



*Pilgrimage of a Soul:
Contemplative Spirituality
for the Active Life*

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A Metamorphosis of My Soul

Sabbatical prompted in me a posture like that of the caterpillar-come-butterfly. I entered my chrysalis by way of an extended period of time confined to a place that was strictly intended for rest and renewal. Sabbatical was a disciplined season of withdrawal, detachment, solitude, silence and stillness.

For more than a decade, Chris and I had engaged a world of poverty—children forced to be soldiers in West Africa, children abandoned because of AIDS in India, women and girls enslaved in the commercial sex industry, victims of war in Kosovo, children living on the streets in urban centers of South America. Wanting to respond to these people who had become my friends compelled me to give everything I could toward building an international community that would bear witness to a better world—a community that would emulate justice, peace, equality and opportunity, a community that would reflect the reign of Christ. In a world like ours where the work seems to never get done and there’s always more to do, our community encouraged my husband and me to rest from this labor. It’s sort of shocking, isn’t it? In a world of extreme injustice and poverty, how could we stop serving and disengage from it all? There’s so much to be done. . . .

Again, Mother Teresa teaches us. In her rules she established a rigorous schedule of service accompanied by a thoughtful period of regular rest—one day a week, one week a month, one month per year, one year in every six. Mother knew better than any of us that our labor on behalf of the poor is never done. But she also understood the value of solitude, silence and stillness. Even throughout an active day of service in the life of a Missionary of Charity, every sister keeps to a routine of daily prayer interspersed throughout the day. In Nirmal Hriday, amidst a sea of dying men and women, at particular hours in the day you will find the sisters withdrawing from their work to pray in the upstairs chapel. Mother said, “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. . . . We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

And this kind of silence is more about an interior state than it is necessarily about the external. Mother’s chapel is built facing one of the busiest streets in Kolkata. I’ve never been in that chapel when it’s quiet. But the nuns who gather there still their minds, bodies and souls for regular brief moments in their day—even amidst the sounds of blaring horns, diesel trucks and people calling out the sale of their wares. Rest, stillness, solitude and silence are all critical conditions to transformation in our lives and the world around us.



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Phileena Heuertz,

Word Made Flesh director

Work—Rest. Service—Prayer. Action—Contemplation. Life offers us the challenge of holding these essential elements of what it means to be human in tension with one another. One without the other leads to either pompous piety or frantic fury. The one who closes herself

off from the world under the guise of “prayer” is at risk of becoming out of touch, irrelevant and prone to self-righteousness. In her “prayerfulness” she may succumb to judgment and superiority since she is not connected with the real lives of people around her. True prayer connects us with the compassionate Christ who connects us to all humanity and inspires us toward compassionate service.

Similarly, the one who neglects contemplation is at risk of being motivated and driven by false-self compulsions. When one neglects giving attention to his interior life, he is not master of his house. His “programs for happiness” control him and he goes through life unaware that his “service” is more truly frenetic activity. He is not only blind to the real needs of those he serves, but to his own needs as well. True acts of service do not build up our egos but bring us into deeper solidarity with the poor, marginalized and victims of injustice, who compel us to prayer. . . .

Our community had the wisdom to recognize the imperative value of rest in what had become a very intense bent toward service. Chris and I had leaned heavily into the question, “What can I do for God?” and neglected to regularly recognize our need to ask, “What can God do for me?” We were victims of the Puritan work ethic. We struggled to find people in similar fields of service who modeled sabbatical (rest) well. Chris and I entered pilgrimage and the season at Duke tenuously. The prospect of five months of detachment from work loomed over me and seemed more daunting than visiting former child-combatants in Sierra Leone. What in the world would I do with all the time?

Transformation, which essentially involves healing, is a slow process. It is rarely full and complete in an instant. It takes time. And during that time, it demands cycles of awakening, longing, darkness and yes, even death. All are crucial to this most sacred work in us. Being healed of that which shackled me and prevented me from being fully me took time and space for solitude, silence and stillness. You might enter a sabbatical expecting a kind of convalescence, but it wound up being more like rehab for me—lots of stumbling and frustration and even anguish. This is how it feels when we emerge from our cocoon as we begin to live into our true self—the person loved for who he is alone and not what he can do or be for others. During seasons of transformation we have to find our footing and let our wings harden so we can make the flight of our life. An intentional sabbath season made it possible for me to enter my chrysalis and submit to a metamorphosis of my soul.

—from chapter five, “Transformation”



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