourselves, those places we'd prefer not to think about (43)."

II.

A consideration of the tri-partite structure of the volume reveals the author's method. I will describe briefly the three parts to whet readers' appetite. I shall, however, dwell more fully on certain aspects which either are truly original or/and which I consider of special value for those on the spiritual journey.

Bourgeault structures her work in three parts, each quite different, with different purposes, all equally valuable and practical in a different way. **Part One** I find profoundly important—theoretical, yet personal in the sense of offering insight into ourselves

as physical, psychological, spiritual beings. And it answers a question long pondered by students of monasticism, namely: what is it about the Benedictine (monastic) life, or spirituality, or way, that is so attractive, so powerful. Or put another way: why is the *Rule of St. Benedict* so important? Wherein lies its transformative influence or power? The way Bourgeault's volume addresses this problem qualifies it as required reading for those interested in Benedictine spirituality. This is the author's truly original contribution, which I will return to shortly.

Part Two is quite "practical" in the more usual sense of the word, though again it is also related to *praxis*, explaining ways of actually chanting, but also with an excellent introductory foray into music as self-discovery (in Chapter 7, "Finding Your Own Voice") [2] and concluding with workable suggestions for integrating chanting into one's personal prayer life. The author's presentation of Gregorian notation is as clear an explanation as I have seen of both the intricacies of this medium and of its strength and essence.

Part Three presents "Creative Adaptations", ways in which those on the spiritual journey in various Christian traditions have already responded to the need for sung celebration of the Divine with adaptation to contemporary life-styles. The chapters on Taize, Iona, and Gouzes chant and Songs of the Presence invite and encourage the reader to join the chorus! Although Bourgeault warns her readers not to start a chanting practice if they don't intend to persevere, this chapter's material offers "practical" ways in which occasional chanting can in fact be used for specific situations. Further, the impressive number and diversity of the various chanting communities it describes is a sign of the great interest in this *praxis* and provides proof that chanting is by no means an "esoteric" or "medieval" oddity foreign to life lived within the twenty-first century.

III.

Both Parts Two and Three offer excellent material in "how to" develop a *praxis* of chant as personal prayer. But Part one's exploration of the essence of psalmody is so important that I will devote most of the following part of the review to these insights, in the hope (shared by the author) that my readers will sense the potential of a careful reading of the volume for their own spiritual and mental growth. Even if one still balks at **chanting**, the copious

insights into the wisdom/transformative power/essence of the psalms and of the office (with its coordination of antiphons) will deepen anyone's communication with this body of sacred texts.

Christian psalmody differs from most chant traditions, which rely on repetition of a single mantra or phrase, by flooding the mind with images and emotions. It requires "compassionate engagement" with **meanings**. Yet though more "mental" than other traditions, contemplative psalmody is "a total immersion program" for "awakening the *unitive imagination*(49)." Bourgeault defines "unitive imagination" as a kind of full-spectrum "thinking with the heart" which goes beyond mere linear knowing, by engaging the faculties of intuition, sensitivity, creativity, and conscience lying deep within the psyche (49f). Christianity is a religion of the "**unitive**" **Word** which does not yield itself up easily to a linear, or cause-and-effect thought process. Bourgeault offers the quite cogent illustrations of this fact with reference to elements in the Christian tradition which at the **literal** level may not make clear sense—the Virgin Birth or the mystical body of Christ—but to the awakened unitive imagination "become precise road maps of the path of inner transformation (50)." This movement beyond the literal, she points out, was the whole goal of the spiritual journey for much of early Christian tradition.

Benedict did not have access to such terms as "archetypal unconscious" and "unitive awakening" in the sixth century, but his "school for the Lord's service" was essentially a systematic method for the awakening of the unitive imagination (50)." And the qualitative and quantitative focus of his school was psalmody. Benedictine monasticism refined the training of the unitive imagination to a high art, but the same potential lies in all of us. The cultivation of psalmody can help anyone to live a more focused life in the spirit.

Discussion of the very original—and most important aspects of the "hidden wisdom of psalmody" comes early, in Chapter 3 of Part One. As mentioned above, it could well be basic reading for all persons interested in an essentially spiritual way of life inspired by St. Benedict. Proceeding from the observation that the religious tradition based upon Benedict's *Rule* seems to have no actual spiritual *praxis*, in distinction to all other religious traditions, which offer "elaborate training in breathing, meditation, stimulation of the inner body through conscious vibrations, strengthening the power of conscious attention." Bourgeault reexamines the tradi-

tion. What is the “actual technology of transformation”? Her perceptive answer is that such a rigorous training **does** indeed exist, “lurking, just below the surface, in the Divine Office.” “The esoteric training is accomplished in the choir, with Gregorian chant as the premiere vessel for the actual rearrangement of conscious perception (29).”

The author supports her thesis with a clear presentation of the four basic transformative principles underlying all sacred chanting. And again, as the volume’s sub-title promises, she presents them as elements which we today can also work with toward a more focused, awakened life. In many traditions, she suggests, chanting is “fundamentally a deep immersion experience in the creative power of the university.” The chanter makes music with the four basic chanting elements of which the earth was fashioned and through which all spiritual transformation take place—**breath**; **tone** or vibration when voice is added to breath; **intentionality** or meaning of words, especially important in Christianity where conscious attention and consent to the meaning of a passage is crucial; and **community**, listening to one another and adjusting to one another (32-34).

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Rounding out the good points of *Chanting* are its comprehensive index of topics, a glossary of technical terms, an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and its very listenable CD of chant examples. The CD contains chanting by the author herself and her groups, as well as examples from other communities, and its emphasis is always practical, do-able, and sincere.

IV.

I conclude with a personal witness to the practical effectiveness of this volume’s offerings. At our regular bi-monthly gathering of Benedictine oblates, I presented an overview of *Chanting* as part of our educational program. I asked those present if they would be willing to try out the author’s suggestions, using the familiar opening of the Benedictine office: “O God, come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me” as our chant text. I asked them first to find their own point of resonance and to feel their body resonate, simply by singing a tone, then adding the words “O God.” We then chanted these sentences together for several minutes, using the simple Anglican tone Bougeault suggests. That was the extent of my plan for the group, and I expected to conclude the

session with some discussion of their reaction. But when after the minutes of chanting I gave a gentle signal to cease, ready for reactions, we experienced instead an additional several minutes of profound meditative silence. The experimental chanting had indeed drawn the neophyte chanters into a different, deeper realm. And when we did discuss the "experiment," the predominant reaction was appreciation.

This volume can make anyone want to jump into the practice of chant. But it offers much, much more than directions for chanting. Anyone serious about becoming more aware of the presence of the Divine in their life can profit greatly from reading it, considering its insights, and applying many of its suggestions, even apart from an actual chanting practice.

Further, there are so many echoes of Benedict's *Rule* and so many probing references to and subtle meditations on foundational aspects of the Benedictine "way" in this volume that it might serve as required formation reading for monastics and oblates within the Benedictine tradition. For instance, Bourgeault's recognition that "thinking with the heart" is what psalmody furthers, constitutes a valuable gloss on Benedict's invitation to his daughters and sons to "listen with the ear of your heart" and to make such heart-listening the basic attitude of their lives.

Notes:

1. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2004. The author has a richly diverse background of spiritual traditions and *praxis*. Her first-hand experience of eastern as well as western practices provides solid foundation for her discussion of the contemplative path. She is a hermit, an Episcopal priest, a medievalist, and a musicologist.

2. Bourgeault's discussion of the role our **voice** plays within our existence (in Ch. 3 and 7, pp. 33 and 75-78) will probably be quite new to most readers, and also most certainly mind-opening. One of the "hidden" truths long known and long lost to most Christians, her presentation shares much with the insights offered by study of the Aramaic Gospels (e.g. Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*) and the theology of twelfth-century Hildegard of Bingen's recognition of the Eucharistic/Incarnational essence of singing. "[T]rue voice is closely intertwined with true self . . ." Our true singing voice is intimately connected to our authentic self, and "this authentic self is nothing less than the glory of God written in you as your *being* . . .(76-77)"

3. An endnote on endnotes: One of the pleasures of this volume are its endnotes, several of which amount to mini-discourses on important topics. Bourgeault has the gift of focusing in on the essential elements of complex issues, such as the Cistercian (Trappist) method of transformation (pp. 214-215) and her characterization of the Celtic, Wisdom-oriented spirituality contrasted with the Roman style of Catholic Christianity (p. 229). She also includes extensive bibliographical references for further exploration as well as results of personal experience of the topics under discussion.

Dewey W. Kramer

DRISCOLL, Jeremy, *A Monk's Alphabet: Moments of Stillness in a Turning World* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006), pp. 210. ISBN-10: 1-59030-3733-3. (Hardcover) \$19.95.

One must search far and wide in monastic writing to find a book such as this—one that speaks not *about* monasticism, but *out of* monasticism as a daily experience—a book of a monk going about being a monk—albeit in some circumstances outside a monastery. We accompany the fertile and subtle mind of Jeremy Driscoll inside his monastery of Mt. Angel in Oregon, and follow him to Rome, where he teaches at San Anselmo, to Paris and elsewhere. All is written with a sense of place, and love for community and its characters. Unforgettable is “Bonnie,” his late Abbot, who loved to reenact ham scenes from the worst movies, and did so on his death bed, in a role of a sheriff who had been shot.

More intriguing still are visits to Driscoll’s own inner thoughts—not didactic expositions, but subtle questioning, a mind puzzled with life: “Nothing that exists is necessary. But everything that exists, does. Tell me why, and I shall be much relieved.”

While theology is a serious part of his life, Driscoll thinks in the context of prayer and speaks out of silence. His aim is “to think clearly and deeply and to do so with love.” His willingness to write tentatively gives one a gentle nudge along in one’s own hesitant search:

There must be a way of being tentative that could be beautiful, helpful, that could move us closer to some greater grasp of things. So here is a goal for words proffered: humble speech in which the silence from which the speaker emerges and soon returns is also heard as a living, life-giving space.