
Improving our Seeing and Listening

BY E. GLENN HINSON

If we are honest, we must admit that we are not good at listening to God and seeing the world as God sees. Our culture does not help: it catches us up in busyness and distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world?

How does contemplation prepare us to increase the love of God and of neighbor among humankind, which is H. Richard Niebuhr's definition of the purpose of the Church and its ministry?¹ By "contemplation," I mean prayer in the sense of attentiveness to God—listening and seeing the Beyond in the midst of our lives. As I would understand our Christian perspective, at some point we have entered into a covenant relationship with God which, not surprisingly, has been viewed throughout Jewish and Christian history as analogous to the covenant relationship of marriage. What we try to do in the course of our lives is to develop a deeper and deeper covenant relationship and to let that transfuse and transform everything we do. Ideally, we want to make all of life a prayer.

A seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother Nicholas Hermann, or Brother Lawrence, spoke of practicing the presence of God. For about ten years after entering a Carmelite monastery, he tried the rigorous Carmelite disciplines, but they merely frustrated him. Washing dishes in the convent kitchen, he discovered that he could talk to the God of pots and pans. In everything he was doing, he could maintain an attitude of attention to the presence of God, or as he expressed it in another place, he could maintain a passionate regard for God. "I turn my little omelet in the pan for love of

God," Brother Lawrence said.² After dozens of readings of his classic, I have decided that what he did was to fall head over heels in love with God and let that transfuse everything he was doing. Wisely, though, he reminds us that "we must know before we love and to know God we must think often of [God]."³

GETTING TO KNOW AND LOVE GOD

How can we not only deepen our knowledge of God but also our love for God? Fortunately, we do not have to invent something brand new. Believers have wrestled with this question for centuries and offer us ample guidance. Indeed, scriptures remind us that God has built messages into the order of things or, to put it another way, is always beaming messages to us. The Hebrew people believed that God communicates through nature, through history, and through our own lives. What we have to learn is to *see* and to *listen*.

Through nature. You know Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." The psalmist recognized, just as we should, that it's not a matter of physical sound. "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4). Psalm 8 reminds us that the task of *seeing* is ours. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; [then I must ask], what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4). Readers of the Gospels will discern, too, how Jesus drew object lessons from nature. "Stop worrying!" he commanded the anxiety-ridden of his day. "Look at the birds in heaven, that they do not sow nor reap or store in barns, and yet your heavenly Father cares for them. Aren't you worth more than they are?" (Matthew 6:26; my translation). God is intimately involved in the human story. Indeed, God, as it were, numbers every hair of your head (Luke 12:7)!

Through history. Although the Jewish people believed God communicates through nature, they had still greater confidence that God beams messages to us through history. That is true of *all* history, for God is Lord of all history. Thus Isaiah could call Cyrus, the Persian king, "the Lord's anointed" (Isaiah 45:1). Nevertheless, it is truer still of certain segments of history. For the Jewish people, the story of stories is the exodus out of Egypt. From time immemorial they have gathered at Passover to observe a *seder* commemorating the exodus. According to the instructions of Jesus' day for that observance, after a meal of lamb and herbs the youngest child was to ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The oldest person would then tell the story of the exodus from Egypt. To those directives, a rabbi named Eliezer added, "Do this as if you yourselves were

going out from the exodus in Egypt!” For Christians there is another story of stories—the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It is no accident that Christian meditation through the centuries has focused on the Gospels, for it is they which contain the greatest story ever told. By coming like a little child and entering into the story, the story can do a job on you. What job? It forms in you the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5).

The Hebrew way of knowing differed from the Greek way precisely at this point. The *Greek* way is the way of empirical observation and rational reflection. You look, listen, touch, taste, smell, and then reflect rationally to arrive at an understanding. In the seventeenth century, Descartes and Bacon framed this in a scientific method, and it has served us well since. The *Hebrew* way is the way of story. Within nature is a story. Within history is a story. If we will enter into it to make it our story, it will open up insight about the world, God, and ourselves. If you will reflect a bit, you will realize that who you are is a complex of stories that have molded and shaped your attitudes and responses. What we seek in meditation on the Jesus story is that it may form in us the mind of Christ and his way of responding to our world.

Through our own lives. If we have gained some insight into who God is through nature and history (especially those “great moments” in the story), we may surprise ourselves by discovering that further knowledge may come through ordinary, everyday life. In a wonderful collection of prayers, Michel Quoist reminds us that God “has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for [God] through all things, events, people. Everything must reveal God to us.”⁴ “If only we knew how to look at life as God sees it,” he insists, “we would realize that nothing is secular in the world, that everything contributes to the building of the Kingdom of God.”⁵ More important still, “If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer.”⁶ Yes, that is precisely what we want to have happen. We want to *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer. Jesus told parables precisely to get people to do so.

HOW TO IMPROVE SEEING AND LISTENING

If we are honest, most of us will admit that we are not doing too well with our seeing and listening. Our culture does not help us in our quest. For one thing, it catches us up in busyness. We run, panting and frantic, through crowded calendars. We engage in what Thomas Merton called “activity for activity’s sake.” Nothing deeper informs what we are doing. For another, it distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. Ours is the age of uncollectedness and mindlessness. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today’s world?

At the outset let us recognize what thoughtful believers have acknowledged throughout history: God is essentially “beyond knowing.” We

would be very presumptuous to assume that we can “know” in an intimate way the Creator of a universe of one hundred and fifty billion galaxies. Jacob (Genesis 32:30) and Moses (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4) and some other saints may have seen God “face to face,” but the Apostle Paul warns the rest of us that we now see God as in a mirror and only at the end “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Limits of our humanity notwithstanding, however, God has planted in us a desire to know God. Like the

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psalmist, we, too, cry, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Psalm 42:1-2).

How, then, will we fulfill our heart’s desire in a

culture that puts so many obstacles in our path? Through the ages the saints have come up with two solutions that are polar opposites. One is *to spend time among people who are hurting*; the other is *to draw back and spend time in solitude and in silence*. When Evelyn Underhill, already an established expert on Christian mysticism, asked Baron Friedrich von Hügel to serve as her spiritual director, he told her first to spend two afternoons a week in the ghetto. “It will, if properly entered into and persevered with,” he assured her, “discipline, mortify, deepen and quiet you. It will, as it were, distribute your blood—some of your blood—away from your brain, where too much is lodged at present.”⁷ Most of us learn quickly, however, that we cannot stand an uninterrupted diet of exposure to human suffering. After a while it may harden and callous our hearts. That is why the saints have gone in the opposite direction, retreating to find solitude and silence.

Our goal, remember, is to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Few in our culture can sustain a high level of attentiveness to God, however, if they do not draw back on occasion and get away from the press and struggle of every day. I recommend four types of retreats: daily, weekly or monthly, thirty-six to forty-eight hour retreats twice a year, and sabbaticals.

My *daily retreat* consists of a forty-five minute walk before breakfast every morning. Walking is very meditative. I cannot tell you exactly what I do because it varies: sometimes I just walk, and other times I meditate on a passage of Scripture or pray for someone. But I can tell you the result. When I finish my walk, I am collected. I get more done. My thinking deepens. And I am present where I am—really present. In addition, I am convinced it accounts for good health.

Not all can walk as I do, and you will need to find what works best for you. Some use the “centering prayer” that Thomas Merton developed. Father Thomas Keating suggests that one find a quiet place and spend twenty minutes twice a day being present before God. Douglas Steere began each day with thirty minutes of silence followed by thirty minutes meditating on a passage of the Gospels. Dietrich Bonhoeffer required seminarians at Finkenwalde to meditate on the same passage of Scripture for thirty minutes each morning for a week.

Most of us need longer retreats. At least once a month—perhaps, for some people, once a week—we should spend a day “sparing time for God” and for ourselves. Just idle your motor. Twice a year, we would benefit from retreats that last at least thirty-six to forty-eight hours, over two nights. Often it takes us that long to become inwardly quiet wherein we can hear “the still, small voice” of God. Finally, there is an urgent need for sabbaticals. Once the privilege of professors, they need to become common practice for many other professionals and even non-professionals. Many churches now make provision for their pastors and other staff to have sabbaticals not just to study but to be refreshed and renewed and re-created.

A BALANCING ACT

Jesus taught us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27; cf. Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:33). This means that a vital and healthy spirituality will balance experiential, intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions. These are like four legs under a table. Take away or shorten one leg and the table will wobble; take away or shorten more than one, it will fall. Sadly, many persons think of the spiritual life as entirely a matter of experience and neglect the other elements which would account for a well-rounded approach to faith.

Of course, the spiritual life is experiential. Faith begins in awe, not in cognition. “When mind and soul agree, belief is born,” Abraham Heschel has written. “But first our hearts must know the shudder of adoration.”⁸ Generation after generation of saints have confirmed that, while all human efforts to reach God will fall short, God takes the initiative to get in touch with us. “We love because God first loved us,” an early believer concluded (1 John 4:19). No one made it clearer than Bernard of Clairvaux, the great twelfth-century Cistercian: “Every soul among you which is seeking God will know that [God] has gone before and sought you before you sought [God].”⁹ When we think about expanding the experiential aspect of our spiritual lives, therefore, we should keep in mind that it is first and foremost a matter of opening to accept God’s love. That is what prayer is. Prayer is opening like a flower to the morning sun to let the energy of God’s love illumine our hearts.

Opening to accept God’s love is not as easy for most of us as it may sound. We have experienced storms in life that have caused us to pull our

shutters closed and bar our doors from the inside. Pride makes us want to earn, merit, and deserve what we receive, so we have trouble accepting grace. When we are mired in a ditch, pride is our first and greatest obstacle to taking the hand God stretches toward us. Jesus reminds us that if we can do like the tax collector—lay aside all dignity and open to God—God’s love will flow in and help us cope with our fear and anxiety, those blood brothers who prevent us from becoming whom God wants us to be (Luke 18:9-14). “Perfect love casts out fear,” John says (1 John 4:18). He does not mean that we will lose every trace of fear. Some fear is healthy and helpful. No, he means that God’s love will bring fear under control and turn it into a positive force. So, too, does Paul counsel the Philippians about anxiety: “Stop worrying about everything!” he urges. “Rather, in every circumstance in prayer and entreaty with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the *shalom* of God which passes all human comprehension will throw a guard around your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7; my paraphrase).

Our faith journey, therefore, starts with experience. Nevertheless, anyone who has entered into a relationship with God experientially will want to understand, to “hit the books” as it were. That is what the first of the great medieval schoolmen, Anselm, calls “faith seeking understanding.” Where should we seek? Through the centuries Christians have pointed to Scripture as central to the search. On one level this would entail reading and studying it, using the best translations and aids available to discover what the writers were saying to the first readers. At another level it would involve meditation, listening to scripture passages to discover through them God’s Word to us today. “In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained to seminarians at Finkenwalde, “that it is not only God’s Word for the Church, but also God’s Word for us individually.”¹⁰

Besides Scripture, many have found grace and insight in the classics of Christian devotion, other writings, and, today, other media such as movies and plays. Classics which have touched many lives include Augustine’s *Confessions*, *The Imitation of Christ*, Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*, Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Teresa of Avila’s *Autobiography* and *The Interior Castle*, John of the Cross’s *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Pascal’s *Pensées*, Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Woolman’s *Journal*, William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Sören Kierkegaard’s *Purity of Heart*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Divine Milieu*, Thomas R. Kelly’s *A Testament of Devotion*, and Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Novels and plays and other writings may open wide windows in our walk with God, too. As western culture has shifted from a more typographic to a more iconic and tactual character, many are discov-

ering grace in movies such as *A River Runs Through It*, *Nell*, *Schindler's List*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and many others.

When we enter into a covenant with God, we also enter into a relationship with humankind and come under a social obligation. God created humankind out of love with a desire that all may be one. When we disrupted God's plan, God called a people and then God sent his Son to bring humankind together, and God sends us, the Church, to continue the Son's mission. Our first task is to *live* in community like those first Christians tried to do. We do not stop with that, however. To continue the mission of Christ in the world should lead us to social service and social action, meeting human need wherever or in whatever form we find it. Multitudes of Christians have experienced their most significant spiritual growth as they have forgotten themselves and followed Jesus into the world.

The social dimension suggests another element of a Christian's spiritual life: the institutional. Since the turbulent sixties, "baby boomers," people born between 1946 and 1965, have adopted a highly critical attitude toward "religion," which they identify with institutions. Over against this view, however, we must recognize that Christianity is the most institution-creating of the world's faiths. That has something to do with our concept of incarnation. God entered into human life in Jesus of Nazareth. In the same way, we embody our faith in institutions, e.g., in Scripture, meetings for worship, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and even buildings. As a matter of fact, most persons will depend on regular gatherings for the nurturing of their spiritual life. Notwithstanding the fault they find with institutional Christianity, "boomers" will depend on institutions to find both the spirituality and the community that they covet!

Let me emphasize once again the importance of balance in the spiritual life. If you rely too heavily on the institutional, you may need to pay more attention to your life of prayer, lest you end up with a religion of form without its power (2 Timothy 3:5). If, on the other hand, you get too caught up in the experiential and neglect the intellectual, social, or institutional, you may "burn out," consuming all of your spiritual energy in seeking spiritual "highs," as many did during the revivals of the "Great Awakening" in the eighteenth century. A whole section of New York became known as the "burnt-over district." It is easy, too, to get so caught up in social concerns that you pull the plug from the spiritual socket which generated those concerns in the first place.

CONCLUSION

If you do not remember anything else from this article, remember this: *Relax! It's all about Grace.* All too often, people who become serious about their spiritual life start straining, as if it all depended on them. Please, hear this: *Your spiritual growth doesn't depend on you.* The Apostle Paul underscores the point in his letter to the Corinthians. "I planted. Apollos watered. God caused the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

NOTES

1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 31.

2 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by E. M. Blaiklock (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1981), 85.

3 *Ibid.*, 52.

4 Michel Quoist, *Prayers*, translated by Agnes M. Forsyth and Anne Marie de Commaille (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 17.

5 *Ibid.*, 11.

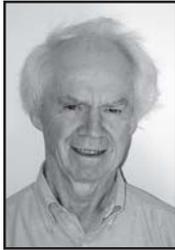
6 *Ibid.*, 29.

7 Quoted by Margaret Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), 75.

8 Abraham J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1951), 74.

9 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs, in *Selected Works*, translated by Gillian R. Evans (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 275.

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 82.



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