A Revolution of Love: Creating Contemplatives in the College Classroom

By **Alan Kolp**

One student wrote, "Contemplative spirituality has given me hope and has filled a large hole I feel as though I have always had in my life." This student has learned what it means to be a contemplative. She has dealt with the three key questions. What is it? How do you practice contemplative living? And what do you get out of it? These three simple questions continue to fuel my desire to teach an undergraduate class on contemplative spirituality. The students range across all college majors and from all four years in college. Almost no one is a religion major and for most of them this is the only religion class they will ever take. And in the beginning all they know is that the word "contemplate" means to "think deeply about something."

Admittedly, it is impossible to create a contemplative in a fifteen-week semester. But I am confident that a desire for a deeper, loving life committed to the pursuit of meaning and purpose can be awakened. And I am confident that to tap that desire and, then, to choose the contemplative path is always a revolution of love. This is what the student could not possibly know, but what he or she wants to learn. What the student would never guess is that to become a contemplative inevitably involves their own revolution of love.

To understand this, we align with the theology of Franciscan Ilia Delio. She states that "God lives deep within us, as the center of love."[1] When students tap into desire, they begin to touch the love at their center, which is God deep inside us. This is what we Quakers simultaneously call the "Light Within." It is in this sense that students come to see the Light, learn to mind the Light and to walk in the Light.

It is at this point that Thomas Merton's invitation to contemplation now makes sense to students – even though they won't be monks. Merton calls each of us: "The chief desire of the monk is, then, to surrender to the light of Christ, to remove all that acts as an obstacle between ourselves and that light."[2] Merton amplifies this in a Circular Letter to Friends from September 1968: "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action."[3]

First comes desire. The learning path of this contemplative process is fueled by desire. Desire leads to discovery. Discovery itself is not an event, but a process – a process which requires discipline. If the students continue this disciplined discovery,

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inevitably they find they are developing. This development happens intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Finally, they experience delight. They are delighted to discover who they are becoming and to consider how they will continue to live contemplatively in an often crazy world.

Psychiatrist and spirituality teacher Gerald May is immensely helpful in understanding exactly what desire is and how it originates spiritual longing. May states, "the fundamental spiritual longing . . . has three basic dimensions: a desire for unconditional love, a need for belonging and union, and a deep hunger to 'just be.'"[4] Spiritual longing is the way our basic human desire is lived out in our quest for meaning. And desire is nothing more than the manifestation of what May calls the "fundamental life-force," which is both a personal energy and cosmic energy, which is love. May's words remind us of Delio when he declares, "the fundamental life-force of creation is an expression of divine love, and divine love is realized most directly in the immediate appreciation of that life-force" (May 204). Students begin that process when they tap into that desire and recognize it as spiritual longing.

Desire leads to discovery. Discovery is desire in the search mode. Students don't know what they are searching for, so this is where Merton plays a role. Merton's opening words from *New Seeds of Contemplation* give the students a sense of where the search is going. These words appear on the syllabus, serving as a kind of promise of what can happen:

> Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision.[5]

Probably the most important word of this definition of contemplation is the word "awareness." No doubt, the earliest aspect of the discovery stage is helping students learn to be more aware. Like most folks, they assume they are very aware, until they begin to learn how unaware they actually are!

Discovery is the initial phase which asks for some commitment and some practice. Typically, we don't discover haphazardly. One of the most important aids in this process is the key book I use. In 1999, Roger Walsh authored *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken the Heart and Mind*.[6] Early in the book Walsh offers a crucial nugget for students. He says, "This book is much more concerned with learning and living than with believing" (Walsh 15). This points to the first level of discovery. To become contemplative is an experience – a lived experience – and indeed becomes a way of living. Doubtlessly, it involves theology and/or philosophy, but contemplation is more than belief. And learning is more than getting ideas from books.

Walsh helps students begin their discovery process with the first central practice, namely, "Transform Your Motivation." The subtitle for this practice is revealing: "Reduce Craving and Find Your Soul's Desire" (Walsh 29-68). Walsh cleverly begins this section by addressing

happiness. Typically, students will tell you their goal in life is to be happy. But Walsh knows that most things students think will make them happy turn out to be fool's gold.

Soon Walsh is talking about things like the Buddhist's Four Noble Truths. Students learn that their cravings are normally attachments and that attachments are desires which have been captured by things that won't lead to happiness. As their awareness develops, they understand Walsh when he tells them: "Happiness lies not in feeding and fueling our attachments, but in reducing and relinquishing them" (Walsh 41).

The discussion easily turns to cell phones as a prime example of attachment – or even addiction. The gadget in your pocket has addicted you and made you unaware of almost everything else – a rude discovery! We best listen to these words of one of the students: "I came to a frightening conclusion – let's say I use my phone for five hours a day; multiply that by 365 days in one year to get 1,825 hours. That is equal to using my phone for about 76 days of the year!" This may sound like an exaggeration, but I suspect it is a good deal closer to reality than we think.

To deal with this, Walsh offers multiple exercises and strategies. These are crucial in cultivating awareness, redirecting motivation and encouraging growth by nurturing new experiences. These exercises become key points of engagement in this process. To embrace this is seriously to begin the journey of becoming a contemplative; and this points to the third aspect of the contemplative journey, namely, discipline. Without discipline it is nearly impossible to live contemplatively.

Discipline is really discovery over time. It builds on awareness. It continues to make sense to quote from the Walsh book, since this is what students are using. The fourth practice, "Concentrate and Calm Your Mind," introduces an exercise to gain focus. He opens with this observation: "Our frantic minds reflect our frantic lives as we try to fit more and more into each day. We constantly do two or more things a day" (Walsh 156). His remedy makes sense and points the students in a contemplative direction: "To begin, commit a specific time – a day might be good to begin with – to doing only one thing at a time" (Walsh 157).

Discipline is tied to intentionality. Discipline turns intent into action; and discipline is intentional action over time – repeated. At some point, discipline turns the intended action into a habit. Again, we can look at the exercise, do one thing at a time. Trying it once will not turn it into a habit or a way of life. We need to keep doing it. Inevitably, we will fail and have to begin again. It is easier to maintain discipline if we have a coach, guide or spiritual friend. We know it is difficult to become a contemplative all by yourself. Typically, there is a role for a helper and/or a community. Walsh puts it this way: "Spiritual friends are invaluable. But a friend who has practiced longer, traveled the path further, and understands it more deeply can be invaluable" (Walsh 283).

If the student can become disciplined in the contemplative way of living, he or she will develop – experience growth. Although the class is not specifically geared toward Christianity, it is worth choosing words from Merton to articulate where contemplative development heads. Merton exclaims, "The true contemplative life is then simply a deep penetration and understanding of the ordinary Christian life which, for all that we call it 'ordinary' is the most wonderful of all miracles: God Himself living in us!" (*MJ* 48). I especially like how Merton talks

about "deep penetration" here. I think most students experience some form of that.

Obviously, students already have an identity before they take the class, but that identity is made deeper and more profound by becoming contemplative. Throughout fifteen weeks together, they are able to deepen their ordinary lived experience and come to have a sense that the Spirit does live in them. Again this is the normal development of love in the life of a person. I like how Delio expresses it: "We all want to belong to someone; we are love creatures. We yearn for wholeness, happiness, and peace in love. But the more we look outside ourselves, the less settled we are within ourselves" (Delio 197). To become contemplative is to grow into wholeness, find more happiness and come to a peace that is grounded in love.

As students grow more into becoming contemplatives and experience the reality behind Merton's and Delio's words, their growth suggests to me an effective way to address the current generation of younger folks – be they millennials, Gen Z or now Gen Alpha. A few years ago, Linda Mercadante offered this characterization of these younger folks:

> They virtually all rejected religious or salvationary exclusivism and championed an internal rather than transcendent "locus of authority." Almost all embraced a liberative ethos – especially in gender and sexual orientation issues – rather than accepting older role-restrictive teachings. Most had a belief in "Universal Truth" as well as affirming the essential similarity of all religions. Most downplayed religious commitment. Many had a decidedly therapeutic orientation to spiritual practice. They also demonstrated a positive-thinking ethos of conviction that one's ideas create one's reality. Most soundly rejected the idea of "sin." The vast majority used spiritual experience as a touchstone and often saw nature as a source or mediator of spiritual feelings.[7]

Contemplative spirituality is a creative way to invite younger folks in their own revolution of love that will enable them to live meaningful lives with purpose in a world that promises to continue being crazy.

If they can discover and develop this kind of contemplative life, they surely will experience delight – the fruit of contemplation. Delight can happen in the moment, but deep and lasting delight requires practiced work at living well. Contemplative spirituality is a very good way to get there. While not offering a scientific pre- and post-study, these words from a young woman reflecting on the process of the class offer insight into the process of contemplative growth and the delight that can result:

> Though I did not know it going in, I think this class will be one of those that continues to help me in the future, not in the quotes I learned, but in the ability to change my mindset, see new perspectives, and adjust to changes. There could not be a better time for a class like this than right now at a major life transition, reminding me to take in the moment, feel connected with the universe, help others to grow, and be contemplative.

An articulate young man preparing for ministry sums it up this way: "I am Awake. I am Alive in the Truth."

This squares well with how Merton (also with God-talk) understands the contemplative journey. He tells us: "The 'spiritual life' is then the perfectly balanced life in which the body with

its passions and instincts, the mind with its reasoning and its obedience to principle and the spirit with its passive illumination by the Light and Love of God form one complete man who is in God and with God and from God and for God" (*NSC* 140).

I am confident that most of the students now will talk about their spiritual life as contemplative living. Contemplative living seeks a balanced life, which they all know does not come with a college degree. They also seek wholeness in their lives, which Merton describes as the complete person. Again, the craziness of our world fragments, distorts and distracts in multiple threatening ways which make wholeness a tough quest.

Finally, part of the delight, which students discover and treasure, is the promise and power of community in their contemplative living. Over forty class sessions, a sense of community develops and becomes a grace to their journeys. They experience what it means to be both receiver and giver of encouragement, grace and wisdom. Merton knew this well: "Very few men are sanctified in isolation. Very few become perfect in absolute solitude. Living with other people and learning to lose ourselves in the understanding of their weakness and deficiencies can help us to become true contemplatives" (*NSC* 191).

However, one of the most important functions of community is to help equip everyone to serve and to minister in a world that wants what contemplatives know and have. Maybe this is the "so what" of contemplative living. Walsh puts it well at the end of his book when he tells the students and us: "Our world is in desperate need of healing. But it also rests in good hands, because it rests in yours. And in you rests the Source of all healing, and all that is needed to awaken you and the world" (Walsh 285).

I have a vision for younger folks. And I have a gift to give them. That gift is nothing more than the perfect gift of contemplation God wants to give each one of us. I am content to let Merton describe why I do it and why all of us who are contemplatives do it:

> The ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his own private intuition of God: it is a sea of Love which flows through the One Body of all the elect, all the angels and saints, and their contemplation would be incomplete if it were not shared, or if it were shared with fewer souls, or with spirits capable of less vision and less joy. (*NSC* 65)

1. Ilia Delio, *Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (New York: Orbis, 2013) 100; subsequent references will be cited as "Delio" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 101; subsequent references will be cited as "*MJ*" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 296.
4. Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1987) 71; subsequent references will be cited as "May" parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 1; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.

6. Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999); subsequent references will be cited as "Walsh" parenthetically in the text.
7. John Seel, *The New Copernicans: Understanding the Millennial Contribution to the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018) 194.