

A path back together through reading contemplative classics

My students and I are finding our way into the world again with Evagrius, Teresa of Ávila, and Howard Thurman.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration © gremlin / E+ / Getty)

A few years ago, [I wrote in this column](#) about a course I teach on contemplative prayer in which we read six books and then read them again. My hope is to explore reading and rereading as contemplative practices in their own right—and to discover how differently texts can speak at different moments of our lives. The second goal sometimes feels a bit artificial; we and the world don't always change enough within the short space of a semester to shape our rereading in noticeable ways. But the

last time I taught it, in the spring of 2020, we first read our six books while COVID-19 was beginning to move across the globe. By the time we began rereading, we were looking at each other from boxes on a screen, already in a different world.

This semester, I'm teaching it again—and we might experience something like the reverse of last time. Although classes are meeting in person, our school still feels quiet and empty. We still have to raise our voices to make ourselves heard through our masks, and every class leaves a Zoom link open for anyone who has tested positive. Most meetings and events take place online. But as the sun shines a little bit longer each day and our COVID dashboard shows decreasing cases on campus, it's possible to imagine a fuller reopening of our life together—much slower than the rapid closing down we experienced two years ago, but an opening nevertheless.

What has this meant for how we read these books? In 2020, those thrust into an unwelcome solitude searched the books for ways to inhabit it that would help them resist loneliness, isolation, despair. “The monk is one who is separate from all and in harmony with all,” Evagrius wrote from the 4th-century Egyptian desert. We took heart from the “and” in that sentence—more than a “but” or an “and yet,” the simple “and” made it seem as if keeping separate and connected at once were an ordinary thing to do. It must be within our human competence, we told each other, to physically distance ourselves from one another while remaining connected enough to harmonize.

Those for whom sudden solitude wasn't the problem but rather the need to carve out some interior privacy in cramped quarters with friends and family were often drawn to Teresa of Ávila's image of the interior castle. Everyone has an interior castle inside them, Teresa told us, at the center of which God dwells. And any of us, Teresa wrote, can enter that castle and walk around in it whenever we want, without having to ask anyone for permission.

In 2020, we read our six books seeking wisdom as we went inside. In 2022, we are reading them as we seek a way back out. This time, what shines out from Evagrius's writings on prayer is how grounded the practice is in our relationships with each other. “If you desire to pray as you ought,” he writes, “do not sadden anyone.” Trying to pray when we're out of relationship with each other, he insists, is like trying to draw water from a well with a bucket full of holes.

Evagrius, living as a solitary, seeks what he calls “undistracted prayer.” But solitude alone cannot guarantee it. It’s the quality of our engagement with each other that makes the kind of attentive, justice-seeking prayer that Evagrius advocates possible. Our prayer, he says, should help us see ourselves in each other.

In 2020, Teresa’s interior castle offered a secret spaciousness that we could inhabit, even in crowded places. In 2022, the dwelling places of Teresa’s castle are visible not only as the way into our depths but also as the way through them to our lives with others. You can’t always be sure if you’re loving God, Teresa writes. But you can always know whether or not you love your neighbor. If our prayer is not leading us more deeply into that love, she suggests, then we’ve gotten off track.

Prayer helped us find a path inside, and it offers a path back out. All this time, we’ve longed to be together. We’re tired of missing family celebrations; we’re tired of Zoom church. But is reconnecting in person as simple as gathering in the same room and picking up where we left off? How long until we feel comfortable being together in an office, a classroom, the home of a friend? Have we cultivated habits of mind in our distanced life together that we’ll have to change in order to bring our full attention to each other? Bringing the world within us and the world around us into some kind of alignment is a challenge at any time. In a time of a shifting pandemic, it feels like real work.

If Teresa’s interior castle gives us a way to explore our secret depths in prayer, Howard Thurman’s swinging door challenges us to make room for the secret depths of others. As a young minister learning how to pray in public, Thurman began thinking of his heart as a swinging door through which his needs and the needs of his congregation could meet in prayer. Prayer, he writes in his testimony against segregation, *The Luminous Darkness*, makes the door of the heart swing open, not only into life but into the particularity of each other’s lives. That is what it means to love, he insists: to make our heart a swinging door through which we encounter one another in our particularity and offer to one another what he calls our “unhurried attention.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A path back together.”