

Contemplation

A long loving look at the real

Walter J. Burghardt

This adventure in contemplation has three stages. First, some introductory remarks about obstacles to contemplation. Then, the more substantive issue: What is contemplation? Finally, practical suggestions on how to realize your capacity for contemplation.

Part One

The primary villain is a 20th century law, a law that hounds us without our knowing it, has a strong ring of virtue, seems self-evident for responsible living. Almost three decades ago Walter Kerr framed that law as follows: "Only useful activity is valuable, meaningful, moral. Activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral."¹

By that law most Americans live. That is why they feel guilty if they have nothing to "do." That is why many are reluctant to confess they took yesterday off, "did" nothing, just enjoyed. That is why so many just justify a vacation: it will help them work better when they get back. That is why the introductory ploy at a cocktail party is not "Who are you?" but "What do you do?" That is why young coronary patients are characteristically restless during leisure hours and feel guilty when they should relax.

How did we come to this unpretty pass? Through a philosophy. Not that utilitarianism conquered our culture with one master stroke. As Kerr phrased it, "Ideas that are powerful enough to dictate the conduct of whole generations...enter the blood and marrow of a people as spirochetes do – unnamed, invisible – quite a long time after a lonely thinker has set them loose in the silence of his study."²

You have to back to Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832), identifying happiness with utility, pleasure with profit. Back to James Mill (d. 1836), rigid utilitarian

educating his small son on a philosophy of rigid utilitarianism. And there was the son himself, John Stuart Mill (d. 1873). He began Greek and math at the age of three; at eight, he had read Aesop, Xenophon, and Herodotus in the original, together with masses of history; about 12, he was grappling with Aquinas and Aristotle; at 13, political economy, Adam Smith. At 21, he broke down, "victim of a dejection which robbed life not only of its pleasures but also of its purpose."³ And the last word in that philosophical assault may have been succinctly written in 1871 by an English logician and political economist, William Stanley Jevons (d. 1882): "Value depends entirely upon utility." This, I am afraid, is a thesis that dominates much of American culture today: what is important is usefulness, the profit I can extract from an experience or a possession.

A second reason why contemplation has fallen on hard times goes back to the churning sixties. The world was challenging the Church: "Forget this fascination with another world. Come to us where we are. Help us make the passage into a technological age without the brutality of a new paganism. If you remain comfortably in your cloisters, God will become a stranger to contemporary culture."

The Catholic Church was framing an even more anguished plea. Take the opening sentence of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

In the agonizing call for action, contemplation suffered. Work *is* prayer. To serve God, to pray, you need to get down on your knees; the world is your kneeler.

The obstacles to contemplation are graphically summed up in a comic strip—mother inside the house, looking out a window, her little boy sitting in the yard with his back to a tree:

Mother: "Ditto, what are you doing out there?"

Ditto: "Nothing."

Mother: "You must be doing something! Now tell me!"

Ditto: "I'm not doing anything."
 Mother: "Ditto! You tell me what you're doing!"
 Ditto: (to himself) "Good gosh!"
 (he tosses a stone; out loud) "I'm throwing rocks!"
 Mother: "I thought it was something like that. Now stop it at once!"
 Ditto: "Okay."
 (to himself): "Nobody will let you just do nothing any more."

Part Two

Now turn to contemplation. What is it? Oh, not the popular sense of "contemplate," which is instantly associated with "navel." Contemplation in its profound sense is just as real as your navel but far more exciting. The contemplative Carmelite William McNamara once called it "a pure intuition of being, born of love. It is experiential awareness of reality and a way of entering into immediate communion with reality." And what is reality? "People, trees, lakes, mountains. You can study things, but unless you enter into this intuitive communion with them, you can only know *about* them, you don't *know* them. To take a long loving look at something – a child, a glass of wine, a beautiful meal – this is a natural act of contemplation, of loving admiration." The problem? "All the way through school we are taught to abstract; we are not taught loving awareness."

Never have I heard contemplation more excitingly described: a long loving look at the real. Each word is crucial: real...look....long....loving. The *real*, reality, is not reducible to some far-off, abstract, intangible God-in-the-sky. Reality is living, pulsing people; reality is fire and ice; reality is the sun setting over the Swiss Alps, a gentle doe streaking through the forest; reality is a ruddy glass of Burgundy, Beethoven's *Mass In D*, a child lapping a chocolate ice-cream cone; reality is a striding woman with wind-blown hair; reality is the risen Christ. Paradoxically, what alone is excluded from contemplation is abstraction, the "spaced out," where a leaf is no longer green, water no longer ripples, a man no longer breathes, and God no longer smiles. What I contemplate is always what is most real: what philosophers call the concrete singular.

This real I *look* at. I do not analyze or argue it, describe or define it; I am one with it. I do not move around it; I enter into it. Lounging by a stream, I do not exclaim, "Ah, H2O!" I let the water trickle gently through my fingers. I do not theologize about the redemptive significance of Calvary; I link a pierced hand to mine. Remember Eric Gill's outraged protest? "Good Lord! The thing was a mystery and we measured it!" Kerr compared contemplation to falling in love: not simply knowing another's height, weight, coloring, ancestry, I.Q., acquired habits; rather, "the single, simple vibration that gives us such joy in the meeting of eyes of the lucky conjunction of interchanged words. Something private and singular and uniquely itself is touched – and known in the touching."⁴

I am not naked spirit; I am spirit incarnate; in a genuine sense, I *am* flesh. And so I am most myself, most human, most contemplative when my whole person responds to the real.

Many of us have grown up on a dehumanizing Anglo-Saxon legacy: passion is something to be ashamed of. Strong feeling is a sign of weakness; the manly reaction to reality is stoicism. Love, of course, but let not love enrapture you. Be afraid, if you must, but keep your teeth from chattering. Take joy from a sonata, but let it not thrill you. Death will always sadden, but you dare not weep. Detest sin, but never be disturbed by it. Protest injustice, but grow not black with anger.

No, to "look" wholly means that my whole person reacts. Not only my mind, but my eyes and ears, smelling and touching and tasting. Not senses utterly unshackled; for at times reason must temper the animal in me. But far more openness, far more letting-go, than we were permitted of old, in a more severe spirituality, where, for example, touch was "out," because touch is dangerous. No one ever thought of reminding us that free will is even more dangerous. Or cold reason.

This look at the real is a *long* look. Not in terms of measured time, but wonderfully unhurried, gloriously unhurried. For many Americans, time is a stop watch, time is money, life is a race against time. To contemplate is to rest—to rest in the real. Not lifelessly or languidly, not sluggishly or inertly. My entire being is alive, incredibly responsive, vibrating to

every throb of the real. For once, time is irrelevant. You do not time the Philadelphia Symphony; you do not clock the Last Supper. I shall never forget the Louvre in Paris and the haunting Mona Lisa. On the one hand, an endless line of tourists, ten seconds each without ever stopping; on the other hand, a lone young man at rest on a stone bench, eyes riveted, whole person enraptured, sensible only of beauty and mystery, aware only of the real.

But this long look must be a *loving* look. It is not a fixed stare, not the long look of a Judas. It demands that the real captivate me, at times delight me. Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake Ballet* or Lobster Cardinal, the grace of God's swans or the compassion in the eyes of Christ – whatever or whoever the real, contemplation calls forth love, oneness with the other. For contemplation is not study, not cold examination, not a computer. To contemplate is to be in love.

True, contemplation does not always summon up delight. The real includes sin and war, poverty and race, illness and death. The real is AIDS and abortion, apartheid and MS, bloated bellies and stunted minds, respirators and last gasps. But even here the real I contemplate must end in compassion, and compassion that mimics Christ is a synonym for love.

A long loving look at the real. From such contemplation comes communion. I mean the discovery of the Holy in deep, thoughtful encounters – with God's creation, with God's people, with God's self – where love is proven by sacrifice, the wild exchange of all for another, for the Other. Thus is fashioned what the second-century bishop Irenaeus called "God's glory—man/woman alive!"

Part Three

But how realize this capacity for contemplation? Especially in its profound religious sense, a long loving look at the Real, oneness with Someone transcendent. Several suggestions.

First, some sort of desert experience. Not that contemplation is incompatible with the City; without a continuing contemplation, wherever you are, you

may well perish. Rather that the process can best be initiated by an experience that brings you face to face with solitude, with vastness, even with powers of life and death beyond your control. That is why the physical desert runs through the Bible, through salvation history, through the Church's tradition – specifically the Hebrew people, Christ Jesus, the desert fathers. The desert is a place of trial and struggle, a proving ground (see Exo.16:1 ff., Mt. 4:1 ff.), where the values of life are presented in clear, stark terms, where you opt for living or nature destroys you.

I shall never forget how, decades ago, Fr. McNamara revealed in word and his own person how the desert evokes your capacity for initiative, exploration, evaluation; interrupts your ordinary pattern of life; intercepts routine piety; disengages you from the regular round of respectable human activities. You learn to be alert, perceptive, recollected, so that issues become clear, reality recognizable. You know yourself, not a statistically polled image of yourself. You know God, not abstractions about God, not even a theology of God, but the much more mysterious and mighty God of theology.

In the desert tradition one meaning persists above all others: the desert is where we encounter God, where God comes to meet us, where God visits God's people: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hos.2:14). The desert is not an escape, though it could be. Only the few abide bodily in the desert. In fact, for most the desert is not a place but an experience that takes hold of you, becomes part of you, turns you inside out, opens the City to contemplation, to a long loving look at the real. Here you can face Kazantzakis' terrifying trinity: "love, death, and God – perhaps one and the same."

A second suggestion: develop a feeling for festivity. Here I recommend Josef Pieper's slender volume *In Tune With The World: A Theory of Festivity*.⁵ With remarkable perceptiveness Pieper develops the thesis that festivity resides in activity that is meaningful in itself. I mean activity that is not tied to goals, to "so that" or "in order to." Festivity, therefore, calls for renunciation: you must take usable

time and withdraw it from utility. And this you must do out of love, whose expression is joy. Festivity is a yes to the world, to the reality of things, to the existence of woman and man; it is a yes to the world's Creator.

It is only if you can say such a festive yes to the real that you will see, with Teilhard, how "God is as out-stretched and tangible as the atmosphere in which we are bathed." Matter and spirit, he insisted, are not two things glued into unity, but aspects of all created being. The divine milieu is not only the mystical but also the cosmic body of Christ; here it is that creative union takes place.

A third suggestion, closely allied to festivity, intrinsic to it: a sense of "play." I don't mean "fooling around." I mean what poet Francis Thompson meant when, in his essay on Shelley, he likened the poet's gifts to a child's faculty of make-believe, but raised to the nth power – whose box of toys is the universe, who "makes bright mischief with the moon," in whose hand "the meteors nuzzle their noses."

It demands a sense of wonder. With that sense we are born; but as we grow older, most of us lose it. We get blasé and worldly-wise and sophisticated. We no longer run our fingers through water, no longer shout at the stars, no longer make faces at the moon.

Water is H₂O, the stars have been classified, and the moon is not made of green cheese. We've grown up. Rabbi Heschel saw it as our contemporary trap: "believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered. All enigmas can be solved, and all wonder is nothing but 'the effect of novelty upon ignorance.'"⁶ The new can indeed amaze us: a space shuttle, the latest computer game, the softest diaper in history. Till tomorrow; till the new becomes old, till yesterday's wonder is discarded or taken for granted.

No, don't put everything under a microscope, don't program life in a computer. Let your imagination loose to play with ideas – what it means to be alive, to be in love, to believe and to hope. I shall always be grateful to a psychologist who two decades ago monitored a simulated Jesuit faculty meeting, watched us reach dead ends because we were enslaved to past solutions, and kept asking, "Where's the wild idea?"

A fourth suggestion, intimately linked to festivity and play: don't try to "possess" the object of your delight, whether divine or human, imprisoned marble of free-flowing rivulet; and don't expect to "profit" from contemplation, from pleasure. Here Kerr has written a paragraph that has influenced my living far beyond my ability to describe:

To regain some delight in ourselves and in our world, we are forced to abandon, or rather to reverse, an adage. A bird in the hand is *not* worth two in the bush – unless one is an ornithologist, the curator of the Museum of Natural History, or one of those Italian vendors who supply restaurants with larks. A bird in the hands is no longer a bird at all: it is a specimen; it may be dinner. Birds are birds only when they can be in the bush or on the wing; their worth as birds can be known only at a discreet and generous distance.⁷

A fifth suggestion: read, make friends with, remarkable men and women who have themselves looked long and lovingly at the real. The list is long and impressive; I list only a handful of personal favorites. But note what kind of folk these are: not solitaires, not neurotic escapists, but flesh and blood in a flesh-and-blood world – unique, however, because each smashed through boundaries and stretched human limits to the walls of infinity.

I mean biblical figures like Abraham and Mary of Nazareth, murmuring yes to Yahweh though they knew not where it would take them. I mean martyrs like second-century Ignatius of Antioch on his tortured way to the Colosseum: "God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground, that I may prove Christ's pure bread." Martyrs like 20th century Martin Luther King, with a dream of black freedom he bathed in blood. I mean saints like John of the Cross, with the Carmelite interplay of dark night and radiant joy, or purgation and unifying likeness. Saints like Thomas More: "Man God made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind." I mean uncanonized women like Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa, arms embracing the homeless and the hopeless from New York to Calcutta. I mean Anne Morrow Lindbergh, with her counterculture conviction (expressed so sensitively in *Gift From the Sea*) that "this is my hour to be alone."

I mean Lao-tzu doing everything through being, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel doing everything through worship. I mean philosophers like Jacques Maritain, insisting that the culmination of knowledge is not conceptual but experiential: man/woman "feels" God. I mean Mr. Blue, Myles Connolly's New York mystic who flew kites and exulted in brass bands. I mean Nikos Kazantzakis, standing in old age before the abyss tranquilly, fearlessly: "There are three kinds of souls, three kinds of prayers. One: I am a bow in your hands Lord. Draw me lest I rot. Two: Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall break. Three: Overdraw me, and who cares if I break. Choose!" I mean short-story writer Flannery O'Connor, dead of lupus at 39, with her mature acceptance of limitation, with her God never far away, quietly loved, with so much Christlife in her frail frame – what I can best describe as grace on crutches. I mean Thomas Merton, always the contemplative but moving from renunciation to involvement, making contact with Hindu and Buddhist and Sufi, protesting Vietnam and violence, racial injustice and nuclear war.

Touch men and women like these, and you will touch the stars, will touch God.

A final word. To me, an ironic, scandalous facet of the contemporary search for the transcendent, for direct experience of the real, is that the searcher rarely seeks it in our Western culture, in Western Christianity. Ironic and scandalous because this is our ageless tradition. It goes back to Jesus, alone with his Father on the mountain, in the desert, in the garden. It goes back to the Fathers of the Church and the fathers of the desert: Gregory of Nyssa finding God in the image of God that is our inner self; Antony seeking God in community, Pachomius in solitude. It goes back to the medieval mystics, to Eckhart and Hildegard, to Ruysbroeck and Julian of Norwich. It goes back to Teresa of Avila ravished by a rose, to Ignatius of Loyola in ecstasy as he stares at the stars.

We have betrayed our tradition. Few of these contemplatives fled the world – even when they removed to a discreet distance. But for all their involvement with people and passions, they sensed one basic truth: our involvement, our activity, will be sterile, fruitless, unless we are men and women of prayer. There is a degree of truth in the adage, "To

work is to pray." But it can be dangerously seductive. Unless there is a personal relationship between you and God, unless you can look upon things and persons and God with a long loving look, your activity is likely to end in frustration and failure – and you a castaway.

The world is athirst for women and men who know God and love God; for only such women and men can give to today's paradoxical world the witness to a living God that this age demands. My personal failing – where I can be devastatingly lacking – is to me agonizingly apparent: at times I do not come through as a man who looks long and lovingly at the real. The consequence? Some men and women who touch me do not thrill to the touch, and so they abide in their loneliness, continue to experience the absence of God.

Contemplation, my friends, is not a luxury; it is the mark of a lover; it is the mark of a Christian.

===== NOTES =====

1. Walter Kerr, *The Decline of Pleasure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) 48. This paper is heavily indebted to Kerr's work, which is actually one of the most "useful" pieces I have ever read on contemplation.
2. *Ibid.* 49.
3. *Ibid.* 54.
4. *Ibid.* 210-211
5. New York: Harcourt, 1965 (ancient, if you wish, but not dated).
6. *In Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: Harper, 1959) 40.
7. Kerr, *The Decline of Pleasure* 245.