Transparent lives

The slow but urgent work of contemplation

by Eugene H. Peterson in the November 29, 2003 issue

Forty years ago, I found myself distracted. I was living 20 miles northeast of Baltimore in a small town that was fast becoming a suburb. Assigned there by my denomination to start a new congregation, I started out with a fair amount of confidence and energy, and with strong personal, organizational and financial support. But as time went on, I found myself increasingly at odds with my advisers on the means and methods used for ensuring the numerical and financial viability of the congregation.

It wasn't long before I was in crisis. A deep chasm had opened up between what I was preaching and the way I was leading our congregational development. My attitude toward the men and women I was gathering in the congregation was silently shaped by how I was planning to use them to succeed, with little thought to feeding their souls with the bread of life. I found myself thinking competitively about the other churches in town, about how I could beat them at the numbers game.

I never wavered in my theological convictions, but I had to get a church up and running, and I was ready to use any means to do it: appeal to people's consumer instincts, use abstract principles to unify enthusiasm, shape goals through catchy slogans, create publicity images to provide ego enhancement.

Then one day my wife and I attended a lecture by Paul Tournier, who showed me another way of being. Given my distracted condition, the timing was just right. The lecture provided a fine image, shaping my life personally as a follower of Jesus, and vocationally as a companion to other followers of Jesus, in the role of pastor and writer.

Tournier was a Swiss physician who at midlife shifted his medical practice from examining rooms and surgeries to his living room. He left a medical practice that was focused entirely on the body and embraced a healing vocation that dealt with the whole person—body, mind and spirit. He wrote many books, and I have read

them all. They were not great books—anecdotal in style, personal in story—but an appealing spirit of discerning grace permeated everything he wrote.

Driving the 20 miles home my wife and I were commenting appreciatively on the lecture, when she added, “Wasn’t that translator great?” I said, “What translator? There wasn’t any translator.” She said, “You’re kidding me. He was lecturing in French, and you don’t know 20 words of French. Of course there was a translator.” And then I remembered her as she stood just behind Tournier’s shoulder, unobtrusive, and translating his French into my English. She was so modest that I forgot she was there.

And there was something about Tournier himself. During the lecture I had a growing feeling that what he was saying and who he was were completely congruent: his long life in Switzerland and his lecture in Baltimore were the same. Just as the translator was “assimilated” to the lecturer, her English words carrying the meaning and spirit of his French words, so his words were at one with his life—not just what he knew and what he had done, but who he was.

The transparency of the man was a memorable experience. There was no dissonance between word and spirit, no pretense. Later on I remembered what T. S. Eliot had said about Charles Williams. Some people are less than their works, some are more. Charles Williams cannot be placed in either class. To have known the man would have been enough, to know his books is enough. He was the same man in his life and in his writings. That’s the sense I had that day with Tournier. He wrote what he lived. He lived what he wrote. He was the same man in his books as he was in person.

This was the day that the word contemplative entered my vocabulary, giving shape to the way I wanted to live my life. I use the word contemplative with considerable apprehension, fearing that you will associate it with the kind of living that’s done best in monasteries or in mountain retreats or in desert caves. I’m apprehensive that you’ll disqualify yourselves on the grounds that you work in a noisy office or live in a dysfunctional family or don’t have much interest in that kind of life.

Although many connect the word with a quiet life of withdrawal, I need a word to designate those times when we sense that a life is being lived well, that a conviction is held honestly, without contrivance. My concern is spiritual theology, and I need a word to identify what is distinctive in the Christian life in contrast to much of what is

muddying the word “spirituality” in America. I’m looking for a word that defines the way Christians—every butcher, baker, candlestick-maker Christian—can live to the glory of God. I want to free the word contemplative from its captivity in Buddhist and Trappist monasteries and reclaim it for people like ourselves.

Last summer, our ten-year-old granddaughter, Lindsey, was staying with us for a couple of weeks. Two Carmelite nuns were planning to visit us after she left. The nuns were spending a few days in the mountains of Salt Lake, and the forest fires were really bad just then. So they called and asked if they could come a few days early. I said certainly they could. When Lindsey heard that the nuns might overlap with her visit, she said she didn’t want them to come. “All the nuns do is go ‘Hmmm . . . hmmm . . . hmmm.’” So much for stereotypes.

As it happened, they didn’t come, and when we told them what Lindsey had said, they laughed and said they should have come early and given her a good, healthy dose of the utter and relentless earthiness of nuns.

If there’s a single word that identifies the contemplative life, it is congruence—congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it. So we admire an athlete whose body is accurately and gracefully responsive and totally submissive to the conditions of the event. When Michael Jordan played basketball, he was one with the court, the game, the basketball and his fellow players. Or take a musical performance in which Mozart, a Stradivarius and Yitzak Perlman all fuse indistinguishably in the music.

Congruence also occurs often enough in more modest settings: a child unselfconsciously at play; a conversation in which the exchange of words becomes a ballet revealing all manner of truth and beauty and goodness; a meal with friends in a quiet awareness of affection and celebration, a mingling of senses and spirit that adds a eucharistic dimension to the evening. Tournier provided a living image to me that evening, a model for Christian living in the uncongenial conditions of contemporary American culture.

Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sonnet “As kingfishers catch fire” is as fine an evocation of the contemplative life as any I know.

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung
bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me*: *for that I came*.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

Hopkins piles up a dazzling assemblage of images to fix our attention on this sense of rightness, of wholeness that comes together when we realize the utter congruence between what a thing is and what it does: kingfisher, dragonfly, a stone tumbling into a well, a plucked violin string, the clapper of a bell sounding—what happens and the way it happens are seamless. He then goes on to us men and women—”each mortal thing”—bodying forth who and what we are.

But what kingfishers and falling stones and chiming bells do without effort requires development in humans, formation into who we truly are becoming, in which the means by which we live are congruent with the ends for which we live.

Hopkins doesn’t talk about achieving this congruence. He talks about its being achieved in us. What the plucked string and the dragonfly and the kingfisher do as determined by biology or physics happens with us when Christ lives in us, Christ living the Christ way in us, in the truth of our lives, playing through our limbs and eyes to the Father. I love that final image: Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs—your limbs, my limbs—lovely in eyes—your eyes, my eyes: the contemplative life, living the Christ life in the Christ way.

The words of Jesus that keep this in focus are “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life. But this isn’t easy. It is easier to talk about what Christians believe, the truth of the gospel formulated in creeds and doctrines. We have accumulated a magnificent

roster of eloquent and learned theologians who have taught us to think carefully and well about the revelation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is easier to talk about what Christians do, life as performance, the behavior appropriate to followers of Jesus codified in moral commandments and formulated in vision statements and mission strategies. We never lack for teachers and preachers and parents who instruct us in the mores and manners of the kingdom of God. None of us here are likely to pretend perfection in these matters, but most of us are pretty well agreed on what's involved.

But what counts on my agenda right now is the Christian life as lived, lived in this sense of congruence between who Christ is and who I am—being in Chicago right now at this busy, heavily trafficked intersection of the kingdom of God, Christ playing in my limbs and my eyes.

It has always been more difficult to come to terms with Jesus as the way than with Jesus as the truth, more difficult to realize the ways our thinking and behavior get fused into a life of relational love and adoration with neighbor and God, God and neighbor.

Right now there is a happy resurgence of interest in spiritual matters both in and outside the Christian community. Why just now? The reasons are complex, but this seems obvious to me: people are fed up with leaders and friends who talk learnedly and officiously about God but show little evidence of being interested in God. People are fed up with leaders and friends who tell them what to do, talk at them about what to do but show very little interest in who they are. The ideas about the truth of God don't seem to be connected to a relationship with God. Maybe this depersonalization of God and us has achieved a critical mass, and more people are not liking what they are noticing—that there are a lot of people talking about God but seldom to God, that there are a lot of people who are talking at us but seldom to us.

Suddenly there's this stampede of interest in what is popularly called spirituality. For those of us who are involved vocationally in the Jesus way and the Jesus truth, it's encouraging to observe this resurgence of interest in what is at the heart of the gospel, this gospel that we teach and preach and give witness to: a life made whole, healed from the inside out like the paraplegic's (Mark 2); a life newborn from above like Nicodemus's (John 3); a life like the Samaritan woman's with "a stream of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4)—women and men from all walks of life wanting to

have life and have it abundantly (John 10). Some of us have been at this business a long time, working with men and women to bring “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), to present our minds and bodies as a living sacrifice to Christ (Rom. 12:1, 6:13).

I just mentioned this stampede of interest in spirituality. But Baron von Hügel, a great writer on these subjects a century ago, held firmly that nothing significant is ever accomplished in a stampede. Von Hügel was right. We can’t do anything during the stampede. So what responsibilities do we pastors and teachers have to people in the stampede, responsibilities to give witness and guidance to living the life of Christ, not just thinking about it, not just reading the rules pertaining to it?

I propose that each of us take the opportunity to rope a few steers, pull them out of the general mayhem, get them into a corral and quiet them down. And after the stampede adrenaline is drained out of their bloodstream, we can go to work. I don’t know what your corrals look like—classrooms, sanctuaries, writing desks, kitchens, board rooms, whatever. Any one of them is a suitable context for getting a hearing and demonstration regarding the contemplative life, the Christian life maturely lived, a life in which Jesus is taken seriously as the way to live and the truth to be lived (John 14:6).

Two things that are basic to the Christian life are unfortunately counter to most things American. First, Christian spirituality, the contemplative life, is not about us. It is about God. The great weakness of American spirituality is that it is all about us: fulfilling our potential, getting the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge over the competition. The more there is of us, the less there is of God.

Christian spirituality is not a life-project for becoming a better person. It is not about developing a so-called deeper life. We are in on it, to be sure, but we are not the subject. Nor are we the action. We get included by means of a few prepositions: God with us (Matt. 1:23), Christ in me (Gal. 2:20), God for us (Rom. 8:31). With, in, for: They are powerful, connecting, relation-forming words, but none of them makes us either the subject or the predicate. We are the tag-end of a prepositional phrase.

Sooner or later in this life we get invited or commanded to do something. But in that doing, we never become the subject of the Christian life nor do we perform the action of the Christian life. We are invited or commanded into what I call

prepositional participation. The prepositions that join us to God and God's action in us within the world—the *with*, the *in*, the *for*—are very important, but they are essentially a matter of the ways and means of being in on and participating in what God is doing.

These ways and means are the second basic in the Christian life that are also counter to most things American. Ways and means must be appropriate to ends. We cannot participate in God's work but then insist on doing it in our own way. We cannot participate in the building of God's kingdom but then use the devil's tools and nails. Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life.

Philosopher Albert Borgmann, a Montana neighbor of mine, is our most eloquent and important spokesman in exposing the dangers of letting technology determine the way we live, dictating the means by which we, in his phrase, "take up with the world."

Borgmann is not antitechnology. In fact, he's very respectful of it. He just doesn't want it to ruin us, and it is ruining us. In great and thoughtful detail, he brilliantly answers the question Walker Percy raised in several novels: "How does it happen that we know so much and can do so much and live so badly?" This is the concern motivating the contemplative life, and it is a concern of spiritual theology: to focus attention on the way we live, the means that we employ to embody the reality and carry out the demands of Jesus who became flesh among us.

Two areas are conspicuously in need of attention these days regarding ways and means, areas in which we're doing the right thing the wrong way. And because we're doing it the wrong way, the wheels are coming off the wagon. The two areas are our approaches to congregational life and to scripture.

The congregation is not about us. It is about God. God calls a people. Jesus named 12 disciples to be with him. The Spirit descends upon 120 praying men and women filling them with itself. The people we gather with for worship each Sunday and work with as salt and light are not of our choosing. God calls and forms this people, whom the Hebrew prophets are bold to designate "the people of God," and St. Paul was unembarrassed to call "saints."

God means to do something with us and means to do it in community. We are in on what God is doing, in on it together. We become present to what God intends to do

with and for us through worship. In worship, we become present to the God who is present to us.

The operating biblical metaphor regarding worship is sacrifice. We bring ourselves to the altar and let God do to us what God will. We bring ourselves to the eucharistic table, entering into that grand fourfold shape of the liturgy that shapes us: taking, blessing, breaking, giving—the life of Jesus taken and blessed, broken and distributed; and that eucharistic life now shapes our lives as we give ourselves, Christ in us, to be taken, blessed, broken and distributed in lives of witness and service, justice and healing.

But this is not the American way. The major American innovation in the congregation is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. Americans have developed a culture of acquisition, an economy that is dependent on wanting and requiring more. We have a huge advertising industry designed to stir up appetites we didn't even know we had. We are insatiable. It didn't take long for some of our colleagues to develop consumer congregations. If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most effective way to get them into our churches is to identify what they want and offer it to them. Satisfy their fantasies, promise them the moon, recast the gospel into consumer terms—entertainment, satisfaction, excitement and adventure, problem-solving, whatever. We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches?

Given the conditions prevailing in our culture, we have the best and most effective way ever devised for gathering large and prosperous congregations. Americans lead the world in showing how to do it. There's only one thing wrong. This is not the way that God brings us into conformity with the life of Christ. This is not the way that we become less and Jesus becomes more. This is not the way in which our lives become available to others in justice and service. The cultivation of consumer spirituality is the antithesis of a sacrificial, "denying yourself" congregation. A consumer church is an anti-Christ church. It's doing the right thing—gathering a congregation—but doing it in the wrong way. This is not the way to develop a contemplative life, a life in which the Jesus way and the Jesus truth are congruent, where "kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame."

Scripture is not about us, either. It is about God. God has revealed God's self to us in scripture so that we might know and respond to God, understand where we are in God's creation, what it means to be called into a life of God's salvation. We do not

primarily read scripture in order to develop a better self-image, or to discover the hidden treasures in our lives. Scripture is not about us. Basically, we are listening to God revealing God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We do, in fact, find ourselves included. We are addressed, we are invited, we are commanded, we are promised, we are immersed in a world where God rules and saves and blesses—us. But there are no secrets here on how we can rule and save and bless. We are not the subject and we do not supply the action.

So what is the way in regard to scripture? How do we receive this text? Here's how: by listening and responding and submitting. "Let it be to me according to your word" is the way I read this text. Our reading of this text is a personal listening to a personal God. We listen to God speak our lives into being. We listen to the story that provides a narrative shape and meaning to a life of following Jesus in the conditions of the world. It is a prayerful, relational, obedient listening. But that's not the American way of reading. Too many of us read only for information, for know-how, to better ourselves, to prepare for a job, for a profession. When we need a break from that, we read for diversion, for entertainment.

American spirituality has an indiscriminating love of technology. We like getting things done, no matter how. Use the fastest and most efficient means at hand, but get it done. Fastest and most efficient almost always means impersonal. People ask questions, act stubborn, make mistakes and get in the way—so bypass the personal. Under the influence of technology, we have acquired the habit of reading the scriptures technologically, scripture depersonalized into information used to get things done more quickly.

But we don't get a say in how God runs this world, this grand creation, this globe-circling salvation, this heart-stopping beauty. We don't get a vote in the work that's set for us each day, the work of witness, compassion and justice—healing the sick, working for peace, welcoming a stranger, having babies, burying the dead.

And we don't get a say in how we do it. Our scriptures train us in this how; skill and attentiveness are required in order to read scripture the way it is written, which is personal and submissive. This entire area of ways and means requires far more attention and practice than we are used to giving it. How we say and do whatever it is we are saying or doing is on par with what God does and the work we do at his command.

Until we care as much about and are as careful with the means as we are the ends, virtually anything we do makes matters worse. Spiritual theology is primarily about means. Life is contemplative when the means become congruent with the ends.

So here it is again, doing the right thing (reading scripture) but doing it in the wrong way (reading it impersonally for information or for principles that I can use to get ahead). Using impersonal ways and means will never bring about any congruence between the text and our lives and, of course, nothing remotely contemplative.

The contemplative life, growing toward congruence, is slow work. It cannot be hurried. It is also urgent work and cannot be put off. Life is deteriorating around us at a rapid pace, and the life at the center, the gospel life—with the elements of congregation and scripture as major pieces—is being compromised, distorted, degraded at an alarming rate. In the American way, slow and urgent are not compatible. They cancel one another out.

But in the Christian way, they are joined together. Urgent as this is, there is no hurry. Impatience cancels out contemplation. Patience is prerequisite. Formation of spirit, cultivation of soul, developing a contemplative life, realizing congruence between the way and truth—all this is slow, slow work requiring endless patience. Human life is endlessly complex, intricate and serious. There are no shortcuts to becoming the persons we're created to be. We can't pump contemplation on steroids.

Unfortunately, patience is not held in high regard in American society. We get faster and faster and we become less and less; our speed diminishes us.

Talking at length about the contemplative life under American conditions seems just absurd. It seems such a fragile way of life in this culture of massive technology, arrogant leadership, pushing and shoving, insatiable consumerism. Contemplation? Kingfishers and dragonflies? Stones . . . tumbled over roundy wells? It's so inefficient, so ineffective. Yet Jesus tells us to do it this way.

Rick Bass, a very good writer, is another Montana neighbor of mine. Besides being an excellent writer, Bass is a fervent environmentalist. Environmentalists care deeply about this creation, which is a good thing, but a lot of them are also pretty mean-spirited, angry, even violent—verbally if not physically. Bass is small of stature, elf-like, energetic, and laughing, it seems, most of the time. There's not a polemical bone in his body. He hosts parties for the loggers and the miners, working

for common ground, developing a language of courtesy and understanding.

Bass wrote an essay recently that I consider required reading for anyone who cares about the contemplative life, immersed as we are in this impatient, shortcut addictive culture. He writes that when confronted with a complex and difficult task, he used to imagine himself laying down one brick after another, brick by brick by brick, to eventually accomplish his aims. But he's recently changed his metaphor from bricks to glaciers. A glacier is the most powerful force the world has ever seen. Literally nothing can stop a glacier.

A glacier is formed by the falling of snow that collects over a period of time. As the snow deepens, the weight compresses, ice forms, then more snow, then more ice, year after year— and nothing happens. Nothing happens until that glacier is 64-feet thick. Then it starts to move and nothing can stop it.

Bass notes that one theory about the origin of glaciers is that they are "the result of a wobble, a hitch, in the earth's rotation. . . . Glaciers get built or not built, simply, miraculously, because the earth is canting a single one-trillionth of a degree in this direction for a long period of time, rather than in that direction." And then this comment: "When I am alone in the woods, and the struggle seems insignificant or futile, or when I am in a public meeting and am being kicked all over the place, I tell myself that little things matter—and I believe that they do. I believe that even if your heart leans just a few degrees to the left or the right of center, that with enough resolve, which can substitute for mass, and enough time, a wobble will one day begin, and the ice will begin to form, where for a long time previous there might have been none. Keep it up for a lifetime or two or three, and then one day—it must—the ice will begin to slide" (*The Roadless Yak*, Lyons Press).

Or, to replace his metaphor with ours: we'll see Christ playing in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men's and women's faces.

Eugene Peterson gave the fifth annual Christian Century lecture, from which this article is adapted.