

*Spiritual Formation – Briercrest (rev2007)*

*Benedictine spirituality, spiritual Disciplines, and the Awareness of God*

It will be apparent that I am not here as someone already spiritually formed, whatever that would look like. And while I am completely sold on the value of spiritual disciplines, I am here as someone whose fragile attempts at consistently practicing them is an ever-present reminder of my weakness. Moreover, while I'm convinced of the importance of pursuing this thing we call spiritual formation, I'm always reminded that it's in and through the messiness of my life where formation happens. It can't be done propositionally, from the outside.

Formation, or learning the truth about ourselves and our place in the world, is only experienced existentially, that is, from the inside of our own untidy stories.

Let me begin with a quote from an author I admire: (Barbara Brown Taylor)

“Narrative is not a choice I make when it comes time to tell the truth; it is the way that truth comes to me--not in crisp propositions but in messy tales of encounters between people and people, between people and creation, between people and the Divine.”

Let me take you back twelve years ago, to a time when everything in my life pointed to Christian success. I was, I think, a respected elder in a church, a “small group” leader, working in a Christian social care ministry. I had the prerequisites of Christian life down, and I was doing a good job carrying them out, but, as poet David Whyte has said somewhere, it was like, “part of me was imitating myself,”...which is a description of a heart unconvinced of real engagement.

Many years ago I had a dream, the point of which was only too obvious. Jesus is at some distance, casually reclining on a large flat rock. As he does, he is fully engaged with a curious collection of people, gathered around him. He is smiling and frowning. He is listening, occasionally you see lines in his forehead; occasionally you hear bursts of laughter.

Me, I am a guide. I stand behind a velvet rope held up by a few chrome posts. I point at him and at the people around him. With me are also a collection of people, they are sightseers. They look alike. I field a few questions and respond with information about Jesus' life, his habits, his home town, and other demographic information. After awhile I motion for us all to move on to what I suppose is the next exhibit. But just before I turn to accompany the group, Jesus looks up, and our eyes meet.

I got the point. Jesus was more artefact than presence. Perhaps for many of us, particularly those of us raised in the Western Christian tradition, this picture has particular application. Risking oversimplification, we have been given a set of doctrines that seem adequate enough in their own right, but, when leaned on too heavily, they leave us groping for an existential connection to our souls.

Perhaps some or many of you here have had a similar vision, or encounter, or what Thomas Merton calls “**a contemplative moment**”, that exposed a disconnection between what you theologically assent to and your everyday life. In other words, you got a message that exposed your need to stop with the show, no matter how successful, and recline with your Creator.

This gradual stopping with the show, and the tentative but growing trust of reclining in God, can be called spiritual formation.

Of course it would be nice that once we woke up, or the third time we woke up, or hundredth time we woke up to the poverty of our Christian state, we could apply a patch, like a Windows update.

For me, what this “gift of awakening” did was set me upon a renewed search for a way of living that would keep my eyes and my ears open to the movements of God. I wanted to be one of those gathered around Jesus.

Well, one day, while journaling, an idea straight out of Sunday school came to me. I decided I needed a verse to hang my life on, a sort of motto, taken from scripture, that would be more than a motto, it would have to act as a kind of compass. The verse I came to was this: *"For I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."*

As I thought about this verse, I found the end clause, “and him crucified”, placed me more readily in the company of Catholic writers. In general, and at that time, they seemed to reflect the timbre and the direction of Paul's words better than many Protestant/Evangelical writers.

The verse of course is perfectly balanced and whole. My church majored on the knowledge bit, but the crucified bit, the *kenosis*, the inner self-examination in order for self-emptying, was minored on.

I found a book that began my journey in correcting this. It's been about eleven years I suppose, but I still remember the excitement of reading Henry Nouwen's “The Way of the Heart”. Silence, solitude, and contemplative prayer were things new and startling, and within my setting, even seemed controversial. I lived with Nouwen for some time. So much of his writing is “Spirit Forming”.

It was through Nouwen's frequent references that I then came to Thomas Merton. His book, "New Seeds of Contemplation" completely absorbed me. Merton remains for me, a kind of pilgrimage. Certainly my appreciation and appetite for contemplation and things monastic was greatly kindled by him.

Well, like the deer in the Psalm, I found myself longing for more cool water. Fortunately I learned early on that not completely understanding a book is no reason for not reading it, especially when there are signs of resonance.

Reading a text like this is something that works on you in oblique ways, and comes back to you in mini-harvests. So began my reading of St. John of the Cross, Thomas à Kempis, Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and so on. I also began reading poets like William Blake, Emily Dickenson, and especially Gerard Manly Hopkins. And a few Church Fathers such as Augustine, and Gregory the Great, biographer of St. Benedict.

Then, upon learning about Benedict, I picked up Kathleen Norris's, "Cloister Walk". This was the book that hooked me on Benedictine spirituality. That was ten years ago. Since then I've read a good deal of Benedictine authors along with the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Two other books that greatly influenced my Benedictine journey was Esther deWaal's "Seeking God", and Joan Chittister's, "Wisdom Distilled from the Daily". These are what I call "authors of pilgrimage" that God has used to shape my life.

Shortly after reading "Cloister Walk" I began to practice the way of St. Benedict in the only way I knew how. I read the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which was, at first, a disappointment. But as I kept going back to it, I found, as I guess generations of people have found, that its genius lies in its deep simplicity and immediacy in situating the reader in tension and choice and promise.

The *Rule*, originally written for cloistered monks, is a sixth century piece of literature that at its heart, is a practical fleshing out of the gospels and a guide for moving through life attentively, in humility and delight. Also, for me, Benedict's phrases, "prefer nothing to the love of Christ" and "hold nothing more precious than Christ" and "do all, for the love of Christ", directly connected to my Corinthian verse.

Because Benedictine spirituality is communal spirituality, I knew I needed to begin airing out my Benedictine predilection to those close to me. Of course my wife Debbie already knew of my interest, knew I wore a Benedictine cross under

my shirt, knew I went to join Ephaphtha House, the little Catholic community, for Vespers, knew I occasionally hung out at St. Joseph's Basilica for the Liturgy of the Hours, but I was still an Elder in an Alliance church.

In time I did talk to a couple other Elders I knew would be open and honest with me, and I did talk to the pastor. There was some lingering concern, but I was trusted.

Things progressed. In the small group Deb and I used to belong to, our first gathering after the New Year was always a check-in time about our hopes, goals, resolutions, and so on. So beginning New Year 1999 I committed myself through a kind of public confession, in front of the group, to the Benedictine vows. I eased into it. I made one vow each New Year. It was kind of like a three year novitiate.

The first vow *stabilitas*, or stability, calls me to stand still, and, without attempting escape, face my inner fractures. It calls me to be present to God. It calls for patience, for waiting.

The second vow, *oboedire*, or obedience, is also where we get our word *audio* from, which means *to hear*. The vow of obedience has the notion of listening to the deep truth in God's word, and then doing the truth. Benedict's phrase for this is, "Listening with the ear of your heart." This of course requires silence and occasionally solitude.

The third vow, the vow that Thomas Merton described as most mysterious, is *conversatio morum*, or, *being open to conversion*. This vow asks me to live—today—in such a way as to always be open to conversion, to be ready to change course, move on, and grow. *Conversatio morum* shows me how life is a series of conversions, and that in this muddled day, is opportunity for another.

During this time I also learned of *lectio divina* and so following the spirit of Benedict I ended up sectioning the Psalter off in four weeks, according to the Anglican Common Book of Prayer. So for the past seven years, with varying degrees of consistency, I have prayed and read through the Psalms every month.

I was also exposed to the *Opus Dei*, or the Work of God, otherwise known as the Liturgy of the Hours. *Opus Dei* is Benedict's term for the daily series of choral communal prayer. Most monasteries now practice, at minimum, lauds, noon prayer, vespers and vigils. The prayers are taken primarily from the Psalms and the gospels. To get some taste of participating in the Liturgy of Hours, I began visits to St. Josephs in Edmonton and to Ephaphtha House.

I thought that practicing Benedictine spirituality, in this rudimentary, although unorthodox way, would be enough. But the thing had taken on the hallmarks of a calling, and I found myself being pulled further along.

This pull was also opening me up to the notion of life as *sacrament*. Growing up, I was conditioned to a disembodied and an *ahistorical* faith, that is, a faith for my head and a faith that emphasized my future security. But Benedictine spirituality befriends earth and time. It sees the physical and the spiritual as indivisible, and it honours the unfolding of human history. In this way, I believe, it takes the full implications of the Incarnation more seriously.

Matter matters, here and now; and it matters profoundly. A wonderful example of this in the *Rule of St. Benedict* is the request that, "...all utensils and materials of the monastery be treated as sacred vessels of the altar." For Benedict there is no split between the sacred and profane.

Again, that the ordinary is infused by the holy is particularly critical and evident in the way we are to treat one another. Whether stranger or friend, rich or poor, we are to see Christ in everyone—not theoretically, but corporally, *incarnately*—and receive them in the "warmth of love".

One other happy thing for me about Benedictine spirituality was that I found my faith joined to a time before and beyond the sad splits of Christendom.

Well, with all this knocking around inside me I took the next step. In February of 2001, after pondering and praying and talking to Debbie and after several supper table discussions, I decided to become an *Oblate novice*. I located the surrounding Benedictine monasteries through an internet search. There are five in Canada. St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster Saskatchewan was the closest. At over a hundred years, St. Peters is also the oldest Benedictine monastery in Canada.

I wrote Father Lawrence, the oblate director at the time, and expressed my desire to enter the novitiate under his guidance and become "attached" as they say, to St Peter's. It was a much more casual affair than I had expected or hoped for. You know how you always hope for a bit more drama and romance in the things you're up to? It wasn't dramatic or romantic.

In a simple ceremony, in front of a small crowd of elderly monks, other Oblates, and my family, I was asked by the Abbot, "What do you seek?" I responded, "I seek to serve God through the Oblate way of life." The Abbot then prayed that my intention would be strengthened and brought to maturity

through holiness of life. During my novitiate, I discovered that I had already done most of the work and required reading needed for oblation. So here, I was a bit of a “keener”. One year and three months later, at a similar ceremony, I received "Final Oblation".

The word oblate means *offering*. As an Oblate of St. Benedict I have promised to *offer* myself to my particular community, through living out the spirit of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. This entails of course, the three vows, the discipline of the *Opus Dei*. As an oblate, I’m encouraged to practice daily *lectio*, as well as communal prayer according to my particular station of life. I’m also committed to carry out "the spirit of monasticism" where I live.

The “spirit of monasticism” is essentially, simplicity of life, detachment from those things that inhibit simplicity and mindfulness, and care and service to others. All through cultivating a humble awareness of God’s cosmic presence, and Jesus Christ’s presence in others. Putting this another way, discovering the fullness of God in the simple, quotidian, everydayness of life.

To assist in my formation and commitment, I’m also encouraged to make regular retreats or pilgrimages to the monastery.

***One of the great joys of visiting the monastery is time spent with Father James, a Benedictine monk and for the last 30 years, a hermit, until an illness forced him back into full community. He has become a fellow traveller and guide for both my wife and I.***

Sitting, having tea with Father James, a person who has immersed himself in a daily rhythm of prayer, study, work and a regular apostolate, is in itself spiritually forming. My time with this monk has cemented the belief that I will always need a true soul-mentor in my life.

So here I am, Oblate now, officially for six years, but I suppose unofficially for ten years, and finding that this turn of mind and heart is not easy.

One monastic, when asked what the monks did in the monastery all day said, "We fall and we get up, we fall and we get up." This rings true for me. My experience is that it is one thing to be awakened to the schisms in my life that have misshaped me, and quite another to pluck up and promise to do something about it, for the long haul. I suppose this is why St. Benedict warns novices that the way is narrow at the outset. But thankfully, he quickly adds that for anyone truly desiring an “expanded heart”, there is a way. For anyone desiring to relax

into the rhythm inherent in life, with space enough for others, there is a way, it simply requires the habit of attention.

Benedictine spirituality is, of course, simply one path for spiritual formation. Benedict himself says, that if someone can find a better way, they should pursue it. For me, the Rule, which is better translated as *trellis*, has become an assistant for intentionally seeking God. Of course, whatever you decide your own spiritual *trellis* will look like, *intentionality* will be key to your formation.

Before I talk briefly about my own disciplines I want to again make this perhaps obvious but crucial observation: While *spiritual formation* is a life-project, it is **not** a project or program; it is *always gift*. Here's a story:

The ancient's say that once upon a time a disciple asked the elder, "Holy one, is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?"

And the Holy one answered, "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."

"Then of what use," the surprised disciple asked, "are the spiritual exercises that you prescribe?"

"To make sure," the elder said, "that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

The spiritual disciplines are ways to cultivate awareness, and so to be open to the gift, wherever and whenever it comes.

### *These are the daily disciplines I practice...*

*Otium sanctum*—holy leisure. This is not so much a discipline as a posture, a reclining. It is the way I try to approach the disciplines, but in fact, it's the way I want to be in the world. Holy leisure is non-violent, non-competitive, able to live with being misunderstood, and always rejoicing in the well-being of others.

*Lectio Divina*—is for me, text to transformation, symbol to reality shift. *Lectio divina*, is contemplative reading of the Psalms or gospels or other texts. I try not to, in the first place, read for information; so word's are not mined for meaning but instead are taken in, mouthed, tasted and absorbed. Over time, I hope they leach down and reshape me.

*Contemplative prayer*—which for me is something called *Centering Prayer*—This is closet prayer. Centering prayer supposedly comes out of the apophatic tradition as described in, "The Cloud of Unknowing." But according to my mentor, Father James, it is found in scripture, in Galatians (4:6) *And because you*

*are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* So Christ, already in our hearts, calls out to the Father through the Spirit. Centering prayer is simply joining the prayer, already and always in progress.

*Journaling*—is the way I track my life. It's how I find out what I'm thinking, and it's how I think. For me, part of this process has been to take a phrase or a verse from my daily *lectio* and through journaling, poke around the edges for insight or new meaning.

*Meditative walking*—for me has been a personal discovery. For anyone wanting to try this, if you'll indulge me, here are some tips as you walk. You might want to try this during your retreat. Take time to notice the sweep of air. Feel the breeze with your face. Breathe it. Taste it. Smell it. Every season has its own fragrance and every day has its own bouquet.

Notice the light and the shadows. Open your eyes wide, without straining. Take in every reflection, a verdant glint on a blade of grass, a flash of rainbow light from a droplet of water. Notice the liturgy of light. Every season has its own radiance, every minute has its own luminance.

Listen to the percussion of rush-grass against your legs. Listen to the dry clay break under your foot. Listen to the rain drum on the brim of your hat. Listen to your breathing, all the way home. When you walk like this, you feel God's delight.

I do all of this to remind myself of God's presence, right here, right now and that he likes me and enjoys, even yearns for my company.

... In *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, Joan Chittister relays this story:

"There are three stages of spiritual development," a teacher taught. "the carnal, the spiritual, and the divine.

"What is the carnal stage?" the disciple asked.

"That's the stage," the teacher said, "when trees are seen as trees and mountains are seen as mountains."

"And the spiritual?" the disciple asked eagerly.

"That's when we look more deeply into things. Then trees are no longer trees and mountains are no longer mountains," the teacher answered.

"And the Divine?" the disciple asked breathlessly. "Ah," the teacher said with a smile. "That's enlightenment—when the trees become trees again and the mountains become mountains."

Our scriptures tell us the same, (Acts 17:27, 28)...indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'. Spiritual formation is about learning to believe this.

Thomas Merton suggests, and I'm paraphrasing here, that every event, every encounter, every moment holds within it a seed of possibility for an existential meeting with God. However, the cultivation of this kind of mindfulness comes only as we are able to put ourselves out, not in grand schemes of asceticism but through the simple daily observance of our disciplines. To practise the disciplines only when we want to, of course, requires no discipline. That's self-consolation. To stay close to your own cycle of spiritual discipline, as Joan Chittister says, is to risk conversion.

**Let me conclude with this...** I am far less holy than I thought I would be, when I started out on this road. And it's not because my practice of the spiritual disciplines is less than what I had hoped for. It is the case, that through these practices, I have been secularized. This, for me, is another way of saying that I am learning to move away from the *sacred centers*, and learning to see all things within the embrace of God. *Sacred centers* create an "us and them", where truly, there is only a "we". *That of course is the message of Pentecost.*

What this means, practically, is that instead of approaching people as "ministry opportunities", which is always sort of paternalistic, we instead identify with people, that is, be open to the kind of equality that is profoundly fraternal.

In my estimation, true spiritual formation will lead to identifying, and locating our story with, to use Bruce Cockburn's words, *street people, hookers, and bums*. It will lead to being at ease with, and vulnerable to, those outside of the Temple, the shunned ones, the poor, the disabled, gay and lesbian folk. And, if we have imagination for it, if we can gaze into the eyes of Christ without looking away, maybe even Enron executives, scaly operatives, and suicide bombers.

It is true what Van Gogh said, "That to love God it is necessary to love many things."

*stb*